

LOOKING AT PHILOSOPHY

The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter

Second Edition

DONALD PALMER

College of Marin



Mayfield Publishing Company
Mountain View, California
London • Toronto

Introduction to Kierkegaard
from LOOKING AT PHILOSOPHY:
THE UNBEARABLE HEAVINESS
OF PHILOSOPHY MADE LIGHTER.
by Donald Palmer.

Schopenhauer's method of dealing with Hegel was first to call him names, then to ignore him. But the generation of continental philosophers who followed Schopenhauer had to deal more directly with Hegel, whose influence by the 1830s had become immense. One of the most curious members of this generation was the Dane SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855). Kierkegaard, who is generally recognized today as "the father of **existentialism**," thought



Søren Kierkegaard

of himself primarily as a religious author and an anti-philosopher. In truth, he was not opposed to philosophy as such but to Hegel's philosophy. Nevertheless, like the rest of his generation, Kierkegaard fell more under Hegel's spell than he would have liked to admit.

Kierkegaard blamed Hegel for much of what he took to be the dehumanization of the intellectual life of a whole generation. This dehumanization was the result of a "correction" that Hegel made to Aristotelian logic. Aristotle had laid down the three basic principles of logic as:

1. The principle of identity ($A = A$)
2. The principle of noncontradiction [not (A and not- A)]
3. The principle of the excluded middle [either (A) (not- A)]

Hegel believed these principles to be erroneous. His new dialectical logic overturned them. In the dialectic, everything is in some sense its opposite; therefore, it is not the case that $A = A$ because $A = \text{not-}A$. (Greek democracy was in some sense equivalent to Greek slavery hence it was its own opposite.) If the principle of identity falls, then the principles of noncontradiction and of the excluded middle collapse too. Kierkegaard took offense at the pompousness of Hegel's suggestion. He mocked it with vignettes like the following:

If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it; . . . whether you marry or do not marry, you will regret both. Laugh at the world's follies, you will regret it; weep over them, you will regret that; laugh at the world's follies or weep over them, you will regret both. . . . Believe a woman, you will regret it, believe her not, you will also regret that; believe a woman or believe her not, you will regret both. . . . Hang yourself, you will regret it, do not hang yourself, and you will also regret that; hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret both. . . . This, gentlemen, is the sum and substance of all philosophy.

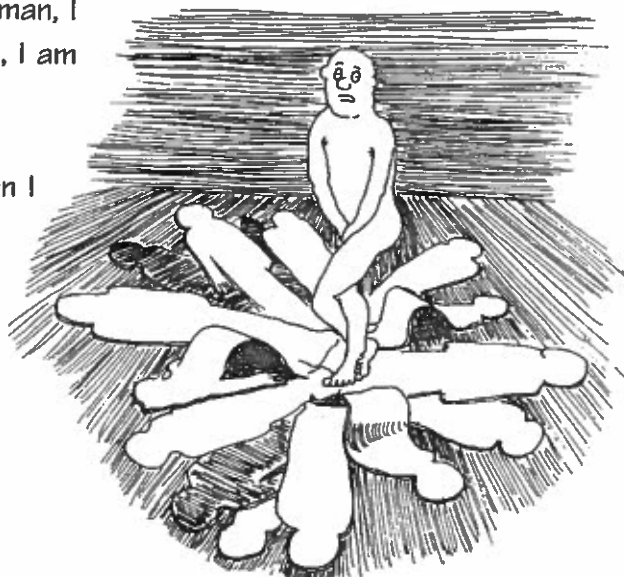
This is not really the sum and substance of all philosophy

in the concreteness of existence of things in the world as he was in the concreteness of individual human existence. René Descartes had been right to begin philosophy with the self ("I think, therefore I am"), but he had been wrong, as was Hegel after him, to equate the self with thought. "To think is one thing, to exist is another," said Kierkegaard. I can think and say many things about myself—"I am a

teacher, I am a man, I am an American, I am in love, I prefer chocolate to vanilla." Yet, when I am done talking and thinking about myself, there is one thing remaining that cannot be thought—MY EXISTENCE, which is a "surd" (an irrational residue). I

cannot think it, rather I must live it.

