



Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

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# THE SOVEREIGN PARADOX KIERKEGAARD ON TIME AND EXISTENCE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that Kierkegaard did not systematically investigate it, the notion of time as a fundamental characteristic of human existence assumes a privileged status within his thinking. Just as the notion of time constitutes an important angle of approach to Kierkegaard's authorship, so does a study of Kierkegaard contribute significantly to a renewed evaluation of the notion of time.

In the present paper I will offer a cursory glimpse into Kierkegaard's huge world of thought, as seen from a definite vantage point. My aim is to outline some of his views about time, based primarily on his *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concept of Dread*. In connection with this review, I will hold two theses up for a more detailed discussion. For the relationship between the author and his pseudonyms cf., e.g., M.C. Taylor (1975): *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship. A Study of Time and the Self*.

## 2. KIERKEGAARD ON TIME AND ETERNITY

According to Kierkegaard, *man* is to be described as *a synthesis of body and soul, the unifying third being spirit*, that is, divine consciousness, or consciousness of the self. In the immediate, sensual, life human being spirit is not actualized, but manifests itself only as potentiality and assignment. This manifestation of spirit, which expresses itself in an obscure and disturbing way to the unenlightened human soul, is termed: *dread*. In contrast to *fear*, which is always directed toward something definite, dread has no object or, rather, its object is: the indeterminate. This accounts for its opacity.

Dread is *the expression of freedom prior to the breakthrough of the will*, which is decision, or choice. In dread, *freedom is enslaved*, only not by something external, but by itself. The spirit, which is freedom, is entrapped in its own being, and closed within its own self. Nothing can force it out against its own will. Dread is overcome when man, in the courage of despair, chooses himself by daring to become a free being. By virtue of its own free decision, he takes possession of himself in the light of eternity, and is thereby changed into spirit: *it is first in the decision of the will in, and for, freedom that man's spirit breaks through and completes the synthesis of body and soul*.

But is the question of time relevant to this? Yes, very much, indeed: it is crucial! The point is that the determination of man as a synthesis in spirit of body and soul, sensory perception and rational thinking, can also be adequately expressed by means of two related concepts. In fact, man can just as legitimately be described as *a synthesis of time and eternity*, the unifying third being the *moment*, or "an eye's twinkle".

All existence is bound to time which is a fundamental condition of human life. However, that time, which is common to all beings in existence, is merely a *vacuous succession* of a multitude of indifferent instants. In and by itself, time is nothing but an empty series of accidental occurrences that succeed each other at different instants. Eternity, on the contrary, is synonymous with *presence* that, by a sudden instantaneous breakthrough into time, is able to arrest its flow and suspend its advancement.

Kierkegaard describes this instant, or moment, as: "eternity's first reflex in time", or: "the atom of eternity". This is the significance of the moment as considered abstractly. The assignment of the existing thinker, however, is to experience the moment concretely. The importance of this mission is emphasized by the designation of the moment as the crucial Christian category. When considered concretely, the moment is experienced as immediate, or instantaneous, presence. This is the break-through of the spirit.

In his explanation of the instant as "suddenness", which is depicted as ambiguous, Kierkegaard refers his reader to Plato's dialogue '*Parmenides*', regarded as one of the most important works in speculative dialectics. But to emphasize the difference between speculation and existence, Kierkegaard utilizes the distinction between time as an empty order of instants on one hand, and time as momentous presence on the other.

The moment, interpreted as presence, is the conceptual condition of temporality, and it is defined by reference to *the three temporal modalities*: past, present, and future. Thus temporality, being posed by the partition of time into three, is conditioned by the moment's incision in, or penetration of, the concrete series of events. Temporality now appears as *a concrete human time*, in contrast to *an abstract series of events*.

Following Kierkegaard, the *now* as *presence* is a product of human consciousness, since a humanlike consciousness is needed to distinguish between presence and absence. However, the moment is *ambiguous*, since it is *a double synthesis* of time and eternity: conceived as that instant which poses time, the moment itself only a reflex of eternity, and does not participate in time; understood as that instant which suspends temporality by inducing it into eternity, the moment is the fullness of time, and an absolute paradox. In this sense, *the synthesis of the moment* is also *the synthesis of the spirit*.

