

Also by James Giles

NO SELF TO BE FOUND: The Search for Personal Identity

A STUDY OF PHENOMENALISM

FRENCH EXISTENTIALISM: Consciousness, Ethics and Relations with Others
(*editor*)

Kierkegaard and Freedom

Edited by

James Giles

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Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	vii
<i>Notes on the Editor and Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
1 Introduction <i>James Giles</i>	1
2 Speculation and Despair: Metaphysical and Existential Perspectives on Freedom <i>Anthony Rudd</i>	28
3 Kierkegaard, Freedom, and Self-interpretation <i>David M. A. Campbell</i>	43
4 Autonomy in Kierkegaard's <i>Either/Or</i> <i>Jörg Disse</i>	58
5 Kierkegaard's Leap: Anxiety and Freedom <i>James Giles</i>	69
6 Freedom and Modality <i>Poul Lübcke</i>	93
7 The Idea of Fate in Kierkegaard's Thought <i>Julia Watkin</i>	105
8 Freedom and Immanence <i>Michelle Kosch</i>	121
9 Indirect Communication: Training in Freedom <i>Peter Rogers</i>	142
10 Self-deception and Freedom in Kierkegaard's <i>Purity of Heart</i> <i>D. Z. Phillips</i>	156

8

Freedom and Immanence

Michelle Kosch

This chapter will focus on a peculiar and generally overlooked aspect of Kierkegaard's position on the issue of free will. Kierkegaard rejects two views that he labels 'immanent' – the immanent-ethical (often referred to simply as the 'ethical stage', but also described as the 'universal' or 'ideal' ethical) and the immanent-religious (Religiousness A). To speak quite generally, one can say that the ground for the rejection in both cases is a lack of fit between these standpoints and what he calls 'existing subjectivity'. One is entitled to say this because, in a body of work designed to make Christianity difficult to accept, dedicated in large part to demonstrating that there is no reason to accept it, Kierkegaard raises one significant point in its favour – that it is a 'perfect fit' with the situation of existing subjectivity (*CUP*, p. 230). The purpose of this chapter is to argue that freedom is that characteristic of the situation of existing subjectivity with which the two immanent standpoints fail to fit.

It is reasonably clear, I believe, that Kierkegaard is an incompatibilist in the ordinary sense, holding that a commitment to determinism entails the denial that we are free. Determinism, however, turns out to be but one among several views he feels we must reject if we are to affirm freedom. He is also, I shall argue, an incompatibilist in a second, far more radical sense, holding that a commitment to an immanent source of ethical value also entails the denial that we are free. The question of what one can legitimately affirm without denying freedom is, in fact, a question that underlies the entire project of the pseudonymous works. For not only the aesthetic view of life, which simply denies choice, but also the immanent-ethical and the immanent-religious views involve beliefs that are inconsistent with the belief that we are free.

I shall begin by laying out Kierkegaard's ordinary incompatibilism (section I); for if one does not see this, the extraordinary incompatibilism must remain invisible. Then I shall explain, and try to defend, this second incompatibilism as it relates to the immanent ethical standpoint (section II). In section III, I shall address what I see to be the main objection to the view presented in section II, and in so doing explain the problem for freedom posed by the immanent religious standpoint. Next, I shall explain why Kierkegaard thinks what he calls 'paradoxical-religiousness' does not pose the same problem, and what he means by the claim that Christianity and subjectivity are a 'perfect fit' (section IV). Finally, in section V, I shall address three objections that may be raised against the argument presented in sections II–IV.

I

The grounds Kierkegaard adduces for the first incompatibilism are fairly standard ones. If some form of determinism were true, then all human behaviour would be necessitated. But in that case, he claims, it would be wrong to speak of actions – the idea that one acts necessarily is a contradiction (*EO*, II, p. 175). Believing in action requires believing in choice, believing that there is an either/or, and this is expressed by the 'reflection that wants to point out that everything could be otherwise' (*EO*, II, p. 174). I take this to be the core of the position advanced in *Either/Or*, II, where the criticism levelled against both the aesthetic view and that of speculative philosophy is that they affirm freedom, if at all, in at most a compatibilist sense – freedom as the absence of a feeling of constraint, the unity of subjective desire with objective necessity (*EO*, II, pp. 45, 137, 239. See also Anthony Rudd in Chapter 3). The point of intersection of A's position (that is, that of the aesthetic individual in *Either/Or*, I) and that of 'the philosophers' is that both see action under the category of necessity (*EO*, II, pp. 170–1).

Although Kierkegaard seems willing to countenance the compatibility of freedom and the necessity of history in *Either/Or*, II, he justifies this willingness by drawing a distinction between actions, which are internal, and events, which are external and governed by necessity (*EO*, II, pp. 174–5). Even here, that is, action and necessitation are held to be incompatible. This position, that individuals lead a 'double existence', has the unfortunate consequence that (internal) actions can in principle have no impact on (external) behaviour, and Kierkegaard seems to have abandoned it by 1844. In *Philosophical Fragments*, he argues against the position that history is necessary precisely on the

grounds that at least some historical events result from free actions. If history were necessary, 'freedom . . . would be an illusion' (*PF*, pp. 77–8. See also *CA* p. 82ff for the identification of 'the historical' and 'freedom').

