Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Intellectual Life[1]

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After the Copernican shift in philosophy inaugurated by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), reflection on the nature of subjectivity decisively shaped how the question of God was approached and understood, especially on the European Continent. Because this topic is a vast one, I limit myself to discussing three interrelated issues at the forefront of 19th and 20th century thought on subjectivity and the problem of God. These issues will be explored as they were worked out by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Freidrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) Paul Tillich (1886-1965) and Karl Rahner (1904-1984). The entry is divided into three parts. Part one deals with the ontological nature of subjectivity itself and what it reveals about the conditions of the possibility of a subject's relation to the Absolute. Part two explores the role of subjectivity and interiority in the individual's relation to God, and part three takes a look at the theme of the "unhappy consciousness," and how its development led to important attacks on theism. At the end of the chapter I offer a few reflections on how the sophisticated theist might reply to some of those attacks.

Adequacy and Subjectivity

The Copernican shift set in motion by the work of Immanuel Kant not only revolutionized philosophy, it was transformative of theology as well. The pioneering work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who as a young man had immersed himself in the work of Kant, set forth a theological vision that both critically embraced, and moved

significantly beyond, Enlightenment insights. Starting from an analysis of subjectivity greatly indebted to Kant and those who followed him, Schleiermacher analyzed the conditions of the possibility of the self's relation to the Absolute. In doing so, he made groundbreaking claims that would influence theological discourse throughout both the 19th and 20th centuries: any theological discourse *adequate* to its subject matter must take into account the role of the subject in its relation to the Absolute; failure to do so leads to a concept of God wholly inadequate to the reality of God, one in which God is understood as outside of, and completely other than, the subject.

An analysis of the subject and the objects to which it is directed reveal that God cannot be an *object* for a subject. For any object grasped by a subject is conditioned by that subject in myriad ways. Insofar as the object that is *for* a subject is grasped as *different* from the subject, the object must be limited by the subject. Since the object is different from the subject, there must be a unified horizon or space, as it were, in which both subject and object appear, can be grasped *as* different from one another, and *in* which they can interact. As such, the Absolute, or that which is wholly unconditioned, cannot *appear* to a subject; were it to appear it would not only be conditioned by the space *in* which appears, it would also be limited by the subject *to* which it appears. Furthermore, any object that appears must, as appearance, be conditioned by the a priori structures of the knowing subject; as such, objects of knowledge conditioned by these structures are not unconditioned. Schleiermacher notes that ". . . any possibility of God being in any way given is entirely excluded, because anything that is outwardly given must be given as an object exposed to our counterinfluence, however slight that may be.

The transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object. . . is always a corruption…."(Schleiermacher 1999 [1830] §4.4).[2]

Given these limiting conditions, is it possible to speak of God at all? While we cannot, according to Schleiermacher, speak directly of the Absolute, we can speak of ourselves *as conditioned* by the Absolute, for the Absolute grounds both self and world. For the Schleiermacher of *Christian Faith,* all genuine religion is grounded in the "feeling of absolute dependence" or what he also calls the "God-consciousness." This "feeling" is not one feeling among others that can be made an object *of* consciousness, but is given at the very ground of consciousness itself, in what Schleiermacher calls the immediate self-consciousness. In self-consciousness, the self makes itself its own object, and can thereby distinguish between itself and the world. However, the relation between self and world, between the spontaneity and receptivity of the self, presupposes an original unity of consciousness, a moment given in pure immediacy, wherein the two are one. It is this original unity of consciousness that makes possible the transition between the moments of spontaneity and receptivity. The consciousness of absolute dependence is given in this moment of pure immediacy; it is "the self-consciousness accompanying the whole of our spontaneity, and because this is never zero, accompanying the whole of our existence, and negating absolute freedom." (1999 [1830] §4.3). God is the "Whence of our active and receptive existence" (1999 [1830] §4.4). However, while the Absolute must accompany all moments of consciousness (since it grounds the self), consciousness of God is not directly given in the immediate self-consciousness (Adams 2005 and Frank 2005). What is given, rather, is a consciousness of the self as absolutely dependent, in particular in regard to its own spontaneous action in relation to the world. The

