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ETHICS, ONTOLOGY AND RELIGION:
Reflections on Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourses*

I

In a famous footnote to *Being and Time* Heidegger wrote that

> "In the nineteenth century Søren Kierkegaard explicitly seized upon the problem of existence as an existentiell problem and thought it through in penetrating fashion. But the existential problematic was so alien to him that, as regards his ontology, he remained completely determined by Hegel and by ancient philosophy as he saw it. There is thus more to be learned philosophically from his 'edifying' writings, than from his theoretical ones – with the exception of his treatise on the concept of anxiety." (SZ 235)

Unfortunately, Heidegger does not make clear which writings of Kierkegaard he is referring to as 'edifying'. What is clear, however, is that his evaluation of Kierkegaard is determined by his own distinction between *existentiell* and *existential,* a distinction that also, largely, corresponds to that between ontic and ontological. Both of these points are underlined by further footnotes referring to Kierkegaard. (SZ 190, 338)

What, then, does this distinction mean in its specific application to Kierkegaard?

Let us note, first, that in *Being and Time* Heidegger believed himself to be re-opening a long forgotten philosophical question, the question of Being. In the immediate past this question had disappeared behind Neo-Kantian epistemological questions, behind an equation of philosophy with world-views-and, in connection with this latter, behind an understanding of philosophy conditioned by psychology. Since none of these approaches to philosophy concerned themselves with the question of Being, the possibility of any positive ontology was necessarily alien to them. Heidegger himself did not claim that he was already in a position to deliver this missing ontology, hut only to be raising the question of Being in such a way as to re-open the way to it. There are two implications here that are directly relevant to his assessment of Kierkegaard.

The first is that there is no current ontology that is, as it were, immediately available for use. Insofar as Kierkegaard's thought reflects certain ontological commitments these, according to Heidegger, are limited to what he had inherited from Hegel. But these are inadequate for the kind of re-opening of the question of Being that Heidegger himself is now undertaking. Hegelian ontology does not enable Being itself to be seen in its truth and as such. The same therefore applies to Kierkegaard. Not-having

access to a fundamental ontology, Kierkegaard is forced back onto the experience of Being that is available on the strictly limited plane of the ontic or the existentiell, i.e., the plane of everyday life itself. No matter how deep or penetrating his analyses of such psychological conditions as anxiety are, Heidegger is saying, they are never going to reach that level at which Being comes into view in its truth and as such. It is also clear for Heidegger that the same applies to other religious thinkers such as Augustine and Luther who also approach the question of existence in a merely ontic or existentiell way. Why is this especially characteristic of the religious thinker? Because the religious thinker is only concerned about the impact of ultimate questions on the lives of specific individuals or specific groups. The religious question is "Can I, as this particular being that I am, find a gracious God?" or "What is the task to which God is calling me, the task that awaits me and no other?" Having no essential interest in ontology, the religious thinker will always fall back on whatever is the dominant ontology of his time – for Augustine Neoplatonism, for Kierkegaard Hegelianism. But if philosophy now wants to re-open the question of Being, it can do so only on the basis of the resources available uniquely to its current time and current need.

But this already points to the second implication of Heidegger's basic undertaking that is relevant to his evaluation of Kierkegaard: that in seeking to re-open the question of Being philosophy is not entirely without resources, it is not starting from nowhere but from the situation of our own time as that is interpreted in a pre-ontological way by its most penetrating minds – amongst whom, of course, Kierkegaard is (for Heidegger) a leading figure. Kierkegaard's psychological, existentiell analyses and descriptions do not themselves give us an ontology, but they give us material for ontological reflection – and, Heidegger says, they do so pre-eminently in his 'upbuilding' works.

Before we proceed to those works themselves, however, there is a further question to consider, and that is the role of phenomenology. At least in this early period of his thought, it is clear that Heidegger is using a version of Husserl's phenomenological method. In the face of the impasse of contemporary philosophy, it is precisely Husserl who provides a method by which to rescue the question of Being from the obscurity of scholasticism, even though such an application of phenomenology is alien to Husserl himself. Putting it very crudely, then, we could say that if Kierkegaard (and others) provided Heidegger with his material, Husserl provided him with his method. Phenomenology held out the promise of a method that, instead of imposing an alien thought-structure upon it, would allow Being to disclose itself in the manner of its own way of Being, in its unconcealed shining-forth, Being in beings, as Heidegger would later formulate it. This, however, prompts a question regarding the way in which Kierkegaard might be understood to provide material for ontology. Is Kierkegaard himself already practicing a kind of phenomenology or is he maybe engaging in a kind of pre-phenomenological reflection that provides phenomenology proper with material for analysis?

