

most important to keep in mind is the fact that no existentialist ever asked for slavish, uncritical adherence to a particular "line" of thought. Each of these authors challenges you as an individual to think things through on your own, and to make a final decision using what Nietzsche calls "intellectual conscience." This emphasis on the individual's own responsibility is perhaps the most valuable and enduring contribution of existentialism to philosophy.

Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1813, the youngest child of a large family. He was raised in a prosperous middle-class home, with the strictest devotion to church and religion. His father was a successful merchant and an avid reader of theology, and his mother had been his father's servant before she became his second wife. Kierkegaard had a hunchback, and this, according to some, is the "thorn in his flesh" he often mentions in his writings. He viewed his life as governed by a deep melancholy, which he self-consciously attempted to hide with wit and gaiety. An event of crucial importance for Kierkegaard was his breaking of his engagement to Regine Olsen in 1841. His reason for this action is an important but unsolved mystery in his life. First educated at home, he began university as a student of theology, but soon turned to literature and philosophy. Kierkegaard was especially steeped in the philosophy of Hegel, which he studied in Berlin. A dominant theme in his life was his opposition to official state Christianity, seen by him as encumbered by a passionless conformity to bourgeois respectability and stability. Instead, Kierkegaard advocated a life of intense religious commitment, free from superficiality and empty formalism. His works include *Either/Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), *Training in Christianity* (1851), and *The Attack Upon "Christendom"* (1854-55). His writings were largely ignored outside of Denmark up until the twentieth century, when they became very influential. Kierkegaard died in 1855, at the age of forty-two, after collapsing while carrying the last of his inheritance from the bank.

Kierkegaard's Aims

The overriding concern in Kierkegaard's religious and philosophical writings is to provide insight into the meaning and fulfillment of human life: to provide insight into what makes a human life worth living, and what makes it genuinely satisfying for the individual who is living it. He believed that in his own time both secular and religious people were especially unable to attain the meaning and fulfillment of which they are capable. In *The Present Age*, he describes his own culture as having lost an agreed-upon sense of qualitative distinctions accepted within society as a whole. People no longer make a clear distinction, for example, between fine art and schlock art, or

between great writers and hacks. As a result, there is no longer a basis for experiencing things as genuinely worthwhile or significant in life. As such distinctions are leveled down, Kierkegaard claims, the possibility of finding meaning and fulfillment in our lives is diminished. We would then lose any generally accepted bases for making the kinds of commitments that would give our lives a point and a sense of direction.

In his characteristically existentialist view, Kierkegaard believes that achieving meaning in life is not something simply given to us, something that comes with just being alive. Rather, it depends on the choices we make. It is by our decisions, by the stands we take, that we can impart a meaning to our lives. This is why our choices are a matter of the greatest seriousness. In Kierkegaard's view, we only genuinely come to exist as human selves through the life-defining choices we make.

Unlike the other existentialists discussed in this volume, however, Kierkegaard does not believe that we are ultimately on our own in making the best possible choice for our lives. His final recommendations are religious, and he argues that the best decision we can make is one in which we are dependent on God. Hence he is called a religious or Christian existentialist, in contrast to such figures as Nietzsche and Sartre, who are often designated secular existentialists.

As a religious thinker, Kierkegaard has been extremely influential, especially in the twentieth century. But his original views also had an especially profound effect on secular existentialist thinkers, like Heidegger. Many of the major themes in secular existentialism were first developed by Kierkegaard. First, he holds that everyday life tends to be deeply unfulfilling. Second, he claims that human existence involves a profound tension or conflict between two dimensions, *facticity* and *transcendence*, that is, between what we always already are and the capacity we have to transcend this existence. Third, Kierkegaard holds that the meaning we find in life is not something that simply comes to us, but is something we attain through struggle, by means of our choices and commitments. And *finally*, he formulates the view that certain kinds of decisions lead to more fulfilling lives than do others, and that these decisions express and constitute what we truly are. On his view, then, we are, to a certain extent, self-constructing beings: we are what we make of ourselves by means of our decisions.

The Human Situation

Though Kierkegaard was an exceptionally original thinker, he was familiar with Hegel's thought and often reacted to it. According to Hegel, the development of reality through history must be understood as following a *dialectical* process. The term 'dialectical' is etymologically related to the word 'di-

ologue'. Socrates and Plato originally thought of a dialectical process as like a conversation between two people who, starting from opposing perspectives on an issue, eventually arrive at a position that preserves the insights of each and on which both can rationally agree. Hegel believed that history generates opposing forces and principles, like subject and object, or the immanent and the transcendent, and that these opposites are reconciled in history by a rational, dialectical process.