consciousness of absolute dependence is the consciousness that "the whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside us" (Schleiermacher 1999 [1830] §4.3). Consciousness of the self as dependent arises from the consciousness of a "missing unity" in the river of the soul's life as it flickers from spontaneity to receptivity. We can think of this "missing unity" as the horizon or backdrop of consciousness. This horizon comprehends both self and world, and is the condition of the possibility of both their difference from, and relation to, one another. It is traversed by consciousness itself insofar as consciousness must move between itself as the subject of reflection and the world that is given to it to know. Consciousness comes to an *explicit* awareness of this missing unity only in reflecting upon the transcendental conditions of the possibility of the moments of self-consciousness, in which there is an antithesis between self and world. Both the immediate self-consciousness and the feeling of absolute dependence are only given along *with* the sensuous self-consciousness; that is, only insofar as the self distinguishes between itself and its world can it arrive at an awareness of the underlying unity conditioning the possibility of its making this distinction. There is an important sense, of course, in which this underlying unity is given in the immediate self-consciousness. However, while the *traversal* of this missing unity occurs at the level of the immediate self-consciousness, one only becomes aware of its implications (namely, absolute dependence on the Whence of our active and receptive existence) through reflection.

In the *Dialektik* Schleiermacher asks, "How does it [the immediate self-consciousness] relate to the transcendental ground?" And he answers, "We consider the latter to be the ground of the thinking being in regards to the identity of willing and

thinking. The transcendental ground precedes and succeeds all actual thinking, but does not come to an appearance at any time. This transcendental ground of thought accompanies the actual thinking in an atemporal manner, but never itself becomes thought" (Schleiermacher 2002: 568). The Absolute transcends consciousness so thoroughly that it "does not come to an appearance at any time." For Schleiermacher, consciousness of God is not given directly in the immediate self-consciousness. As noted above, what is directly given is a consciousness of the self *as* absolutely dependent. Co-posited along with this consciousness is the Absolute itself.

Similar insights can be found in the work of two of the twentieth centuries most influential theologians, Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner. Tillich, influenced by both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, combines Schleiermacher's insights concerning the relation of the subject to the Absolute with an emphasis on existentialist themes.[3] He stresses that God is not a being among beings and cannot be an object *for* a subject: "If God is brought into the subject-object structures of Being, he ceases to be the ground of Being, and becomes one being among others (first of all, a being *beside* the subject who looks at him as an object). He ceases to be the God who is really God" (1961:172). Because God cannot be an object *for* a subject, God does not, strictly speaking, exist: "God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence" (1961: 205). God is, instead, the ground of being. As such, Tillich agrees with Schleiermacher that God cannot *appear:* "The ground of being cannot be found within the totality of beings, nor can the ground of essence and existence participate in the tensions and disruptions characteristic of the transition from essence to existence" (1961: 205). It is thus fundamentally wrongheaded to search for evidence for God's existence; to do so is to

think of God as a being alongside of other beings, one who influences them and as such leaves evidence for its existence among the "traces" of its effects on other things. The evidentialist challenge to God's existence, which compares the claim for the existence of God to the claim for the existence of a teapot so infinitely small that in principle, it cannot be detected by any instrument (Russell 1997 [1952]: 542-48), succeeds only because it defines God in contradictory terms, and then rightly concludes that such a being cannot exist. The evidentialist assumes that if there is God a) God must exist as a thing among things; b) one which, however, cannot make an empirical difference, and for which there can be no evidence. If God is defined in such contradictory terms, it is no wonder then that belief in God is irrational! For Tillich (as for both Schleiermacher and Rahner) God as Absolute does not exist *in* the world of things and as such cannot have the sorts of effects, or leave the kind of empirical traces, that things in the world leave. Rather, God, as *absolute* conditions and grounds both subject and object, that is, God is the ground of all that exists. To these reflections Tillich adds the question of ultimate concern: if God is thought of as "one being among others, then [God] would not concern us infinitely" (Tillich 1961: 20). Only that which grounds and conditions all being, including our very existence itself, can concern us ultimately. God, then, is the correlate of an "unconditioned concern" (1961:12).