What do Kierkegaard's texts themselves suggest? The religious or 'upbuilding' writings to which Heidegger refers seem to offer a descriptive account of a self that, as it moves through a series of failed self-understandings is driven to ever deeper and ever more all-encompassing self-understandings, moving in the direction of a description of the fundamental structures that make it possible to speak of the self as 'existing' at all. Some interpreters of Kierkegaard have seen in this a phenomenology of the self that, even if it does not contain a developed ontology has such an ontology implicit within it. Although Heidegger himself does not fully clarify this, my view would be that he sees Kierkegaard as operating at the level of pre-phenomenological reflection rather than as practicing some kind of phenomenology. Nevertheless, Heidegger would presumably agree with those who see Kierkegaard as a kind of phenomenologist that, whatever its limitations, Kierkegaard's account of the human situation is *open to* phenomenological and, ultimately, ontological deepening. There is thus a continuum of sorts between what Kierkegaard is doing and what the phenomenological ontologist wants to arrive at.

It has taken a while to arrive at the point at which I can formulate my own case, and it is essentially this: that those who would rescue Kierkegaard from the opprobrium of being a 'merely' existentiell thinker by arguing that he is indeed a phenomenologist and a pioneer of a new kind of existential ontology are mistaken. Heidegger is essentially correct in saying that the ontological problematic was profoundly alien to Kierkegaard. However, Heidegger is mistaken in claiming Kierkegaard's upbuilding writings as material for his own project of fundamental ontology. Kierkegaard does not, as Heidegger claims, simply accept the ontological horizons of Hegelian thought. On the contrary, Kierkegaard's thought contests every possible ontology (Hegelian in the first instance but also, by implication, Heideggerian), as relevant to the ethical and religious situation of human existence - and, since the ethical and religious questions are the most urgent and the most decisive questions that a human being can face, ontology is excluded from the circle of what Paul Tillich called our ultimate concerns. In this respect Shestov's absurdist reading of Kierkegaard, for all its shortcomings at a scholarly level, is arguably closer to the mark than Heidegger's reading (a comment that, intriguingly, has in its favour the biographical evidence that it was precisely apropos what Shestov had identified as a shortcoming in the thought of Heidegger that Husserl pointed Shestov in the direction of Kierkegaard).[1]

That Heidegger should point especially to Kierkegaard's upbuilding works is striking with regard to the way in which Kierkegaard himself also emphasises their importance in his retrospective 'report to history', *The Point of View for my Work as an Author.* Here Kierkegaard insists that he was from the beginning a religious author and 'proves' it by pointing to the fact that throughout the period when he wrote the

[1] See N. Baranova-Shestova, *Zhizn 'L'va Sheslovapo perepiiske ii vospo'miinaiiiiyam sovremeniikov,* Paris, La Presse Libre, 1988.

aesthetic and philosophical pseudonymous works he was also publishing small sets of upbuilding discourses, later collected and published as the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses.* Kierkegaard says that whilst the pseudonyms were the works of his left hand, these discourses were the works of his right hand. However, as he adds, the world took with its right hand what he offered with his left, and with its left what he offered with his right. In other words, whilst works such as *Either/Or* became talking-points in the fashionable world, the discourses were almost entirely ignored. But the fact of their existence proves that religion was not something he only had recourse to when his inspiration dried up, like so many romantic poets (and, more recently, rock stars and movie actors), but that the religious questions were there from the beginning.

If we haven't actually read them, this might lead us to think of the discourses as doctrinal texts, setting out the Christian teaching to which the crises and anxieties of the pseudonymous texts point. In terms of a distinction made famous in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* we might imagine that they represent Kierkegaard's answer to the question concerning the 'what' of Christianity, as opposed to the 'how' of pure subjectivity. Or we might be reminded of the way in which right hand/ left hand imagery occurs also in the *Postscript*, when Kierkegaard, quoting Lessing, says that if God held all truth in His right hand and the infinite pursuit of it in His left he would always choose the left. In other words, that the pursuit of truth is better than its possession.