Schematically, the process of dialectic begins with an *immediacy*, something that is a *particular* aspect of reality and is just given independent of conceptual reflection. For example, Hegel thinks of our particular sensations, prior to conceptual reflection, as immediate. Thus one might have a sensation of a particular redness independently of thinking of it as similar to or different from other color sensations. Another example of immediacy is a person's particular desires and urges conceived independently of conceptual reflection. One might have particular sexual urges, for instance, independently of any reflection on how they fit into one's conception of oneself as a moral and responsible agent.

In the dialectical process, according to Hegel, immediacy comes to be *mediated* through reflection. This reflection always involves *universal* or general considerations, which serve to transform our understanding of the immediacy in experience. For example, we would think of a particular color sensation differently if we understood it as falling into a general class, such as the class of red sensations, conceived as distinct from the class of orange or of yellow sensations. Similarly, we would think of our immediate sexual desires differently if we understood ourselves, together with these desires, as having a role in a community of rational beings with shared interests and a common culture. Furthermore, it is crucial to Hegel's view that this process of rational reflection not only influences our ways of thinking about things, but that this influence also transforms our behavior, our projects, and our institutions. When rational reflection changes how we think about our sexual desires, we will come to respect other people's feelings and sensibilities, and we will set up institutions such as marriage as a publicly recognized exclusive relationship.

The mediation Hegel has in mind always preserves the essential content of the aspects of immediacy. The aspects of immediacy are *aufgehoben*, that is, superseded but yet preserved by the dialectical process. The outcome of the dialectical process usually functions as a "new immediacy," and another process of mediation can then be brought to bear on this new immediacy. As this rational process continues, the result becomes more and more rational until reality is conceived as and becomes maximally rational. At this point the *Absolute* has been reached, and the rational is the real and the real is the rational.

Like Hegel, Kierkegaard conceives of human reality as a clash of opposites, but he does not believe that these disparities can always be resolved through rational mediation. One set of opposites plays a particularly important role throughout Kierkegaard's thought. In his view, a self is a tension between the finite and the infinite, which he also characterizes as a tension between the temporal and the eternal. For Kierkegaard the notion of the temporal signifies the events of our lives considered as immediate and distinct from one another, as separate particular moments. As temporal beings, we are no different from the other animals, having sensations and trying to satisfy desires. By contrast, the notion of the eternal signifies the overarching unity that these events can have just for humans. This unity has the potential of providing the separate moments of our lives with the kind of meaning and significance they lack without this unity. What is distinctive about humans is their ability to give their lives an enduring meaning.

Kierkegaard denies that the disparity between the temporal and eternal aspects of our lives can be resolved by a rational, dialectical process, and this disagreement with Hegel is fundamental to his view of human reality. In Kierkegaard's thought there is a deep and unresolvable distinction between (1) the abstract speculative outlook on reality found in Hegel's philosophy and (2) the concrete circumstances of a person who is attempting to find meaning in her life—"the existential situation." In the existential situation we find ourselves to be finite, temporal beings who are confronted with the demand to impart a meaning to our lives that goes beyond the transitory and local—the demand to achieve an eternal and infinite significance for our existence. From the existential point of view, these confrontations cannot be resolved by rational dialectic. In fact, it is not clear that the tension can be resolved at all by our efforts. We experience ourselves as finite and temporal, and we sense an impassable divide between what we are at this level and the infinite and the eternal, which stand as demands and ideals for us.

The crucial tension at the core of human existence cannot be resolved by rational thought. A kind of resolution of this tension is expressed in the idea, fundamental to Christian belief, that the eternal can exist in time; that the infinite can be incarnate as a finite being. Yet as thinkers, the most we can do is to become acutely aware of this paradox—that "the eternal has come into being in time," which for Christians means that God has become a temporal human being. Such a paradox cannot even be understood as a genuine possibility: "there is nothing for speculation to do except to arrive at an understanding of this impossibility."¹ Thus, whereas Hegel posits a rational reconciliation of all opposition in reality, Kierkegaard believes that

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 187.

existential reality exhibits a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict. This conflict is something with which the individual must struggle in taking a stand on his or her life. In effect, Kierkegaard stands in sharp disagreement with Hegelian rationalist optimism. This is no doubt one of the reasons that his views became so influential after European faith in rational progress was so badly shaken as a result of the First World War.

