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OF TIME AND ETERNITY IN KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF ANXIETY

Louis Dupré

I. Schelling's Impact

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard first sketched the principles of a religious anthropology which he developed more systematically in *The Sickness Unto Death*, his other "psychological" study. The earlier work remains important for several reasons. It introduces a new method of theological reflection and provides one of the principal categories through which our own epoch has come to understand itself. But its most significant contribution doubtlessly lies in a theory of the self as a self-realizing yet dependent synthesis. In the following essay I shall analyze the crucial element of this anthropological synthesis: the relation between the eternal and the temporal.

So then man was said to be a synthesis of soul and body; but he is at the same time a *synthesis of the temporal and the eternal*. I have no objection to recognizing that this has often been said; I have no wish to discover novelties, but rather it is my joy and my darling occupation to think upon things which seem perfectly simple. (CD 76; VI, 173)

The somewhat polemical tone of this passage as well as the comparison with earlier theories, the denseness of the text itself, here and in the corresponding description in *The Sickness Unto Death*, strongly suggest the impact of other theories. Kierkegaard felt, of course, no compunction about borrowing from others, nor did he attempt to hide his sources. In *The Concept of Anxiety* overt references abound. Yet none support his central definition of the self. This absence should alert us to the probability of interpretative problems. If Kierkegaard fails to name his predecessors while generally admitting their existence, his reason for doing so must be either that he has fundamentally transformed the original theories or that he has so thoroughly assimilated what he borrowed as to consider it his own. In either case the text invites a critical comparison with earlier theories.

I have no doubt that Kierkegaard's principal source for his dynamic theory of the self is Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations on the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809). In this work, interesting in its own right (Heidegger devoted a series of lectures to it in 1936), Schelling reformulated the problem of freedom in a manner that has remained influential unto our own day. From Descartes to Kant the ques-



tion of physical determinism had dominated the discussion of freedom. In Schelling's pantheistic perspective its integration with an absolute totality became the critical issue. How can a free agent remain autonomous while being a part of a wider absolute? Kant had skirted the problem when he considered (and dismissed) the possibility of a moral theonomy. His primary concern had remained with the possibility of free actions in a physically determined universe. For Schelling the more important question was the relation of freedom to a transcendent absolute. In modern terms: How can the pre-existence of *given ideals* fail to jeopardize moral autonomy? Authentic freedom tolerates no predetermined order of values or ideals. In his answer also Schelling anticipates modern solutions. God does not predetermine freedom, but, rather, is the very source of man's self-determining activity. Hence, a dependence on the absolute lies at the very roots of moral autonomy. To render this solution acceptable Schelling first had to neutralize the fear of pantheism which had led to the unbridgeable chasm between the Absolute and the finite free agent. The agent does not relate to God as he relates to the physical world. His activity must at some point *coincide* with a divine creativity on which it intrinsically depends. Man is most intimately united with God when he is free. Opposition begins where freedom ends.

But how can such a God-like freedom include a capacity of evil? To solve this formidable problem Schelling distinguishes the Ground of God's existence from that existence itself. This "Nature-in-God", as he calls it, remains, of course, inseparable from God's Being, yet since it does not coincide with that Being, it *is not* God, but rather the Ground from which God himself as well as all creation emerges. Man as the only creature to rise from this dark Ground to the full clarity of a spiritual existence displays a unique resemblance with God, a resemblance which in fact rests upon a partial identity. Only in him is the Word fully spoken and does spirit become manifest. Still while attaining individual form in the clarity of spirit man also remains attached to the indeterminate Ground from which he emerges. In God nature and spirit are indissolubly united. In man their bond remains fragile, ever to be strengthened anew. Being endowed with spirit, he *is not* simply spirit. At any time he may disturb the delicate balance between spiritual selfhood and dark nature. Neglecting one or the other he separates his particular will from the divine Will. Schelling's interpretation of moral evil is at once dualistic (in God) and qualifiedly monist (in man).

In his discussion of original sin Kierkegaard takes his distance from both. His more traditional approach has no use for such unorthodox distinctions as the one between spirit and nature in God. Nonetheless on a human level he also interprets sinfulness as a removal from "spirit", a regression to a more "natural" synthesis of soul and body. For him the conscious acceptance of the primordial dependence introduces an eternal element into man's being and constitutes it into a spiritual self. Here especially we detect traces of Schelling's influence. For the German idealist

the spiritual origin of freedom lies, outside the succession of time, in a primary act that determines all time-and-space conditioned activity. In Schelling's own words:

The act whereby life in time is determined belongs itself not to time but to eternity. It does not precede life even with respect to time, but goes through time (without being grasped by it) as a by nature eternal deed. Through it human life reaches up to the origin of creation, because through it man is, outside the realm of creation, free and of eternal origin. However incomprehensible this idea may appear to common thinking, there nevertheless corresponds in each person a feeling to it, as if he had been from all eternity what he is, rather than having become so in time.¹

Man is constituted as *act* and as *will* in his timeless origin and this aboriginal being-act conditions all his activity in time. The impact of this theory upon Schopenhauer and, through him, upon Nietzsche is evident. But it also profoundly affected Kierkegaard's concept of the self as will. Beginning with *Either/Or* he consistently describes genuine selfhood as a *choice*. The self posits itself by choosing itself. Hence freedom constitutes man's very essence.