Kierkegaard relies here upon a distinction that is, if not universally accepted, then at least familiar – that between freedom as a capacity to act as one intends (a sense of freedom compatible with necessity) and freedom as a capacity to form intentions that are independent of determination by prior events (including prior mental states). His claim is that if we are willing to affirm freedom only in the first, but not in the second sense, then we might take the aesthetic, but cannot take the ethical standpoint – for only freedom in the latter sense supports attributions of responsibility. The first of the two exclusive disjunctions presented in the second letter of *Either/Or*, II is thus the either/or of incompatibilism in the ordinary sense: either freedom or necessity; either an active, ethical attitude or a passive, contemplative, aesthetic attitude. This is the very same disjunction he presents in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* under a different name: one must become either 'subjective' or 'objective' (*CUP*, pp. 192–3).

The second disjunction is the either/or of freedom of choice that appears once one has accepted the first term of the first disjunction. The standpoint of the ethical in the general sense is defined by its claim that there is such a disjunction, regardless of whether it is formulated ethically: good/evil, or religiously: the decision of an eternal happiness/unhappiness in time. That is, it is defined, in the first instance, as the affirmation of the capacity to choose ('On the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical' (*EO*, II p. 166)) – as the affirmation of freedom of the will (see *EO*, II, p. 214, where absolute choice is defined as the choice of oneself as free). This second disjunction is the one to which Kierkegaard refers when he says that the ethical posits a contradiction. 'For thought, the contradiction does not exist. . . . For freedom, the contradiction does exist, because it excludes it.' (*EO*, II, p. 173) Freedom cancels the contradiction by choosing one side and thereby excluding the other. But for that to be possible, the disjunction must first be present to it as a disjunction.

Accepting the ethical standpoint in this general sense is of a piece with affirming that the question, 'What am I supposed to do?' (*EO*, II, p. 171) has meaning. If it has no meaning, 'life comes to a halt' (*EO*, II, p. 171). To affirm that the question has meaning, however, is to think that it matters what one does, to have a subjective interest in one's choices, and to accept responsibility. It is important for the argument I

shall present in sections II–IV that the ethical in this general sense is also a part of both forms (A and B) of the religious. It is this sense of the ethical to which Kierkegaard refers when he says that the ethical and the religious lie ‘so close that they continually communicate with each other’ (*CUP*, p. 162). The ethical or subjective standpoint ‘culminates in immortality, without which the ethical is merely custom and habit’ (*CUP*, p. 175), in concern for an eternal happiness (*CUP*, p. 130), and in the conviction that the issue of an eternal happiness or unhappiness is decided in time (*CUP*, pp. 94–5). This, that something of infinite importance is at stake, is simply the most emphatic expression of the conviction that it matters what one does – that is, of the ethical standpoint in general.

II

If the question, ‘What am I supposed to do?’ has meaning, however, it is natural to think that it also has an answer. Ethics requires content. If it has none, then it is difficult to see the choices of the ethicist as differing in any substantial way from the inclinations of the individual living the life of aesthetic immediacy. The source of ethical content, or rather the kind of source this content can have, divides the sort of ethics Kierkegaard feels we can accept from the sort he feels we must reject, if we are to affirm freedom. For some views that are apparently ethical views, in that they purport to give answers to the question of what one is supposed to do, in fact give answers that entail that no true disjunction was present to begin with. That is, some types of answer render the question itself senseless. The views Kierkegaard labels ‘immanent’ have, he claims, this characteristic. Accepting the presupposition of the ethical in the general sense – the affirmation of freedom, responsibility and the importance of subjectively interested choice – should ultimately lead one to reject the immanent-ethical. This is Kierkegaard’s second incompatibilism, and I shall now try to show why it is worthy of consideration.

To claim that ethical content is immanent is to claim that its source is accessible to thought – that it is known, and known to be the good. Kierkegaard also refers to the immanent ethical as the ‘universal’ or ‘ideal’ ethical; all of these terms point to the same set of characteristics. Immanent views are rationalistic in at least a weak sense: they presuppose that reasons can be given for why one path of action is better than another, why some things are to be valued and others not. These reasons