Spheres of Existence

A good way to begin to understand Kierkegaard's positive views is by looking at his threefold classification of the ways we humans can attempt to achieve fulfillment. In his view there are three main "spheres of existence" or modes of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.² Sometimes Kierkegaard portrays these lives as a sequence of steps, each of which we must take on the path to meaning and fulfillment. Kierkegaard presents these three modes of life as advocated by several different pseudonymous authors. For example, the putative author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in which the religious life is discussed, is Johannes Climacus, a philosophically inclined religious writer. The aesthetic, *Either/Or* part of *Either/Or* is presented as written by "A," the ethical, *Or* part by "B," and the entire book as edited by Victor Eremita. Kierkegaard's reason for presenting a mode of life through the device of a fictitious author might be to detach the ideas from his own authorial position, and thereby to encourage the reader to decide for himself or herself whether such a life is genuinely worthy of choice.³

Kierkegaard uses the word 'aesthetic' in a sense closely related to its Greek origin, *aisthesis*, which means sensation, and especially feeling. An aesthetic person is someone who lives for sensations, and in particular, for feelings. The most fundamental characteristic of the person living the aesthetic life is that his purposes are exhausted by the satisfaction of desires for momentary or short-term fulfillments. An obvious example of an aesthetic person is someone whose purpose in life is solely to satisfy desires for "peak experiences," such thrills as those achieved from, say, bungee-jumping or doing cocaine. But another example of an aesthetic life would be the professor who is so elated whenever she obtains a new result or makes an exciting discovery that she lives just for those rushes of intense pleasure she gets

2. See C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1983), 33–54.

3. This type of view is developed by Louis Mackey in *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), in chapter 6, 241–46.

in such moments. The aesthetic life can also be lived with different levels of reflective attention. An unreflective person might simply strive for moments of pleasure without any plan designed to secure them, whereas a strategist like the seducer described in *Either* devises elaborate designs to ensure frequent moments of satisfaction and infrequent moments of frustration.

Kierkegaard believes that the aesthetic option will always fail as a route to fulfillment. One reason for this failure is internal to the nature of the aesthetic life. An aesthetic person aims at the satisfaction of desires for momentary pleasures, but whether such satisfactions are actually secured often depends on circumstances beyond his control. An experience of intimacy can be thwarted by another's lack of inclination, a sudden loss of confidence can ruin a chance for a gold medal, and the difficulty of an issue can hinder an inquirer from gaining philosophical insight into it. This is so no matter how well crafted one's strategies are for achieving one's aesthetic goals. Success in the aesthetic life, therefore, is dependent on fortune.⁴ Moreover, even if one often succeeds in one's aesthetic endeavors, one will always be gripped by the anxiety that some misfortune will result in failure in future ventures. This anxiety undermines the sense of well-being that is the aim of the aesthetic life, and hence robs the aesthetic life of genuine success.

At a deeper level, both the attraction and the failure of the aesthetic life can be explained by the fact that human beings are a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. Most abstractly, this means that though our lives are constituted by a series of separate moments in time, we are also beings whose existence can transcend the disunity of these moments. Put more existentially, this means that though we are beings governed by basic passions and desires, aiming at momentary satisfactions, we are also beings who can make life something more coherent and unified, something more than just a series of fragmented projects aimed at transitory enjoyments.

But why should this reflection on the metaphysics of a human life have any implications for what kind of life is best for us? And how, in particular, can it help to explain why the aesthetic life is doomed to be unfulfilling? To answer these questions, we need to examine a current in the thought of the Romantic period that Charles Taylor has called *expressivism*.⁵ Expressivism is the view that in order to achieve fulfillment in life we need to express who and what we are. In this view, which has its roots in German Romanticism and was richly developed by Hegel, human beings have a certain nature or essence, and the best kind of life is one in which that nature or essence is expressed. In Hegel's view, for instance, as history proceeds the nature of human beings is progressively expressed in the arts and sciences, and in cul-

4. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 388.

5. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), chapter 1.

tural institutions such as marriage, civil society, and the state. As the expression of human nature becomes more comprehensive, human life becomes increasingly more fulfilled.