Many of the same themes are sounded in the transcendental Thomism of Karl Rahner. The original experience of God, for Rahner, is not "an encounter with an individual object alongside of other objects" (Rahner 1984: 54), and the knowledge of God is not one in which "one grasps an object which happens to present itself directly or indirectly from the outside" (1984: 21). Rather, the original experience of God is present

in transcendental experience, and occurs at the heart of subjectivity itself. This transcendental experience is "the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unfailing consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's unlimited openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality" (1984: 20). As the term of transcendental experience, God is co-known in every act of knowledge, not as an object of knowledge, but as that which conditions all knowledge. Transcendental experience is the "subjective, non-objective luminosity of the subject," and it is "always oriented to the holy mystery." As such, Rahner argues, the knowledge of God is "always present unthematically and without name" (1984: 21).

What Rahner means by *transcendental experience* is further developed through his analysis of the "the infinite horizon" which is the "term of transcendence" conditioning both the subject's experience of itself and its "unlimited possibilities of encountering this or that particular thing" (1984: 61). He calls this transcendental condition of all experience the "pre-apprehension of being" (*Vorgriff auf esse)* (1984: 33). What is pre-apprehended grounds both self and world. This ground cannot be nothing, for "nothingness grounds nothing" (1984: 33). Moreover, it is not the mere sum of all beings, but the very condition of their possibility: "Indeed we must express it as something distinct from everything else because, as the absolute ground of every particular existent, it cannot be the subsequent sum of these many individual existents" (1984: 61). This ground Rahner calls "the holy mystery." Because it conditions *all* acts of knowledge, God, as holy mystery, is always experienced unthematically, even by those who deny God's existence.

The difference between God and world, according to Rahner, is fundamentally different from the difference between categorical realities. For *that* categorical realities can be compared with each other presupposes an ultimate horizon or backdrop against which they appear and can be set in relation to one another. Hence Rahner notes that the difference between categorical realities "is antecedent to them because they presuppose as it were a space which contains and differentiates them, and no one of these categorically distinct realities itself establishes its difference from the other or is this difference" (1984: 63). God on the other hand is different from the world in that God grounds the very possibility of the difference between categorical realities and between self and world. As such, God can only be experienced in original, transcendental experience, in which the unique difference between God and world "is experienced in such a way that the whole of reality is borne by this term and this source and is intelligible only within it" (1984: 63). As such, God can only be experienced in the very depths of the self, wherein the ground of both self and world can be found. God is not "outside" the self in the way that categorical realities are. To think in such a way is to count God among existent *things*. Those who think of God in this way are imagining a false God, one that does not exist.[4]

As can be gleaned from the discussion thus far, theism in the 19th and 20th centuries was revolutionized by Kant's Copernican revolution laying out the transcendental conditions of objective knowledge. For Kant, of course, objective knowledge had to do only with possible objects of *this-worldly* experience. But Kant's focus on the subject's contribution to knowledge was extremely fertile, leading Schleiermacher and those who followed him to investigate the subject's relation to the

Absolute. Theological investigations carried along these lines came to surprisingly similar results. God cannot appear, and is not among the appearances. Hence categories of thought applicable to empirical objects cannot be employed in cognizing God. Rather, God must be thought of as the ground of both the subject and its world. And as such, God can only be experienced in the depths of subjectivity itself, in that moment establishing the difference between self and world, and conditioning both.

Thus far I have provided an account of how an analysis of subjectivity provided important clues into how God, as absolute, had to be conceived from an ontological perspective. But the riches of this theological tradition did not reside in this ontological analysis alone, but rather in how these results were applied to an understanding of the subject's relation to God from what we now would call an existential perspective.

Ultimacy and Interiority: Why Subjectivity Matters

I now turn to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). There is no doubt he was significantly influenced by Schleiermacher's thought (Crouter 2005: 98-119). He moved beyond Schleiermacher, however, in exploring the nature of subjectivity and its relation to absolute dependence from the first person standpoint, that is, the standpoint of the subject engaged, in one way or another, in his or her life project. Kierkegaard eschewed the kind of abstract philosophical thought exemplified by Hegel's logical system. Instead, Kierkegaard explored questions of ultimate value and their relation to the will from the standpoint of *passionate* engagement. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* his pseudonym Johannes Climacus notes "the issue is not about the indifferent individual's systematic eagerness to arrange the truths of Christian paragraphs, but rather about the concern of the infinitely interested individual with regard to his own relation to

such a doctrine…." (Kierkegaard 1992 [1846]: 15). What does the standpoint of the infinitely interested individual reveal about subjectivity? What insights can be gleaned from this analysis concerning the conditions of the possibility of the subject's relation to God? These are two of the fundamental questions that preoccupied Kierkegaard in his oeuvre as a whole, and in particular in the *Unscientific Postscript,* one of his most philosophically rigorous works.