are typically provided by reflection upon some conception of human essence claiming universal validity. Kierkegaard is relatively unconcerned with exactly how this justification is supposed to be accomplished, and this is why the immanent-ethical covers so many different views: Kantian, Socratic/Platonic and Hegelian ethics are all more or less clearly implicated. (The relegation of views following roughly Humean lines to the aesthetic stage is informative: Kierkegaard does not consider an appeal to desire, where desires are seen as brute facts about human beings, to be a form of justification.) He is unconcerned about the concrete justifications because he thinks it is the form of all these views that is problematic. Their distinguishing characteristic is the claim that ethical content is grounded in self-knowledge, that the moral ideal is some form of autonomy.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard cites Socratic/Platonic ethics as a paradigm of immanence, and he tells us exactly what is wrong with it. If virtue is knowledge, then sin is ignorance; and this means that there is no sin at all (*SUD*, p. 89). Here ‘sin’ should be taken not in its ordinary Christian sense but rather as moral evil in general, so that to claim that there is sin is simply to claim that wrong is imputable. If we took ‘sin’ to have its ordinary Christian meaning, the discussion of a ‘Socratic notion of sin’ would have to appear senseless from the outset. It is worth noting, at this point, that the meanings of the terms ‘sin’ and ‘guilt’ are oddly transposed in Kierkegaard’s work, and this transposition is quite generalized. The term ‘sin’ does not, in ordinary usage, mean moral evil in general. The latter is something that is present only if the individual in question has brought it about and is responsible for it, whereas the former is supposed to be present even in individuals who, morally speaking, have as yet done nothing wrong – this is what it means to say there is hereditary sin. Conversely, in the ordinary usage of the term, guilt does entail responsibility. One cannot ordinarily be guilty for something one did not intend or could not have avoided. For Kierkegaard, these terms have roughly the opposite entailments. In *The Concept of Anxiety* it is the hereditary aspect of sin that he denies, claiming that original sin comes into the world anew in every individual, ‘by the qualitative leap of the individual’ (*CA*, pp. 31, 37. See also James Giles’ discussion of the leap in Chapter 5). On the other hand, he occasionally, though not universally, uses ‘guilt’ to refer to a state in which an individual can find herself of necessity – hereditarily, as it were (for example, at *CUP*, p. 528). The notion of necessary guilt will be addressed in section III, and Kierkegaard’s reasons for using the term ‘sin’ rather

than 'evil' should be clarified by the argument to follow. Seeing how this argument works, however, requires specifying sin, at least preliminarily, as moral evil in general.

The argument presented in *The Sickness Unto Death* is not a complaint about pagan ethics that relies on specifically Christian presuppositions, but is instead a rehearsal of a perfectly standard objection to Platonic ethics – namely, that interpreting virtue as a form of knowledge means denying individual responsibility for virtue and vice, denying that virtue is a choice. And the validity of the objection does indeed become clearest when one considers the account of moral evil available to someone who claims that ethics is immanent in this sense. For if the best life is that in accordance with reason, and if it is such because rationality is constitutive of ourselves as agents, then any failure to live such a life must be an indication that the individual involved is either (more or less permanently) substandard or simply confused.

What Socrates lacked for the definition of sin, claims Kierkegaard, was a conception of 'the will, defiance' (*SUD*, p. 90). The difficulty is better put by saying that he lacked a conception of the agent as capable of defiance. For merely adding a conception of the will does not help, unless it is as a faculty separate from and independent of its criterion of value. If defiance is to be possible, the criterion of value cannot be taken to be internal to the will, in the sense of being the law of its operation or the condition of its effectiveness. This is why Kierkegaard attacks Kant in the very same paragraph (the significance of the reference to an 'intellectual categorical imperative'). If the will is equipped with its own internal standard of value, then it is impossible to make sense of intentional, imputable deviations from that standard. If that standard is rationality in the narrow sense, such an intentional deviation would amount to an intentional mistake. If the standard is the good life in some broader eudaimonistic sense, intentional deviation would amount to a sort of masochism (see *CUP*, p. 403). Moral wrong can take the form of weakness or ignorance, but the idea of defiance remains incomprehensible, because it has to seem an unmotivated form of self-destruction on the part of the will itself.

That, of course, is how both Plato and Kant wanted it to seem, and this is the locus of Kierkegaard's critique. The immanent ethical standpoint in general assumes that any answer to the question, 'What am I supposed to do?' must come equipped with an account of why any reasonable person would want to do what he is supposed to. But there is a strong tension between the desire to have a rationally convincing

answer to the question 'Why be moral?' – that is, to be able to adduce arguments to the effect that immorality is irrational – and the desire to affirm freedom, which entails that an agent is capable both of being moral and of being immoral. The more airtight the answer, the more tempted one is to regard wrong as a manifestation of ignorance, accident, or pathology. Or, conversely, to the extent that one affirms that it is possible for an intelligent, relevantly informed, and psychiatrically sound individual to do the wrong thing (in other words, to the extent that one affirms that wrong is potentially imputable), to that very extent one has shown one's answer to the question 'Why be moral?' to be less than entirely convincing.

