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Remembering the Impossible Possibility: Kierkegaard and Human Capital

Now there is room, now you can venture.¹

What is the relevance of Kierkegaard as a political thinker? How might a reading of Kierkegaard constitute a response to our times? We mean to follow Mario Tronti's surprising advice: that to explore capitalism in the present (to diagnose its effects, and to seek a remedy for them) we should read the work of Kierkegaard.² This is because, for Tronti, the latest form of capitalism is subjective. Having conquered the external world, destroying the vestiges of political resistance, capitalism is seeking to conquer the internal one, too. This does not mean that we should read Kierkegaard in order to find an authentic subjectivity against capitalism, because this new subjective form of capitalism is all about being authentic and so it can easily be co-opted. On the contrary, we shall argue that whatever the self is in Kierkegaard, it cannot be equated with any simple image of the authentic individual that is resolutely for themselves and against others, but precisely the opposite. To be truly a self is to be open to the other. It is to be other to oneself as oneself. Such a passionate self is exactly the opposite of the image of the self as presented in human capital, whose only relations to others are one of self-interest. We argue that the difference between these two conceptions, as presented by Kierkegaard, is ontological. It is the difference between essence and existence, the finite and infinite, and the actual and the possible. The precedence given to the self in

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 358.

² 'Grandezza di Hegel avercela raccontata per come era. Marx ha fatto bene a prendere coscienza, su questa base, delle leggi di movimento del capitalismo. Ma per andare oltre di esso, invece che partire da Hegel, forse era meglio partire da Kierkegaard.' [It was the greatness of Hegel to have told it like it was. On this basis, Marx was right to become aware of the laws of movement of capitalism. But to go beyond him, it was perhaps better to have started with Kierkegaard than Hegel]. Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), p. 42.

human capital is therefore, for Kierkegaard, an ontological error, and not merely matter of choosing between authenticity and inauthenticity, for it reverses the relation between these terms, and confuses the condition with the conditioned. Before we get to the diagnosis of this error, whose detail will have to wait to the end of this paper, we want to explain why we agree with Tronti that in the current crisis it would be worth our while to read Kierkegaard again.

The Tragedy of Politics

In 1966, Mario Tronti, published the classic book of the *Operismo* movement in Italy, *Operai e capitale* [*Workers and Capital*], which runs like a hidden source throughout the writings of Italian political thinkers.³ His thesis is that the struggle at the heart of capitalism lies between the worker and capital. To enter the labour market, so classical economic theory tells us, the individual worker has to sell their expertise, skill and ability to an individual capitalist. The relation between work and capital is presented as though it were supposedly the relation between free individuals buying and selling objectified labour as salaried labour. For Tronti, however, such a model of the labour market is an idealisation. The individuality upon which the model depends is actually *produced* by that model. The worker already understands themselves as human capital as an investment for future earnings. I relate to myself as a commodity that has a certain value summed up by the level of a salary I might earn. The model does not take up what it already given. It has to produce a society where people already view themselves in this way. In this way, it is only capital that is truly free. The free individual is dependent on capital for his or her existence. This process of individualisation is

³ Mario Tronti, *Operai E Capitale*. (Torino: Einaudi, 1966).

the *objectification* of the subject. In place of the living human subject, part of a larger societal whole, capital produces a *generalised subjectivity*.

During the revolts of the '60s and '70s, Tronti hoped that the self-organisation of those workers, who knew their lives were mutilated by the monopoly of capital, could resist this objectification, thereby changing the nature of capitalism itself. Yet even in *Operai e capitale*, there is already the presentiment that such a political struggle is coming to an end. Rather than announcing a new age of politics, Tronti already pronounces its eulogy. The politics of *revolution* would be replaced by the politics of *reflection*, which is nothing but the management of capital.

Does this mean that resistance is futile? We have to create new collectivities that have never been imagined, but to do so means we first of all have to win back our own subjectivity from the generalised subjectivity of human capital. If human capital is the objectification of subjectivity through salaried labour, then the passionate revolutionary act in the present age is to recover the self that continually escapes this process. Yet how can the self resist its own objectification, when it only recognises itself in this form? The objectification of the worker in human capital might be an ontic fact, but as the only possibility of existence it is always an ontological mistake. The point here is not say what the future is, for this would be always to define it in terms of a present actuality, but to demonstrate that the future is always open and only appears impossible from the viewpoint of the present. What is beneath the objectified self, is not an authentic individual defined in advance, but the power of the possible over the actual, which means that the actual is always a reduction of the possible, and the possible always greater than the actual.

There is one reader who would profoundly disagree with our thesis that Kierkegaard's work is a weapon against capital. Indeed, he would argue that his work is a symptom of the disease

rather than its cure. So we must next answer to his doubts and scepticism about our whole endeavour.