In itself, as a pure *incision*, the instant does not belong to time. Only that which has *duration* participates in time. But, by virtue of the moment, a demarcation is posed between the past, the present, and the future. The moment obtains its true significance only by a human decision, or choice, and *the decisive choice is that choice whereby man chooses himself in his eternal validity, and that is simultaneously the choice that poses the distinction between good and evil*. That is the crucial moment of existence.

This choice is incompatible with randomness: all or nil, life or death, is here at risk. However, man is obliged to opt for life, it being impossible to choose death consciously. Therefore, death is not the consequence of a choice, but of an abstention from choice which indicates the absence of faith. The self demands to be reborn in full consciousness with a recognition of its existence as being given. At the very moment of self-acceptance the self, recognizing its lack of perfection, arises to consciousness as the only possibility, accepting its own personal past, including all its deficiencies and shortcomings.

The birth of the spirit in freedom presupposes the conscious decision of the will, and signifies its unconditional surrender to that power which has put it into existence. By this move, the only true synthesis is produced: the synthesis of time and eternity. This synthesis is what makes man whole by uniting body and soul in the light of eternity. After all, the self is the only reality, and the one who chooses thereby affirms himself, just as the one who abstains thereby betrays himself. Kierkegaard describes the free decision of the will as "a jump on the depth of 70.000 fathoms".

*Salto vitale sive salto mortale!* -

Let us consider, for a moment, the dominant frame of reference for these thoughts, the pattern of Kierkegaard's authorship. Our two basic works, *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concept of Dread*, were both published within the same week of the year 1844; this indicates their intimate relationship, although they are ascribed to different authors, or pseudonyms: "Johannes Climacus" and "Vigilius Haufniensis". In this paper I will, for brevity's sake, ignore the important fact that Kierkegaard wanted his reader to discern the pseudonyms, assuming that this will not alter my conclusions in any radical way.

It is common known fact that Kierkegaard, in his philosophical anthropology, separated *three levels of existence*: the *aesthetical*, the *ethical*, and the *religious* (A & B): 1) The *esthete* is the *carnal man* who has chosen to live for his own desires and who is therefore disposed to "kill time". 2) The *ethicist* is the *sober man* who has acknowledged that life is too short for frivolous distractions and that the mission of mankind is to save that which is given in time by redeeming it for eternity. Further, the *religious man* is the one who has understood that this assignment can not be accomplished by himself alone, but only with the assistance of God. Finally, the religious stage is differentiated between: (A) *the blurred belief in an almighty power*, and: (B) *the distinct belief in Jesus Christ as the temporal incarnation of the eternal One*, which is an *absolute paradox*.

According to Kierkegaard, the true mission of man cannot be fulfilled without God. In relation to man, God appears mainly as possibility, boundless, unrestricted possibility. *God is that instance which - or, rather, who - in spite of all evil, makes it possible to exist*. At the same time, **God is A & Ω**, *the One who is, who was, and who comes*. Further, by virtue of this sempiternity, *God is simultaneous with all beings* that exist at any time. Now, to existing man, eternity does not appear as presence, but rather as the impending. The future is that 'incognito' through which eternity is related to time, and the relationship is mediated precisely in the crucial moment, which is the moment of choice.

By choosing eternity, man decides his own future; so one can say that the future is "all there is":  $\alpha$ ) If the moment is not yet posed, eternity appears behind us as the past. So *the ancient Greek tempted to recall himself backwards into eternity*; but eternity can never be past, that would involve a contradiction.  $\beta$ ) If, on the other hand, the moment is posed, but only as an empty incision, eternity will appear to consciousness, but only as an indefinite impending. Therefore *the Jew discards the idea of the fullness of time because he constantly attempts to keep eternity at a distance*.  $\gamma$ ) If, finally, the moment becomes clearly posed, namely, as the moment of decision: it is eternal but, concurrently, a past that returns in the future; and, at this very point, eternity is present in the fullness of time as that presence in which the past becomes united with the future. For this very reason *the Christian must enter eternity forwards, with full consciousness*.

The crucial concept here is: *the fullness of time*. In the fullness of time everything became new, because "the spirit became flesh and dwelt amongst us". The gospel is just "that little world-historical announcement" which proclaims the incarnation of God. We now approach the basic problem that was raised in the *Philosophical Fragments*: Is it at all possible that an eternal salvation can take its point of departure in history? Can one build ones eternal salvation on a knowledge of history? If this knowledge is understood as *objective reflection*, in contrast to *subjective passion*, the answer is: No! For Kierkegaard, it is obvious that only a passionate subjectivity can constitute the truth. To accept anything less would involve the elimination of faith.