An example of this tension that Kierkegaard certainly had in mind is found in Kant. For it was precisely Kant's insistence that reason is the only standard of morality that made it difficult for him to affirm radical evil.¹ The conception of evil he ultimately presents is quite limited. He denies that evil can take the form of defiance, claiming that defiance of the moral law is not a humanly possible motivation.² He explicitly denies that human freedom can be seen as freedom for evil.³ But more importantly, he makes an account of evil possible in the first place only by separating the legislative function of the will from its executive function in the second *Critique* and later works. In so doing, he weakens the argument for autonomy given in the *Groundwork*, which relies on the claim that the freedom of the will consists in its capacity for self-legislation according to reason, that the moral law is a condition of the possibility of the effectiveness of the will – that a will acting otherwise than morally is heteronomous, and to that extent not free. Kant's difficulty, according to Kierkegaard's diagnosis, consists in trying to hold, together, both an immanent ethics and a proper conception of freedom of the will.

Kierkegaard expresses this general difficulty by saying that immanent views are ultimately committed to a negative conception of evil, a conception whereby evil is 'weakness, sensuousness, finitude, ignorance, etc.' (*SUD*, p. 96). If ethical content is internal to us, indeed constitutive of our true selves, then evil is something negative, not a choice in the true sense. The claim that ethical content is immanent rests on a denial that moral agents confront a true either/or – and thereby denies the original premise of the ethical standpoint in general. Immanent ethics, as ethics, presupposes the possibility of evil; as immanent, however, it denies this possibility. Kierkegaard thinks this is the necessary downfall of any immanent ethical position: 'an ethics that ignores sin is a completely futile discipline, but if it affirms sin, then

it has *eo ipso* exceeded itself' (FT, pp. 98–9). This is what it means to say that the first ethics is 'shipwrecked' upon the concept of sin (CA, p. 17).

Now it is clear, upon closer inspection, that the position suggested by the judge in *Either/Or*, II is immanent in the relevant sense. Jörg Disse argues in Chapter 4 of this volume that *Either/Or*, II presents what is essentially an abstract, non-rationalist conception of autonomy, and I rely upon his analysis in making the following observations. The most significant aspect of the position is the claim that the will contains its own internal criterion of value: 'The task the ethical individual sets for himself is to transform himself into the universal individual. . . . But to transform himself into the universal human being is possible only if I already have it within myself *kata dynamin*.' (EO, II, p. 261). Living ethically is a matter of developing a potentiality inherent in the will itself. Every life view that posits a condition outside of itself is despair: autonomy is the ethical ideal. The ethical individual differs from the aesthetic individual in that the latter is 'transparent to himself' (EO, II, p. 258): knowledge of what to do is based on self-knowledge. Evidence of the judge's confidence in this general principle is provided by his very refusal to give a systematic characterization of the concrete demands of the ethical life and his conspicuous refusal to offer any sort of justification for those he does mention. Knowing what to choose, indeed, choosing rightly, follows directly from taking choice seriously. The judge's denial of radical evil (EO, II, pp. 174–5) is, I submit, entailed by this view.

It is generally held that the inferiority of the ethical stage as it is presented in *Either/Or* becomes visible only once one has advanced beyond it, and that justifying the rejection of the ethical life-view requires religious presuppositions – that is, requires an appeal to notions, such as sin and atonement, that have no place in the view itself. The idea is that the view presented by the judge is a consistent, if incomplete and hence ultimately inadequate, approach to life. This is, if not a universal, certainly a commonly held interpretation. I believe this is incorrect. The view presented in *Either/Or* is, rather, undermined from within by its own account of freedom. Like the 'first ethics' of *The Concept of Anxiety*, it includes sin 'only insofar as upon this concept it is shipwrecked' (CA, p. 17), and I take this to mean, quite simply, that as ethics it presupposes freedom, and hence the possibility of evil, while as immanent it denies precisely this possibility. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard soon abandoned it for good.

III

I should like at this point to pre-empt a possible objection to this account of how the ethical shipwrecks on sin, and at the same time to explain how the two religious stages (immanent and paradoxical) differ in regard to the question of freedom of the will. It might seem that what Kierkegaard is saying in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety* is that the ethical is brought down by the necessity of sin – a claim quite different from, and in fact inconsistent with, the interpretation I have presented. That is, since sin is universal, or so he seems to argue, it must be the case that we cannot live up to the demands of the ethical. A relevant passage is the following: 'Ethics proposes to bring ideality into actuality. On the other hand, it is not the nature of its movement to raise actuality up into ideality. Ethics points to ideality as a task and assumes that every man possesses the requisite conditions. Thus ethics develops a contradiction, inasmuch as it makes clear both the difficulty and the impossibility' (CA, p. 16). A similar passage can be found in the context of a discussion of the same issue in *Fear and Trembling*: 'In sin, the single individual is already higher (in the direction of the demonic paradox) than the universal, because it is a contradiction on the part of the universal to want to demand itself from a person who lacks the *conditio sine qua non*' (FT, p. 98). It is easy to take the 'condition' that ethics assumes to be the capacity for good. If this is the 'impossibility' referred to in the passage, then it contains a very strong claim – not simply that we need not fulfill the demands of ethics, but rather that we cannot. This reading is supported by various other comments made in this discussion, for instance: 'all ancient ethics was based on the presupposition that virtue can be realized' (CA, p. 19). If we take the rejection of the first ethics to be based on a substantive claim to the effect that virtue cannot be realized, it obviously entails one of two things: either 1) ethical standards do not apply to us at all, or 2) we are necessarily guilty. Although I think these boil down to roughly the same thing, let us simply put the first aside for a moment and address the second. The second, it seems to me, is not the position that Kierkegaard ultimately wants to take at all. It is, rather, the position of Religiousness A.