I posit the absolute, for I myself am the absolute, I posit the absolute and I myself am the absolute, but in complete identity with this I can say that I choose the absolute which chooses me, that I posit the absolute which posits me. ...And what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity. (*Either/Or* II, 217-18; III, 198-99)

In his later writings Kierkegaard qualifies the extent to which active self-realization has an absolute character. But the primacy of the will and the necessity of a moral choice remain essential conditions for establishing genuine selfhood. Later in *The Sickness Unto Death* he still asserts: "The more will, the more self. A man who has no will at all is no self" (SUD 43-44; XV, 87). And in *Training in Christianity* we find the process of self-realization once again defined as a choice of oneself (TC 159; XVI, 155). On the other side, a corrective of what would otherwise have remained a purely voluntaristic (and virtually atheistic) theory of self appears already in the "Ultimatum" at the end of *Either/Or* II. There we learn that not the ethical choice alone establishes the self "in its eternal validity", but the awareness of the essential inadequacy of this choice, the idea that before God "we are always in the wrong". This inadequacy of the ethical realm is, of course, the principal theme of *Fear and Trembling* but also, in a somewhat different version (emphasizing failure rather than moral inadequacy), of *Repetition*.

II. *The Eternal and the Temporal*

Having acquainted ourselves with the main source of Kierkegaard's theory of

the self, we now turn to his own discussion of the synthesis of the eternal and the temporal. This synthesis, both in *The Concept of Anxiety* and in the *Sickness Unto Death*, completes the immediate synthesis of soul and body, and establishes the self as spirit.

Man is a synthesis of the soulish and the bodily. But a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third factor. This third factor is the spirit. (CD 39; VI, 137)

I assume that “soul” in this context (in contrast to its use in Kierkegaard’s “religious” works) means no more than the animating principle that has the potential to become spirit, but has to pass through a process of reflection in order to do so. In any event it is a category of immediacy. John Elrod defines it well:

To exist soulishly determined means to exist in accord with one’s natural and cultural immediacy. It means living according to the categories of nature and culture totally devoid of an awareness of one’s self as a self. But with the inflection of spirit, this soulish determination of the self in its natural and cultural immediacy becomes conscious of itself as real and ideal, is challenged by the possibility of its own freedom, and is stratified as a being which is in both time and eternity.²

The spirit, “the third factor” constitutes in fact a new synthesis—between the eternal and the temporal—or, more correctly, it transforms the existing synthesis into a wholly different one.

The synthesis of the eternal and the temporal is not a second synthesis but is the expression of the first synthesis in consequence of which man is a synthesis of soul and body sustained by spirit. (CD 79; VI, 176)

Nor does the dynamic opposition eternal-temporal exhaust the existential synthesis. In *The Sickness Unto Death* other dialectical poles appear—the finite and the infinite, the necessary and the possible. Though their dialectical oppositions do not appear in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard refers to these concepts in a manner wholly compatible with the later “synthesis”. Since we are clearly dealing here with a development rather than a change, I shall assume their presence in the overall synthesis, and treat them (as well as the eternal-temporal) as partial “syntheses” even though, strictly speaking, there is only one synthesis. The question may be raised whether they belong to the spiritualization process proper, or whether they form part of the “immediate” synthesis of body and soul. I have no doubt that the former is the case, yet in such a manner that they remain subordinate stages which do not receive their definitive meaning until the synthesis of the eternal and the temporal has been posited. The synthesis of the eternal and the temporal differs from the other two: spirit is identified with *one* of the elements of the synthesis, the

eternal, while at the same time resulting from the supreme synthesis itself.³

The synthesis of the soulish and the bodily is to be posited by the spirit, but *spirit is the eternal*, and therefore this is accomplished only when the spirit posits along with the former synthesis, the other synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. (CD 81; VI, 177)

The eternal as such introduces a transcendent dimension, absent from the previous categories, that wholly transforms the existing synthesis.