In a famous "interlude", discussing the relation between temporality and modality, he raises a related question: Can the past be said to be more necessary than the future? Again, the answer is: No! Understanding this position requires that we are acquainted with Hegel's definition of "the necessary" as "the union of the possible with the actual". From this identification he concluded that history was determined by an innate necessity. Kierkegaard ardently opposed this idea: history is the history of man as created by God, and creation, which is the free act of God, can never emerge from necessity as its source: *all creation originates in freedom, and every cause stems from a freely operating cause*. Not even the consequence of natural law can imply the necessity of becoming.

Aristotle saw the change of becoming as the transition from possibility to actuality. However, as Kierkegaard stressed, such change refers to existence, and not to essence: *possibility and actuality are modes of existence, whereas necessity is a mode of essence*. For that reason, he considered the inference from factuality to necessity as illegitimate; necessity is a purely logical concept which is inapplicable to history.

All that is created is historical, and the past is irrevocable, "over and done with", as we are accustomed to saying. But is the immutability of the past necessarily permanent? Kierkegaard does not think so: the past is no more necessary than the future, and if they both were necessary, man's freedom would only be a pious fraud: then everything would be determined by the law of fate since the dawn of time. This was unacceptable to him and so, in order to circumvent fate, he denied the necessity of the past.

To elucidate the uncertainty of the past impressed upon his entire creation by God, Kierkegaard offered a little example: If a person sees a star, he may begin to doubt its presence and contemporaneity at the instant he realizes the fact that it is created and, therefore might be destroyed again before the light emitted could make it known to him. This point is still viable also in the light of modern physics. For this reason, a shadow of doubt reigns over the entire external world. Not even he who feels the pain by pinching himself in the arm can feel himself safe against a penetration of illusion into his life.

Compare Shakespeare: "*The great globe, yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.*" - The Tempest, act iv. - Please, note the ambiguity of the word 'Globe', the name of his own theatre!

Inasmuch as the believer chooses to rely on something which cannot be known, his doubt is suspended by that decision. Therefore faith is the true "organ" of history. By faith, history is invested with a meaning extending far beyond what is just historical. Only as an object of faith can a historical event constitute that foundation upon which an eternal salvation can be built. Confer Shakespeare once more:

*"And my ending is despair, unless I be reliev'd by prayer which pierces so that it assaults mercy itself and frees all faults."* - The Tempest, epilogue.

### 3. KIERKEGAARD ON THE LOGIC OF TIME

I will now discuss two theses on time which I have found in the works examined: 1) *the thesis of time's dependence on consciousness*, advanced in *The Concept of Dread*, 2) *the thesis of the possibility of recreating the past*, as a precondition for repentance, presented in the *Philosophical Fragments*.

That Kierkegaard's authorship, evaluated as a whole, contains many unresolved tensions, even obvious contradictions, is not surprising seen in the light of his declared aversion against the tyranny of paragraphs, haunting traditional philosophical systems. But it is hardly in itself an infringement on his thinking to demand that the individual works of his pseudonymous authorship comply with some elementary requirements, primarily the requirement of internal consistency, based on the works' own premises. It is here natural to refer to Mark Taylor who, in his work on Kierkegaard's authorship, stressed that the existential stages in the works of his pseudonyms are described in such a way that it is reasonable to see them as coherent and well-rounded concepts.

My intention with these remarks is not what the reader perhaps might fear, viz., to find a poor excuse for educating the ignorant concerning what this great philosopher ought to have written in the event that he had put some greater emphasis on avoiding the most obvious misunderstandings and errors. Finger-wagging is certainly worthless and inappropriate when confronted with a genius like Kierkegaard. My aim is solely to call the reader's attention to certain problems, related to the notion of time in the works under investigation, and to warn against some rather superficial interpretive possibilities in order to suggest various others instead which are probably not so obvious.