The Philosopher of the Interior

Of all the philosophers to take Kierkegaard seriously as a political thinker, Adorno was the quickest to condemn him as a philosopher, quite literally, of interiors. His shelter from history and the objective forces that seek to destroy him 'is the bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century, before which all talk of subject, object, indifferentiation, and situation pales to an abstract metaphor'.⁴ Inwardness is the result of such agoraphobia and not its original cause. I do not despise the streets and the crowds because I am an authentic individual, but retreat into the safety and security of my home, like the animal in Kafka's *The Burrow*, because I fear them. The world then gets produced from my interior as though it was exterior, as I walk around my room, yet the true exteriority of the world is lost. As an isolated and solitary individual, I am separated, Adorno writes, from 'the economic process of production'.⁵ Thus the world that is reflected in my interior is not just a world lost, but a lost world. The relations between things and people have become ghostly and melancholic. 'The contents of the *intérieur*,' Adorno writes, 'are mere decoration, alienated from the purposes they represent, deprived of their own use-value, engendered solely by the isolated apartment that is created in the first place by their juxtaposition.'⁶ It is not the objects that give meaning to my interior life, but my interior life the objects, which then become unmoored from their own objective existence. Such a desubstantialisation is the result of the 'economic process' of commodification and alienation that led to my retreat to my apartment in the first place. I

⁴ Adorno, Theodor W., *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 41.

⁵ Adorno, Theodor W., p. 42.

⁶ Adorno, Theodore W., p. 43.

construct my fortress against the disappearing world, but the reflection of the world in the mirror in my apartment only repeats its vanishing to a greater degree and extent and in such a way that I no longer have an historical relation to the world, but only an imaginary and symbolic one. The table is no longer a table, but a symbol, the chair is no longer a chair, and so on, as though the interior itself, created against the disappearance of the world, were to become the sign of an unchanging and eternal nature. Yet the world supposedly saved is just one more step in its ever increasing fading and decline, reduced to the distorted and misshapen view from my apartment peephole.

For Adorno, the real origin of the internal is the external, the inward, the historical, and the economic, the individual. The isolated individual is the result of social forces that isolate individuals and thus in no way can be a critical response to them. It is not the cure, but the consequence of the very disease it has discovered. The response to the alienation of the individual in modern society is not to retreat into inwardness but to rediscover the relation between the self and others that sustains even that society that disdains them. Yet there might be an objective reason why we might hesitate before Adorno's critique because the very inwardness of the self has become the objectivity of the world, not for the reason he explains, that both the object and the subject have become objectless, but the world has become too 'subjectful'. The furniture in Kierkegaard's apartment, Adorno tells us, have become divorced and separated from the use-value of objects stripped from them by the 'economic process'. Yet is it the authenticity of the object we should first of all concern us? For the 'economic process' that led to their spectral presence lies not in the opposition of the internal and the external, but the internalisation of the external, the becoming subjective of capital. You might respond that this does not at all invalidate Adorno's criticism, but simply situates the problem at another level. The inwardness of the self is just a pale reflection of this subjectification, an answer confusing itself with the question, so it makes no difference

whether we situate this alienation of the side of the self or the object. Our reply would be that the movement of inwardness, precisely because it is a relation to the outside, is a *resistance* to this subjectification and not merely its confirmation. The critic says inwardness is a mirror held up to reality of which it is merely a product but from which it mistakenly imagines that it has freed itself, like the suicide victim who thinks they have escaped the pain of existence but thereby have merely confirmed it once more and perhaps to the highest degree by their act. We say inwardness operates as a counter movement to subjectification at the same level of experience. It is not external, if only imagined, as a disfiguring ally. *Subjectification is inwardness captured by capital*. To think of inwardness, then, is to think what resists capital at the level of the self. Adorno's mistake is that he too quickly objectifies Kierkegaard. The interior of the self is nothing but the *intérieur*, the apartment, the self in retreat from the world. Yet this is not what inwardness is at all. It is to confuse it with its opposite, subjectification.

The objectified self of subjectification, the experience of the generalised subjectivity of our world, is human capital. Human capital, at the theoretical level, is the abolition of any distinction between the internal and the external. It is the heterogeneous, as opposed to homogenous, conception of capital, for in it capital contains its other. Traditionally, capital was divided into fixed and variable capital, where the latter referred only to the power of labour. Everything that lay outside this relation, the family, friendship, love, was outside of capital. Human capital abolishes this difference. Every possible human relation becomes a relation of capital. Thus it is perfectly possible for a classic work in the development of this concept to imagine the relation between the child and the parent to be a relation of capital:

A particular class of human capital consisting of 'child Capital' may hold the key to an economic theory of population. The formation of 'child Capital' by the household, man and wife, would begin with the bearing of children and proceed

through their rearing through childhood. An investment approach to population growth is now breaking new ground.⁷