In the following pages I shall argue that the “syntheses” of the infinite and the possible correspond roughly to those stages of the spiritualization process to which Kierkegaard elsewhere refers as aesthetic and ethical, while the concluding one of the electoral-temporal corresponds to the religious stage. The association remains approximative at any moment and ceases to apply altogether once the lower synthesis becomes transformed by the higher one: at that point the infinite and the possible become convertible with the eternal. But separately from the eternal they belong to a lower level of reflection. In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard had criticized the “infinity without finitude, an infinity void of content” of the German Romantics (*Irony* 290; I, 286). In doing so he had been influenced by Goethe’s idea of *Humanität* which, perhaps under the impact of Spinoza, united the finite and the infinite as necessary complements. Kierkegaard opposes the “mastered” irony based upon this integrative view to the typically romantic irony, “the infinite absolute negativity,” expression of an infinite striving “wherein in turns riot” (*Ibid.*, 63; I, 84).

When irony has been mastered in this way, when the wild infinity wherein it storms consumingly forth has been restrained, it does not follow that it should lose then its significance. ...Irony now limits, renders finite, defines, and thereby yields truth, actuality and content... (*Irony* 338; I, 328)

In calling for a synthesis of the finite and the infinite Kierkegaard here adopts Hegel’s schema without accepting its idealistic implications. Infinity thereby means not a divine predicate, but a quality of existence that allows the person to transcend his given situation. It is, in fact, an attribute of freedom. Wilhelm Anz argues that Kierkegaard has not always succeeded in limiting this subjective infinity and, hence, in properly distinguishing the divine and the human attribute.⁴ This may well be true, but should not overly concern us. For despite its idealist origins Kierkegaard’s notion of infinity marks in fact a return to the more modest and mostly negative infinity of the Greeks—to *apeiron*—which, as Plato had argued, must be limited by *to peras* in order to constitute the real.⁵ This dialectical moment of infinity is the work of the imagination, “the medium of the process of infinitizing” (SUD 163; XV, 88). It constitutes the “expanding factor” in the

self which enables it to move beyond the given and thereby to achieve the distance required for the reflection essential to the spiritualization process. But to the infinitizing movement must always correspond a finitizing one. The infinite, negative Idea “must again assert itself and render the Idea finite, make it concrete” (*Irony*, 326; I, 318).

Yet for Kierkegaard there is still another infinity than that of the imagination—the inwardly infinite—which is directly related to the self’s religious nature. In *The Concept of Irony* he clearly distinguished the two:

But infinity may be either an external or an internal infinity. The person who would have an infinitely poetical enjoyment also has an infinity before him, but it is an external infinity. When I enjoy I am constantly outside myself in the ‘other’. But such an infinity must cancel itself. Only if I am not outside myself in what I enjoy but in myself, only then is my enjoyment infinite, for it is inwardly infinite. He who enjoys poetically, were he to enjoy the whole world, would still lack one enjoyment: he does not enjoy himself. To enjoy oneself (naturally not in a Stoic or egotistical sense, for here again there is no true infinity, but in a religious sense) is alone the true infinity. (*Irony* 313; I, 306).

It is this religious infinity which Kierkegaard will more and more explore in his subsequent works—first in the so-called “movement of infinity” by which the religious person resigns his claim on the temporal in *Fear and Trembling*. This movement precedes the act of faith that “by virtue of the absurd” reasserts its claim on the finite (FT 79; V, 64). Unlike Socrates whose ignorance expressed infinite resignation, Abraham believed “and believed for this life” (FT 34; V, 21) “It is about the temporal, the finite, everything turns in this [faith] case” (FT 60; V, 46).

Here we detect how even the religious infinity has its dangers. For it may carry the religious person away from himself and his earthly task into an attitude of mystical indifference toward the finite.

The God-relationship infinitizes; but this may so carry a man away that it becomes an inebriation, it may seem to a man as though it were unendurable to exist before God—for the reason that a man cannot return to himself, cannot become himself. (SUD 165; XV, 90)

Hence man cannot unconditionally entrust himself even to the religious infinite, unless he balances his devotion by an appropriate concern for the finite. Only after it has become identical with the (religious) eternal allows the infinite itself to be unqualifiedly pursued, because then it replaces its opposition to the finite by an integration with it. Nevertheless, the first, oppositional synthesis remains a necessary moment of reflection; without it the self would never move beyond the immediacy of the given.⁶

In establishing the synthesis of the possible and the necessary the individual overcomes the purely aesthetic attitude in a new consciousness of freedom. Yet here again the temptation of the infinite awaits him, for he may reduce that freedom to a mere feeling of "infinite possibility". Kierkegaard, well aware of this danger, detaches himself from Schelling's theory of freedom which collapses the possible and the necessary in their "Ground". In contrast to the idealistic philosopher he insists on a permanent dialectical opposition between the two poles. Without an awareness of its restricting finitude, that is, its necessity, the sense of freedom turns into an empty *feeling* of possibility. Like the Stoic consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, it asserts its infinite potential only by means of a steadfast refusal of any concrete content. The polemics with Hegel, at their height in *Philosophical Fragments*, continue in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Nevertheless Kierkegaard's firm rejection of the romantic concept of freedom marks a return to a Hegelian synthesis of the possible and the necessary. In *Philosophical Fragments* he had posited (against Aristotle) that the possible excludes the necessary, since it requires an additional determination to be actual. The process of *becoming* by which the transition from the possible to the actual is effected has a beginning and hence lacks the inability to non-existence which characterizes genuine necessity. Now, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, he presents a different concept of possibility which, to be actual, *requires a combination with necessity* (Hegel's own definition).⁷