Here it is appropriate to recall that there is in fact a second immanent position: the standpoint of Religiousness A, based on the idea that 'the individual is capable of doing nothing himself but is nothing before God . . . and self-annihilation is the essential form for the relationship with God' (CUP, p. 461). This view is characterized by a consciousness

of necessary guilt, what Kierkegaard calls the 'immanent expression' of the 'terribleness' of the religious: one cannot, of one's own power, make the finite commensurate with the absolute. In the stage of Religiousness A, the individual sets himself aside in order to find God (CUP, p. 560).

Kierkegaard thinks that this position ultimately involves a denial of freedom as well. Religiousness A, by making guilt a necessary correlate of finite existence, removes the burden of responsibility from the individual and transfers it on to a larger order of things. Existence is indeed a trial, but it is the sort of trial that can have only one outcome. The religious views grouped under this category share one characteristic with the immanent ethical views: the claim that a criterion of the good is accessible to thought – the good as union with God as a philosophically conceived absolute. They differ from that position in holding that human beings, as finite creatures, are incapable of attaining to this good. The ideal of Religiousness A, the task it sets for the individual, is to overcome those aspects of her being in which finitude consists: not only finite desires and attachment to the world (the task of 'dying to immediacy'), but also existence as a particular individual, and indeed the will itself insofar as it is the particular will of a particular individual. This is the ethical imperative of self-annihilation. This ideal entails, as Kierkegaard points out, that so long as the individual is an individual – so long as she exists – the task is impossible to fulfill. For what is demanded is a strenuous effort to overcome one's individuality, and since individual agency is among those characteristics of finite existence that one is supposed to attempt to overcome, it is clear that such an effort is doomed to failure. The existential pathos of Religiousness A is therefore necessary guilt.

It is possible to approach, if not to attain, the ideal set up by Religiousness A – but not, as it were, by trying. Rather, the suffering that characterizes existence under the imperative of fulfilling an unfulfillable task becomes the basis for a *de facto* transformation of the individual's existence. 'Religiousness A makes existence as strenuous as possible (outside the sphere of the paradoxically-religious); yet it does not base the relation to an eternal happiness on one's existing but has the relation to an eternal happiness as the basis for the transformation of existence' (CUP, p. 574). The significance of individual existence is seen not as action, determining the individual's relation to God, but rather as a suffering, determined by the relation of the finite to the absolute. 'The "how" of the individual's existence is the result of the relation to the eternal, not the converse, and that is why infinitely more comes out than was put in' (CUP, p. 574). Infinitely more comes out than was put

in, because Religiousness A posits a reward for the trial of existence – an eternal happiness – but because the trial cannot be 'passed' it likewise cannot be failed. This eternal happiness is therefore *necessary*. Religiousness A 'is orientated toward the purely human in such a way that it must be assumed that every human being, viewed essentially, participates in this eternal happiness and finally becomes eternally happy' (CUP, p. 581). Nothing is at stake for the individual at the stage of Religiousness A. Because this particular conception of guilt is not a true conception of moral evil either, the second claim above – that we are necessarily guilty – ultimately boils down to the first – that we do not stand under ethical requirements.

Necessary guilt, however, is not sin (CUP, p. 532), and the view that sin is necessary is precisely the view Kierkegaard seeks to avoid in *The Concept of Anxiety*: 'We have nowhere been guilty of the foolishness that holds that man must sin; on the contrary. . . . We have said what we again repeat, that sin presupposes itself, just as freedom presupposes itself, and sin cannot be explained by anything antecedent to it, anymore than can freedom' (CA, p. 112). Sin is always particular; it always has its origin in the individual, and can never be traced back to the sinfulness of the race or the finite condition of human beings (CA, pp. 73–5).

