

CHAPTER 13

Kantian paradoxes and modern despair: Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard

SCHOPENHAUER'S POST-KANTIANISM IDEALISM AS ROMANTIC PESSIMISM

In almost all respects, Schopenhauer ought to be taken as a post-Hegelian philosopher, even though chronologically speaking, his major work, *The World as Will and Representation*, was published around the same time as Hegel's own *Encyclopedia* (1818 for the former, 1817 for the latter). However, only after the 1850s, almost twenty years after Hegel's death, was Schopenhauer's work recognized as possibly offering an alternative post-Kantian philosophy both to the kind that Fichte and Schelling had begun and that Hegel had seemingly completed, and to the kind of empirically oriented but nonetheless religiously sentimentalist post-Kantianism of Fries and his school.

Schopenhauer's own life overlapped that of the post-Napoleonic generation: he was born in 1788, and he died in 1860. Because his father was a wealthy businessman, Schopenhauer never wanted for money in his life, which, in turn, gave him the independence from academic life that allowed him to pursue his own, more idiosyncratic course despite the fact that German academia remained more or less totally unreceptive to Schopenhauer's work over the course of his career. In fact, it was not until late in his career that those outside of academia paid much attention to him; Heine, for example, does not even mention him in his books to the French on the state of philosophy in Germany. However, Schopenhauer's financial independence insulated him from all that; for example, he personally subsidized the second, expanded printing of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1844 – the first printing had been largely ignored, and for most of his life there was no demand for a second one, neither of which deterred him.

In his early life, Schopenhauer was also given a wide swath of educational opportunities, including a stint in England as a schoolboy

(which gave him perfect command of English for the rest of his life), and a stint as a teenager in Weimar (where his mother moved after his father's death apparently from suicide). In Weimar, he was introduced to and kept some company with Goethe and other luminaries (with whom his mother was also well connected); in 1811, he went to Berlin to study philosophy, but he sat out the so-called "wars of liberation" against Napoleon, preferring instead to work privately on his doctoral thesis (*On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*), finishing it in 1813. (Schopenhauer was simply uninterested in all the nationalist fervor surrounding the wars, and, as far as he was concerned, the closing of the university during the war only gave him more free time to devote to his studies.) After finishing his dissertation, he then turned to working on his major book, *The World as Will and Representation*, which formed the basis of all his subsequent thought. Although he added things to it over the years in subsequent editions, and he expanded it greatly, he never changed the essential content of the work. Although he studied with Fichte and knew Hegel, he deeply despised both of them. In a well-known incident, he even arranged to have his lectures as a *Privatdozent* at Berlin scheduled at the same time as Hegel's; this move outraged the other faculty at Berlin, since part of a professor's income came from those attending his class paying for "tickets" to the class, and it was felt to be inappropriate that a younger *Dozent* would challenge a full professor's livelihood in that way. As things turned out, Hegel did not have to worry; first, few students came to Schopenhauer's sessions and when, later, none showed up, Schopenhauer had to leave Berlin in a state of moderate disgrace.

This certainly did nothing to soften Schopenhauer's aversion to Hegel, and without much dispute he could lay claim to being one of the founding members of the Hegel-haters club (which Schopenhauer graciously extended to despising all forms of "university philosophy," perhaps because "university philosophers" in turn by and large ignored him). Schopenhauer energetically helped to foster the image of Hegel as a charlatan, a philosophical pretender clothing vacuous stupidity in a dense, impenetrable vocabulary to give his work a specious appearance of profundity to an unsuspecting, intellectually corrupted public. Although Schopenhauer's personal aversion to Hegel (and also to Fichte and even to Schelling) was quite real, it was also based on the competition among the post-Kantian generation to see who would be the successor to Kant, who would act in the "spirit" of Kant if not in his "letter," a competition which for most of his career Schopenhauer seemed to be losing. However,

despite his lack of public success (until late in his career), Schopenhauer consistently maintained that it was necessary to discard the elements of post-Kantian philosophy as they had appeared in the works of Reinhold, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (and Fries and all the other post-Kantians); they were, in his view, not so much an advance on Kant as a distortion of the “spirit” of Kant, and thus one would be better off returning to Kant for inspiration rather than reading any of the corpus of the other post-Kantians.

Nonetheless, just as many of the first generation of post-Kantians had done, Schopenhauer took the key elements in Kantian thought to lie in Kant’s doctrines of the unknowable thing-in-itself and the spontaneity of the human mind in the construction of the *appearing* world. Indeed, for Schopenhauer, the great error of post-Kantianism had been, starting with Fichte, the denial of the thing-in-itself. Nonetheless, like so many of the post-Kantians he claimed to despise, Schopenhauer also wanted to provide a more suitable formulation of Kant’s own notion of the “supersensible substrate of appearances,” of what, in Kant’s own words, is “neither nature nor freedom and yet is linked with the basis of freedom.”¹ To do this, so Schopenhauer argued, one had to stay true to Kant’s own destruction of the faith traditional metaphysics had put in reason’s ability to discern the structure of things-in-themselves, and thus one had to keep faith with Kant’s own restriction of knowledge to appearances, not to things-in-themselves (even if one held, as Schopenhauer did, that Kant’s own “deduction” of the notion of the thing-in-itself was faulty). To that end, Schopenhauer took the lessons of Kant’s three *Critiques* to be that all we can discursively, conceptually *know* of the world is what we get through our *representations* (*Vorstellungen*) of it. Yet, so Kant had himself claimed, we also know as a practical matter that we (or our wills) are unconditionally free (even though we cannot theoretically prove that we are free). We thus have some knowledge of what we are as acting agents in-ourselves (as noumena, not phenomena) that goes beyond our capacities for theoretical knowledge.