Kierkegaard makes several interrelated points regarding these two questions. With regard to the character of subjectivity itself, two points stand out as particularly pressing. First, the analysis that Kierkegaard provides of subjectivity is from the *first* person standpoint. From this standpoint, the subject is always concerned, even if only implicitly, with the significance and value of her own life. Even when she is bored and needs to amuse herself, or desires to always preserve her freedom so that she never commits to anything and lives the life of an aesthete, she is still involved in a project wherein the character of her existence is at stake. Her identity and her experiences are hers, and she must make sense of them as such. Hence she is always *already interested in them*, and the question is not whether, but *how* she will make sense of them, and consequently how she will decide to act. This first person standpoint contrasts sharply with the third person standpoint, in which the individual is viewed as part and parcel of the objective order, firmly ensconced within the causal nexus and thus determined to behave in certain ways by circumstances standing outside of the self.

Second, the character of existence from the first person standpoint is always a temporal one. My existence is never given to me all at once, like that of the God of Boethius, whose existence is thus said to be eternal.[5] Rather, we proceed from the

present to the future. The whole of our life is given one fleeting bit at a time. Tomorrow has not yet occurred, and yesterday has already been lost. And so it is with each instant of time, which continually passes away. The temporality of our existence also implies that the objects of our experience, and indeed the whole of our existence, is given to us piecemeal. Kierkegaard notes that if

> being is understood as empirical being, then truth itself is transformed into a *desideratum* [something desired] and everything is placed in the process of becoming, because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing knowing spirit is itself in the process of becoming. This truth is an approximating whose beginning cannot be established absolutely, because there is no conclusion that has retroactive power (1992 [1846]: 189).

The fact of our temporality implies that we cannot have a metaphysically complete concept of an object, à la Leibniz. In order for us to be able to have such a cognition, the complete object would have to be thought all at once, in a single instant. Kierkegaard follows Kant in shifting from a theocentric model of cognition (which judges the adequacy of a cognition to the extent that it approaches, even if only asymptotically, the divine knowledge of an object occurring *sub species aeterni*) to an anthropocentric one.[6] Human cognition is fundamentally different from God's, for the objects of human cognition–and this includes the self's grasp of itself in self-reflection–are all given in time, one bit after the next.

From the fact of temporality Kierkegaard concludes that a particular kind of objective knowledge is impossible. The *kind* of objective knowledge that temporality makes impossible is objective knowledge understood on a theocentric model, in

particular, absolute knowledge of the Absolute in its relation to the finite. This was precisely the kind of knowledge that Hegel claimed to have arrived at in his system. For Hegel, philosophy arrives at absolute knowledge when it grasps the knowledge that God has of God-self. In response Kierkegaard asks, "Of what help is it to explain how the eternal truth is to be understood eternally when the one to use the explanation is prevented from understanding it in this way because he is existing, and is merely a fantast if he fancies himself to be *sub specie aeterni*?..." (1992 [1846]: 190ff.). Hegel's knowledge of the absolute is a delusion, because the subject is never in a position to grasp metaphysical truths *sub species aeterni*. Rather, the finitely existing subject is always in motion–*becoming*, and it is only from the standpoint of this becoming that she can attempt to make sense of her relation to the absolute.

The becoming of the subject is always *directed* to its future: it is a *striving* impelled by passion. Kierkegaard notes that when the individual "is closest to being at two places at the same time he is in passion"(1992 [1846]: 199), that is, the individual is always *becoming* what she is not yet. What the individual knows and does in the moment is only significant insofar as this is related a project whose completion still lies in the future: "Even if a person has achieved the highest, the repetition by which he must indeed fill out his existence, if he is not to go backward (or become a fantastical being), will again be a continued striving, because here in turn the conclusiveness is moved ahead and postponed. This is just like the Platonic concept of love; it is a want, and not only does that person feel a want who craves something he does not have, but also that person who desires the continued possession of what he has" (1992 [1846]: 121). Directedness to future tasks, to the completion of meaningful projects, is what impels both the will and