The claim that is made in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety* is not, therefore, that we cannot live up to the demands of the ethical because of some inherent limitation – that we are necessarily guilty. Rather, the point is that *if* the immanent ethical attempts to take account of its own presupposition – that evil is possible – it does so in the only way available, by universalizing it. That is, the immanent-ethical, in trying to take evil into account, becomes the immanent-religious. It is to this transformation that Kierkegaard here refers: 'The first ethics was shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the single individual. Therefore, instead of being able to explain this sinfulness, the first ethics fell into an even greater and ethically more enigmatic difficulty, since the sin of the individual expanded into the sin of the whole race' (CA, p. 20). Once sin is taken into account, it is taken into account as a necessary phenomenon, 'as a presupposition that goes beyond the individual. Then all is lost for ethics, and ethics has helped to bring about the loss of all' (CA, p. 19). The immanent-religious view deals with evil by explaining it. The concept of evil is, however, falsified by an attempt at explanation, for this amounts to a denial that it arises from freedom, a denial which 'perverts ethics' and 'pay[s] man a compliment at the sacrifice of the ethical' precisely by substituting an explainable

occurrence (a 'quantitative determination') for what can only be a free act (CA, p. 43).

The two immanent positions are, so to speak, the optimistic and pessimistic sides of the same coin. When applied to the ethical standpoint in the general sense – with its presupposition of freedom of choice and responsibility – they lead to parallel absurdities. According to the first, one cannot become guilty; according to the second, one cannot become anything *but* guilty. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard finds the standpoint of Religiousness A to be far superior to that of the universal-ethical in a number of respects. However, if one wants to affirm freedom, both clearly present similar problems. Holding either of these views means not taking the ethical in the general sense seriously, not taking freedom seriously, providing an *escape*. Kierkegaard summarizes the distinction between the immanent conceptions and Religiousness B as follows:

If the individual is dialectically turned inward in self-assertion in such a way that the ultimate foundation does not itself become dialectical, since the underlying self is used to surmount and assert itself, then we have the *ethical interpretation*. If the individual is defined as dialectically turned inward in self-annihilation before God, then we have *Religiousness A*. If the individual is paradoxical-dialectical, every remnant of original immanence annihilated, and all connection cut away, and the individual situated at the edge of existence, then we have the *paradoxical-religious*. This paradoxical inwardness is the greatest possible, because *even the most dialectical qualification, if it is still within immanence, has, as it were, a possibility of an escape, of a shifting away, of a withdrawal into the eternal behind it; it is as if everything were not actually at stake*. But the break makes the inwardness the greatest possible. (CUP, p. 572, final emphasis mine)

The 'possibility of an escape' is the possibility of 'a shifting away' of ultimate responsibility, away from the individual and on to something larger – human nature, the order of things. A 'withdrawal into the eternal behind it' is, in some form or another, saying (to return to *Either/Or*, II) 'I am what I am' rather than 'I will become what I will become' (EO, II, p. 178) – where the second 'will' should be taken to mean, 'through an act of will'. The view that the eternal grounds or explains the finite is always ultimately a denial of the freedom of finite individuals, a denial that everything is actually at stake.

IV

The two immanent views do not, Kierkegaard believes, exhaust the possibilities. There is a third alternative: we have a criterion of value, but not one with which we have, so to speak, come equipped – rather, we have a criterion that has been given to us. This is the view that the source of ethical content is *transcendent*. Kierkegaard's claim, I believe, is that in the absence of some transcendent source of value, there is no answer to the question of what one ought to do that does not at the same time deny that one can *either* do it *or* refuse to do it – that is, that does not at least implicitly deny the either/or of freedom of choice.

Philosophical Fragments is an effort to specify a set of necessary conditions for the transcendence of a criterion of value, to explain what such a criterion would look like. It would have to take the form of a revelation from God, the communication of a content to which human beings did not have and could not have had access before the communication itself. The communication would have not a heuristic, but rather a constitutive role – that is, the communication of the criterion would be at the same time its establishment as a criterion. The communication itself would have to be a contingent historical fact, its content likewise contingent. Were either in any sense necessary, one could have access to the criterion without having heard the communication. That is, the criterion would be, after all, an immanent one.

The ethics associated with Religiousness B (the 'second ethics') is a transcendent ethics of this sort. Its claim is that God has been born as a human being, and has in so doing revealed the appropriate way of life (ethics as *imitatio Christi*), making available a criterion that was not available before. Kierkegaard emphasizes that the acceptance of Christianity is the acceptance of a fact, not of a doctrine. Doctrines are subject to critique; they can be more or less rational, can accord more or less well with human nature. The distinguishing feature of Christianity, claims Kierkegaard, is that one cannot assess it according to such immanent criteria. Christianity protects itself from absorption into immanence by means of its absurdity. One either accepts that the incarnation happened, or one does not. There can be no reason for such acceptance.

For although the incarnation purports to be a historical fact, acceptance of this fact is not knowledge of any ordinary sort. The occurrence of an incarnation is unverifiable not only in the strict sense in which any singular historical fact is unverifiable. It is also the unique token of its type; no relevantly similar cases can be used as comparison. Most

importantly, though, as revelation it is objectively invisible. About it one can know only that something has happened, not that what has happened is in fact an instance of revelation. For what it communicates could not in principle be known by any other means, and so it is not subject to any possible verification. The condition of understanding something as a revealed criterion must, Kierkegaard says, be given along with the criterion itself. But this condition provides at most a possibility of understanding, not an undeniable reason for acceptance. Such a communication is the object of belief, of subjective appropriation, not of objective certainty. The possibility of subjective appropriation does not, however, amount to a criterion of truth for the belief appropriated.