These thoughts might lead us, particularly if we are philosophically or aesthetically minded, to distrust the discourses. As works of Kierkegaard's right hand aren't they going to offer a boring claim to possess the truth, to give the religious 'answer' to the anxious questions posed by the pseudonyms? Wouldn't we do better just to leave them alone and stay with our infinite pursuit of truth?

Perhaps such thoughts have contributed to the huge neglect of the discourses in the secondary literature. They cannot, however, stand up to a reading of the texts themselves. Here, for example, we also find references to right hand/left hand imagery, again with reference to Lessing. This time, however, the question is not directly that of truth, but of eternal salvation. Kierkegaard (writing now in his own name) says that we would always want to choose the pursuit or, as he puts it here, the expectation of an eternal happiness (or blessedness) over its possession. For us, as human beings, the highest is not to be able to claim to be saved, but to be concerned with the question of eternal happiness. Another discourse opens with a distinction that also anticipates the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: the distinction between what Kierkegaard here calls 'indifferent' and 'concerned' truths. There are truths, Kierkegaard says, whose dignity consists precisely in the fact that they are indifferent to the circumstances of the one who believes them. The theorem of Pythagoras does not become more or less true according as to whether I am in a good mood or a bad, young or old, English or Russian. (Kierkegaard possibly saw historical truths as similarly decidable in the light of evidence that is independent of personal or local variations

in perspective. However, he does not seem to have been over-concerned about defining their scope too closely. More important is the fact that there is another kind of truth, 'concerned' truth. Here it matters and matters essentially whether the one who is confronted by them is young or old, cheerful or downcast, precisely because they are truths that concern him in the concrete particularity – arguably even the singularity – of his life. When a troubled wife asks her husband 'Do you, do you really love me, is it true that you love me' it is precisely the answer that he (and nobody else) gives, now (and at no other time) that matters. As this example (which, I should say, is not Kierkegaard's) suggests, such concerned truths do, for all their particularity, make a claim to truth. The wife does not want the husband merely to *say* that he loves her, she wants him really to love her, in truth, with all that that means.)

The subject-matter of the discourses, then, is not doctrine, as a fixed and finished product, something that can simply be taught in an objective manner: it is the ongoing, open-ended and infinite pursuit of eternal happiness as a matter of concern to each individual in their concrete particularity.

But let us step back a moment, for we have not yet closed the door to a phenomenological/ontological reading of the discourses. It is, after all, possible that this concerned pursuit of eternal happiness by the individual will constitute itself in existence as an individual exemplification of what turns out to be a more general ontological structure. That I am desperately hungry and will faint if I don't get anything to eat and that finding food is therefore of overriding concern to me (whereas my neighbour may be fully satisfied in this regard) is perfectly consistent with, and, indeed exemplifies, certain general biological conditions that all human beings have in common. Why should not an individual human being's passionate concern with his eternal happiness similarly reflect a more general, universal structure of human being? And there are recurrent patterns in the discourses that suggest that something like this might be the case. Let us then look at the anthropology of the discourses (if we can call it that) and then see why it is not serviceable in the cause of fundamental ontology and why we must understand this anthropology in another way. In a final section I shall, briefly, sketch the outline of this 'other way' and offer one or two suggestions concerning its implications for contemporary thought.

II

In the discourses Kierkegaard characteristically presents the human condition under the aspect of two alternative modes of existence. Man stands perpetually at a cross-roads. On the one side is a life absorbed in the world. On the other, a life open to God. The pattern is familiar from a long tradition of Christian piety and preaching in which Kierkegaard is not ashamed to stand.

In the first of the discourses on a text he once described as 'his favourite' ('Every Good and Perfect Gift is from Above' from May 1843),

Kierkegaard gives a paradigmatic account of those whose lives are lived solely in worldly terms:

> Without knowing how, they are carried along by life, one link in the chain that joins past and future; [they are] unconcerned as to how it happens, they are carried along on the wave of the present. Reposing in that law of nature that permits a man to develop himself in the world in the same way that it spreads a carpet of flowers over the earth, they live happily and contentedly amidst the changes of life, not for one moment do they wish to tear themselves loose, they give credit where credit is due, thanks to the one to whom they ascribe the good gifts [they have received], help to the one they think needs it, according as to what they believe will be most helpful for him. That there are good and perfect gifts they know well, and they know from whence they come; for the earth gives its increase and the heavens give the former and the latter rains and their families and friends are concerned as to what is best for them, and, naturally enough, their plans, wise and reasonable as they are, succeed, since they are [indeed] wise and reasonable. For them, life contains no riddles, and yet their life is a riddle, a dream ... (OT 42–3 [33])