We must be aware of the fact that the common characteristic of the two works is not limited to their pseudonymous character. The simultaneity of their creation and publication attests to a much deeper affinity. When evaluated in the light of the teaching on the existential stages, the pseudonyms appear to enjoy the same status. Both figures, Climacus as well as Haufniensis, can be considered as exponents of the religiosity A, all the while they are both referring to, and also approximating to, the religiosity B. The most significant feature in our context, involving the exposition of the notion of time in these works, is the concepts of logic as presented in connection with the polemics of the two pseudonyms against the favorite target of Kierkegaard's anger, Hegel.

Kierkegaard here categorically states that time and change are notions which are incommensurable to any logical system. Therefore Haufniensis in his introduction clearly insists that: "in logic, no motion is allowed to occur, for logic is, and all logic merely is". Later he appends in a note, ironically, that "motion in logic can be accredited to Hegel". But without agreeing with Hegel, much less acclaiming him for having induced motion in logic, we can today - with the benefit of a knowledge gained from historical hindsight - safely assert that, on this particular point, Kierkegaard was wrong.

The development, in the recently passed decennia, of a formerly unknown logical discipline: *tempo-modal logic*, has demonstrated with all desirable clarity that, in fact, it is possible to introduce time and motion, or change, into logic. But this modern logic is, in reality, based on a rediscovery of medieval ideas. Kierkegaard's conception rests on a prejudice which he seems to share with the majority of European philosophers.

*It is all the more strange to conclude that his own reflections on the concept of time represent a deeply original contribution to - tempo-modal logic!* Let us look somewhat more carefully at the two theses stated above, starting with that on human consciousness as a precondition of temporality. Haufniensis offers the following justification:

*"When time, correctly, is designated as infinite succession, it seems natural also to determine it as well as: past, present, and future. But this distinction is misplaced if understood as lying within time itself, for it emerges first in time's relation to eternity ... That life which is in time, and is merely temporal, has no presence.*

*"The moment characterizes the present .. but if one is to determine time by means of the moment .. then the moment is precisely not the present, for the purely abstract and imagined intervention between past and present does not exist .. but if, on the contrary, time and eternity touch each other, it must be in time, and so we arrive at the moment. In Latin, it is termed: momentum, and its derivation .. expresses mere disappearance. Thus understood, the moment is not the atom of time, but that of eternity.*

*"The synthesis of the temporal and the eternal is not just another synthesis, but simply an expression of that primary synthesis in which man is a composition of body and soul, born by spirit .. First when the spirit is posed, the moment is present .. It is first in this moment that history begins; nature does not lie in the moment .. The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch. And it is first now that the division into present, past and future, is invested with import."*

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A natural interpretation of this thesis, based on the cited context that poses human consciousness as a precondition of temporality, indicates a clear-cut differentiation between: *a) the empty passing of time in nature, which is just a vacuous succession of instants, b) the true temporality, understood as the human time of history, being characterized by a tripartition, namely, in past, present, and future, where the past and the future manifest themselves as memory and expectation, respectively, and where the present is actualized as experience and the free choice of the will.* This interpretation is basically correct - but it is invalidated if supplemented with a claim that time, in spite of its subjective validity, is objectively nothing but an illusion, and thus invalid in and for nature.

Kierkegaard's view that "subjectivity is the truth", that spirit is opposed to nature, and his associated doctrine of the dependence of temporality on consciousness, might make it natural to hold that only subjective time is real, whereas objective time is illusive. But the suggestion that "time is nothing but a subjective illusion" misrepresents his view. It was hardly Kierkegaard's intention to reduce the natural sciences *ad absurdum*.

Further, *nature is the basis of all existence*, constituting the common foundation of unconscious and animated nature. For this reason, natural time should be called illusive solely in the context of *considering its significance to human existence*. In which sense, we may then ask, is spirit opposed to nature? The answer to this question, as far as I see, must refer to *the absolute, or sovereign, paradox: the incarnation of God*.

The incarnation unites time with eternity in such a way that God, the Creator of all, assumes human form in Jesus Christ. This is "inconceivable", therefore it cannot be an object of human knowledge. But why does Kierkegaard claim that it is "inconceivable"? Is not the moment precisely something we all know? Yes, we know it as that which is disappearing; but as such it is nothing but a simulation of eternity, just a mimicry.

Solely as *the satiated fullness of life*, that is, as *God's own presence*, is the moment incomprehensible: in this specific sense it cannot be comprehended, but only experienced. Nevertheless, its incomprehensibility is such that we can conceptualize the difficulty that prevents our comprehension of it. At issue is a contradiction, viz., the contradiction that, for the human spirit, eternity must needs be something that is itself created!