It is passages such as these that startled even Foucault, who emphasises to his listeners, in his lecture course *The Birth of Biopolitics* (a course that is nothing else but the history of the genesis of the concept of human capital), that even the relation between parents and child is viewed as future investment.⁸ He goes on to explain that at the heart of human capital is an entirely new concept of the value of work. It is no longer measured *objectively*, as it is in Smith, Ricardo and Marx, but *subjectively* (it is this transformation that is missing in Adorno's criticisms of Kierkegaard). How does the individual utilise resources given to them? How do they invest in themselves in the present, so as to profit in the future because of increased earnings? Work is no longer a limited question of an element within an objective economic process of production, but the very question of existence itself and thus a matter of life and death. Human capital analyses work not from the side of *work* (work as objectified) but from the viewpoint of the *worker*. I invest for the sake of future revenue (this is the general definition of capital). My salary is future revenue of capital. In this case, the capital is *myself*. I invest in myself in the present (education, training and health, for example) so that I can earn more in the future. This is the difference between Marxist analysis and neo-liberal one. In the former, I myself am appropriated by capital, whereas as for the latter, I myself am the capital, therefore, by definition I cannot be appropriated by it. For Marx, the expression 'human capital' is an *oxymoron*. For the new theorist of capital, it is a *tautology*. I am a part of capital that produces a flux of revenues. I am myself an enterprise and a subject of investment. Society is nothing but the unity of such individual enterprises whose smooth

⁷ Theodore W Schultz, *Investment in Human Capital : The Role of Education and of Research* (New York: Free Press, 1970), p. vii.

⁸ In the lecture of the 14th March 1979 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics : Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. by Michel Senellart (Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 216–238.

operation is the sole purpose and function of the state. You might argue that is just the old notion of *Homo economicus*, but in so doing you would miss what is entirely new and novel in this phenomenon. If the rational agent of exchange is the traditional definition of the subject in classical economic theory, then in the concept of human capital I am not simple a partner of exchange but an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of myself. I am nothing but a generalised self requiring investment and it is this investment, above all, that individualises me (my salary being an objectified mark of this differentiation). I am both capital and producer of capital. It is at this point that capital directly enters and determines life and the function and purpose of a rationally organised society, generally speaking, through control, screening and selection, becomes the amelioration, accumulation and increase of human capital alone. Such a capital has no exterior. It is life itself.

It is not a matter here, in response to what appears the remorseless victory of human capital, to appeal to an authentic individual who would be exterior to the flows of capital and labour, because it is precisely this authentic individual that is produced in the flows. Capital and subjectivity are synonymous in human capital, so any appeal to a self would be immediately interiorised. It is not as though in the contemporary age anyone thinks that we should be less authentic, objectified and alienated in work; rather work should be an expression of our creative freedom. It is this 'creative freedom' that is our alienation. It is not authentic individuality that is at stake here but what is more profound than any objectified subject, which is the *possible*. This is why Kierkegaard never tells us *objectively* what it means to be subjective (as though you might define this in advance). We must make the distinction between *what* the self is, its role and identity within society and *how* the self is. In the first case, the self is an actual self. It is the self arrived at the end of a process. It is the self I have invested in through my education, training and health. But the self as a 'how' is not a self in this sense at all; it is the self of *the possible over and above the actual*, rather than

subordinate to it. The first self is ontic; the second ontological. Human capital never goes to the limit of the objectified interiority of the self, even though it is utterly parasitical on its abilities and capacities that exceed it. What matters in the rationally governed society of human capital is the partial actualisation of possibilities and never the pure possibilities of life that precede any actualisation. This explains its fatalism and despair.

The paradox of writing about Kierkegaard is in speaking about the passionate self you immediately change it into the actual self. This is the danger of examples. There is one way to avoid this danger. Rather than describing *what* he writes describe *how* he writes.

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writing is the very practice of being a passionate self and it is to this we shall now turn. The form of his work is not merely an aesthetic contingency, but expresses the very difference between the actual and the possible self.⁹

The Passion of Thinking

The content of Kierkegaard's thought cannot be separated from its form. You cannot ignore how he writes as though you could get straight to his thought and disregard its style.

Philosophy imagines thought could be communicated without the necessity of words. Of course it knows this is an impossible dream, but at best it suffers words as a means of communication rather than the real expression of thought. Words are merely the vehicle, whereas thought are what animate words from within. In this way, we can distinguish between thoughtless and thoughtful words. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writing is not a mere addition, a trick meant to deceive the readers, whose exhausted response might be to

⁹ Of course this is not the only performance in Kierkegaard work but it is the drama that produces it. Indeed you could argue that it is littered with such performances. The image we have in mind here is his famous analogy of the swimmer. 'In learning to go through the motions of swimming, one can be suspended from the ceiling in a harness and then presumably describe the movements, but one is not swimming.' Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling Repetition*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 37–8.

say, ‘Well it really is Kierkegaard writing after all and we can ignore all these other names.’