The world as we *must represent* it is to be taken more or less exactly as Kant had described it: a world of substances interacting with each other according to strict, deterministic causal laws. The world as it is in-itself, however, need not be that way. Schopenhauer’s striking suggestion was to assert that this knowledge of the will as a free, unencumbered striving was the knowledge of things-in-themselves, and that this capacity of the

¹ See *Critique of Judgment*, §57, §59.

will was not simply a characterization of what “we” were in-ourselves but what the *world* was in-itself. Schopenhauer’s own understanding of how to get at the “supersensible substrate” that was the basis of both nature and freedom differed from Schelling’s own strategy in his *Naturphilosophie*. Whereas Schelling had tried to find some way to reconcile the Newtonian conception of nature and the practical requirements of freedom in an “Idea” of nature that was prior to both of them, Schopenhauer accepted (what he took to be Kant’s strictures on) the incompatibility of our knowledge of nature (the “world as representation”) and the noumenal reality of the world. There simply was no “unity” of subject and object as Schelling had claimed, and thus there could be no “intellectual intuition” of the absolute that would establish such a unity. Schelling’s (and Hegel’s) attempts at providing an account of agency and nature that presented a “unified” conception were, so Schopenhauer said, nothing but “atrocious, and what is more extremely wearisome humbug.”²

The conditions under which any experience of nature is possible thus include “the inseparable and reciprocal dependence of subject and object, together with the antithesis between them which cannot be eliminated” and therefore if we are to seek the “inner ground” of the world, the supersensible substrate of appearance, we must look to something other than the structure of *representation* itself.³ Schopenhauer drew the conclusion that one cannot get *behind* the opposition of subject and object to find something deeper that unites them; one must abandon the standpoint of representation that requires that fundamental opposition of subject and object in the first place.⁴

Our most fundamental knowledge of ourselves is through our grasp of our embodied presence in the world. That grasp has two facets: first, there is the representation of the body as yet another material substance interacting with other substances in the material world according to causal laws; but, second, there is also the awareness of the body as the expression of one’s *will*.⁵ The latter grasp of one’s own body is much

² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (trans. E. J. F. Payne) (New York: Dover, 1966), I, p. 26; §7.

³ *Ibid.*, I, p. 31; §7.

⁴ In this respect, Schopenhauer seemed to be following Reinhold, while rejecting Reinhold’s own conclusions: “Now our method of procedure is *toto genere* different from these two opposite misconceptions, since we start neither from the object nor from the subject, but from the representation, as the first fact of consciousness . . . [This] suggests to us, as we have said, that we look for the inner nature of the world in quite another aspect of it which is entirely different from the representation,” *ibid.*, I, p. 34; §7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 100; §18: “The action of the body is nothing but the will objectified, i.e., translated into perception.”

different from the former, and Schopenhauer appeals to our experiential sense of this to make his point, namely, that our “felt” understanding of our own embodiment is totally different from our grasp of any other material object. Other objects are inert, but we grasp ourselves as moving ourselves around in the world (instead of “being moved” around in the world). In grasping one’s body in this way as the *expression* of one’s will, one is thereby grasping what one really is *as* a thing-in-itself, as a “will” that is not a member of the causal order even though it is capable of initiating its own string of causal connections (from action to consequence).

On the basis of that, Schopenhauer proposed that we understand the nature of things-in-themselves as therefore being that of “will” (or at least analogous to the will). That is, our only grasp of things-in-itself is (as he takes Kant to have at least suggested) given through our own practical sense of our being able to move ourselves about in the world, relatively independently of control by other things in the world; and, even though we cannot know the nature of things-in-themselves by appealing to reason (which, as Kant had shown, only lands us in insoluble contradictions – antinomies – when we apply requirements of pure reason to things-in-themselves), we can by analogy posit that, whatever things-in-themselves are, they have the structure of the “will.” Using our immediate experience of our own willing, we can analogically determine that the world-in-itself is a case of “will,” of groundless striving that has various different empirical manifestations.⁶ Kant’s great mistake in asserting that we could know nothing at all about the nature of things-in-themselves had to do with his overlooking the way in which our reflective understanding can detach itself from its dependence on what is given in experience and grasp through the use of analogical concepts what is the “ground” of that experience. (Schopenhauer freely admitted that his route to the nature of the thing-in-itself was different from Kant’s and, so he thought, superior.⁷)

Since the will is a thing-in-itself, it cannot be explained by appeal to the principle of sufficient reason, which means, as Schopenhauer saw, that there can in principle be no explanation of why we willed one thing rather than another, even though from the theoretical perspective (that of appearance), we must assume that every action is strictly determined. The body simply is the empirical appearance of the will, and the kinds

⁶ See *ibid.*, I, pp. 110–111, §22: “We have to observe, however, that here of course we use only a *denominatio a potiori*, by which the concept of will therefore receives a greater extension than it has hitherto had.”

⁷ See *ibid.*, I, p. 170; §31.

of accounts proper to explaining bodies in motion (whether through Newtonian means or by appeals to motives) work well when applied to the *body* as appearance but fail abruptly when applied to what the body *expresses*, the will. As empirical appearances – as flesh-and-blood human beings living in the natural world (the world of “representation”) – we are completely determined; as will, we are independent of the natural causal order.

The difficulty, as Schopenhauer clearly saw, was saying that “we” or “I” is in-itself the “will,” since, as a thing-in-itself, the will “lies outside time and space, and accordingly knows no plurality, and consequently is *one*.”⁸ Behind the realm of appearance – which Schopenhauer interprets as more like a dream, illusion, the veil of Maya – stands the reality of the thing-in-itself as a restless, non-purposive striving “one,” the “will” that strives without a goal at which it aims. This is the true “supersensible substrate” of nature, the “one” that underlies the “all.” Like some other post-Kantians (whom he despised), Schopenhauer in effect argued that Kantianism had to culminate in some kind of quasi-Spinozism in order to avoid making the relation between freedom and nature fully unintelligible, a conclusion that had seemed to threaten Kantianism since the “Third Antinomy” of the first *Critique*. As Schopenhauer phrased his conclusion: “The will reveals itself just as completely and just as much in one oak as in millions . . . The inner being itself is present whole and undivided in everything in nature, in every living being.”⁹ Curiously enough, like Schelling (whom he hated), he also invoked Plato to explain this, and, like Schelling, he drew conclusions about how, for example, organic life cannot be explained mechanically: the objectifications of the will in appearance (the way the will as the single thing-in-itself appears to minded agents as they represent it) are, he said, equivalent to Plato’s Ideas; since each basic type of “objectification” is a different Idea, a fundamentally different way in which the will appears (objectifies itself), it is fruitless to explain “higher” levels of appearance in terms appropriate to explaining lower ones; and the different “levels” are to be taken as different ways in which the “will” seeks an adequate expression for itself, a mode of coming to self-consciousness about itself.¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 128; §25. ⁹ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 128–129; §25.