Now, Kierkegaard thinks that the problem with immanent views is visible from a general philosophical perspective (see, for example, *CUP*, p. 572) and he thinks that philosophy can have a negative role in paving the way for the sort of belief that becoming a Christian involves. An examination of the situation of existing subjectivity points to the idea that ethical content must have a transcendent source if it has any at all. This is, I believe, what he means when he says that God is 'negatively present' at the extreme of ethical subjectivity (*CUP*, p. 53). And freedom is the particular presupposition of ethical subjectivity that leads one to believe this. This is what he must mean when he says that 'freedom . . . is the wonderful lamp. When a person rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into existence for him' (*CUP*, p. 138).

This last claim cannot, however, be taken to mean that the negative argument amounts to a proof that there is some transcendent source of value, and it certainly does not amount to a proof that Christianity is that source. It is obviously possible to have a firmly incompatibilist position, in both senses, without being a Christian. This, it strikes me, would simply put one in the position of some of Kierkegaard's twentieth-century followers – such a person would be an existentialist according to the generally accepted meaning of the term. Nor does Kierkegaard intend to offer any proof, or indeed any objective evidence at all, for the truth of Christianity.

His account of the negative relation of philosophy to Christian belief relies in an obvious way on Schelling's account of the relation of 'negative' to 'positive' philosophy. Negative philosophy paves the way for a philosophy of revelation by presenting a riddle: in the absence of revealed religion, the ethical standpoint is despair and existence is futile.⁴ But it cannot provide the answer to this riddle itself. Revelation is an answer to the riddle, but it presents itself, if at all, as an undervivable fact. Kierkegaard makes the same distinction, and posits the same

relation. Psychology, the doctrine of subjective spirit, 'tends toward' dogmatics without having the resources to substitute for it (*CA*, p. 23). It does not lead to dogmatics in any deductive way – rather, it tells us that something like revelation would do the trick, if it were only there. That is, one does not reason to the truth of Christianity by means of *modus tollens*. Rather, one despairs of a solution to the riddle posed by the immanent ethical views, and accepting Christianity is one way out of this despair. Philosophy can help one 'seek the leap as a desperate way out, just as Christianity was a desperate way out when it entered the world and will continue to be that for everyone who actually accepts it' (*CUP*, p. 106).

It is a way out, Kierkegaard thinks, because of its fit with the situation of existing subjectivity. It presents a criterion that avoids the dilemma of immanence, one that purports neither to follow directly from the conditions of agency nor to be unattainable (for Christ is a human model). This fit, however, does not entail its truth. Indeed, were its truth demonstrable, it would, *eo ipso*, fail to fit. The way out has to be a desperate one. There could be no mechanism which would pick out Christianity as the one true revealed religion from a set of pretenders to this position. This is why Kierkegaard offers only necessary conditions, not sufficient ones, in *Philosophical Fragments*. The only sufficient condition would be the communication's in fact having come from God – but there is no way to know that this is the case. Grace, in other words, is both objectively and subjectively opaque. To look for a statement of sufficient conditions, however, or to expect to find an argument for the truth of Christianity, would be to miss Kierkegaard's point entirely. For the question he seeks to answer about Christianity is not the question of its truth, but that of its suitability to a situation, the situation of existing subjectivity, whose defining characteristic is freedom.

Now, one might wonder why this particular project is an important, or even a valid one. To this question Kierkegaard has an answer, one from which the argument outlined earlier in sections II–III follows directly. The answer lies in his diagnosis of the underlying cause of the ethical problem of his age, the problem of moral indifference. Kierkegaard does not see this indifference as the sceptical consequence of a failed attempt, on the part of enlightenment thinkers, to provide a rational justification of ethical content, and he certainly does not advocate a return to religion as a (second-best) answer that must be relied upon in the absence of such a justification. Rather, he thinks this attempt has had, in the eyes of his contemporaries, all too much success, with pernicious results. 'The trouble is not that Christianity is not

voiced . . . but that it is voiced in such a way that the majority eventually think it utterly inconsequential' (*SUD*, p. 103). The inclination to rationalize Christianity, to offer 'three good reasons' for being a Christian, both causes and signals lack of enthusiasm (*SUD*, p. 102): 'the question about certainty and definiteness is . . . a subterfuge in order to avoid the strenuousness of action. . . . No, if I, acting, am truly to venture and truly to aspire to the highest good, then there must be uncertainty and, if I may put it this way, I must have room to move' (*CUP*, p. 426). Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the problem of his era is unique in this respect. The problem is not, he claims, scepticism about the truth of Christianity, not the suspicion that religion is false or the religious life irrational. Rather, the problem is the conviction that religion is rational, that it is obvious that one should be – and, as it were, automatically is – a Christian. Speaking from a sort of public health perspective, as he often does, he claims that the major cause of moral indifference is not moral scepticism, but rather moral certainty, is the conviction that every answer to the question, 'What should I do?' must come equipped with a set of undeniable reasons for doing what one should, and thus with a very strong reason for doubting that one could do otherwise.