What's wrong with this? Isn't it part of the neurosis of so-called 'modern man' that he has forgotten how to live life like this, how to take each day – how to take life – as it comes, that he is absorbed in 'having' instead of just 'being'? What's wrong with allowing ourselves to just go with the flow?

Kierkegaard's most direct answer to this question comes in the discourse 'Strengthening in the Inner Being'. Here he re-examines the person to whom he now refers to as 'the fortunate man': his "every dream is fulfilled, his eye is satisfied more quickly than it is aroused to desire, his heart hides no secret wish, his longing has learnt to know no limit. But if you were to ask him where it all comes from, he would lightly answer that he didn't know." (OT 94 [89]) This inability to answer betrays the essential limitations of his life. Happy as he is, he is profoundly ignorant of his own why and wherefore. "When a man is met with whose abundant fortune and wealth create general astonishment, he will need to explain the source of it all. If he cannot explain it, then he becomes the object of suspicion, [the suspicion] that he has not come by it by honest means, that he is not in lawful possession of it, but is perhaps a thief." (OT 95–6 [89])

This thought is further refined in the discourse 'To Acquire one's Soul in Patience' where the point is not so much that this is an illegal possession, as that it is, really, no possession at all. Such a man does not possess the world but is possessed by it. One who 'has' no soul has no centred self and therefore cannot possess anything at all. He owns the world only "as the wave owns the sea's unrest and deeps within itself, and knows no other heartbeat than the infinite heartbeat of the sea itself. People indeed claim that the way of possessing the world they are speaking about is something quite different. But that is a deception. For the world can only be possessed, insofar as it possesses me ... if one ...

owns the world in such a way that losing it can diminish one's possession, then that person is possessed by the world." (OT 164 [164-5]) A person who lives like this is, in the words of yet another discourse, "no more than an ornament in the successive unfolding of creation ... a tool in the service of obscure drives, that is, in the service of the world, since the world that he desires is what awakens these drives ... a stringed instrument played by the hand of obscure moods... a mirror, that reflects the world, or better, in which the world reflects itself..." (OT 301 [308])

Such a life falls far short of what we generally take to be a humanly adequate life characterised by thought, decision and action. Of course, we rarely come across a person who lives so completely absorbed in the world and in the moment without experiencing anything other than the fulfilment of all their wishes. More usual are those who would like to be like that, who would be happy (or who think they would be happy) to move through life like a wave in the sea, but who are denied that kind of satisfaction. Their hopes are disappointed or fulfilled only at the end of long struggles or by a change of luck. Such people (perhaps typical of bourgeois society) look to be an advance on the purely immediate person, but although the content of their lives may be richer than that of the person who only lives for the day, they too evaluate the meaning of their lives in relation to their outcome, the happy ending that makes everything alright. If the possibility of final gratification is denied, they will despair.

Imagine a person whose life had an auspicious beginning, who stepped out into the world with high hopes, but who was denied the expected fulfilment, he says:

> Then everything became confused for him. [As he saw it] there was no longer any ruler in heaven, the whole wide world was a mere playground for life's wild cacophony, and no ear could hear a harmony in all this confusion, no hand could get a grip on it and give it direction. Whatever means a person might have with which to comfort themselves, he believed, hope had gone, and would remain gone. So his soul became concerned. And the more he stared into the anarchy into which everything seemed to have been dissolved, the more power [this vision of things] gained over him, until he was rendered as if senseless by it all; his thoughts became dizzy, and he himself plunged down into [the abyss] and lost himself in despair. (OT 100 [94-5])

This is, of course, not far from the popular picture of Kierkegaard himself, the so-called 'melancholy Dane'. But although Kierkegaard portrays this position with an insider's sympathy, the concerned one is also shown to be dependent on the world he rejects, and his negative stance towards it is powered by resentment.

A crucial element in Kierkegaard's portrayal of the crises of the self concerns its relation to time.