With the awareness of freedom grows the consciousness of time. For the Greeks freedom had not yet become the essential category of man's self-understanding. Therefore they also lacked a clear sense of time. "If the Greek life might be supposed to define time in any sense, it is as time past, yet without defining this by its relation to the present and the future" (CD 80; VI, 177). The modern sense of freedom places the emphasis on the future. Kierkegaard contrasts it to the ancient recollection as "the category by which one enters eternity forwards" (CD 80; VI, 178). He thereby resumes the theory he had developed in *Repetition*:

Just as they [the Greeks] taught that all knowledge is a recollection, so will modern philosophy teach that the whole of life is a repetition.... Repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas repetition properly so called is recollected forwards.⁸ (*Rep.* 33; V, 115)

In such a remembrance of the past as permanent reality the consciousness of time remains dormant. ("The Greeks did not in the profoundest sense comprehend... the temporal" (CD 78; VI, 176).) Only the orientation toward the future fully awakens the sense of time.⁹ Faced with an empty possibility to which it must give content, the individual experiences dread, the fear of nothingness. Precisely in this anxious confrontation with the future does he become clearly aware of his temporality. An-

xiety becomes the very face of the future. Kierkegaard wanted, above all, to establish the link between dread and time. Before writing *The Concept of Anxiety* he wrote in his diary: "It is quite possible to show that a very precise and correct usage of language links anxiety and the future together" (V B 55:10; Hong I # 98). Yet the ultimate significance of this dread of the future consists in its projection of eternity. In it the subject unconsciously longs for spiritual selfhood. The *eternal* dwells in it as in its own projected shadow. In the indeterminacy of the future the subject hears the voice of spiritual transcendence calling it away from the immediate here-and-now and inviting it to pass from the temporal to the eternal reality. This encounter with the beyond threatens man's closed existence and, hence, frightens him.

In order to go to the other, we must always move through a dark and narrow passage. Even if it is the good [which beckons us], at first it oppresses us. But the moment when the passage is narrowest and the anxiety most intense, it will appear—while we move from the *other* below us the nothingness of which attracts us as well as frightens us, to the other above us, infinitely high, the absolutely *other* which also for the mind is a nothing, because of its excessive light.¹⁰

However, spiritual selfhood requires more than active self-realization. Active striving alone never comes to terms with its own ultimacy. It never confronts the absolute which it constantly assumes. Only in the religious attitude does the self achieve a conscious relation to that absolute which at once is the source of free self-realization and transcends it. Kierkegaard identifies this transcendent element as *the eternal*. In it the self surpasses the pure succession of an ever renewed forward movement which constantly asserts and relativizes its existence in time. The realized present ever again gives way to the possible future. In its relation to the eternal, however, the self attains that permanence which first fully constitutes selfhood in time. Here existence reaches back to that original point in which, according to Schelling, the self is "free beyond createdness and of eternal origin."¹¹ Even Kant felt the need to ground freedom in a unique deed that can be recognized only "through Reason independently of all conditions of time."¹² Yet neither Kant nor Schelling ever gave a satisfactory answer to the question how a self identical with the free deed can ever *transcend* time. How can what consists in an acting will ever surpass an unending (and hence time-bound) pursuit of the possible? If the eternal has any place in such a theory, can it be more than that of an infinite possibility? One commentator, perhaps more consistent than others, has accepted this consequence, also for Kierkegaard. Enzo Paci writes:

The act ... is always in time and is never the atemporal and the absolute, no more than it is ever the elementary, the simple, the atomic, the one.

Further, the 'foundation' is never a real but a possible, never a being but the possibility of aperture of the becoming in the future. Precisely because actuality is always temporal, spirit is possibility, freedom, rather than being and necessity.¹³

If the absolute is conceived as a God, existing in and by itself, the idea of a necessary, fully real Being must be replaced by that of a pure possibility. Paci considers this conclusion implied in Kierkegaard's theory.