understanding forward. Given that human life is experienced only a bit at a time, even the individual who has arrived at the pinnacle of what life has to offer will desire to keep this throughout the future times that she has not yet experienced; she is always, therefore, as Plato averred, in a state of *want*. Existence, understood from the first person point of view, is always a striving. As such, knowledge relevant to the existing individual must stand in relation to this striving, that is, it must stand in relation to the projects the individual has undertaken, or finally, such knowledge must relate to the question of the ultimate meaning of the individual's finite and temporally conditioned existence as a whole. All genuine knowledge, especially religious truth, must make sense from this passionately engaged, temporally conditioned, first person *finite* human perspective. Objective knowledge–knowledge from a theocentric perspective–is not only fantastic (for here we ignore the temporally conditioned character of human cognition and delude ourselves into thinking that "the agreement between thinking and being is always finished" [1992 (1846): 190 ff.]), but were it to be possible, would be meaningless to temporally conditioned beings such as ourselves who are continuously in movement, and who must make sense of the relation of one moment of our existence to the next.

Given these characteristics of subjectivity, how is understanding of God to be possible? How is the truth to be grasped? Absolute knowledge of the absolute is impossible for temporally conditioned, finite beings such as ourselves. All our cognition is finite cognition. Our knowledge of the empirical object, for instance, is never complete, for it is always revealed to us only successively, in time. Moreover, this incompleteness is also true of our own earthly existence, unfinished until we pass away. Kierkegaard speaks of the "continued learning" which is "the expression of the perpetual

actualization, which at no moment is finished as long as the subject is existing…." (1992 [1846]: 122). The finite subject can never jump out of itself, so to speak, and grasp the complete series of its acts of cognition, thereby grasping itself and its world from a God's eye perspective. Moreover, reflection (and this includes self-reflection) "has the notable quality of being infinite" (1992 [1846]: 112). The self can always reflect on is acts of cognition, and then reflect on these reflections *ad infinitum*. (In this way it can turn in on itself, and never get out of itself.) Truth then, especially religious truth that seeks to understand the whole of one's existence in the world, can never be arrived at through an examination of the *objects* of human knowledge, which are never given at once, but rather constructed through successive acts of synthesis.

This does not, however, mean that the individual cannot stand in a *relation* to truth, for while absolute truth cannot be *captured* in any moment of thought, it can at least be *indicated* by the direction of thought as a whole. The directedness of thought has to do with not only the successive syntheses of discrete acts of cognition with one another, but also with the self's reflection on its own activity of synthesis, namely self-reflection. Self-reflection thereby implies reflection on the self *as* it cognizes its world. Now, while the completeness of such reflections can never be given, the *drive* to continuously synthesize the successive moments of reflection with prior ones is immediately given through the activity of the self, and as such, proleptically anticipates the whole series. In other words, through reflection on the self's continuous striving as it moves from one instant of cognition to the next, it is possible to indicate the self and its relation to its world *as a whole*. This is especially true of *infinite passion*: through infinite passion I reflect on my striving as a whole, and am therefore concerned with the

ultimate meaning of my life. This is why Kierkegaard claims that God can only be found through the "subjective way;" the existing individual has God "not by virtue of any objective deliberation, but by virtue of the infinite passion of inwardness" (1992 [1846]: 200). Only through the infinite passion can the question of God matter at all, and as such, it is only through this passion that the individual can stand in a real relation to God.

Kierkegaard thus concludes that the *mode* of relating to God (whether through infinite passion or in a merely desultory way) is what determines whether the individual worships the true God or not: "If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit, and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol, where is there most truth? The one prays to God in truth though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol" (1992 [1846]: 201). The individual that prays in a false spirit directs herself half-heartedly; as such, she does not direct herself to what concerns her ultimately, and thereby prays to a false God. On the other hand, *infinite passion* ensures that the relation is directed to that which concerns the self and its world *absolutely*. Since there is only one thing, namely God, that can satisfy the deepest longings of the soul, the *mode* of relating ensures that it is the single Ultimate to which the self is directed.