Time, of course, does not disclose itself to us in a pure form, as if we could 'see' it passing. Rather, we experience time as it is refracted in our attitude to what happens in time. Once more, there are two basic

modalities of such experience. The first is that of the wish. 'Who,' Kierkegaard asks rhetorically, "has forgotten the priceless delight that children take in wishing, and no less pleasurable for rich children than for poor. Who has forgotten those beautiful tales from a vanished age, in which it was as in childhood, when the wish summed up the meaning of life...." (OT 251[253]) Remembering that for the person who was absorbed in the present 'every wish was fulfilled', we infer that the mode of wishing presents an experience of time as a continuum in which there is no radical break between present and future, and in which the anticipation of a future gratification fills the present without any sense of residual lack.

It is easy to draw attention to the naivety of such a 'childish' position, but, Kierkegaard insists, it also has its worth. In wishing we reveal who we really are. "Tell someone who your friends are, and they will know you; entrust them your wishes, and they will understand you, for not only is the soul revealed by what it wishes, but also, in a quite different manner, it renders you transparent, insofar as the wish subtly betrays how you are inwardly. For when you give utterance to your wish, the other person can see whether this is something that should be wished." (OT 250 [254])

But wishing is one thing, life is another. The fortunate one whose every wish is fulfilled is an exception and experience actually makes it impossible to continue in the naive bliss of the wish. Sometimes the frustration of our wishes is purely external, in the sense that we cannot get what we want. In this case, the person who is vehemently attached to their wish is likely to grow impatient, a topic to which the discourses return again and again. In 'To Preserve One's Soul in Patience' Kierkegaard allows impatience itself to speak.

> So what, then, is this life, in which the only certainty is the one thing that one knows nothing for certain about, namely, death! What is hope? An importunate nuisance, one cannot get rid of, a cunning deceiver, who keeps going longer than honour, a tiresome friend, who is always in the right, even if that should mean putting the Emperor in the wrong. What is recollection? A tiresome comforter, a cheat who wounds from behind, a shadow, one can not get rid of, even if someone wanted to buy it. What is happiness? A wish one gives away to whoever will have it. What is friendship? An illusion, a superfluity, one more irritation! What is it all, what is it all ... (OT 198 [195–6])

The impatient person demands instant gratification and if this is denied mocks the wish, rather than re-examining it to see if it was something that should have been wished for in the first place. In this way, although it assumes the aura of experience, impatience is no less abstract in relation to time than the wish.

But we have a choice. Over against impatience stands patience, and the importance that Kierkegaard gives to patience is exemplified in the fact that it appears in three of the titles of the discourses, 'To Acquire one's Soul in Patience', 'To Preserve one's Soul in Patience' and 'Patience

in Expectation'. The virtue of patience is, moreover, closely connected with that of expectation, which, also features in several discourse-titles: 'Patience in Expectation' (again), 'The Expectation of Faith' and 'The Expectation of an Eternal Happiness'. Both patience and expectation, separately and together, point to a relation to time that accepts time's essentially extended, open, unfinished character, and, consequently, the inevitable deferral of gratification that belongs to a life lived in time.

Worldly life itself demands a certain level of patience. The walker has to moderate his pace, if he is not to wear himself out before he reaches his destination, the person with a heavy load will rest from time to time to renew their strength, the trader waits at his stall, the fowler and the fisherman must wait patiently for their catch, the mother patiently endures sleepless nights and all the worries of a growing child. (OT 160-1 [160-1]) In these cases, however, patience is being construed in an external way, as a means to an end and not as an end in itself. Such a person does not end up by acquiring patience itself, but uses patience as a means to achieve an external goal. With regard to the inner life, however, i.e., the matter of gaining a soul, patience is intrinsic to what is to be achieved. For the soul, Kierkegaard says, is "the contradiction of the temporal and the eternal" (OT 163 [163]). If this definition is accepted it means that the gratification of temporal wishes cannot of itself be finally determinative for the soul's well-being. By virtue of its orientation to the eternal the soul is, in one sense, already what it is, it has a certain determinate identity given to it from its very inception. "He who comes naked into the world owns nothing, but he who comes into the world in his soul's nakedness does nevertheless own his soul, it is, as it were, that which he is to acquire and it is not like something external to him, like something new that needs to be taken possession of." (OT 163 [163-4]) Gaining or preserving one's soul, then, is bringing together and holding together the two temporal dimensions of the soul or self, and patience is precisely the form that this process of unification takes in relation to time. At the same time, because the soul is not some kind of atom of eternity, dropped into time and being required to maintain its self-identity through time, but is what it is in and by the temporal process of being acquired, i.e., as a lived, repeated, resolute self-choice, it is never finally completed in time. For this reason, patience is also qualified by and as expectation.