This implies that he could have written otherwise than he did. Yet he tells us that he was under a compulsion to write this way and no other. Are we simply to ignore and mistrust his sincerity or is there an intimate relation between his thought and how he writes?

Kierkegaard himself could not be clearer on this matter. He tells the reader, in the appendix to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ‘A First and Last Declaration’, that he is the author of all his works and his ‘pseudonymity or polyonymity’ is not ‘accidental [...] but an *essential* basis in the *production* itself.’¹⁰ If it were not so, then it would be no problem to speak of him in the same way we speak of other philosophers and thereby insert thought easily within our historical canon. That he wrote under other names than his own was not because he wished to hide himself from some *exterior* reason, so for example to remain unknown to others, but an *interior* relation to his thought itself.¹¹ By ‘interior’, we do not mean the interior of Kierkegaard, of which we know nothing, as he himself does not, but the relation of thought to its own production. In other words, that thought itself, in relation to itself, is essentially anonymous, despite the intention of the author who writes the words. I think more than I am capable of thinking. It is this ‘more’ that is the basis of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity, and not some hidden desire to conceal an actual self. Facing this ‘more’, Kierkegaard is on the side of the reader rather than himself, and can claim no more authority ‘to know’ than they.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, p. 527. Emphasis in the original.

¹¹ Such non-pseudonymous writings, for instance, which were written for the paper *The Fatherland* and the subsequent publication of the tracts of *The Moment*, whose personal attacks on well-known individuals and the sheer virulence of their style could have been ample cause for hiding behind an assumed authorship if this had been the reason for Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms. See, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Indirect communication, therefore, is not something that befalls his thought from without, whether from psychological, social or historical reasons (because, for example, he wanted to write without public censure), but because it is intrinsic to the nature of this thought, or any thought, where the object and activity of thought are split, and thinking places itself in this split as its very possibility. It is this separation that is the true meaning of subjective as opposed to objective thought. It is not that he is proposing a different thought from Hegel (even if we think that he thought is the thought that all thought is subjective), but this thinking cannot be expressed in a thought, not even this one, because of the separation between thinking and thought itself. This separation is made possible only in the essential basis of its own production that destroys the individual who writes. This is why the issue is not whether you should use the name 'Kierkegaard', when you refer to his pseudonymous writings, but that you know what this name means. It is the author who suffers his work as that which is furthest from himself as something known and actual and who communicates this lack of knowledge to the reader as the very movement of thought itself indirectly through writing. Writing is not something that thought suffers as an unnecessary burden, but the very *suffering* of thought not to be able to express itself as its own truth.

The difference between thinking and what is thought is the passion of thinking. The passion of thinking can only be communicated indirectly through the words themselves and not the ideas they are meant to contain, because I have no privilege access to them beyond the words that I write. The passion of thinking is only present when I am not present to myself, when my thought is more than I am capable of thinking. As readers of Kierkegaard, we have to guard ourselves against the temptation of reading him in the opposite way he wishes us to do so, and how he reads himself. We translate everything he has written into objective thought, into an actuality, into a product we might own and possess as an investment. In so doing, we would miss the passion of thinking, the movement of thought, which each one of

us is meant to enact for ourselves. For we precisely stop thinking when we think we now have the thought. The temptation is to think that by sheer effort of will, understanding and intellect, we can come to the end of his thought (of which we repeat, he knows no more than we do, even with his prefaces, introductions and appendices) by transmuting and translating this passion into an actual thought inserted into a litany of names making up what we know as the history of Western thought in its totality. The paradox of thinking is that I do not know what I think, not exactly anyway, no more than anyone else, and it is this that keeps thinking thinking. It is not the closure of thought that is the object of thought (as in Aristotle's famous definition of God, as thinking thinking thinking) but *the possibility of thinking as the impossibility of thought*.¹² 'This then,' Kierkegaard writes in *Philosophical Fragments*, 'is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think. The passion of thought is fundamentally present everywhere in thought, also in the single individual's thought insofar as he, thinking, is not merely himself.'¹³

I am thinking only to the extent I am not myself, rather than myself. This division in me is the line between thinking and what is thought in thinking. The truth of the passion of thinking, therefore, is not the truth of thought, which is the having or possessing of a true thought in actuality. My thinking is true only insofar as I am divided against myself, I do not know what I think, and it is this truth I communicate to the reader. This is why Kierkegaard calls the passion of thinking a 'downfall'.¹⁴ I do not want to say to you I have the truth and now I want to tell you what it is, rather I want to push my thinking to the limit of what it is possible for me to think, which means really what is not possible for me to think at the edge

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics. Books X-XIV*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick and G. Cyril Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), bk. 12, 9, 1074b34–35.