While the *Postscript,* written by the pseudonym Johnannes Climacus contains much that is true, this discussion is qualified and deepened by Anti-Climacus, in particular in *Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaard took the name Climacus from a Greek monk (c. 570-649), the abbot of St. Catherine's of Alexandria at Sinai. Climacus wrote a

pamphlet called *Klimax tou Paradeisou,* later translated into Latin under the title *Scala Paradiso,* or the *Ladder of Paradise*. The pamphlet describes thirty steps leading to an imperturbability preparing the soul for a heavenly vision. Climacus, then, represents the subjective pole of the God relation–how the ascent to heaven is possible from the point of view of the subject. The problem here is that Climacus does not move beyond a focus on the infinite passion of the subject; neither does he explore the possibility that the subject may fail to direct itself to that which concerns it ultimately. Anti-Climacus, intimately acquainted with the possibilities of the descent of the soul instead of its ascent, details the despair that ensues when the soul fails to chose itself as it stands in relation to the power that constituted it. Anti-Climacus also moves beyond the subject, underlining the role of the Power the constitutes the self: "This formula [i.e., that the self is constituted by another] is the expression for the total dependence of the relation (the self, namely), the expression for the fact that the self cannot of itself attain and remain in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only by relating to that Power which constituted the whole relation." (Kierkegaard 1941 [1849]: 10). The passage is striking in its echoes of Schleiermacher, who defined piety as "the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or which is the same thing, of being in relation to God" (Schleiermacher 1999 [1830]: §4). Only "by relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it" (Kierkegaard 1941 [1849]: 11). In other words, only in choosing itself *as* absolutely dependent can the self choose itself. In rejecting itself, or rejecting itself *as* grounded in the Power beyond itself, it rejects the eternal within itself, and as such, despairs. And yet as Kierkegaard notes, "But the eternal he cannot get rid of, no, not to all eternity; he cannot cast it from him once and for all, nothing is more

impossible; every instant he does not possess he must have cast it or be casting it from him–but it comes back….(Kierkegaard 1941 [1849]: 14)" The self then, is structured in such a way that while despair–which is the desire to be rid of the self as it really is in its absolute dependence–is a distinct possibility, the self is only at peace when it acknowledges itself as grounded in the Power beyond itself. If an individual desires a finite good, but she has not undergone the infinite resignation such that this finite good has been given up to God, so to speak, she stands in danger of despair. In choosing the finite good in such a way (whether it be power or romantic love), she chooses something other than the eternal in herself, and so desires in desperation to get rid of herself. This desire to be rid of the eternal in the self, which is given in and through its absolute dependence, is the descent or fall of the self. It is given as a permanent possibility through self-consciousness, through which the self can freely choose how to relate to itself. The desire to be rid of the self is idolatry, for it is an attempt to ground the significance of the self's existence in finite and conditioned goods. As such, it is a vain attempt to cover over the soul's infinite passion, which can only be satisfied through an acknowledgement of its dependence on God.

The impact of Kierkegaard's existential analysis was enormous. Tillich's notion of "ultimate concern about the ground and meaning of our being" (Tillich 1961: 42) makes sense only from such a first person perspective. Rahner's theology is also deeply imbedded in the existentialist thinking Kierkegaard had launched: the transcendental experience of God's self-communication is given in the interiority of the person, and makes sense only in the context of the existential question that the human being is to him or herself.[7]

Subjectivity and Atheism

Can the subject's relation to the absolute go awry? Is the very positing of the absolute a kind of sickness? These questions were at the forefront of 19th and 20th Continental thought. While the two questions are different, they are interrelated in important ways. It was Hegel who first identified the theme of the "unhappy consciousness," an idea explored by figures such as Kierkegaard and Feuerbach, and then transformed and enriched in significant ways by Nietzsche, for whom it formed the basis of his devastating critique of theism. In this section I briefly discuss its introduction by Hegel and development by Kierkegaard, and then look at the role the idea plays in Nietzsche's atheism.