¹⁰ He even gives Schelling some credit in this regard; see *ibid.*, I, p. 143; §27. Schopenhauer says of the level of “representation” – of minds grasping the world by mental representations of it – that “the will, which hitherto followed its tendency in the dark with extreme certainty and infallibility, has at this stage kindled a light for itself. This was a means that became necessary for getting rid of the disadvantage which would result from the throng and the complicated nature of its phenomena, and would accrue precisely to the most perfect of them,” *ibid.*, I, p. 150; §27.

The problem with the will's "objectifying" itself in the form of self-conscious representational knowledge of the world is that such "objectification" introduces a gap between the knowing agent and the deeper reality of that world, indeed, introduces the possibility and even a motivation for an agent's completely mistaking what is ultimately at stake for him in such purposeless striving. A special talent and a special discipline is thereby required for such self-conscious agents to recognize the "will" that is the basis of their own willing – that is, to recognize that their own individual plans, projects, and strivings are no more than an empirical, phenomenal reflection (or "objectification") of the non-purposive striving that is the nature of the world in-itself. The talent for seeing this is found most clearly in the "genius," which "consists in the ability to know, independently of the principle of sufficient reason, not individual things which have their existence only in the relation, but the Ideas of such things, and in the ability to be, in face of these, the correlative of the Idea, and hence no longer individual but pure subject of knowing."¹¹

This was quite obviously different from the conclusions Kant had drawn, particularly in Kant's account of the experience of the beautiful; Kant characterizes it as an experience of "purposiveness without purpose," a sense that things fit together according to a purpose that we cannot state but which nonetheless prompts us to take an interest in it, and which thereby reveals to us the binding quality of our moral vocation. For Schopenhauer, on the other hand, understanding that the world is "will" puts us in the position of being able to grasp the *futility* of our own strivings, since the "will" has no purpose toward which it is working (and thus it cannot in principle be satisfied). In that light, the only true goal we can have (if it can be called a goal at all) is to escape the pursuit of goals in general, to renounce the illusion of individuality that is necessary to our experience of the world as "representation" (since, as Kant showed, the objectivity of the natural world requires the conception of such a subjective, individual point of view on that world), and to become instead a "selfless" knower, a point of view equivalent to no point of view.

Not unsurprisingly, this distinction of himself and Kant surfaces in Schopenhauer's characterization of the experience of the sublime. In the third *Critique*, Kant had distinguished between the "mathematical" and "dynamical" sublime. The former involves elements of immeasurable greatness (or smallness), such that we cannot even imaginatively

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 194; §37.

present them to our reflection in a sensuous way (the infinitely large cannot be given, for example, a sensuous embodiment). The latter (the dynamical sublime) presents us with something large and overpowering (a hurricane, a huge boulder) that could easily crush us, and, in grasping our physical inadequacy to resist such things, we also grasp our capability, our *will*, to morally resist them – to recognize our own infinite dignity in the face of our finite, physical incapacity to resist such forces. For Schopenhauer, on the other hand, the experience of the dynamical sublime liberates us from our will: “That state of pure knowing is obtained first of all by a conscious and violent tearing away from the relations to the same object to the will . . . beyond the will and the knowledge related to it.”¹² Likewise, for Kant, receptivity to the naturally beautiful (as opposed to art, the artificially beautiful) is evidence of a “beautiful soul,” of an agent attuned to nature’s “purposiveness without purpose,” its being structured as if it had been made to be commensurate to our own cognitive faculties and our own moral hopes, and which gives us a non-conceptual point of orientation for our moral lives; for Schopenhauer, this non-cognitive orientation is only more evidence of the way in which we rise above the will, “since the beauty of the object . . . has removed from consciousness, without resistance and hence imperceptibly, the will and knowledge of relations that slavishly serve this will. What is then left is the pure subject of knowing and not even a recollection of the will remains.”¹³

Like the early Romantics whom he despised, Schopenhauer argued for the superiority of aesthetic experience over all other forms of experience. Art, he says, gives us insight into the Ideas, the “objectifications” of the will in the empirical world (in the world of “representation”), and the higher arts deal with the higher Ideas. In short: aesthetic experience does not serve to reveal to us our moral vocation (as Kant claims) but is instead the vehicle for escaping from the conditions of “the will” in the first place. Art leads us to “perfect resignation, which is the innermost spirit of Christianity as of Indian wisdom, the giving up of all willing, turning back, abolition of the will and with it of the whole inner being of this world, and hence salvation.”¹⁴ (For Schopenhauer, the opposite of the sublime is the charming, since it induces an ultimately false sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in us, luring us into the illusion that satisfaction in human life is ultimately possible.) Not for nothing was Schopenhauer’s thought called the philosophy of pessimism and resignation.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, p. 202; §39.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 233; §48.

Schopenhauer went further and elevated music to the first rank in the arts themselves, thus putting himself in line with the times (and with Romanticism). In aesthetics prior to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, secular music had always been rated somewhat lower than the other fine arts on the grounds that it only served to gratify or call up indistinct emotions. (This was argued in spite of the acknowledged power of music found in Homeric myths about the sirens and even in Plato's suspicions about the force of music.) Secular music was, for the most part, relegated to entertainment, to serving as a pleasing background for socializing. (Twentieth- and early twenty-first-century audiences would be shocked at the level of conversational and other noise found in eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century opera houses.) The early Romantics changed all that, or at least changed the theory of all that, and, by the middle of the nineteenth century, symphony halls were being constructed as Greek and Roman temples, and the appropriate attitude for audiences became those of reverence and silence, with applause and perhaps a few cries of "bravo" (the appropriate emotional release for the audience) coming only at the end. What had earlier seemed music's basic weakness – its close link to a purely emotional pull – had in the hands of the early Romantics been transformed into its greatest advantage.¹⁵ *Only* music, it was now felt, could adequately express the sense of "subjective inwardness" (*Innerlichkeit*) that was most characteristic of modern agency; and Schopenhauer came to be seen as one of the great exponents of this view.

Since music, as Schopenhauer put it, "passes over the Ideas, it is also quite independent of the phenomenal world, positively ignores it, and, to a certain extent, could still exist even if there were no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts . . . [Music] is as *immediate* an objectification and copy of the whole *will* as the world itself is. Therefore music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but is a *copy of the will itself* . . . For this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence."¹⁶ No early Romantic could have put it better, and generations of writers and composers were to take Schopenhauer's words to heart as the articulation of what was at stake in their endeavors. Wagner was one of Schopenhauer's most enthusiastic readers.