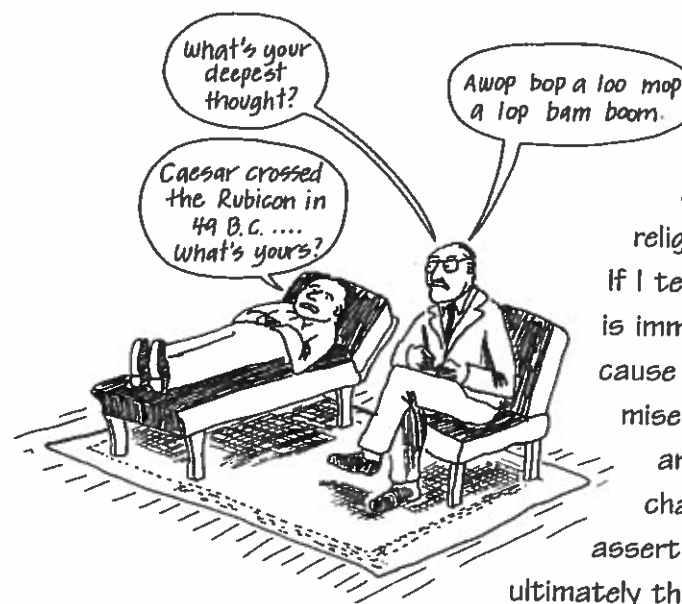
My lived existence, according to Kierkegaard, is equated with passion, decision, and action. None of these categories can be exhausted by thought. But that is not to say that there is no connection between existence and thought. Kierkegaard wrote, "Existence must be interpenetrated with thought." What kind of thought? A kind of philosophical self-consciousness which he called "existential thought."



When All the Roles Have Been Stripped Away, What's Left Is My Existence

To explain this notion we must clarify a distinction that Kierkegaard drew in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* between "objective thought" and "subjective thought." The first category is a kind of thinking for which there exist objective criteria of truth, such as in the case of math, science, and history. If you wonder whether " $3 + 2 = 5$," " $f = ma$," or "Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C.," there are recognized standards that can be used to determine the truth of these assertions. Objective truths exist, then, but they are "existentially indifferent." That is, they have no essential relationship to my existence. If I found out that one of them was false, I might be surprised, but I would not thereby become a different person. Therefore, Kierkegaard's philosophy is uninterested in "objective truths."

Subjective thought, however, is thought for which there exist no objective criteria of truth. This is so, for example, in



the case of VALUES, for instance, ethical and religious claims. If I tell you that it is immoral to cause unnecessary misery to others and if you challenge my assertion, ultimately there are no

objective standards for me to appeal to and I cannot prove my claim. (Kantianism won't work, according to Kierkegaard, because it presupposes a valuing of notions of consistency and noncontradictoriness. But what if you refuse to accept that value?) Similarly, if I claim that "God is love" and you challenge me, I cannot appeal to any objective criterion of truth to justify my assertion.

Nevertheless, these "subjective truths" are essential to my existence in the way that "objective truths" are indifferent. This is because we pretty much are what we do, and what we do—the actions we perform—is the result of decisions, which are embodiments of values chosen. Yet those values cannot be grounded in certainty but are always accepted on faith—a faith in the uncertain.

This need for values and decisiveness in the face of the uncertainty of all things provokes, according to Kierkegaard, a kind of dizziness and loss of footing that reveals the true human condition as one of anguish and despair. Hegel was wrong. The real is not the rational. Rather, the lived experience of true human reality



Vertigo in the Face of the
Uncertainty of Reality

lies underneath rationality as a kind of despairing nothingness longing to be a something. (Yet, had Hegel not said this too?)

There are other "subjective truths" besides those of moral and religious valuation. But these truths can only be communicated indirectly, Kierkegaard told us. They can be hinted at, alluded to, overstated, understated, misstated, joked about, poeticized, or ignored. But they cannot be SAID—or at least, if they are said, they can't be directly understood. Such a truth would be the truth of "MY DEATH." Now, I know that all humans die and that, being a human, someday I too will die. I know much about death from the studies I have made in my history and biology classes. But that does not mean that I have grasped my death as a subjective truth. In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard relates the story of a man who meets a friend on a street corner of Copenhagen and is invited to dinner by him. The invitee enthusiastically promises to attend, but at that very moment the prospective guest is struck and killed by a tile that happens to fall from the roof. Kierkegaard mocks the dead man, saying that one could laugh oneself to death over this case. Here is a person who makes an absolute commitment into the future, yet whose existence is whisked away by a gust of wind. After chuckling for a while over the irony of this story, Kierkegaard then asks himself if he is not being too harsh on the chap. Surely we don't expect the guest to respond to his invitation saying, "I shall attend. Set a place at the table for me, but you must make room for the contingency that a tile falls and strikes me dead, for in that case I shall not attend." Yet the reader of the *Postscript* comes to the realization that



is exactly what Kierkegaard wanted. When we reach the understanding that after every utterance we make about the future, we can correctly add the rider: "However, I may be dead in the next moment, in which case I shall not attend," then we will have grasped the subjective truth of our death.