Like the wish, expectation is oriented towards the future, but, whereas the wish is characteristically focussed on a single, distinct object or aim, expectation is, as it were, pure and, in worldly or temporal terms, object-less: it is the anticipation of eternity.

The one who expects some particular thing can be disappointed, but for the person of faith

> when the world begins to test him sharply, when life's storms crush youth's joyous expectations, when existence, which seemed so tender and mild, turned itself into a heartless master who demanded everything he had given back, having given it only on such terms as made it possible to take it back again -

> then the person of faith may well regard himself and his life with sorrow and pain, but he will nevertheless say: there is one expectation that not even the whole world can take from me, the expectation of faith, and this is victory. I am not disappointed, for I never really believed that the world contained what it seemed to promise. My expectation did not concern the world, but God. (OT 32 [23–4])

What expectation expects is not this or that finite good: it is the selfs expectation that in any and every finite situation it will be able to renew its relation to the eternal, to God, and in that relation, but under the conditions of temporality, acquire, preserve and be what it is. But, as Kierkegaard argues in the same discourse, faith cannot happen to you as a piece of good luck, like winning a lottery. It cannot be merely the object of a wish, it must be willed.

Kierkegaard's discourses offer many examples of how life-presents us with a multiplicity of concerns that draw us away from what is essential towards absorption in worldly finitude. But there is another kind of concern. This is the concern that awakens when the self is no longer satisfied simply with taking the world as the confusing and frustrating object of his attention and desire, but asks "what the world means to him and he to the world, what all that within him by which he himself belongs to the world means to him, and, on this basis, what his life means for the world ..." and it is "first then that the inner being announces itself in this concern." (OT 93 [86]) This kind of self-reflection and self-questioning, however, cannot be satisfied with mere knowledge, "it requires another kind of knowledge, a knowledge which does not maintain itself as knowledge for a single instant but transforms itself in the moment of possession to action." (OT 93 [86]) In such concern,

> ... the inner self announces itself and requires an explanation, a testimony, which will explain the meaning of all things to him, and which will explain the meaning of his own life, in that it explains/transfigures[2] him in the light of the God who holds all things together in his eternal wisdom ... in that concern the inner self announces itself, which does not care about the whole world, but only about God and about himself, and about the explanation which will make his relation to God intelligible, and about the testimony which will strengthen him in the relationship. (OT 94 [87])

In such concern the selfs time-relation is also transformed, as it becomes "older than the moment" (OT 93 [86]) and, in so doing, finds a perspective that first makes possible the God-relationship.

But the way to fulfilling this God-relationship is fraught with danger and Kierkegaard, as we might expect, is eloquent in describing the negative experiences of the way. The self, having lived through and internalised to the uttermost the defining dualities of self and world, time and eternity, etc. is, he says, finally brought to an impasse. The subject is annihilated, but "in this annihilation is his truth" (OT 302 [309]) – the truth that to the extent that a person accepts this annihilation as his

subjective truth, a new possibility of being will be opened up, the possibility of the God-relationship, a relationship that restores him to himself but on a new and unshakeable basis. The shipwreck of human will and understanding clears a space for a foundational dependence on God that encompasses and permeates every aspect of the subject's life in the world. "He who is himself altogether capable of nothing, cannot undertake even the smallest thing without God's help, that is to say, without being aware that there is a God." (OT 313 [322]) The attempt to know God 'from the history of times past', e.g., by immersing oneself in the lives of the saints or in the history of the Church (perhaps even in the study of scripture) is over-lengthy and the result is, in any case, ambiguous, being dependent on knowledge that is itself contingent, approximate and always contestable. But "he who, on the contrary, knows from himself [his own experience] that he can do nothing at all, has every day and in very moment the wished-for and incontrovertible opportunity of experiencing that God lives." (OT 313 [322]) To know that he is nothing is his truth, it is 'truth's secret', entrusted to him by God: in the acceptance of his nothingness he comes to know God.