¹⁵ See Peter Gay's excellent treatment of this theme in Peter Gay, *The Naked Heart*, pp. 11–35 ("Bourgeois Experiences iv: The Art of Listening").

¹⁶ *The World as Will and Representation*, I, p. 257; §52.

Schopenhauer meant what he said quite literally. Music was the sound of the noumenal world; the “lowest grades of the objectification of the will” (such as found in matter in motion) are “the bass notes” of the world, as he says over and over again, in *The World as Will and Representation*. As he also put it, “we could just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will.”¹⁷ The elevation of music to the highest rank among the arts was accompanied by an elevation of the notion of the “genius” to virtually superhuman powers. Kant had already in the *Critique of Judgment* extolled the inborn powers of the “genius” (a concept that was to become a preoccupation for the critics of the nineteenth century); since judgments of taste are made without “rules” (concepts) to guide them, the genius is the person who gives the rule to art. The genius creates original art (which if successful founds a school based on it, for which rules can then be given), but neither the genius–artist nor anybody else can state in advance what the rule is to be for that which has no rules. (In creating something novel, the genius creates something exemplary for other art; the genius creates the exemplar which the school later follows and imitates.) The “genius” is one of Kant’s solutions to the “Kantian paradox” (or perhaps yet another statement of the paradox itself), of our being bound only by laws of which we can regard ourselves as the authors.

Schopenhauer did not seem to be interested in the “Kantian paradox,” but he took Kant’s notion of genius and exalted it even further. The paradigm of the Schopenhauerian genius is the composer, someone like Beethoven, who creates new things (the *Eroica* symphony, for example) that are exemplary for what a work of art (the symphony in general) ought to be. Thus, “the composer reveals the innermost nature of the world.”¹⁸ The composer (and the genius in general) does this without understanding exactly what it is that he is doing; to understand would be to bring it under concepts (to “represent” it), and nobody can bring art, music least of all, under concepts. The genius–composer thus creates his works from “the immediate knowledge of the inner nature of the world unknown to his faculty of reason” and, because of that, must suffer himself more than ordinary people, indeed, “he himself is the will objectifying itself and remaining in constant suffering.”¹⁹

If this is the lesson to be learned from philosophy, then, so Schopenhauer correctly surmised, we will have to change our conception of the appropriate goals of modern life and depart from Kant’s own more

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 263; §52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 260; §52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 263, 267; §52.

optimistic version of those goals. There can be no approximation to an ideal outcome in which the kingdom of ends is realized (however imperfectly), since there is a tragic flaw, as it were, at the metaphysical heart of the world itself. Satisfaction would consist in attaining one's goals, but, since "there is no ultimate aim of striving . . . there is no measure or end of suffering" and thus no satisfaction.²⁰ The revolutionary hopes of Kantian-inspired philosophy for a world of rational faith, of mutual respect, and of the realization of freedom were, in Schopenhauer's version of post-Kantian philosophy, simply naive. The most that could be attained was a kind of resignation and detachment from things (even from ourselves) so that we could escape the necessary suffering that self-conscious life brings with itself. It is only when we understand that, from the standpoint of the "will" (of the ceaseless, pointless striving that is the basic nature of reality), individual birth and death is meaningless – that all that counts is the preservation of the species, not the individual, and, from the larger standpoint, even that does not count – that we are in a position to be *free*, that is, to renounce the illusory nature of individuality (our attachment to which makes death fearful in the first place). Any other form of freedom than freedom-as-detachment and freedom-as-escape-from-selfhood is only illusory, particularly those forms of freedom that seem to be matters of "choice" since, in choosing one thing over another, we are only expressing which motive was weightier and therefore necessarily determined the will to move one way as opposed to another.²¹ Freedom, the watchword of all Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, was, for Schopenhauer, the freedom to rid ourselves of the illusions of agency in the first place, which is possible only for the most cultured and rarefied of people. For ordinary people, there is no kingdom of ends, only the illusions of free choice and the pointless, suffering striving for a goal that does not exist.

As Schopenhauer therefore concludes, when any sane man surveys human life, "perhaps at the end of his life, no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possession of his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again."²² One might think that this would have led Schopenhauer to the nihilism against which Jacobi had warned, but instead Schopenhauer drew some (decidedly non-Kantian) ethical conclusions from such a view.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 263, 309; §56.

²¹ In a characteristic statement, Schopenhauer notes: "By reason of all this, the genitals are the real *focus* of the will, and are therefore the opposite pole to the brain, the representative of knowledge, i.e., to the other side of the world, the world as representation," *ibid.*, I, p. 330; §60.

²² *Ibid.*, I, p. 324; §59.

Each individual as the subject of representation is naturally led to egoism, since the world (and therefore other agents) exists for him “only” as representation. One is, however, led away from egoism and toward forming a conscience in sensing, however vaguely, that the other agent is part of the world of “will” as much as oneself – and therefore in sensing, however vaguely, that there is no real distinction between oneself and the other, that both are mere appearances, even in a deep sense illusory manifestations, of the same underlying “will.” That new awareness gives one the sense, again perhaps only vaguely, that, in harming the other, one is actually harming oneself since, at the deeper level, both are identical. As Schopenhauer puts it, for the “just man the *principium individuationis* is no longer an absolute partition as it is for the bad; that he does not, like the bad man, affirm merely his own phenomenon of will and deny all others; that others are not for him mere masks, whose inner nature is quite different from his.”²³ It is the recognition of the illusion of agency, not recognition of its inherent dignity, that promotes justice and ethics. However, just as no preference for oneself over others (since there is no metaphysical difference that could possibly ground such a preference) can be justified, no preference for others over oneself (that is, no form of altruism) can be justified as well, since there is equally “no reason . . . for preferring another’s individuality to one’s own.”²⁴

Schopenhauer thus explicitly rejects the Kantian injunction to treat everyone as an end and never merely as a means, saying of Kant’s notion that it is “extremely vague, indefinite” and “taken generally, it is inadequate, says little, and moreover is problematical”; *of course*, Schopenhauer asserts, one is entitled to use a convicted murderer merely as a means since the murderer has forfeited whatever rights he had in the first place.²⁵ Moreover, the Kantian notion of the “highest good” is also an absurdity, since it would demand some kind of final and ultimate satisfaction, and there simply can be no such thing. (If anything, as Schopenhauer ruefully notes, deserves to be called the highest good, it would be the complete negation of all striving for goods in general.)