Kierkegaard (or at least Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) is also an expressivist, but with an emphasis that differs from Hegel's. "The task of the subjective thinker," he writes, "is to transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses in existence whatever is essentially human."⁶ The feature of human nature that he believes most crucially requires expression is our existence as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. It is fairly easy to express the temporal aspect: as a rule, we have little difficulty taking on a series of projects whose sole aim is momentary satisfaction. Expressing the eternal side, however, is much more difficult, and it comes only with a struggle. But if we can express the eternal within us, such expression provides a unity, an overarching purpose or theme, for our entire lives. This realization of a unifying structure for one's life is the task of every human: "To have been young, and then to grow older, and finally to die, is a very mediocre form of human existence; this merit belongs to every animal. But the unification of the different stages of life . . . is the task set for human beings."⁷

Kierkegaard believes that this overarching unity can be achieved only by means of a decisive, continuously renewed choice. In other words, it calls for a commitment, a "leap," that will unify one's life. Such a commitment might be to another person in marriage, or to God in a religious life. Here Kierkegaard sets out for the first time what is perhaps the most fundamental theme in existentialism: the idea that we can achieve meaning for our lives only through a decisive, life-defining commitment. In fact, only a person who aims to attain unity in this way can properly be called an *existing individual*. Existence, in this sense, is not a final state or a finished product. This is why Kierkegaard says "existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving."⁸ To be an existing individual is to engage oneself in a difficult process aimed at expressing what one is, a project that never ends so long as one is alive, but must be continuously taken up and pursued.

Accordingly, the deeper reason the aesthetic life fails is that it expresses only one side of the self, the temporal aspect of our nature, while ignoring the eternal aspect. This failure manifests itself concretely in the aesthetic life. Whenever the aesthetic person achieves the momentary fulfillment she was seeking, and the moment of fulfillment has ended, she must start anew, and the moment of fulfillment loses the meaning it had. "Yea, so long as

6. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 318.

7. *Ibid.*, 311.

8. *Ibid.*, 84.

every nerve in you is aquiver . . . then you feel that you are living. But when the battle is won . . . when the swift thoughts report that the victory is yours—then, in fact, you know nothing, you know not how to begin; for then, for the first time, you are at the beginning.”⁹ We remain unsatisfied in this type of life, because meaning and fulfillment require a commitment that pulls the various moments of our lives together, and that imparts a significance to our existence by giving these moments an overall coherence.

Despair, Subjectivity, and Resignation

In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard discusses various ways one might attempt to confront the most basic predicament for human existence: the need to express both one’s temporal and one’s eternal nature. There he describes three unsuccessful ways of managing this predicament, three stances he calls forms of *despair*. The first stance is to be unaware of the problem and thus to live a life of indifference to the most fundamental tension in one’s being.¹⁰ This type of life he describes as “not being conscious of having a self.” If one is in despair in this sense, one does not even feel that one is in despair, and accordingly Kierkegaard calls this state “despair improperly so-called.” For example, an aesthetic devotee of the momentary pleasures of partying and revelry may never realize that there is an eternal side to his nature that he is not expressing. He may feel that he is living well, but Kierkegaard holds that he is in fact in the worst form of despair.

The second stance is to recognize, perhaps as a result of a blow of fate, or by self-reflection, that one is not only temporal but also eternal, and then attempt to resolve the tension between these two aspects by repudiating the eternal and immersing oneself in the temporal.¹¹ For example, an aesthetic person who is aware of her eternal nature might resolutely attempt to disavow her eternal aspect and persevere in living for the momentary pleasures of sport or social life. Because this stance involves denial of a part of the self, Kierkegaard calls it “despair at not willing to be oneself.” Such a stance may range from trying to drive consciousness of one’s despair into the background and ignoring one’s sense of the eternal as much as possible to nourishing a distinct consciousness of one’s despair. Someone who is distinctly conscious of his despair may fully “understand that it is weakness to take the earthly so much to heart,” but as a result may be “more deeply absorbed in his despair and despair over his weakness.”¹²

9. Ibid., 90.

10. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 175–80.

11. Ibid., 180–200, esp. 185–89, 195.

12. Ibid., 189, 195.

The third type of despair Kierkegaard describes is one that results from trying to express the fundamental tension through one’s own power. It is characterized by the attempt to express the eternal through one’s own will alone, while “detaching the self from every relation to the Power which posited it.”¹³ Kierkegaard calls this type of response “despair at willing to be oneself.” He cites the Stoic attitude as representative of this sort of despair. In this outlook one attempts to control oneself, to detach oneself psychologically from any potential cause of distress, and to be content with the events of one’s life no matter how bad they may seem, all by one’s own power.