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 37.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 37.

of my thinking, so that you too will think. Only the passion of thinking communicates the passion of thought, which is not the same as the thought of a passion. I cannot put it into a thought for you, however much you might wish me to do so. You too must experience the ‘downfall’ of your thinking in order to think.

It is too hasty to call this passion subjective, as opposed to objective thought, because it is this separation between thinking and thought that makes the passion of thinking possible. Without the separation of thought, without its distance from me, there would be no passion. We need to distinguish, therefore, between the self that owns and possesses its thought and *the self that is disowned and dispossessed by its thought*. One relates to thought as *actuality* and the other as *possibility*. This distinction between the actual and the possible is more fundamental than the difference between subjective and objective thought, if you think of the one as inward, and the other as external. For thinking to be passionate it is not enough that it is merely interior, it has to be divided against itself, thinking that thinks a thought that is not itself.

The passion of thinking is the difference between the activity of thought and what is thought in this activity. Thinking itself cannot be an object of thought. This is the mistake that reflection makes when it believes it can get behind itself and capture the origin of thinking, like a snake biting its own tail. As soon as I make thinking an object of thought then it is no longer thinking but thought. The difference between thinking and thought can be experienced either negatively or positively. Negatively it is the ossification of thinking, its paralysis and stupefaction in actuality, as though thought where the end of thinking rather than its beginning, a blockage or impediment. It would be the melancholy we experience when we feel that nothing we write or say really expresses what we thought. The opposite of such a disappointment is the *creativity* of thinking. For if we could say or write all that we thought, would we not immediately stop thinking as well as those who might have the misfortune to

listen or read us? Would this not be the stupidity of thinking as opposed to the stupidity of thought? This is the danger of all fanaticisms. Thinking, understood positively, not as the absence of thought, but as the power and passion of thinking itself, overflows thought itself, such that there could never be a final word. Kierkegaard's suspicion of Hegel (or better perhaps Hegelians, since in Hegel there is always the unease and movement of thinking) is that absolute objective knowledge would be, if it were achievable, the end of thinking, a kind of complacency and satisfaction in the existing order of things that he despised. No one would have to write or speak again, or if they did, it would only be the repetition of what had already been thought.

What is the condition of the separation of thinking from what it thinks? It either comes from the side of thinker or what is thought. We have already addressed this phenomenon from the side of thinker. The subject is divided against itself. To the extent that I am really thinking then I am not myself. But how can a self not be itself in being itself? We might answer this by saying that the self is split. One part of the self thinks more than the other, such that I might say to you 'I do not know what I think'. There would be the self that thinks, and the self that does not know what it thinks. The self that thinks, paradoxically since we associated thinking with self-consciousness, would be unconsciousness, as though there were hidden reservoirs to the self that could never be brought to the light of the day. Only at the level of thought is this unconscious self unknown. At the level of thinking it is the self that thinks, even though I do not know what this thinking is. It thinks in the place of me. Yet is this self, which thinks despite me, only an interior relation between an unconscious and conscious self or already a relation to something outside of itself? I am not merely myself because some part of myself is not known to me; rather I am not myself because I am already in a relation to another of which I cannot comprehend yet on which I am ultimately dependent.

The difference between the two conditions is a difference between two relations of the actual and the possible. Either the actual determines the possible or the possible the actual, but in either case the determination cannot be the same. If the actual determines the possible, then is not the same as the determination by the possible. For what do we mean when we say that the possible determines, if we mean that it does so in the same way as the actual? The actual determines the possible by limiting it. It is, to use Kierkegaard's language (through the pseudonym of Anti-Climacus) of the opening of *The Sickness unto Death*, a 'negative unity'.¹⁵ When the possible determines the actual, on the contrary, it expands and inflates it, not from within, but by relating it to, what he calls on the same page, a 'positive third'. This 'positive third' is God, but we should not confuse this with an objective reality proved by thought. The self relates to God not as an actuality, as though it were merely one more item to be added onto the world, but as a possibility reached only when it has come to the end of every possibility. It is a possibility experienced, then paradoxically, through the impossibility of every possibility, an infinite as opposed to finite possibility:

When someone faints, we call for water, eau de Cologne, smelling salts, but when someone wants to despair, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation. A possibility – then the person is despaired breaths again, he revives again, for without possibility a person seems unable to breath. At times the ingeniousness of the human imagination can extend to the point of creating possibility, but at last – that is, when it depends upon *faith* – then only this helps, that for God everything is possible.¹⁶

The difference between the possible and the actual is an ontological one and it at the heart of understanding the passionate self.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death : A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, pp. 38–9.