Of course, from the political point of view, such insight and forbearance cannot be counted on, and thus the state (preferably a hereditary monarchy) must do what is necessary for it to maintain order. (It is, however, a crucial error, Schopenhauer argued, to think that the state ever could, and therefore ever should, promote morality.) At the end of it all, Schopenhauer’s pessimistic, metaphysical post-Kantianism simply

²³ *Ibid.*, I, p. 370; §66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 375; §67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 349; §62.

abandoned Kantian moral and political hopes altogether. Schopenhauer, ahead of his time, was the perfect philosopher for the resigned and discouraged 1850s.

KIERKEGAARD: POST-SCHELLINGIAN HEGELIANISM?

One of those who went enthusiastically to Schelling's lectures, who was inspired by their beginning, and who, along with so many others, became so disappointed by their progression so that he ceased going to them, was the young Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Kierkegaard had come to Berlin – it was in fact to be the only place outside of his native Copenhagen to which he would ever travel – to take in the Hegelian and post-Hegelian atmosphere and thought. Although terribly disappointed by Schelling's performance, he took away with him some key Schellingian ideas and fashioned them into a highly original philosophy that drew heavily on the themes of post-Kantian thought that Schelling was rejecting.

Although Kierkegaard was not himself German, he can still be considered to be a post-Hegelian philosopher in the German tradition. Some caveats, though, are in order: even calling Kierkegaard a philosopher is already both to break with his own self-understanding and to classify him in a way that is not only controversial, but, so many would argue, downright misleading. Kierkegaard is more of a literary figure than what is recognizable nowadays as an academic philosopher (a characterization that would not bother him in the slightest). Although many of his pieces resemble philosophy books or essays, they are more often (or often include) parodies of the type of “systematic treatise” so favored by the post-Kantians; unlike more common literary figures, who would operate with the novel, the poem, or the theater-piece, Kierkegaard seemed to have chosen the form of the philosophical treatise as the vehicle of his literary ambitions. Moreover, Kierkegaard wrote almost entirely in pseudonyms, which allowed him to assume various masks in working out his ideas; not unsurprisingly, it has been a matter of heated interpretation as to just which or how many or to what extent any of these masks actually represent Kierkegaard's own thought. (Kierkegaard's masks even went so far as to his public personae in Copenhagen, where he often carried on as a type of detached dandy, the kind of person who could not possibly be the same fellow writing those deep treatises.) He can also be classified as a psychologist (in the manner in which Nietzsche later used to refer to himself occasionally as a “psychologist”); he is also an ironist, and

many of his pieces would have fit well into the ensemble of ironist essays popular in Jena at the turn of the nineteenth century. He is certainly a Christian thinker, and some of his work might even be called theology. Whatever is the case, almost anything one says about Kierkegaard is bound to be hotly disputed by other Kierkegaardians.

Whatever else he is, however, he is a modernist in the idealist sense. More than many others, and certainly more than Schopenhauer, he picked up on the Kantian and post-Kantian emphasis on *self-direction*, on the notion that what had come to matter to “us moderns” not just in part but “absolutely” and “infinitely” was the necessity to *lead one’s own life*. Belonging to the post-Hegelian generation who only found great disappointment with the shape and texture of emerging industrial commercial society, Kierkegaard radicalized the idea of freedom in light of his disappointment with, if not antipathy toward, the modern world that he encountered around himself. Some, of course – most spectacularly, Marx and Engels – transformed their disappointment into revolutionary zeal and hope for an entirely different future that would make good on modernity’s failed promise. Kierkegaard, much like the Parisian dandies who were to come later, transformed his disappointment into a literary calling and a way of life; for him, the modern world had promised freedom but, instead, had delivered a deadening conformity, and, even worse, a kind of puffed-up rhetoric about itself that seemed far removed from its tawdry reality. The modern world, which was supposed to be about self-direction, seemed not only dully conformist, it seemed to confuse words with life, as if describing itself in grandiose terminology would actually make it grand. Indeed, it was the connection (or lack of it) between “life” and “theory” that drove much of Kierkegaard’s writing and which earned him the posthumous title of “existentialist.”

As any reader of Kierkegaard quickly notes, the target of his most vituperative attacks is a figure named “Hegel,” who puts thought and words above reality and believes that thinking it so makes it so, who claims inflated status, even reality, for what is really just an intellectual game. Kierkegaard’s animus to “Hegel” can be summed up in a quip made in his journal, which could just as well have been said by Schelling: “If Hegel had written the whole of his logic and then said, in the preface, that it was merely an experiment in thought in which he had even begged the question in many places, then he would certainly have been the greatest thinker who had ever lived. As it is he is merely comic.”²⁶ Schelling’s

²⁶ *Kierkegaard’s Journals* (trans., selected, and with an introduction by Alexander Dru) (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), Remark 497. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he notes: “But as it now

objection to all the forms of “negative” philosophy (Schelling’s phrase) as essentially only games of thought with itself that ignore the crucial break between “what we must *think*” and “the way things must *be*” – between “thought” and “actuality,” as Schelling put it – was taken over by Kierkegaard and transformed into something much more radical.

It is, of course, not at all clear that “Hegel,” the object of Kierkegaard’s attacks, is the same figure as Hegel, the nineteenth-century idealist. But, whoever the “Hegel” under attack is, it is fairly clear that it is the Hegel that Schelling presented in his 1841–1842 lectures, a thinker who offered up the “system” and mistakenly identified it with the world. Kierkegaard obviously took to heart Schelling’s striking claim in his first Berlin lecture where, in response to the contemporary idea that “something new must take the place of Christianity,” Schelling rhetorically responded that this proposal failed to take into account the serious alternative of whether anybody had actually ever understood Christianity up until that point.²⁷ Could it be that all the Christians had misunderstood what it took to be a Christian?