The apparent contradiction here is just a reflection, or repetition, of an even more profound and primordial contradiction, viz., that the eternal One once created a temporal world from nothing. So the truth about what happened cannot be independent of time. However, if something first has become true, it must inevitably remain true for all future. It is only in this sense - as future - that a created truth can be termed eternal.

Now the postulate, that eternity is something that only emerges by being created, must apply even to eternal truth; so truth as something created cannot be timeless either. From this it cannot be concluded, however, that truth as created is created with necessity. Granted that the goal of spirit is to break forth as freedom, it must do so freely.

I will now proceed to discuss the thesis of the possibility of reversing the past as a condition for the possibility of repentance. Concerning this thesis Climacus writes:

Man Time World



*"Can the necessary be created?.. All creation is suffering, and the necessary cannot suffer, it cannot endure the agony of reality which is that the possible ... at the moment wherein it becomes real .. is shown to be nothingness: for reality annihilates possibility. Everything which comes into existence thereby proves, by its very creation, that it is not necessary, for only the necessary cannot be created .. Necessity stands entirely alone .. Nothing exists because it is necessary .. The real is not more necessary than the possible .. (cf. Aristotle's teachings on the two forms of possibility in relation to necessity: that he starts by claiming all necessity to be possible is a mistake!).*

*"All becoming occurs in freedom, not of necessity; existing things come into being not by a reason, but from a cause, and all causation (starts) in a freely operating cause .. Everything which has been created is eo ipso historical, for although nothing can be predicated of it, the decisive predicate of history allows itself to be predicated, namely, the fact that it has been brought into existence .. Nature is too abstract to be more strictly dialectical with regard to time. This is the imperfection of nature that it does not possess .. a history - and its perfection, of which it has an inkling, is that it has been brought into existence (which is its past), and that it exists (which is its present).*

*"That which has happened is over and done with, and cannot be repeated, and therefore cannot be changed either. Is this immutability the immutability of necessity? The unchangeability of the past is produced by a change, the change of becoming, but such an immutability does not exclude all change, as it did not exclude it, for all change is excluded only inasmuch as it is excluded at every instant of time. The immutability of the past is (therefore not merely) dialectical in terms of a previous change, but must be dialectical with respect to a higher change that suspends it (viz., that of repentance)."*

To this we can add a remark by Haufniensis: *"The possible corresponds entirely to the future. The possible is freedom's future, and the future is time's possibility."*

The specific passage on nature can be viewed as indicating the correctness of our interpretation of the first thesis. With regard to the second thesis, it is clearly to be seen from the quoted segment that it presents some very peculiar viewpoints concerning the correct definition of the traditional modal concepts: possibility, factuality and necessity. Kierkegaard feels at liberty to correct Aristotle, the greatest logician of antiquity!

A consideration of modern logics does not permit a decision as to whom of them, Aristotle, or Kierkegaard, is correct on this issue. I am personally more inclined toward a pragmatic attitude, according to which a decision is established by convention on the basis of appropriate considerations, and that the validity of systems of logic is understood as relative to their domains of application. Judged relative to this, it is quite conceivable that Kierkegaard's logic does function more purposefully than the Aristotelian system, if evaluated from the point of view of an existentially oriented philosophy.

It may seem misplaced to refer to Kierkegaard's logic as an independent system, as it has not been delivered over to us in a finished, full-fledged form: it is not a "system". It nonetheless appears that it resembles, "potentially", or "virtually", a new type of logic. Furthermore, Kierkegaard in his more philosophical works at least, contrary to Hegel,

insists on the validity of the principle of non-contradiction all the way up to the highest synthesis, which may be identified with the absolute, or sovereign, paradox.

But what, then, characterizes this distinctive Kierkegaardian logic in comparison with other and more traditional systems? I will briefly present the structure of his logical "system", as I find it implicit in the texts ascribed to his pseudonym Johannes Climacus. It seems to be placed midway between the known atemporal and tempomodal systems, because the concept of possibility is defined temporally, whereas the concept of necessity is defined atemporally. Thus the concept of *the necessary* is determined as that which can be denied only at risk of contradiction, in contrast to the concept of *the contingent*, which is determined as that which can be alternately confirmed or denied without running any risk of contradiction. This alternation displays the variability of the temporal.