Infinite Freedom

Heidegger was wrong to say that Kierkegaard had no ontology.¹⁷ The opposite is the case.

You cannot understand Kierkegaard at all if you do not grasp his ontology. The irony is, with respect to Heidegger's own debt to Aristotle, this ontology is Aristotelian. Kierkegaard framed his rejection of Hegel as a return to Aristotle; especially the latter's explanation of change or motion (*κίνησις*).¹⁸ This account has become so common-place to us now that we have great difficulty in understanding what Aristotle's problem was, such that we think his solution is obvious. Change is the actualisation of a potentiality. This definition, however, would be little more than saying that change is change. We need, therefore, to examine Aristotle's problem in greater depth to see how Kierkegaard transforms it.

One person who did take Aristotle's problem seriously was Pierre Aubenque. His book *Le Problème de l'être chez Aristote, essai sur la problématique aristotélicienne* is a controversial and heterodox interpretation of Aristotle's ontology, but it does offer us a way into Kierkegaard's own ontology.¹⁹ Most interpreters of Aristotle would combine his ontology and theology. Aubenque does not. He separates them. Theology is not the science of being. The meaning of being is not the same as theology. Being is not God. Indeed being is not a being at all. Because being is not any being whatsoever, it is not an actuality, even the pure actuality of the Prime Mover. How does this separation of theology and ontology transform the way we think about Aristotle's account of change or motion? In the traditional

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1962), p. 494n.

¹⁸ For an excellent account of the importance of *κίνησις* to the whole of Kierkegaard's work, see Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Pierre Aubenque, *Le Problème de l'être chez Aristote, essai sur la problématique aristotélicienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), pp. 448–456. For an explanation of the heterodox nature of Aubenque's interpretation of Aristotle's ontology, see Joseph Moreau, 'La problématique aristotélicienne', *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 153 (1963), 365–71. For his own more orthodox view, see Joseph Moreau, 'Remarques sur l'ontologie aristotélicienne', *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 75 (1977), 577–611.

commentary change is ultimately explained theologically.²⁰ Change is described through the difference between potentiality and actuality, and priority is given to actuality, since nothing potential could exist without a prior actuality, and without a pure actuality we would have an infinite regress.

Can change be interpreted ontologically rather than theologically? This is Aubenque's gambit. To explain change ontologically would mean reversing the relation between potentiality and actuality, on the one hand, and change, on the other. It is not the difference between potentiality and actuality that explains change, but the meaning of change, which is a specific interpretation of being, that explains the difference between potentiality and actuality. The problem of change is how the unity of something can be maintained over multiple determinations. How can Socrates both be young and old, pale and tanned, and still be the same Socrates? The answer to this question cannot just be that Socrates has the potential to be young, old, pale and tanned, because then we are just going around in circles. The answer is in the meaning of being as such, and that being has two meanings for Aristotle, essential and accidental. There is no contradiction between the one and the multiple because Socrates is not one and multiple in the same sense. He is essentially one and accidentally multiple. It is the difference between these two meanings of being that explains the difference between potentiality and actuality. If there were only one meaning of being, essential, then there would be only actuality and no potentiality. Likewise, if being were only accidental, then there would be only potentials and no actualities.

Being is nothing but what we say about being. It only has a referential meaning. Being has a meaning because we speak about being. This is why being is not a genus for

²⁰ For such a traditional theological reading of potentiality and actuality, see Stephen Mann, 'Energeia and Dunamis', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, ed. by Christopher John Shields (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 400–421.

Aristotle. When we speak about being we are not speaking about this or that thing, rather the meaning of being is the *way* we speak about things, how we refer to them. The being we are speaking of is the being of the sublunary world.²¹ The being of the world is the being of movement. This being is incomplete in two ways: it is fragmented in time and is always changing (becoming other to itself, to use Aristotle's expression). What is important to stress here is the being we speak of is incomplete. In this sense, the being of movement relates to Aristotle's definition of the infinite.

It can come as a surprise to many that Aristotle is a philosopher of the infinite, for they associate him with the finite.²² Is not the universe itself finite for Aristotle, and does he not speak of the infinite as irrational? But in both cases Aristotle is speaking of an infinite thing, either an infinite universe or an infinite bound series, but not an infinite process. An infinite process is not irrational because it does not imply a bounded totality that would be infinite; in other words, an actual infinite magnitude. If infinity is to have a meaning, then it can only be as a potentiality, but we have to be careful by what we mean by 'potential' here. The possibility of confusion lies in the fact that Aristotle does describe infinity as an actuality, but it is like the actuality of a day or a contest rather than an infinite magnitude (*Phys.* 206^a 21-5).²³ The infinite is like a day or contest in that it is not all there at once. When we say the day or contest is happening, we do not mean all the instants of the day are happening. The difference, however, between the infinite, and the day or contest, is that the latter are finite wholes. The day and the contest come to an end, whereas the infinite does not. The infinite is

²¹ This again is the difference between theology and ontology. Theology is about a specific being and not the being of the world. Our difficulty is that our interpretation of Aristotle is distorted through the prism of the Scholastic reading, which is theological.