Although Kierkegaard was at first inspired by some of Schelling’s notions – he wrote in his journal that: “I am so happy to have heard Schelling’s second lecture – indescribable . . . as he cited the word, “actuality,” and the relationship of philosophy to actuality, there the fruit of thought in me leapt for joy as in Elizabeth”²⁸ – he quickly came to the view that Schelling was all hot air, as absurdly pretentious as the people he was excoriating; Kierkegaard even noted sarcastically to a friend that Schelling’s “whole doctrine of potency (*Potenz*) testifies to the highest impotence.”²⁹ Disappointed, he took up Schelling’s diatribe against Hegel and turned it against Schelling himself.

Kierkegaard had fully absorbed the modernist and therefore Kantian stress on autonomy. For Kierkegaard, the Kantian lesson – that in both experience and practice the meaning of things for us could not simply be given but had to be supplied by our own activity, our own self-direction – seemed almost self-evidently true, and the shock was how much it seemed by the 1840s to have been forgotten. That we are called to be self-directing, to lead *our own* lives, to be subject only to a law we impose

is, the *Logic* with its collection of notes makes as droll an impression on the mind as if a man were to show a letter purporting to have come from heaven, but having a blotter enclosed which only too clearly reveals its mundane origin,” Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (trans. David F. Swenson) (Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 297.

²⁷ *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, p. 97.

²⁸ See the appendix to *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, p. 530 (from Kierkegaard’s Journal, November 22, 1841).

²⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 534 (from Kierkegaard’s letter to Emil Boesen, February 27, 1842).

on ourselves, is, as Kant originally saw, quasi-paradoxical.³⁰ If nothing else, it means that we are called (or determined, to capture the dual connotations of the German term, *Bestimmung*) to *choose* what we are to make of ourselves, and, curiously, this calling to radical choice is both not itself something that is subject to choice, and involves the paradox of demanding reasons for choice while ruling them out. We can be subject only to those laws that we author for ourselves; but, as authors, we must have reasons for the laws we author, since otherwise they cannot be “laws” (reasons) but only contingent events; and, as even Kant had seen, that seemed to be paradoxical.

Oddly enough, Kierkegaard’s conception of subjectivity is strikingly close to Hegel’s (although not to “Hegel,” the object of his ongoing jibes). To be a subject, an *agent*, is not to be something fixed, like a rock or a dog; it is to be the kind of entity that undertakes commitments, assumes responsibilities and holds himself to them. To be an “existing subject” is to be a work in progress. A person’s life is therefore more like an ongoing project, and what matters most to anybody is that their life be *their own* life, that their actions and beliefs issue from themselves. People are not simply born subjects; they *become* subjects by virtue of what they take themselves to be committed to.

To be a subject is thus an *existential* matter, to use the language Kierkegaard invented for his purpose. For a person to make it through life as a “subject,” they must assume certain responsibilities and hold themselves to it. Since subjects are such normative creatures, the issue for each subject has to be which normative commitments he or she can hold themselves to and which they should hold themselves to. The fault of all systems of philosophy (of which Hegel’s is the “completion,” as he learned from Schelling and no doubt also heard from Hegel’s epigones in Berlin) is that they think that this existential issue – what does and ought to ultimately *matter* to me and what should I do about it? – can be answered in any kind of systematic or criterial way. It is even misleading to call what counts as leading one’s own life a matter of “choice,” since

³⁰ Kierkegaard even speaks of his own “paradox” in Kantian terms. For example, he has one of his pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, declare: “But the highest pitch of every passion is always to will its own downfall; and so it is also the supreme passion of Reason to seek a collision, though this collision must in one way or another prove its undoing. The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think,” Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy* (trans. David F. Swenson) (Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 46. This is reminiscent of Kant’s own introductory statement in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer” (p. Avii).

what ultimately matters to an individual cannot simply be something that he has chosen (as if one really could confer final and ultimate value on something, like making circles in the air with one's hands, simply by an act of choice). The strange paradox is that what counts is leading one's own life and therefore choosing and acknowledging that the value of *that which* one chooses cannot always be the result of one's *choosing* it, while at the same time holding fast to the idea that it can bind you *only* if you choose it.

In making the "choice," or "decision" about what one is to commit oneself to, it is absolutely crucial that it be made on grounds that are one's *own* reasons, not simply the "objective" reasons of one's culture, one's background, even one's personal dispositions, since all those are subject to deception, manipulation, and blind steering by forces outside of one's own direction. Yet, as Kant and the post-Kantians had come to see, that requires that there be a reason that one did *not* choose, yet which nonetheless can be seen as one's *own* reason. This "paradox" (in Kierkegaard's transformation of it) simply is the paradox of all human life: we must lead our own lives, yet the very basis of what might count as our own life does not seem as if it could be our own.

Kierkegaard's first great book, *Either/Or*, laid out this paradox in a literary manner that self-consciously aped the Hegelian dialectic (at least as he had absorbed it in his rather passing study of Hegel). However, in Kierkegaard's hands, the "dialectic" breaks down without producing its successor out of itself (as he thought Hegel's dialectic did), even though a successor was to be found that was "called for" by that determinate failure. The "successor" follows from what precedes it not by any kind of internal logic but instead by a new beginning, an act of radical choice that is ultimately a commitment to Christianity. The book is typically Kierkegaardian: it consists of a set of essays and letters, partly philosophical, partly literary, written by pseudonymous authors (A and B), which are then edited and commented upon by a third party, also a Kierkegaardian pseudonym (Victor Eremita). The editor cannot choose between them, and the true author, Kierkegaard, never steps in to tell the reader who is right and who is wrong.

The first author, A, presents the case for leading an "aesthetic" life; in the aesthetic mode, the life that is chosen is, oddly, a life that militates against choice (or at least against hard choices or fundamental choices). The aesthete attempts to live life in the present, to focus on the immediacy of his experience – although the aesthete is not a hedonist, since even painful experiences can provide a focus for him – which, so it turns

out, amounts to an attempt to escape or repress one's own agency. The aesthete focuses on giving himself over to the momentaneous in his experience; in effect, the aesthete seeks a *distraction* from himself and from assuming any responsibility for his life as a whole, paradoxically taking himself to be leading his own life by not leading it, by fragmenting himself and losing himself in the submersion in his own passions. (Kierkegaard took one of the paradigms of the aesthetic way of life to be the Don Juan style of seducer, who is so caught up in his own fragmented, fleeting romantic passions that he avoids seeing how he is avoiding any sense of selfhood.) The aesthetic way of life breaks down on its own terms, since the aesthete is, in Kantian terms, electing maxims that he denies he is electing – or, in Kierkegaard's terms, choosing himself as not choosing himself. If it dawns on him that he is caught in this paradox, his only response can be that of *despair*, the feeling of the impossibility of leading one's life in the only way that it matters to you. What matters the most to the aesthete is leading his own life, which he confuses with not leading it, and the self-consciousness of the impossibility of doing that precisely is despair.