In the second part of *Either/Or* Kierkegaard describes a kind of life, the ethical, that might be thought of as an instance of this third type of despair. The mark of the ethical life is a constantly renewed decision, made by one’s own will alone, to live in accord with ethical duty. For Kierkegaard marriage can be an example of the ethical life, for in marriage one can make the decision to commit oneself to another human being by one’s own power, and by renewing this commitment continuously, one can attempt to provide a unity to the various moments in one’s life that expresses one’s eternal nature. Although *Either/Or* does not describe the ethical life as one that involves despair, *The Sickness unto Death* characterizes the striving to express the eternal through one’s own will alone as the most agonizing, albeit the highest form of despair. Kierkegaard calls the attempt to express the eternal aspect of the self by one’s own will alone “defiance.” In his view, or at least in the view of Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *The Sickness unto Death*, this attempt is bound to fail. Of the despairing self who actively attempts to express the eternal he says: “no derived self [i.e. no created self] can by regarding itself give itself more than it is. . . . Hence the self in its despairing effort to will to be itself labors itself into the direct opposite, it becomes really no self.”¹⁴ For the secular existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre, however, a stance of defiance is the highest level of authenticity we human beings can hope to achieve. Indeed, Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* treats defiant, lucid self-awareness as the only realistic response to the absurdity of life.

But for Kierkegaard there is a better solution, which is to be found in the religious life (or at least in one kind of religious life). Religiousness is discussed in *Fear and Trembling*, *Edifying Discourses*, *Philosophical Fragments*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The last of these works represents Kierkegaard’s most thorough and most systematic effort to explain his views on religion. Perhaps the single most important theme of the *Postscript* is the claim that *truth is subjectivity*. With this claim Kierkegaard does not mean to

13. Ibid., 200–207; the quotation is at p. 201.

14. Ibid., 202.

deny that there are objective facts, that is, facts that are independent of our modes of representing and our ways of coming to know the world.¹⁵ Rather, "truth is subjectivity" means that, when issues regarding meaning and fulfillment in one's life are at stake, one's attitude toward the object of one's concerns takes precedence over the issue of whether one is actually right about some fact.

To understand this idea of subjective truth more clearly, let us examine how Kierkegaard contrasts it with his notion of objective truth: "*When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused on the relationship, however, but on the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth.*"¹⁶ We might clarify this passage by thinking about two ways a person might be said to have arrived at the truth. First, someone might master all of the true sentences about something that is genuinely important, while constantly maintaining a detached, theoretical stance. Imagine, for example, a psychologist who develops a theory about human relationships so accurate and insightful that it has changed the lives of millions of people. But suppose further that as a scientist she has developed so detached an attitude towards the world that she is unable to live in accordance with her theory in her own relationships, with the result that her life is very empty and unfulfilled. Such a person possesses the truth objectively, but not subjectively.

By contrast, another person might deeply and passionately live her relationships in accord with her insights. She would be in the truth subjectively. In Kierkegaard's view, when finding meaning and fulfillment for one's life is at issue, what is most important is the nature of one's relationship, not being right: "*When the question of truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be related to what is not true.*"¹⁷ According to Kierkegaard, one is in the truth subjectively when the degree of passion in one's relationship expresses the nature of the thing or person to which one relates oneself. Thus, in his view, if one is attempting to relate oneself to God, the infinite being, the appropriate kind of relationship is one of infinite intensity. To illustrate these claims about truth, Kierkegaard argues that a pagan praying with in-

15. See Robert Adams, "Truth and Subjectivity," in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Eleanor Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993): 15-41.

16. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 178.

17. Ibid.

finite passion, "although his eyes rest on the image of an idol," has a more appropriate relationship to the truth, or is more "in the truth," than someone who has fewer false beliefs and more true beliefs about religion, but holds them without deep feeling.

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 more truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.¹⁸