Now such a closed interpretation of the self as free act hardly corresponds to what Kierkegaard had in mind. He was fully aware of the consequences involved in simply identifying selfhood with self-determination and thereby tying it to an unsurmountable temporality. He also took measures to avoid them. For him the ultimate category of selfhood is not infinite *possibility*, that is, indefinite openness, but *eternity*. Moreover, the category of eternity is not merely one element of a concluding synthesis, unlike the possible which appears as only *one* of the dialectical poles of a synthesis. The relation to the eternal which concludes the constitution of selfhood has no dialectical counterpart. But since this relation also penetrates all other, temporal aspects of the self the eternal must, *in addition*, establish a bipolar synthesis with the temporal. Without this final synthesis the eternal would simply abolish the temporal and suppress the entire process of free self-realization. Hence the eternal, though clearly transcending the temporal, must also relate to it. It could not enter the existing synthesis without inserting itself into it as *one* of two elements of a new synthesis. But it is the *eternal alone* which determines the self as spirit. Kierkegaard perceived the uniqueness of "the eternal", where Schelling, steeped in the romantic use (and abuse!) of religious language, had failed to grasp fully the distinctness of the eternal from the infinitely possible. To be sure, Kierkegaard's solution presents some problems of its own. Can a self defined as freedom still remain open to the eternal? Does the eternal not conflict with time? Is the relativity of actions accomplished in time through which man achieves his selfhood compatible with a relation to an absolute beyond time? Kierkegaard himself once raised the question: "Can the eternal be decided in time?" (XI,A329). To answer it we must first clarify the concept of time itself.

III. *The Instant*

Thus far we assumed that the self-actualization of freedom entails a complete concept of time, if not of eternity. But this is far from being the case. Being primarily future-directed the experience of duration implied in free self-actualization lacks the element of permanence needed to retain the past and to anticipate the future in the present. Its constant forward movement, no more than the ancient recollection, yields the sense of present that characterizes a complete experience of

time. Only with the relation to the eternal does time reach its fullness (II, A 437 (1839)). When the Eternal entered the temporal at the moment of the Incarnation it transformed our time consciousness.

The concept around which everything turns in Christianity, the concept which makes all things new, is the fullness of time, is the instant as eternity, and yet this eternity is at once the future and the past. (CD 81; VI, 178)

To be sure, there always had to be some element of everlastingness, and hence at least an inkling of eternity in duration, for that is the very condition of consciousness in general and of time-consciousness in particular.

When time is correctly defined as infinite succession, it seems plausible to define it also as the present, the past and future. However, this distinction is incorrect, if one means by it that this is implied in time itself; for it first emerges with the relation of time to eternity and the reflection of eternity in it. (CD 76; VI, 1974)

In that general sense all time consciousness implies a notion of permanence. But unless it be interpreted as an intersection of time by eternity, this permanent element tends to be repelled to the past or propelled into the future. The Greek eternity lies behind, as the past "into which one enters only backwards" (CD 80; VI, 177). As Kierkegaard has explained in *Philosophical Fragments* (published in the same year as *Anxiety*), Socratic recollection meant more than reminiscing historical events: the recollected past grounds my present existence. Nevertheless, even though recollection transcends the past as mere past, it attains the eternal only in a temporal *image* which lacks the necessary nature of true eternity. Whatever comes into existence may be immutable once it exists, but it does not thereby become eternal. The immutability of the past annihilates the merely possible by becoming irreversible and thus excluding possible alternatives, but it never attains the intrinsic necessity of the eternal. In an early diary entry Kierkegaard notes how, by a strange dialectic, the concentration on the past may turn into an expectation of the future, as in the Jewish mind (II, A372)—a precocious version of the exegetical principle, *Urzeit ist Endzeit*.

The nature of the eternal implied in the ancient recollection may remain a matter of debate. But about the nature of its presence in the "modern" mind there can be no doubt. The indefinite future which receives all the emphasis contains unquestionably an image of eternity. Yet the eternal here appears only "incognito", that is, without a real present. The "present" merely functions as a dividing line between a closed past and an open future, without real content of its own. "If the instant is posited...merely as a *discrimen*, then the future is the eternal" (CD 81; VI, 178). The subject remains in a dreaming state toward a spiritual existence which it

conceives only as substanceless project. “The eternal must not be understood merely as a denominator of *transitus* but also as a continuous state of fulfillment” (II, A570).

In contrast to the Greeks and the “moderns” Christianity presents the eternal *as distinct from the temporal*. “Christianity continually speaks about eternity, constantly thinks about the eternal” (X³ A286 (1950)). It is true that Kierkegaard also attributes to it a preoccupation with the future, with “post-existence” as opposed to the pre-existence or even the concern with the immediate present of the Greeks (VIII¹ A147 (1847)). In *Repetition* he simply states that eternity for the Christian lies in the future, and in *Works of Love* he surprisingly denies that the contact between the eternal and the temporal occurs in the present, for reasons not unlike those used by the theologians of hope, namely, that the present itself would then be the eternal (which it obviously is not).