From the standpoint of B, it is obvious that there is a natural impetus for the aesthete to begin to lead instead an "ethical" way of life. (Or, in terms of the "dialectic," one "passes over" into the other.) In that way of life, the agent assumes responsibility for himself and elects to hold himself to his self-chosen responsibilities. In B's telling, the paradigm for this is marriage, which involves taking on responsibilities and, in the existential sense, *committing* oneself to holding to those commitments over a whole life. Kierkegaard's ethical life roughly corresponds to Hegel's notion of ethical life, *Sittlichkeit*, of agents' appropriating for themselves socially established duties that are nonetheless realizations of freedom as self-legislation (such as marriage and the family). The satisfactory life, so B argues, consists in understanding that true freedom consists in *choosing* oneself, not *knowing* oneself, and that consists in recognizing one's duties and holding oneself to them.

The ethical life, however, comes up flatly against the Kantian paradox of self-legislation: for the ethical life to be one's own life, it must be that one is subject only to laws one legislates for oneself, and, as Kierkegaard's pseudonym, B, states it: "Here the objective for his activity is himself, but nevertheless not arbitrarily determined for he possesses himself as a task that has been assigned him, even though it became his by his own choosing." It becomes apparent that, although B recognizes A's despair (even while A might be unaware of it), B is too smug about his own, hidden

despair, all of which ultimately catches up with B. B discovers (or at least acquires the intimation) that the paradox of self-legislation cannot be avoided by talk of duty, or ethical community. We cannot simply choose ourselves; such efforts are useless; we are always the creatures of our own histories, social surroundings, and personal idiosyncrasies, and these we do not and cannot choose. The only appropriate reaction to this defiant attempt at self-determination – in Fichte’s language of the “I’s positing itself” – is to acknowledge (as Fichte could not) that we are dependent on an “other,” a “Not-I” that cannot be reappropriated or reconceived as the “posit” of the “I.” We cannot, that is, through our own powers completely choose ourselves.

The intended result of *Either/Or* is to leave the reader in the situation where he is to realize that, in the choice between *either* leading the aesthetic life *or* leading the ethical life, there can be only despair over the impossibility of leading one’s own life in *general*.³¹ That is, one seems to be forced to choose between two ways of life (an “either/or”), both of which are fated to fail in the most important way. *Despair* is the condition of realizing the impossibility of achieving what matters the most to an agent while at the same time being unable to give up striving for it; it is the condition, that is, of realizing that one’s life is necessarily a failure. (Kierkegaard thus distinguishes this form of despair with more “finite” forms, as when one has made it one’s life’s ambition to be the best something-or-another – such as being the researcher who first discovers something – and failed to do so.) To use the language of Hegelian idealism that Kierkegaard so carefully exploited, the *infinite* value of self-determination is both impossible to achieve and impossible to abandon, and that impossibility of achieving “infinite” self-determination lies in the inherent *finitude* of agency itself: the various ways in which we are dependent on all kinds of contingent factors apparently make the idea of self-determination (and therefore of leading one’s own life) a chimera. Simply accepting one’s finitude, moreover, is no answer, since acceptance

³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre’s very insightful treatment of Kierkegaard in his influential book, *After Virtue*, seems to me to get this point about Kierkegaard wrong. He argues that the result of *Either/Or* is to show that there is no rational choice to be made between the two poles, and that Kierkegaard therefore presents the choice as a matter of pure decision, and, moreover, that Kierkegaard’s sharp separation of reason and authority is itself a very contingent product of the modern breakdown of the idea of a rational culture. However, Kierkegaard’s notion does not make things a matter of decision; he is far more concerned with how both conceptions lead to despair, not a general thesis about rationality; both MacIntyre and myself see Kierkegaard’s notions as rooted in Kantian moral theory but in much different areas of that theory. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), pp. 38–43.

only highlights the impossibility of achieving what matters not relatively but “absolutely,” “infinitely.” *Absolute* despair is the realization that it is futile to put absolute value on anything (finite) in the world.

The only way out of this existential dilemma is to accept the paradox for what it is: a paradox whose solution cannot come through reason and which requires therefore something beyond reason to resolve it. It requires, to use Fichte’s language again, one’s holding oneself to the notion that the “I” must freely “posit” itself and must posit the “Not-I” as determining it, and seeing that there is no way out of the paradox. There can thus be no dialectical way out of despair (no way of resolving the paradox), and hence no intellectual solution to the problem – which rules out philosophical solutions to the problem of what it means to be an existing individual. There is also no straightforwardly practical way out of despair: no act of will (or strength of will or “resolve”) can wrench one from the existential despair over the necessary failure of one’s life, since all acts of will are finite and cannot themselves establish something of “infinite” importance (or, to put it another way, for Kierkegaard, no act of will can overcome the metaphysical paradox inherent in the idea of freedom as self-determination). This condition of absolute despair is, as Kierkegaard metaphorically calls it, a “sickness unto death,” a metaphysical malaise attendant on the self-conscious realization of the impossibility of actualizing the only thing that really matters, a sickness that cannot on its own call for its own cure.

In fact, the only way out of such despair must therefore be something else that is not itself a new mode of conceiving of one’s life (as if one could make the “Hegelian” mistake of thinking one’s way out of the paradox). Kierkegaard (famously) calls this the “leap of faith.”³² We must simply *acknowledge* that we are dependent on a power outside of ourselves, and that power must be itself capable of giving us the “reasons” for directing our life that are not subject to the worries about contingency and finitude that color all other affairs in our lives, even if we cannot fully conceptualize how that is to take place. That leap must be to that which is capable of providing us with that resolution, and that can only be the

³² This leads to one of Kierkegaard’s more striking conclusions about his own Christianity, which also concerns his own discussion of guilt (which will have to go undiscussed here): “But it is too often overlooked that the opposite of sin is not *virtue*, not by any manner of means. This is in part a pagan view which is content with a merely human measure and properly does not know what *sin* is, that all sin is before God. No, *the opposite of sin is faith*, as is affirmed in Rom. 14:23, ‘whatsoever is not of faith is sin,’” Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death* (trans. Walter Lowrie) (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 213 (cited from *The Sickness Unto Death*).