In his philosophical writings about religion, Kierkegaard distinguishes between two different sorts of religious life. The first, which he calls "Religiousness A," is characterized by an attempt to relate oneself to God by means of a continuously repeated commitment, solely by means of one's own power. This sort of religiousness can be characterized by three different modes of self-expression, or as Kierkegaard calls them, simply "expressions." The first of these is *resignation*. An attempt to express the infinite in one's life requires that one be willing to renounce all temporal and finite things in order to achieve a relation to the eternal and infinite. As he says, "if for any individual an eternal happiness is his highest good, this will mean that all finite satisfactions are voluntarily relegated to the status of what may have to be renounced in favor of an eternal happiness."¹⁹ This does not necessarily suggest that one must stop eating food, for example, but rather that one must psychologically detach oneself from all such finite things so that one does not rely on them for fulfillment in life. One must, however, be willing to give them up altogether if one's relationship to the infinite is at issue. Moreover, as Robert Adams points out, resignation does not involve indifference.²⁰ On the contrary, it requires the intensification of one's desire for the finite, and in the paradigm case, a concentration of all of one's desire for the finite into a desire for a single finite thing. (This concentration is required, Kierkegaard says, so that the soul will not be "dispersed in the multifarious," as the aesthetic person's is.) Then, while one's desire for this finite thing is the greatest it can be, one, *while maintaining this desire*, resigns that thing.

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard provides two illustrations of infinite

18. Ibid., 179-80.

19. Ibid., 350.

20. Robert Adams, "The Knight of Faith," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (October 1990): 383-95, 387-90.

resignation.²¹ The first involves “a young swain” who falls in love with a princess. Kierkegaard says that “the whole content of his life consists in this love, and yet the situation is such that it is impossible for it to be realized.” But he does not give up his love: “He is not cowardly, he is not afraid of letting love creep into his most secret, most hidden thoughts, to let it twine in innumerable coils about every ligament of his consciousness—if the love becomes unhappy love, he will never be able to tear himself loose from it.” When he comes to terms with the impossibility of his having a relationship with the princess, rather than give up his love, he becomes a “knight of infinite resignation.” This involves two components: first, that he “concentrate the whole content of life and the whole significance of reality in one single wish,” his wish to have a relationship with the princess he loves, and second, that at the very same time he uses all of his strength to sacrifice having a relationship with her. In the process of resignation, the knight never relinquishes his love, and this is of crucial significance. It is by focusing all his love for the finite and temporal into one wish, while at the very same time sacrificing the possibility of attaining that wish, that the knight expresses the eternal aspect of his nature. And thus, “love for that princess became for him the expression for an eternal love, assumed a religious character,” and it “was transfigured into a love for the Eternal Being.”

Kierkegaard also illustrates infinite resignation by the story of Abraham, the great biblical father of faith. Abraham and his wife Sarah have lived long and prosperous lives, but despite their ardent wish, they have never had a child together. But when Abraham is ninety-nine years old, and Sarah is ninety, God promises them a son (Genesis 17: 15–19). Abraham laughs when he hears this, because he thinks that they are too old to have a child, and then God tells him to name the child, whom they soon have, “Isaac,” which means “(one) will laugh.” As Isaac is growing up, however, God one day says to Abraham: “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22: 2). Abraham, in obedience to God, takes his son to Moriah and prepares to sacrifice him. In Kierkegaard’s analysis, when God asks him to sacrifice his son, Abraham fully intends to do so, even though Isaac continues to mean as much to him as anything in the finite world could possibly mean to anyone. And thus, while concentrating his love for the finite in Isaac, he at the same time performs the movement of resignation by agreeing to sacrifice him.

The second expression of Religiousness A is suffering. Suffering arises in

21. All quotations from *Fear and Trembling* are taken from Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941). All subsequent quotations from *Fear and Trembling* are reprinted below.

this kind of religious person because of the difficulty involved in psychologically detaching oneself from finite things—“this process is a dying away from the immediate.”²² Because attachment to finite things comes naturally to us, genuine detachment requires a continuously renewed decision and causes us intense psychological pain. Kierkegaard actually demeans those who flagellate themselves in order to express their devotion to God, because the suffering caused by renunciation is much more intense, he believes, than the physical suffering inflicted by the whip.

The third expression reveals why, just as in the case of the aesthetic life, Religiousness A is in some sense deeply unfulfilling. This third expression Kierkegaard calls *guilt*. The guilt he has in mind here is not the familiar moral attitude, but a special kind of religious guilt. In our attempt to express the infinite by our own efforts, we come to the realization that our expression inevitably will be negative. Guilt “is the expression for the relationship [with an eternal happiness] by reason of the fact that it expresses the incompatibility or disrelationship.”²³ To express the infinite we can only renounce the finite—there is no positive expression of the infinite that is within our power. The theologian Paul Tillich makes the same point in terms of his categories of *ultimacy* and *concreteness*. In religious life, Tillich claims, we desire to express the ultimate, but for us there is no concrete content—an object, event, or act—that can adequately express the ultimate.²⁴ Similarly, Kierkegaard argues that the highest expression possible within the confines of Religiousness A is an eternal or perpetual recollection of guilt, a constant awareness that one’s own powers are insufficient to express infinitude.