The contingent, or accidental, is related to time and equivalent to the temporal that, as we know, is divided into the three modalities, conjugated as past, present, and future. The concept of *the possible* is here defined as the accidental with respect to future, while the concept of *the factual* is defined as the accidental with regard to present or past. Crucial is that possibility and factuality are defined as mutually exclusive determinations. Further, what has become past is defined as immutable in the sense of irrevocably past, although this immutability is not strictly necessary. Finally, becoming is interpreted as a transition from possibility to factuality, occurring at an instant or by a process.

From this we can see how temporality's three *casus* or *tempi*: past, present, future, are installed as primitives, or irreducibles, with *consciousness* as a determining instance. On the basis of the logical system that I have sketched above we can say that freedom, the key concept of Kierkegaard's, manifests itself as a *nisus* anticipating a definite future course among the veritable infinity of possible courses which are all mutually exclusive.

Still, it is a little odd that Kierkegaard found it incumbent to let Climacus be so resolute in his rejection of the principle expressing the irrevocability of the past.

Diodoros Kronos, it is true, made use of the principle as a premise of his famous "Master Argument", whereby he claimed to have shown the future to be predetermined. But Leibniz, who is cited with applause by Climacus, adhered to an equivalent principle: *unumquodque, quando est, oportet esse*, and at the same time he opposed determinism. Therefore it is not very likely that Leibniz found the principle just stated to constitute a serious threat to freedom. Maybe Kierkegaard after all did not accept Leibniz's solution to the age-old question of the relationship between freedom and providence?

Shall we then conclude that Leibniz erred with respect to the principle mentioned? No, not at all. What can be concluded is merely that the word *oportet*, as used in the context above, cannot be equated with the common concept of strict, timeless, necessity. Maybe the principle should be read: *it is impossible for anything, that is, that it was not*. With this rendering, we can take *possibility* in Kierkegaard's sense of *future openness*, and not in Leibniz's and Aristotle's sense of conceivability, i.e., absence of contradiction. So the principle can be translated: *it is inevitable for anything that now is that it once was*. The principle is thereby suddenly seen to be both reasonable, and harmless.

Are we then obliged to concede that Hegel's concept of the necessary as the union of the possible with the actual is merely different from Kierkegaard's, but harmless too? This is at once much more questionable: Hegel's conception of the relationship between the concepts of possibility and necessity appear to imply a collapse of modal distinctions: the differences between the modalities are obliterated, and the relation between reason and outcome is made indistinguishable from that between cause and effect, with the result that determinism reigns absolutely and totally in the end.

The objection here raised against Hegel can likewise be directed against Spinoza. According to him, the only freedom human beings can attain is the intuition of necessity, understood as a knowledge of the laws of nature, or God. This objection does not apply to Leibniz, however; for, according to him, the laws of nature are just expressions of the highest expediency, founded freely by the Creator. To Leibniz, freedom is superior to necessity, and therefore Kierkegaard could use him as an antidote to Hegel.

Without the inspiration from Leibniz, Kierkegaard could hardly have developed a logic as sophisticated as that which we can encounter in his *Philosophical Fragments*. One can, however, imagine yet another source of inspiration, viz., a philological one. As a theologian, Kierkegaard must have been familiar with Hebrew; in this language, the verbs are conjugated into two tenses: "unfinished" (*fiens*) and "finished" (*factum*). His concepts of possibility and (f)actuality might be borrowed from that source.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

How does the question regarding the possibility of repentance stand, as seen in the light of all this? "It is over and done with and cannot be changed", we are used to say. Is that not worthy of credence, after all? Even Kierkegaard is willing to invest the past with a characteristic of immutability and immovability. But to him, this designation does not mean that the past is irrevocable in the necessary sense. Is God, after all, capable of correcting his work of Creation so radically as to undo what has happened?

Kierkegaard applies a subtle logic in order to preserve the possibility of repentance. He is correct in claiming that the immutability of the past cannot be termed necessary in his own preferred sense of that term. Strict necessity is expunged both from history's characteristic factuality and from the causal nexus which is determining for its progress. But is this equivalent to asserting that the Creator can freely disturb or annihilate Truth?