Christian God. Moreover, one cannot simply *decide* to take the “leap.” One cannot, for example, take the “leap” by an act of will: the problem that spurs one into the position of understanding the necessity for such a “leap” is that recognizing one’s finitude means recognizing that it is not within one’s power to confer such a value on anything or to resolve the paradox on one’s own. One cannot simply *will* the impossible, will to resolve the paradox of leading one’s own life by acknowledging that one’s own freedom is dependent on God’s power to empower you to freedom (which is, of course, itself paradoxical). One must, instead, give oneself over to God and accept that only by submitting one’s life to God’s judgment can one then have a life of one’s own. The “Kantian paradox” is “overcome” only by acknowledging the Christian paradox that one must first give up one’s life in order to have one’s life. (Jacobi’s great mistake in his own conception of the *salto mortale* was to think that one could be argued into it, or that one could argue somebody else into it.³³)

To take the “leap of faith” is thus to enter into faith. Why, though, would one take such a “leap”? The motivation to take the leap can only come about through acknowledging the hopelessness of rising to the challenge to choose oneself. The condition under which one can become a faithful Christian is to acknowledge and live with the despair of someone who sees that there can be no prior motivation for the leap, nor can there be any intellectual justification for the leap, nor can the leap actually conceptually resolve the paradox; paradoxically, the only person who can therefore become a Christian is somebody who grasps how impossible it is to become a Christian. To be a believer in the religious sense is not in fact to *overcome* this despair but to be in the constant process of coping with despair, of *living out* one’s despair. (This is analogous to Kant’s own conclusion that, strictly speaking, there can be no *interest* in becoming moral, that the bindingness of the moral law on us is just a “fact of reason.”³⁴)

The appropriate response to this despair, however, is not to fall into depression or “pessimism,” as Kierkegaard notes over and over again. (The contrast with Schopenhauer is obvious.) In fact, the more appropriate

³³ See Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 92–95.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, of course, rejected Hegel’s own attempt to generalize Kant’s paradox of self-legislation into a point about normative authority in general, since, under the influence of Schelling, he took Hegel to have attempted to solve this in a purely intellectual, logical sense that left the existing world and the existing individual out of consideration. Thus, Kierkegaard says, “The questionableness of the ‘Method’ becomes apparent already in Hegel’s relation to Kant . . . To answer Kant with the fantastic shadow-play of pure thought is precisely not to answer him,” *ibid.*, p. 292.

immediate reaction is comical. For Kierkegaard (as, again oddly enough, also for Hegel, although not perhaps for Kierkegaard's "Hegel"), the truly comical has to do with the gap between what we take ourselves to be doing (when we take ourselves to be doing something important) and what we are really doing. Thus, all life is comical, since in all life we are trying to do something we cannot do, seeking to choose ourselves while necessarily failing to do so.³⁵ However, such a comical approach can only be justified about the state of despair if it is combined with a tragic sense of what is at stake in despair. The comical spirit reconciles itself to the pain experienced in living through such a contradiction (in understanding, for example, that what one thought was so important and to which one devoted so much time and energy was in fact something else entirely); but the basic contradiction in human life, for which the appropriate response is despair, understands that the comical view of itself is only partial.³⁶ Ultimately, the religious attitude (faith, coping with the unavoidable metaphysical despair of life instead of repressing it or futilely seeking to overcome it) is not itself truly comical, since it is a "contradiction," but one for which the categories of "pretense and reality" are not appropriate. The religious stance is one of subjective inwardness – there are no behavioral criteria for whether one is coping with such despair, and there is no direct way to respond to another who claims to be in such an ongoing self-relation. As coping with the contradiction, the inwardness of the religious stance is thus "above" the comic; it realizes what is comical about itself (that it strives for that which it has no ordinary hope of achieving), but its "infinite" seriousness about itself makes it more similar to the tragic stance.

For Kierkegaard, the reaction to the post-Kantian tradition seemed straightforward. He seems to have taken Kant to have pointed out the problem, and Kant's successors to have shown how *not* to deal with it. After Kant, there could be no God's-eye metaphysics that would resolve the problems of what it means to be human, since Kant had pinpointed both the answer and the problem: to be human is to be "spontaneous" and "free," and that, so Kierkegaard argued, was not a *theoretically* resolvable problem. Kant had claimed a "practical" resolution, but Kierkegaard

³⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 459: "The comical is present in every stage of life . . . for wherever there is contradiction, the comical is also present. The tragic and the comic are the same, insofar as both are based on contradiction; but *the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical the painless contradiction.*"

³⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 84: "Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving, and is both pathetic and comic in the same degree. It is pathetic because the striving is infinite; that is, it is directed toward the infinite, being an actualization of infinitude, a transformation which involves the highest pathos. It is comic, because such a striving involves a self-contradiction."

had taken this in his own “existential” direction. The post-Kantian attempt to come to terms with it, especially the Hegelian attempt to think through what it would mean to be modern and to live and think without reliance on the “givens” of the past, was judged by Kierkegaard to be an utter failure. He rejected all of Hegel’s historicism, seeing nothing particularly “modern” about the problem of autonomy, but he kept all the terms – except that, for Kierkegaard, the Hegelian hope of a reconciling politics, art, and philosophy had to be abandoned. There is no hope for any political reconciliation of modern life; all that is left, he seemed to be saying, is a set of radically individual callings – of each individual, confronting the necessary but impossible task of leading his own life, acknowledging the despair that necessarily follows from that acknowledgment. On Kierkegaard’s view, the fate of the modern world was not the establishment of reconciliation in *Sittlichkeit* and free politics, but a social world of puffed-up conformism populated by despairing individuals engaged in efforts to deny and repress their despair.

What modernity had done, in Kierkegaard’s view, was make it clear that what people made of their lives was entirely up to them, although, in a strangely paradoxical way, not up to them at all. Modernity itself, so it seemed to Kierkegaard, had simply failed.