If the eternal is in the temporal it is in the future (for the present cannot get hold of it, and the past is indeed past) or in possibility. The past is actuality; the future is possibility. Eternally the eternal is the eternal; in time the eternal is possibility, the future. Therefore we call tomorrow the future, but we also call eternal life the future. (*Works of Love*, 234; XII, 240)

The emphasis on the future is justified insofar as Christianity first conceived of eternity as that endless openness which only the future possesses. In fact, the same idea lies at the origin of what Kierkegaard refers to as “the modern” attitude—however far it may since have removed itself from the Christian view. But unless one relates these statements about the eternal as future to the more fundamental emphasis on the *present* as the meeting point of time and eternity, they distort the perspective of Kierkegaard’s theory. In an early *Edifying Discourse* he explicitly defined the relation to the future as a subordinate one: “Through the eternal can one conquer the future, because the eternal is the foundation of the future” (*Ed. Disc.* I, 21).

The eternal is the “fullness of time” (II, A437) that allows the present to incorporate past and future into its own everlastingness. As Kierkegaard formulates it in a *Christian Discourse*:

When by the help of eternity a man lives absorbed in today, he turns his back upon the next day, so that he does not see it at all. If he turns around, eternity is confused before his eyes, it becomes the next day. But if for the sake of labouring more effectually towards the goal (eternity) he turns his back, he does not see the next day at all, whereas by the help of eternity he sees quite clearly today and its task. . . . Faith turns its back to the eternal in order precisely to have this [the eternal] with him today. But if a man turns, especially with earthly passion, towards the future, then he is farth-

est from the eternal....(*Christian Discourses*, 76-77; XIII, 74)

In this passage we have the whole complex dialectic of the present and the future with respect to the eternal in Christianity. The eternal lies indeed, also in the future, but it can be attained only through an intensive consciousness of the present. It becomes most manifest in the lasting presentness which man experiences at the privileged moments of his existence. Thus joy consists in being fully present to oneself, in truly "being today". "Joy is the present tense with the whole emphasis upon the *present*. Therefore it is that God is blessed who eternally says Today" (*The Lilies of the Field* in *Christian Disc.* 350; XIV, 160).

To the present-less time consciousness of the Greeks and the moderns Kierkegaard opposes the Christian awareness of the "instant", the point where time encounters the eternal.

The life which is in time and is merely that of time has no present. It is true that to characterize the sensuous life it is commonly said that it is 'in the instant' and only in the instant. The instant is here understood as something abstracted from the eternal, and if this is to be accounted from the present, it is a parody of it. The present is the eternal, or rather the eternal is the present, and the present is full. (CD 77-78; VI, 175)

The *instant*, perhaps Kierkegaard's most original category, has nothing in common with the mathematical abstraction that divides a homogeneous line into past and future. In such a spatial representation no single moment has any particular significance. Nor does eternity consist in the infinite extension of such abstract "instants". "Eternity...is the opposite to the temporal as a whole" (*Christian Disc.* 103-04; XIII, 98). At the same time only the eternal introduces a full awareness of time, thus positing both itself and its opposite: "eternity [is] constantly permeating time" (CD 80; VI, 177). This dual nature gives the eternal an ambiguous character. Viewed from time the instant passes from the past into the future; viewed from eternity it knows neither past nor future or, more correctly, it transforms past and future into a lasting present. Being an "atom of eternity" (CD 79; VI, 176) the instant restructures the entire synthesis of selfhood into a spiritual one. "No sooner is the spirit posited than the instant is there" (CD 79; VI, 177).

Only with the breakthrough of the eternal is the final synthesis of the self accomplished, the one that relates temporality as a whole to its opposite. "The synthesis of the soulish and the bodily...is accomplished only when the spirit projects at the same time along with this the second synthesis of the eternal and the temporal" (CD 81; VI, 178). To be sure, temporality was present from the beginning and hence also an implicit consciousness of eternity. But once the eternal becomes conscious in its opposition to time it entirely transforms the relation between present, past and future. Through the eternal the present is posited "as the annulled

succession" (CD 77; VI, 175). The instant preserves the past and holds the spiritual essence of the future. Yet it forms no "eternal return", no mere repetition of the past in the future. It contains the past *as past*, in its unique and irreversible identity, and the future *as anticipated*, as what-is-yet-to-come and has never been. Far from abolishing history the instant gives it an unprecedented importance: the moment of the objective presence of the eternal in time divides history into AD and BC. Yet it overcomes the purely *successive* character of history. In the timeless instant all times and events acquire a lasting presence. In our age poets have expressed the same idea in different modes. Thus Claudel writes:

Rien n'a pu ou ne peut
Etre qui ne soit à ce moment même; toutes
Choses sont présentes pour moi (*La ville*).

And T. S. Eliot:

Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end
And all is always now. ("Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets*).