Hegel identified a key moment in the development of self-consciousness where the self is alienated from itself; this he calls the *unhappy consciousness*. In an earlier version of the story, the misery of human life leads the individual to project all happiness into a future estate, thereby dulling the pain of the present condition, but also devaluing its significance as well. In his later, more sophisticated account, the very appearance of self-consciousness brings with it the unhappy consciousness, for self-consciousness implies consciousness of the antithesis between self and world. The self then comes to understand itself as finite subjectivity, and as such as standing in opposition to the Absolute and Universal. Here the finite subject finds her finite existence bereft of value. All value is instead projected onto an Absolute that is other than and beyond both self and world. This subject is not at home in this world; she is constantly longing for God. These sentiments, notes Hegel, "we find expressed most purely and beautifully in the Psalms of David, and in the Prophets; the chief burden of whose utterances is the thirst of

the soul after God, its profound sorrow for its transgressions, and the desire for righteousness and holiness" (Hegel 1944 [1837]: 321. Moreover, insofar as the individual is self-conscious of his or her self-assertion in the struggle to exist, she grasps herself at odds with the universal, and thereby comes to understand herself as evil. Hence Hegel notes that "this existence for self, this consciousness, is at the same time separation from the Universal and Divine Spirit. If I hold to *my* abstract Freedom, in contraposition to the Good, I adopt the standpoint of evil" (1944 [1837]: 321-322).

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is a vivid portrayal of the unhappy consciousness made sick by its longing for the absolute. Both the knights of infinite resignation and of faith give up that which they most love in the world for God. This resignation is symbolic of a resignation of the value of finite existence in general, in particular of the finite self and its temporally conditioned desires. But once the knight of infinite resignation resigns the finite she is never at home in the world again; the re-valuation of the finite becomes a problem. Kiekegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, himself a knight of infinite resignation, cannot understand how the knight of faith is able to be at home in the world, to desire earthly things and to take delight in them, once the movement of infinite resignation has been achieved. Kierkegaard uses beautiful image of the dancer to make his point:

> It is said that the dancer's hardest task is to leap straight into a definite position, so that not for a second does he have to catch at the position but stands there in it in the leap itself.… The knights of infinity are dancers too and they have elevation. They make the upward movement and fall down again.… But when they come down they cannot assume the position straightaway, they waver an

> instant and the wavering shows they are nevertheless strangers in the world. (Kierkegaard 1985 [1843]: 70).

On the other hand, says Silentio, the knight of faith accepts the finite back again in such a way that she cannot be distinguished from a Philistine: "to express the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely-that is something only the knight of faith can do…." (1985 [1843]: 70). For Kierkegaard, the movement of the knight of faith is not only a real possibility, but it is *only* through faith in God that genuine love of another is possible. For only the self that accepts its true selfhood, thereby acknowledging the Power that grounds it, is capable of truly loving another in and through this Power.

Friedrich Nietzsche's bad consciousness is also a close relative of Hegel's unhappy consciousness; however, his recommendations are diametrically opposed to those of Kierkegaard. According to Nietzsche, the very nature of self assertion, of life itself, "operates essentially, that is in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction, and simply cannot be thought of at all without this character" (Nietzsche 2000 [1887]: 512). However, the requirement that humans live harmoniously amongst themselves in society required the bridling of these instincts. They were not, however, obliterated, but redirected inward: "Hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change in destruction–all this turned against the possessors of such instincts: *that* is the origin of the bad conscience" (2000 [1887]: 521). While this bad conscience is a sickness, it is "an illness as pregnancy is an illness" (2000 [1887]: 524). Out of it is born the entire inner life of human beings; the bad conscience is the "womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena" (2000 [1887]: 523); it is, as such, the cradle of the soul. Hence Nietzsche notes that "the entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were

stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth, and height, in the same measure as outward discharge was *inhibited*" (2000 [1887]: 520). Through the bad conscience the individual becomes conscious of himself *as* a subject; it is, as such, a necessary moment in the development of self-consciousness.

The priests, however, turned this necessary illness into something much worse and more difficult to overcome: they turned the bad conscience into the consciousness of sin and guilt. Hence the religious individual "apprehends in 'God' the ultimate antithesis of his own ineluctable animal instincts," and in doing so "ejects from himself all his denial of himself… in the form of an affirmation" (2000 [1887]: 528) that is, he projects his denial of himself onto something absolute and outside himself–God–thereby gaining an *absolute* foothold for the rejection of all his finite drives! Nihilism–the nihilation of all finite drives–thus arrives at its acme through the *affirmation* of God.