Faith

Kierkegaard’s characterization of Religiousness A makes room for another possibility, a type of religion in which one does not rely solely on one’s own powers. In the *Philosophical Fragments*, he contrasts Religiousness A, or as he calls it here, “Socratic Religion,” with Christianity. In Socratic Religion, the truth is not held to come to a person from an outside source, but rather to come from inside a person, as an innate (inborn) idea, and it becomes conscious by a process of remembering what one knew more clearly. The moment at which one recollects is not of particular significance, for there is a sense in which one possesses the truth all along; Socratic religion is one of human self-sufficiency. By contrast, in Christianity, or “Religiousness B” as

22. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 432.

23. *Ibid.*, 473.

24. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 1:211. See Robert Adams discussion of Tillich’s relationship to Kierkegaard in “Truth and Subjectivity,” 37.

it is called in the *Postscript*, we do not possess the truth all along. Instead, we are initially in error. Furthermore, we do not arrive at the truth by discovering something already in us, but rather by being taught by God as teacher. The moment at which one realizes the truth is therefore of decisive significance, because before this moment one had no grasp of the truth at all.

Furthermore, Christianity supplies concrete content for religious expression. The Truth that we are taught is a Person: the Incarnation, God who has become human while remaining God. The God who has become human is the ultimate paradox—the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal in a single being. As we have seen, Kierkegaard does not believe that the resolution of the most fundamental oppositions in reality can be achieved by means of a Hegelian rational dialectic. Instead, he argues that the ultimate paradox—that the eternal has been in time—in virtue of its very nature defies understanding. Kierkegaard maintains that this incomprehensibility is an asset, for this paradox is precisely the sort of thing that can inspire passion of the kind required for an expression of the infinite. “Subjectivity culminates in passion, Christianity is the paradox, paradox and passion are a mutual fit, and the paradox is altogether suited to one whose situation is to be in the extremity of existence.”²⁵ Thus, to be a Christian requires continuously reaffirmed commitment to the deepest paradox conceivable, and this requires the greatest possible passion. This passion is expressed in a *leap* of faith, in taking a stand on a religious commitment that is absurd, and thus cannot be rationally established or explained. One who has faith is condemned to *silence*.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard illustrates a further characteristic of Religiousness B by the example of the knight of faith. Kierkegaard contrasts this knight with the knight of infinite resignation who, as we have seen, concentrates all of his desire for the finite into his love for the princess and then sacrifices the possibility of a relationship with her in order to express the infinite. The knight of faith is similar to the knight of infinite resignation in that he also goes through these two movements in order to express the infinite. But he is unique in making an additional move: *At the very same time* that he resigns the finite he receives and accepts it back “by virtue of the absurd.” After making the movements of resignation, Kierkegaard says, the knight of faith “makes still another movement more wonderful than all.” The knight says about the princess he loves, but from whom he has psychologically distanced himself in the process of infinite resignation: “I believe nevertheless that I shall get her, in virtue, that is, of the absurd, in virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible.”

For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the paradigmatic example of the knight of

25. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 206.

faith. In the biblical account, as he takes the knife to sacrifice his son, an angel calls to Abraham from heaven: “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Genesis 22: 12). Abraham then sees a ram whose horns are caught in a thicket, and sacrifices it instead of his son. In Kierkegaard’s interpretation, Abraham resigns Isaac by agreeing to sacrifice him in obedience to God, and then accepts him back when God provides a ram for the sacrifice. For Kierkegaard it is crucial that when Abraham accepts Isaac back, he does not relinquish the movements involved in infinite resignation. Instead, he maintains his intense love, his resignation, and his acceptance, all at the same time.

In Kierkegaard’s view, the movement of faith is extremely difficult to make. Kierkegaard imagines the knight accepting a relationship with the princess while preserving the movements of infinite resignation. Speaking through the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio, he says, “but by faith, says that marvelous knight, by faith I shall get her in virtue of the absurd. But this movement I am unable to make. As soon as I would begin to make it everything turns around dizzily, and I flee back to the pain of resignation. I can swim in existence, but for that mystical soaring I am too heavy.” (Kierkegaard seems to be reflecting on his own relationship with Regine Olsen here.) In Adams’ view, the movement of faith is so difficult because the “taking back of what one is still giving up with all one’s force is a practical . . . contradiction,” and this contradiction is “the absurd by virtue of which the knight of faith says the princess is to be won.”²⁶ (A practical contradiction arises when an agent cannot perform an action due to conflicting factors within its specification.) For Kierkegaard, the complex attitude of Abraham, and of the knight of faith who accepts the princess back while at the same time maintaining infinite resignation, is an expression of the ultimate paradox—the unity of the temporal and eternal, of the finite and infinite. Abraham resigns Isaac in expression of the infinite, and accepts him back in expression of the finite, and maintains both attitudes at once, thereby expressing the ultimate paradox.