The point of Kierkegaard's story is not to provoke a sense of morbidity. According to him, the discovery of one's death as a subjective truth becomes the pretext for another discovery—that of "one's existence" as a subjective truth. Only against a backdrop of the yawning abyss



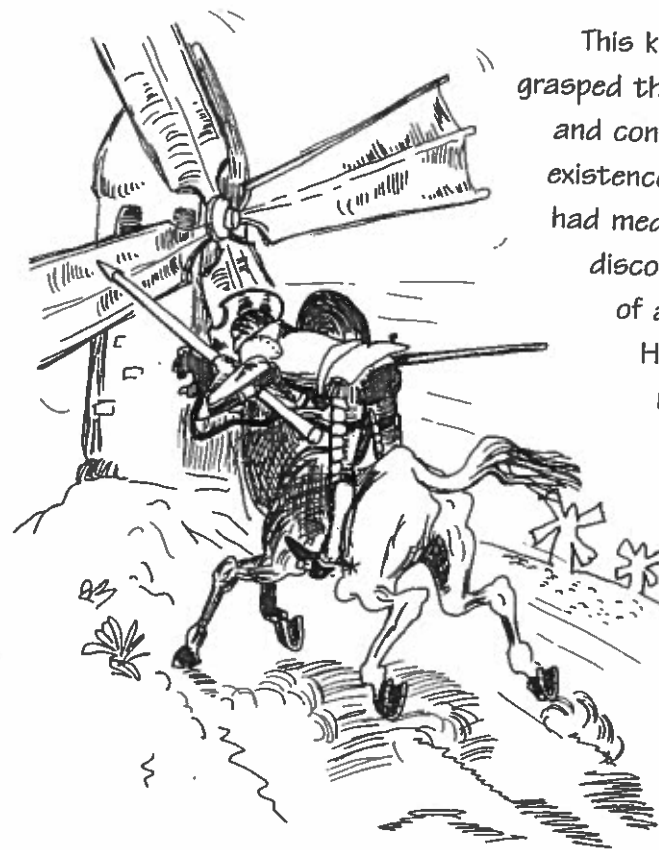
The Individual Before the Yawning Abyss of Eternity

of eternity can the immediacy and fragility of existence be understood. Most people are oblivious to the proximity of nothingness, and they spend their lives engaged in petty thoughts and pointless projects. ("Do my socks have holes? What will people think of me if I wear a soiled tie?") But the discovery of our subjective truths concretizes and intensifies our existence. It helps us to order our priorities and clarify our values and to recover the self from its alienation into social roles, material possessions, and linguistic abstractions. It reveals (and at the same time creates) the self that had been invisible to the self.

For Kierkegaard, the self is essentially subjectivity, and subjectivity is constituted by the individual's commitment to his subjective truths. The authentic self, for Kierkegaard, is one that "chooses itself" by a form of self-reflective activity that both clarifies and creates one's values while assuming total responsibility for those values. It was this that Hegel had left out of his system, according to Kierkegaard; or more correctly, it was this that any system would necessarily swallow up. Therefore, Kierkegaard was antisystematic and titled one of his books *Philosophical Fragments*, yet another slap in Hegel's face.

Søren Kierkegaard saw as his task not the development of a new epistemology, nor the creation of a new system of metaphysics, but the creation of a whole new kind of human being, one who could grasp his own freedom and create his own destiny. (In this he was joined by two other wayward nineteenth-century thinkers at whom we have yet to look: Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche.) Kierkegaard calls his version of the new human being "a Knight of Faith." This is a person who, for Kierkegaard, has an almost superhuman kind of strength and greatness. Kierkegaard wrote of the archetypal Knight of Faith,

Not one shall be forgotten who was great in the world. But each was great in his own way . . . each became great in proportion to his expectation. One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal, but he who expected the impossible became greater than all. Everyone shall be remembered but each was great in proportion to the greatness of that with which he strove. For he who strove with the world became great by overcoming the world, and he who strove with himself became great by overcoming himself, but he who strove with God became greater than all.



That Other "Knight of Faith"

This knight has grasped the absurdity and contingency of all existence. David Hume had meditated on the disconnectedness of all things. But Hume had only meditated on it while the Knight of Faith feels it in his bones. yet he finds the strength within himself to unify his world, to hold it together

with an act of will, which Kierkegaard called "faith." He is an individual who has looked profoundly into the world of men and seen that at the deepest level we are alone—in "absolute isolation"—an aloneness that constitutes a kind of madness, "divine madness," for Kierkegaard's hero is alone with his god. In fact, Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, his "new human," is not new at all. Rather, he is based on Kierkegaard's tortured interpretation of the biblical patriarch Abraham, who heard a voice in the night telling him to



sacrifice his son. Abraham took full responsibility for the meaning of the message—it was his meaning, his subjective truth—and for his actions, thereby becoming a Kierkegaardian hero. Kierkegaard wrote of him, "Abraham was greater than all, great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness." Hegel had transformed human existence into pure thought. Kierkegaard counteracted Hegel's rationalization by introducing into philosophy a new category, "the category of the absurd," and putting it in the heart of his ideal human being.

Of course, Søren Kierkegaard was not the only philosopher of his generation to be deeply influenced by Hegel. When KARL MARX (1818–1883) arrived as a young philosophy student at the University of Berlin in the mid-1830s, Hegel had been dead of cholera for five years, but his spirit still reigned supreme. To do philosophy in the Germany of the 1830s was to do Hegelian philosophy. Nevertheless, the Hegelians were by no means in agreement as to what



Hegel's Spirit Reigns Supreme