In the final discourse, "The One who Prays Rightly Strives in Prayer and Triumphs - in this: that God Triumphs", the conclusion is that one 'triumphs' in prayer only be allowing God to triumph, that is (once more), by becoming nothing. In the course of this discourse, Kierkegaard has spoken of the struggle of prayer as being a struggle on the part of the one who prays not simply to get something from God but to understand the meaning of what he is experiencing in life: what he wants above all is an 'explanation' or 'clarification' (*Forklaring*) from God. But the final outcome is not an explanation or a clarification in a theoretical sense but a transfiguration (*Forklarelse*) of his situation, in and as he consents to being nothing.

> The outer world, and every demand he ever made on life, was taken from him, so now he struggles to find an explanation, but he cannot fight his way through. At last it seems to him that he has become an utter nothing. Now the moment has come. Who should the one who thus struggles wish to be like if not God? But if he himself is anything [in his own eyes] or wants to be anything, then this something is enough to prevent the likeness [from appearing], Only when he himself becomes utterly nothing, only then can God shine through him, so that he becomes like God. Whatever he may otherwise amount to, he cannot express God's likeness but God can only impress his likeness in him when he has become nothing. When the sea exerts all its might, then it is precisely impossible for it to reflect the image of the heavens, and even the smallest movement means that the reflection is not quite pure; but when it becomes still and deep, then heaven's image sinks down into its nothingness. (OT 380 [399]))

To become as nothing, to become, simply, nothing, then, is both to have arrived at the end of the spiritual struggle to know and to become who we are, it is also, as such to return to our original created

existence as bearers of the image of God, and to become capable of fulfilling our primary creaturely vocation: to worship and to adore God as our maker.

III

Kierkegaard's view of the human situation, of the contradictions inherent in that situation and of the way to resolve those contradictions is well-structured and coherent. It is appealing to treat it as some kind of existential phenomenology. But we cannot. Why not? Because precisely the climax of this presentation renders any purely theoretical approach impossible. There is no bridge from man to God. There is only the annihilation of the human – and the miracle of grace. That this miracle is already anticipated in God's gifts in creation (indeed, in the primordial gift *of* creation) does not make its dependence on God any the less, nor does it make God any more accessible to a purely theoretical orientation. If God is the foundation of human selfhood, it follows that that foundation is in principle unknowable. Precisely in finding ourselves — in nothingness – we find ourselves as unknowable, as inexhaustible mystery.

Even though Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses do not immediately invoke the dogma of the incarnation, of the God-man (who, as both the pseudonyms Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus insist, is an offense to reason, a sign of contradiction, the absolute paradox) they end by plunging us into the ultimately riddle-like and paradoxical nature of our existence as such. Here, Kierkegaard suggests, there can be no scope for indifferent truths, only for concerned truth, the truth of the attitude I must take in this situation of inner paradoxicality. Brought again and again to the moment of choice, who I am and what I am is determined by my free and undetermined choices. I am who I am in my responsibility for the threefold relation to the world, to myself and to the ultimate source of my existence that makes me this particular individual that I am.

But if these choices cannot be reasoned or made into the object of theoretical reflection (at least, not without their defining characteristics being thereby evaporated), do we simply crash into a blank wall of silence?

Kierkegaard is, indeed, eloquent about silence and about the necessity of silence at the heart of the religious life – but, note, that he is *eloquent* about silence. How could it be otherwise in texts that, translated into English as 'discourses', are more precisely translated simply as 'talks'.

Here, as so often, the formal characteristics of Kierkegaard's texts play a crucial role in helping us to interpret them correctly. Loosely modelled on sermons these texts are framed as addresses, addressed to the reader as to a single 'You'. This point is underlined again and again on the short prefaces that Kierkegaard wrote for each collection of discourses. In these prefaces he repeatedly emphasizes the role of the reader. In boldly figurative language he speaks in the first preface of the

little book of two discourses going out into the world until it finds "that individual whom with joy and gratitude I call *my* reader, that individual whom it seeks, towards whom it, as it were, stretches out its arms, that individual who is sufficiently well-disposed to let himself be found, sufficiently well-disposed to receive it..." (OT 13 [5]) In the preface to the second collection of discourses he speaks of the reader as one "who, by being in the right mood sets free the captive thoughts that long to be released ..." (OT 63 [53]) In subsequent prefaces the reader is one who takes with the right hand what the author offers with his right hand (!), who transforms the talk ('Tale') into a conversation or dialogue ('Samtale'), who raises the discourse from corruptibility to incorruptibility, who is the bridegroom for whom the discourse waits.