Thus "recollection" assumes a new meaning in the Christian context. Rather than denying history it interiorizes time and thereby overcomes the distention of time through time.

Kierkegaard warns against a too easy "eternalization" of time or of any of its moments. Writing against Martensen and other Hegelians he ridicules the idea of attaching to each moment an eternal significance *in its own right*. This, in fact, amounts to a simple divinization of time, which in the end abolishes the genuinely temporal. True eternity always retains a certain resistance to time, however much it permeates it. Hence the birth of a new opposition (the eternal—the temporal) once the eternal enters the soul-body synthesis. To treat each moment as if it were itself "immortal" (as, according to Kierkegaard, "metaphysics" does) reduces the eternalization of time to a "comic" level. The Christian concept of immortality evaluates time more realistically:

Even though Christianity teaches that at the Day of Judgment a man must give account of every idle word he has spoken, which we understand simply as a total recollection, . . . and even though the doctrine of Christianity cannot be more sharply illuminated by any contrast than it is by the Greek conception that the immortal souls first drank of Lethe in order to forget, yet it does not by any means follow that recollection must either directly

or indirectly become comic, directly by the fact that one remembers ludicrous incidents, indirectly by transforming ludicrous incidents into essential decisions. (CD 136-37; VI, 233)

Here the eternal clearly preserves an identity that never coincides with time or with any of its moments. Only in immortal life, that is, in existence after death, can eternity fully assert itself in the human spirit and this essential reality “will have the effect of the water of Lethe so far as concerns the unessential” (CD 137; VI, 233). Kierkegaard’s equation of pure eternity with immortality creates, however, serious problems. How can existence-in-time ever become *fully* “eternal”? The idea of immortality, constantly assumed, never received an adequate treatment in his work.

The difference between an existence locked in a closed temporality and one that has opened up to the eternal appears in the subject’s attitude toward his own potential, and particularly in the concomitant feeling of anxiety. Each ascent to a more spiritual level of selfhood requires a leap into the unknown which provokes anxiety. Even the dormant awareness of possible selfhood that hides in the immediate harmony of soul and body elicits an unfocused dread. Such was the “profound sorrow unexplained” (CD 58: VI, 156) that clouded the ancient mind, an “anxiety before its own absence of anxiety”.¹⁴ Similarly Kierkegaard describes man’s condition before the Fall as anxious, even though neither a clear consciousness of freedom nor of eternity existed. Anxiety intensifies once freedom becomes fully conscious and the individual faces the gaping emptiness of his own fateful potential. Christianity alleviates this dread before the future. The believer no longer realizes his freedom in a vacuum of sheer possibility, but in a present that preserves a redeemed past and maintains a continuity with the future. Not the mere nothingness of infinite possibility confronts the Christian, but the transcendent power to recapture (*Gjentagelse*—“repetition”), ever again, a freedom disrupted through fate or sin. Meanwhile faith introduces its own anxiety. Once sinfulness has been revealed, the ability to commit moral evil takes on a *concrete* character unknown to the dreaming apprehension of the prelapsarian or pagan mind. The more the individual becomes aware of his relation to the eternal, the more he realizes his ominous power to sever that relation. Next to this dread before his power of evil the person who has confronted the eternal also experiences another, demoniacal fear of the good, the fear of admitting the eternal into his existence in time. If he yields to it, dread will turn into despair (as described in *Sickness Unto Death*).

The lesser or greater presence of the eternal determines the attitudes toward despair. The aesthetic attitude knows only an implicit despair, the refusal to let the spirit break through which Kierkegaard described in the behavior of a Nero (*Either/Or* II), or even of a young woman who dismisses the serious choices of life (*Sickness Unto Death*). The ethical attitude is perfectly capable of despair about the self as self-realizing project, but not of that ultimate refusal to be oneself in

one's relation to the eternal. Only in a clear consciousness of the eternal can man fully choose closed finitude, fatalistic resignation, deliberate escape into a world of fantasy or exclusive reliance on his own potential. The possibility of despair presupposes a clear awareness of that full responsibility of existing in time which man receives only in the light of eternity.

Comparing now the synthesis of the eternal and the temporal with the other two syntheses we notice that the former both transcends and transforms the latter. In contrast to the balance between the finite and the infinite, between the necessary and the possible, the final synthesis results in a clear priority of one term (the eternal) over the other. The eternal, once it appears, transcends both its own synthesis (with time) and the two others. As the principle that orders and structures the whole the eternal has no parallel. Indeed, it distorts the existing harmony in an upward direction. The synthesis with the eternal is lopsided from the start: the temporal owes its own content to its opposite, and the eternal preserves its transcendence even after having posited its temporal counterpart. This unbalance also affects the other constituents of the selfhood. The presence of spirit conveys a different dimension to the finite and the infinite than they had in the aesthetic or in the ethical attitudes. In a religious perspective the *infinite* becomes an attribute of the eternal, fully exchangeable with it. If he fails to keep this semantic shift in mind Kierkegaard's reader will object to the confusion of a term that signifies at once the realm of pure fantasy, unlimited human possibility, and the very nature of God. A similar transformation occurs in the possible. On a purely ethical level the possible consists in that open-ended freedom which draws the individual beyond the circle of his given reality. It tempts him to the hazardous projects and fantastic schemes against which *Sickness Unto Death* warned. But elsewhere the possible becomes synonymous with the eternal in man. Thus in *The Works of Love*:

The possibility of the good is more than possibility, for it is the eternal. This is the basis of the fact that one who hopes can never be deceived, for to hope is to expect the possibility of the good; but the possibility of the good is the eternal. (*Works of Love* 234; XII, 240)

And further:

But if there is less love in him, there is also less of the eternal in him; but if there is less of the eternal in him, there is also less possibility, less awareness of possibility (for possibility appears through the temporal movement of the eternal within the eternal in a human being...). (*Ibid.*, 241; XII, 248)

In *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* Kierkegaard describes faith as the opening up of possibility. Even when fate appears to have closed off all avenues to an acceptable future, the knight of faith can still hope—and hope for this life—in virtue

of the eternal. The coming of the eternal in time constitutes the ultimate possibility, for “with God nothing is impossible”.

NOTES

For *The Concept of Anxiety*, I have used Lowrie’s translation (*The Concept of Dread*, Princeton University Press 1957—reissued several times), abridged as CD. Other abridgments: SUD (*Sickness Unto Death*), *Rep. (Repetition)*. Others are self-explanatory. This essay appears simultaneously in slightly different form, in *The International Kierkegaard Commentary*, the volume on *The Concept of Anxiety* (ed. Robert Perkins, Mercer Press, 1984).

1. Friedrich Schelling: *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der Menschlichen Freiheit* in *Werke* (ed. Otto Weisz) Leipzig: Eckhardt, 1907, Vol. 3, pp. 481-82.

2. John W. Elrod: *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 40.

3. Mark C. Taylor in *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 88-89, has drawn attention to this apparent discrepancy.

4. Wilhelm Anz: *Kierkegaard und der deutsche Idealismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1956), pp. 32-33.

5. The Ancients had, at least in late Antiquity, also a positive idea of the infinite. Thus for Epicurus the instant holds a fullness of content and an infinity of experience that renders immortality superfluous. The same idea appears in Marcus Aurelius. Indeed, the idea of the instant implies logically the idea of the infinite and excludes mere finitude. Cf., Rodolfo Mondolfo: *Problemi del pensiero antico* (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1935), pp. 216-21. Also, his *L’infinito nel pensiero dei Greci* (Florence, F. LeMonnier, 1934).

6. In assuming that the relation finite-infinite belongs already to the process of spiritualization proper, my reading differs from John W. Elrod’s for whom this relation refers to the same phenomenon designated by the soul-body duality (*op. cit.*, p. 37). Still Elrod himself mentions reflection as a “cooperative aspect of the process of infinitizing” (p. 34), while defining the soul-body relation as immediate, “totally devoid of an awareness of one’s self as self” (p. 40).

7. The new compatibility of the possible with the necessary may well be due to its combination with the romantic infinite. (“In the possibility everything is possible” (CD 140; VI, 235); “The man who is educated by possibility is educated in accordance with his infinity” (*ibid.*)). Such an “infinite possibility” requires a restriction (a “necessity” in a wholly different sense) to achieve the transaction to actuality. Cf., Nicola Abagnano: “Kierkegaard e il sentiero della possibilità” in *Studi Kierkegaardiani*, ed. Cornelio Fabro (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1957), pp. 9-28.

8. For a further development of the idea of repetition as the forward movement of freedom, cf. my *A Dubious Heritage*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), Ch. 2, “Kierkegaard’s Religion as Freedom”, pp. 30-52.

9. Paul Tillich exactly paraphrases Kierkegaard’s thought on the link between the two: “It is the future that awakens us to the mystery of time. Time runs from the beginning to the end, but our awareness of time goes in the opposite direction. It starts with the anxious anticipation of the end. In the light of the

future we see the past and the present." *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner, 1963), p. 123. My attention to this passage was drawn by Mark Taylor.

10. Jean Wahl: *Etudes Kierkegaardianes* (Paris, Vrin, 1974), p. 251.

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 482.

12. *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der reinen Vernunft* in *Werke* (Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften) VI, 31.

13. "Su due significati del concetto dell'angoscia in Kierkegaard" in *Symposium Kierkegaardianum, Orbis Litterarum X* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1955), p. 199.

14. Jean Wahl: *Etudes Kierkegaardianes*, p. 233.