In rejecting theism Nietzsche does much more than reject the idea of God: he questions the value of the idea of truth itself, the affirmation of which he believes requires an impossible *view from nowhere*: the ideal of objective knowledge demands "that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something,* are supposed to be lacking" (2000 [1887]: 555). Insofar as the enterprise of science requires the positing of objective truth, science too, requires the abnegation of life and an asceticism based on "our longest lie (2000 [1887]: 588)." The person who has faith in science "affirms another world than that of life, nature and history" and must "deny its antithesis, this world, *our* world," for "it is still a *metaphysical faith* that underlies our faith in science (2000 [1887]: 588)." Hence the

positing of the absolute, according to Nietzsche, whether it be in the guise of an absolute, objective truth, or the absolute ground of existence (God) cannot but lead to an alienation of the individual from himself. The individual is finite, and has only his or her perspective and desires at her disposal. To try and move beyond this finitude with respect to knowledge is a "castration of the intellect" (2000 [1887]: 555), a new kind of nihilism achieving in the realm of knowledge what religion had achieved in the realm of desire.

Nietzsche's critiques of theism, and others making similar points (for instance, those of Feuerbach and Marx) had a large impact on Western thought. Two critiques discussed above especially stand out: first, theism provides a totalizing discourse undergirded by an absolute standpoint–that of God. Of course, this "view from nowhere" is a mere fiction, since *all* standpoints are finite. Nevertheless, this God's eye view is invoked by those in power to legitimize and absolutize their own finite claims, and to invalidate those of the powerless. Second, theism promotes guilt and suffering–a sick "unhappy consciousness" that denies validity to earthly human desires and standpoints insofar as they are recognized *as* the desires and standpoints of merely finite individuals. Theism thereby leads to a this-worldly nihilism and the projection of all meaning and value, and indeed the very possibility of happiness, into another world.

These criticisms were especially devastating to a particular kind of theistic discourse, one that tended to understand God in simplistic terms, as an *object* for a subject. Other kinds of theistic discourse, in particular of the kind promoted by some of the figures explored in this essay such as Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Tillich, were much more resilient to these kind of attacks. Beginning their approach to theism from an

investigation of the nature of the existent subject, their systems had built into them the insight that *all* human knowledge and willing express *only* finite and partial points of view. This is as it should be. As Tillich warned it is the *mis-taking* of what is merely finite *as if* it were absolute that is both idolatrous and demonic (Tillich 1961: 216). Moreover, locating access to the divine at the heart of subjectivity itself, these thinkers had strong arguments showing that true religion overcomes the sickness of the unhappy consciousness. God does not stand *over against* the subject in such a way that God is wholly other and apart from the subject, so that the self must project all value *outside* of itself. Rather, for these figures, God dwells in the depths of the human heart, transforming–not obliterating–human desire into an expression of divine love.

Related Topics

Chapter 2: Judaism; Chapter 12: Western Philosophy; Chapter 21: Historical Inquiry; Chapter 23: Religious Studies and Theology; Chapter 24: Moral Inquiry

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Further Reading

Each of the following Cambridge Companions is devoted to one of the figures discussed in the essay. The Companions cover all major aspects of the thought of each of the figures and are written by leading scholars in their respective fields.

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ENDNOTES

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[1] I am indebted to Michael Popejoy for research assistance on this project.

[2] References are not to page numbers, but to paragraph and section numbers of the second edition of *Christian Faith*.

[3] In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, he notes that "Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependence' was rather near to what is called in the present system 'ultimate concern about the ground and meaning of our being," Tillich 1961: 42.

[4] "For *that* God really does not exists who operates and functions as an individual existent alongside of other existents, and who would thus as it were be a member of the larger household of all reality" Rahner 1984: 63.

[5] So Boethius, "…eternity is the complete possession of an endless life enjoyed as one simultaneous whole…. What is rightly called eternal is that which grasps and possesses simultaneously the entire fullness of an unending life, a life which lacks nothing of the future and has lost nothing of the fleeting past. Such a being must necessarily always be its whole self, unchangingly present to itself, and the infinity of unchanging time must be as one present before him." Boethius 1957 [524].

[6] On the Kantian shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric model of knowledge, see Allison 2004: 27-45.

[7] This idea is present throughout all of Rahner's *Foundations*. He notes, for instance, that "the meaning of all explicit knowledge of God… can really be understood when all the words we use there point to the unthematic experience of our orientation towards the ineffable mystery" (Rahner 1984: 53).