The notion that one can maintain an attitude of resignation toward something and at the same time an attitude of accepting it back is the most central idea in Kierkegaard’s conception of faith. Adams argues that in developing this account of the knight of faith, Kierkegaard is presenting a solution to a psychological problem that arises for the religious life, and for any life which involves deep, all-embracing commitments.²⁷ If I am committed to

26. Adams, “The Knight of Faith,” 385. See also Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, 212–45.

27. Adams, “Truth and Subjectivity,” 35–41, and in conversation.

expressing my relationship with God in my entire life, how am I to be related to such features of everyday finitude as my ordinary physical and psychological needs? The solution of Religiousness A is that I should resign them, but this strategy involves agonizing psychological distress. By advocating Religiousness B, Kierkegaard is recommending a different solution, one that combines psychological detachment with acceptance. According to this solution, I should not consider these finite elements as the aim of my search for ultimate fulfillment, yet I accept them as integrated into a life devoted to this quest. But although a life lived in accordance with this conception escapes the anguish of the three expressions of Religiousness A, it nevertheless involves embracing the ultimate paradox, an act of acceptance that, in Kierkegaard's view, poses an immense challenge.

The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

One of the deepest problems that Kierkegaard raises for faith in *Fear and Trembling* is whether the requirements of the religious life can ever override the requirements of the ethical life. In Hegel's conception, this could never happen, because ethical requirements are expressions of the universality essential to all rational reflection and agency, and nothing can supersede what is rational and universal. Kierkegaard, in contrast, thinks ethical requirements can sometimes be superseded. To show this, he focuses his discussion of this issue on the divine command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This sacrifice, Kierkegaard assumes, is ethically wrong, because it requires making of oneself, as a particular individual, an exception to rational and universal principles. His point is not that all human sacrifice is ethically wrong. On the contrary, he suggests that if the Greeks would be saved by Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, these acts of human sacrifice might have an ethical, universal justification. But no such ethical justification applies in Abraham's situation. In this case, Kierkegaard holds, feeling an impulse to make oneself an exception to universal ethical requirements is "temptation": "Whenever the individual after he has entered the universal feels an impulse to assert himself as the particular, he is in temptation." Nevertheless, Abraham's religious faith requires him to sacrifice his son.

By Kierkegaard's account, faith, in which "the individual as particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute," is a relationship of a particular person to a particular God. Thus, faith stands in opposition to the rational and the universal. Kierkegaard's crucial claim, then, is that religious faith, as a particular thing, *supersedes* the universal; in Hegelian terms, it is a "new immediacy." "Faith," he says, "is precisely this paradox, that the individual as particular is higher than the universal." But faith does not *do away* with the ethical; rather it *supersedes* it while preserving its essential

content. This is manifest in Abraham's *struggle* with the command to sacrifice his son. Having faith is not like being an outlaw who rejects ethical principles altogether. If Abraham's faith did away with the ethical, there would be no need for him to struggle with God's command.

Yet, in addition, faith does not supersede the ethical in a way that is rationally comprehensible. Abraham cannot express his faith in language, for language is limited to the expression of universal concepts, the means we have for rational comprehension. Rather, the relationship between faith and the ethical remains a paradox. We can become acutely aware of this paradox, we can passionately struggle with it, but we can never rationally grasp it: "it is and remains to all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought." In Kierkegaard's view, then, there is a dimension of humanity, expressed in an individual relationship with God, that is independent of one's relationships and obligations to humanity, and that cannot be rationally comprehended but only passionately appropriated. And thus, for the knight of faith, life does not become meaningful through rational acceptance of a coherent system of ethical principles. Rather, it becomes meaningful through a passionate struggle to live in accord with the fundamental and irresolvable paradox that lies at the heart of human existence.²⁸

28. We are grateful to Robert Adams and Oliver Carling for enlightening discussion of issues in this section.