²² For a thorough explanation of the infinite in Aristotle, see Ursula Coope, 'Aristotle on the Infinite', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, ed. by Christopher John Shields (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 267–86.

²³ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 351.

an imperfect or incomplete actuality. It remains permanently unfulfilled. Because the infinite is not a whole, it is not a 'this'. It is not a thing or substance. It is not the coming to be of something, but 'coming to be' as such that never comes to an end.

The being of motion is infinite in this sense. It is an imperfect or incomplete actuality. Aristotle says as much in the Greek: ἡ τοῦ δυνάμει ὄντος ἐντελέχεια, ἣ τοιοῦτον κίνησις ἐστίν (change is the actuality of that which is potential as such) (*Phys.* 201^a10).²⁴ It is because being is incomplete, always coming to be, that there is a difference between potentiality and actuality. If being were complete, then nothing would come into existence (or go out of existence), for everything would be what it is necessarily. There would be, then, no motion. Another way of understanding the incompleteness of being, at least at the level of the mundane world, is that nothing is what it is. Socrates is never perfectly Socrates; the apple tree is never perfectly the apple tree, and so on. It is because everything is never what it is that everything is fragmented in time, and always becoming other to itself. This explains also why being is said in two ways, essentially and accidentally. If everything is essentially what it is, then there would be no accidental properties. On the contrary, in this world, we see everything is on the way to being itself but never wholly becomes itself. The being of the world is the being of infinite motion or change. Nothing actually is what its potentiality is. Or in this world, potentiality always exceeds actuality. It is this overflowing of potentiality that explains why being is always in motion.

While Aristotle speaks of being objectively (in terms of the natural processes of generation and decay), Kierkegaard does so subjectively. It is not a matter of whether Kierkegaard gets Aristotle right or not, whatever that might mean, because he does not set

²⁴ Aristotle, *The Physics. Books I-IV*, trans. by Philip Henry Wicksteed and Francis Macdonald Cornford (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), bk. III, I, 201a10. This is our own translation following Aubenque's French [*l'acte de ce qui est en puissance en tant que tel*], p. 454.

himself up as a scholar of Aristotle.²⁵ What matters is how he uses or is inspired by Aristotle. Like him, change or motion is at the heart of his understanding of being, and being is understood as infinite in the way explained by Aubenque. We can see this in perhaps the most difficult and dense pages of *Philosophical Fragments*, which Johannes Climacus describes as an interlude, ‘Is the Past more Necessary than the Future, or Has the Possible by Having Become Actual Become more Necessary than It Was?’²⁶

Kierkegaard understands change or motion ontologically as ‘coming into existence’. We must distinguish between something that already exists and changes, and ‘coming into existence’. Coming into existence is movement from possibility to actuality, from non-being to being. What is necessary does not change, because what is necessary just is. This means that non-being must really exist, otherwise we would not be able to distinguish between ‘coming into existence’ and what is necessary. Because the necessary just is, it does not ‘suffer’ actuality. To suffer actuality means that the possible is annihilated in two ways; just this possibility is annihilated in actuality by ‘coming into existence’, and all the other possibilities are annihilated because just this possibility is actualised. If there were not this difference between ‘non-being’ and being as such, and if non-being did not precede being, then there would be no ‘coming into existence’. What is would be, and there would be no change in being. All there would be would only be the necessary attributes of being, and there would no difference between existence and essence.

²⁵ For a complete and scholarly account of Kierkegaard’s engagement with Aristotle’s modal categories, see Løkke Håvard and Arild Waaler, ‘Physics and Metaphysics: Change, Modal Categories and Agency’, in *Kierkegaard and the Greek World - Aristotle and Other Greek Authors*, ed. by Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, 2 (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010), 25–46. We find it strange that they are so obsessed with whether Kierkegaard was correct about Aristotle or not. First of all, he is not a scholar of Aristotle and never sets himself out to be, and secondly, if they had been aware of Aubenque’s work, they would have seen that his use of Aristotle’s *κίνησις* is not as outlandish, despite how iconoclastic that interpretation might be, as it first appears.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 72–88.