The moment of decision to which the discourses point, then, may transcend both reason and language, but, in the mode of concrete personal address, in which the reader reads as one who is personally affected and concerned by what he reads, the discourses can, as linguistic constructs – dialogically – bring the reader himself to that crossroad of choice. They cannot force his hand, they cannot demonstrate that this choice and no other *must* be the consequence of a correct reading in the way that a logical or even a historical argument can show that 'x' is the only possible outcome of a chain of reasoning. Choice means always having to choose.

But this also means that the whole content of the discourses must be viewed in the light of this rhetorically constructed text-reader relation. When, from this standpoint, we look back to what we called the a thropology of the discourses, we can see that they are by no means a neutral record of psychological descriptions. The basic dualities represented in the various personalities (the fortunate one, the concerned one, the despairing one, etc.) are precisely shaped in order to bring the reader into the situation of choice. Seen in this way, it becomes apparent that many of these personalities could not exist other than as contrapuntal possibilities that illuminate from a fictitious side the one possibility of choosing to have faith. When, for example, did we ever meet anyone who really lived completely absorbed in the moment, who really experienced life as if he was nothing but a wave in the sea? Such a type is not a real existential possibility but a rhetorically-determined construct. Other personalities featured in the discourses may seem more convincing, but I suggest that the same principle applies here too. None represent a full or a realistic description of an actual life. Each is to be read as a signpost pointing the reader back to himself and to the concrete self-choices that confront him in his own existence. Therefore to take the psychological scenarios of the discourses either as exercises in a pre-ontological phenomenology or as pre-phenomenological psychological description that nevertheless remains essentially open to phenomenological analysis is fundamentally erroneous, since to do so would be to suspend the intensity of the dialogical claim that constantly conditions my attempts at self-understanding and self-commitment.

The main focus of this discussion has been precisely the religious

choice to which the discourses aim to lead their readers. It has been my working assumption that this is also conceived by Kierkegaard as fundamentally congruous with ethical choice, when ethical choice is not thought of simply as the individual conforming himself to a universal moral law but as requiring the activation of freedom and will. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* famously points to the situation of choices that run against otherwise universal ethical laws, but that is not the issue here. Here, even within the range of what is generally accepted as morally desirable, the possibility of being an ethical subject at all, of being able to choose or to activate our potential freedom and, therefore, of being answerable for who we are (all of which, I take it, is integral to Kierkegaard's understanding of faith) – all this is possible only on the basis of accepting ourselves as paradoxical and ungrounded existents whose place in Being remains, for us, indeterminable. Conversely, this very ungroundedness itself points us back to the urgency of attending to the concrete claim and the concrete answerability of the exigencies of being in a situation of dialogical address.

All of which, I suggest, illuminates the significance of Heidegger's misreading of Kierkegaard's discourses as material for phenomenological reflection. For this misreading precisely epitomises Heidegger's failure adequately to address the ethical aspect of existence. This failure, I am saying, is not an accidental element in his thought but colours it from the very beginning – even if there are important ethical issues that can be retrieved from many of the issues around which Heidegger's thought moves. Heidegger's programme of fundamental ontology is not accidentally but necessarily determined by its avoidance of the ever-particularising, ever-open and ever-undetermined situation of dialogically-framed choice.

In *Topos* No. 1 (4) Tatiana Schitzova argued for the need to supplement Heidegger's analysis of Dasein with Bakhtin's dialogical thought. The argument of this essay is that the very specific kind of dialogicality which we meet in Kierkegaard – which, like Dr. Schitzova, I too regard as congruent with that of Bakhtin – makes it impossible to speak of this as a supplement but, rather, as calling for another kind of philosophising than that which we encounter in Heidegger.

Abbreviations

SZ Heidegger, M., *Sein unit Zeit,* Tübingen, 1963 (reprint of 7th edition).
OT Kierkegaard, S. *Opbyggelige Taler 1843, Opbyggelige Taler 1844, Tre Taler ved tænkte Leiligheder,* Copenhagen, 1998.