We must carefully consider what is at issue here. If God can suspend the laws which he has ordained for his creation, he comes close to contradicting himself!

There is reason to believe that, precisely, the future's characteristic of possibility, when compared to the irrevocability of the past as mediated by the present, constitutes a basic law for all creation. This law guarantees the direction of time's progress and points out a fundamental condition of all possible experience. The consequence of suspending the direction of time would be the instantaneous destruction of all order in the universe. If the direction of time's flow is suspended, thermodynamics is simultaneously suspended, which leads to cosmic collapse, that is, the instantaneous outbreak of chaos.

But there is a clear distinction between logical and physical necessity. In contrast to the former, which is atemporal, the latter is firmly anchored in time and expresses its unfaltering direction. Kierkegaard is entirely correct in saying that the determination of what is going to happen is not absolute. As already hinted at, Kierkegaard recognizes a conditional physical necessity. Of this necessity it is true that every cause refers to a "freely operating cause", which can only mean that *all causality is rooted in spontaneity*. This view corresponds to the fact that *the basic physical laws are stochastic*.

To Leibniz, as well as to Aquinas, Anselm, and Augustine, the faith in providence implies that the truths relating to future contingents must be immutable, or atemporal. The idea of a timeless truth is also in other ways deeply embedded in Western thought. There is hardly any other presupposition which appears so fundamentally established and unrelinquishable. Nevertheless, it is difficult to liberate oneself from the immediate impression that this concept is at variance with the idea of human free will.

Leibniz claimed that he had a satisfactory solution to the difficulty; his proposal can be seen as an elaboration of the so-called "medieval solution", due to the scholastics. Whether or not Kierkegaard embraced this solution is, as seen above, an open question. Belief in God's forgiveness means confidence in the divine care and love, regardless of how one's life has progressed. The idea that man's fate is decided of eternity is foreign to Kierkegaard, since it seems to exclude human freedom. This does not imply that Leibniz' own solution is inconsistent: it may well be consistent without being plausible.

God as creator is omnipotent. God as providence is omniscient. As a consequence of his omniscience, God knows everything concerning the future which can possibly be an object of knowledge. Does this exclude that God as creator can produce something hitherto unknown and totally new even to himself? Only if it is assumed that the truth about everything which ever can and will occur is already given and known of eternity. But, of course, nothing can prevent God from creating something entirely new!

New truth is continually being created. *But, when something has first become true, it must at least be true forever, in all future. On this interpretation of the notion of truth, the futurity of eternity is finally confirmed.* This understanding takes the idea of creation seriously by allowing the creation of new facts. At the same time it permits the work of creation to be understood as "a divine experiment" (cf. the Danish bard Grundtvig).

On the basis of the notion of truth which has here been outlined, it is natural to compare time with a tree in which the past forms the root and trunk, and the soaring branches stretch into the future with its open possibilities. Is the future always open? Any and all trees, even the tree of time, can wither and die. This is the termination, death; and death "always gets the final word", as the saying goes. Contrary to popular meaning, this is no necessity either, since everything is possible for God!

But repentance is a condition, the condition of salvation, according to Climacus, and to Kierkegaard. What does it mean to repent? Is repentance nothing but lamenting one's wasted possibilities? In order to make sense of this concept it may be advisable to consult a poet, Dante, for example. Kierkegaard and Dante certainly do not have much in common, but, at least, they do share one property: integrity, seriousness, sincerity. To Dante, repentance is a condition of admittance to the most exalted level of happiness, which is the eternal beatitude - and with this he is on a par with Kierkegaard.

How does Dante describe this change? After having seen the cave of the damned and climbed the mountain of purification, he passes two rivers: Lethe (river of oblivion) and Eunoë (river of remembrance), before he can reach the earthly paradise. Both Dante and Kierkegaard believe that, *by being allowed to forget the evil and remember the good, the soul is finally allowed to enjoy true happiness, heavenly beatitude!*

Note: The problem of reversing the past is considered more fully in ch.9, just as the topics of time and modality are discussed in detail, also formally, in ch.s 10, 11 & 12.

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Almost all quotations in this paper refer to these two central texts:  
"The Concept of Dread", Caput III & "Philosophical Fragments", Interlude.  
S. Kierkegaard: Samlede Værker 1-20, 3.udg., bd.6, København 1964.

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