Existence, as opposed to essence, is temporal, for ‘coming into existence’ happens in time. When we speak of essences, we are speaking of what is. Socrates is a wise man. But really we should say ‘Socrates was a wise man’. For while Socrates lives change is possible. Only in his death is his essence revealed and fixed for eternity. Yet this essence might not have come into existence. We can speak of the past in two ways: the past as what has happened, and the past as the happening of what has happened (what Kierkegaard calls an ‘intrinsic duplicity’²⁷). We can say Socrates was a wise and he lived in Athens. Now he is dead those facts are necessary, but not as the original possibilities they once were. What is unchangeable has its origin in change; otherwise being would be necessary and not contingent. The past could have been different from what it was, and the past that does exist only exists because these possibilities were actualised, and not others. The difficulty here is to see that the actual past has its source in possibility, because if this possibility had not been actualised, then the past that now appears to us as unchangeable would not have ‘come into existence’.

Simply by happening the past shows that it is not necessary, for if it had not occurred then the necessary attributes would not be true (Socrates did not exist, he was not wise, and there was no Athens). We try to obscure the contingency of being by transforming the happening of what happens to something that has happened, but this is an ontological error for Kierkegaard. It is to confuse being with a being, existence with an essence (as though existence itself had an essence). What exists (essence) is not the same as ‘coming into existence’ of what exists (existence). I might marvel at the star in the sky, Kierkegaard remarks, and everything that it is, but one can also be astonished that it exists at all.²⁸

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 79.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 81.

The past is double. That an something happened is certain, but only because I am committed to its happening. To the latter I do not stand with certainty, but faith. Of course there are degrees of uncertainty. I might be more or less certain of the happening of the star than other historical events, but even there what I thought had been actualised might not have been, and there were other possibilities. Even the most rigorous science must be open to reality, and there are always future events that could lead to revisions of the past. To see the past as merely a collection of facts that are necessarily true would be to abolish what is past about the past as such, since it would merely be what we apprehend in the present now. The past of the past, the absolute past that distinguishes the past from the present or the future, is that the possible always remains with the past such that through the future it can transform the present. I believed that x had happened, but now I realised that there were other possibilities that had always been there. ‘The possibility,’ writes Kierkegaard, ‘from which emerged the possible that became the actual always accompanies that which came into existence and remains with the past, even though centuries lie between.’²⁹

All events are contingent and uncertain. They are uncertain and contingent because they come out of the nothingness of non-being, and in their arrival just this possibility is annihilated, and all other possibilities. My relation to this happening can only be one of belief. I can only say ‘this happened’, but I cannot be certain that it had, otherwise its ‘coming into existence’ would have been necessary. I can see the star in the sky, but I cannot see the transition from non-being to being, or the ‘multiple possible’ to the actual. I have to believe that. The happening of what has happened is not an immediate perception or a fact. It is that through which I already grasp and reflect upon the facts. ‘Belief,’ Kierkegaard writes, ‘believes what it does not see; it does not believe that the star exists, for that it sees, but it

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 86.

believes that it has come into existence.’³⁰ To doubt something is not the same as not to believe in the happening of something. The former is a modest doubt. I might doubt whether the star really is as I see it, but this is nothing as to refuse to believe the star had ever come into existence. This, Kierkegaard argues, is an act of will. It is to see everything in a different light. It would be to see one’s seeing another way. Yet one could not appeal to the facts to explain this change, for it is precisely these facts one now views otherwise. Towards the actual one has knowledge; towards the possible, the happening of the actual, one can only have faith, but faith you must have.

With this difficult and arcane discussion of Kierkegaard’s ontology via Aristotle, we might feel we have wandered far away from our original question as to whether he is still relevant to our age. This is not a matter of whether professional philosophers are still and will be reading him (something no doubt that would make him shudder), but whether he still speaks to us politically and why Tronti would have suggested now is the time to read him again. Capitalism is increasingly a problem of subjectivity. Human capital has now become the definition of capital as a whole, and Foucault is right to describe this as a singular event in history, whose consequences we are only beginning to understand. We need to think this event ontologically. This requires, first of all, we understand it in the proper way. This means, above all, we understand it historically, because this is precisely how capitalism obscures its own ‘coming into existence’, and that the only relation to the happening of capitalism as an event can be a matter of belief. It exists because we have faith in it. The worst way to read Kierkegaard is to think it is a matter of discovering an authentic subjectivity, for it is this authenticity that has been appropriated by capital. What is it that Kierkegaard teaches us? The possible always precedes and is greater than the actual. There is always an alternative, for

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 81.

what is comes into existence and passes out of existence. Being is incomplete and imperfect and there is no necessity in this world. It is up to us, whoever ‘we’ are, to look for those possibilities that have always accompanied the past, but we will only do so by looking towards the future out of this infernal frozen present in which all possibilities appear to have been annihilated and whose slogan is ‘there is no alternative’. On the contrary, Kierkegaard tells us, ‘in existence the watchword is always “forward”’.³¹

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³¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, p. 345.

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