V

It seems to me that if there is to be an answer to the question of what exactly Kierkegaard thinks is wrong with the two immanent views, this has to be it. I should like, in conclusion, to address three specific objections to the interpretation outlined above.

The first is that a reading like this threatens to saddle Kierkegaard with a simplistic, indeed an outdated and hopelessly metaphysical notion of freedom of choice. The argument in section II might seem to rely on a notion of free choice that any insight into human psychology or the actual phenomenology of action must resist. Things are not so black and white, one might say. No one simply, consciously chooses the evil over the good (or the converse, for that matter) in some moment of suspended deliberation, of absolute freedom from any motivating factors. It might, in fact, seem that insistence on the imputability of evil in this very strong sense must commit Kierkegaard to some version of the indifference notion of freedom – and not only has this notion been, justly, discredited; Kierkegaard himself explicitly denies holding it (*EO*, II, p. 174; *CA*, pp. 49, 112). He makes this denial explicit, I believe, precisely

because of the danger that many of his claims are most intuitively read in this light. The denial has, however, legitimate grounds.

On the one hand, it is based on his rejection of the phenomenology of decision such a conception presupposes. One comment in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* suggests why this should be so: 'When existence gives movement time and I reproduce this, then the leap appears in just the way a leap can appear: it must come or it has been' (*CUP*, p. 342). Kierkegaard seems to think that we do not, as it were, *experience* choice. A decision is a leap; it takes place in a moment, and has no extension in time. Nowhere, and most notably nowhere in *The Concept of Anxiety*, is Kierkegaard willing to say anything in general about the leap itself. But if we can say nothing about the moment of decision, except that it is something that must come or has been, then we also cannot say that it is some state wherein two options, say the 'good' option and the 'evil' option, appear equally choiceworthy. We certainly cannot describe it as some suspension of all inclinations toward one thing or the other, because a suspension of all interest or inclination is precisely a suspension of the ethical attitude altogether – Kierkegaard associates this sense of 'indifference' with 'becoming objective'. Finally, a temporally extended state of deliberation of the sort suggested by the indifference view follows, if it comes about at all, only from a decision to deliberate, and in this case the relevant choice has already been made (see *SUD*, p. 94). From the ethical standpoint, even indecision is the result of a decision.

On the other hand, the claim that evil, if it is to be imputable, must be (at least conceivably) intentional is not, in the first instance, a phenomenological or psychological claim. It is, in the first instance, an *ethical* claim, simply the claim that we are free in the sense required by the ethical standpoint. Now, Kierkegaard does not see this freedom as somehow severed from psychological reality, a metaphysical notion that has little to do with how human beings actually work. He addresses, in *The Concept of Anxiety* and elsewhere, the issue of how human psychology must be in order for something like sin to be possible. But he places a strict limit on the scope of this sort of inquiry: although psychology can clarify the issues of ethics, it cannot *replace* ethics. Psychological clarification stops at a certain point, and Kierkegaard takes scrupulous care always to stop just there: at the point where clarification becomes explanation – that is, at the point where a clarification of the ways in which we tend to act turns into the denial that we act, in any real sense, at all.

This, that it is an ethical claim, gives rise to a second objection, addressed specifically to the premise of negative argument. Kierkegaard operates from the beginning with a commitment to freedom grounded in the idea that we have an ethical task, that we are free for good and evil. Yet he admits – indeed insists – that in the absence of some transcendent source of value, the content of these notions cannot be adequately specified: ‘Absolutely right. And no *human being* can come further than that [that is, the Socratic position]; no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is. . . . That is why Christianity begins in another way: man has to learn what sin is by a revelation from God’ (SUD, p. 95). It seems that he needs, in order to get the argument off the ground, some notion of evil that assumes more than he should be allowed to assume in the absence of a religious presupposition. The negative argument threatens to lead not to the intended conclusion: that a transcendent criterion of value is what is required – but rather to a different conclusion entirely: that in the absence of such a criterion, we cannot take ourselves to be free in the relevant sense to begin with. If this is true, then Christianity looks like the solution to a riddle of its own creation, not a way out of any desperate situation in which a non-Christian could be in any danger of finding himself.

This objection makes sense given one assumption; that we cannot think ourselves free in the absence of some concretely specified moral task that we see ourselves as free *for* – that some specifiable moral law must be the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom. Kierkegaard does not hold this view. For him, the ethical attitude is not, in the first instance, the recognition that one stands under some concretely specified ethical imperative. It is, rather, the mere raising of the question, ‘What am I supposed to do?’ This question arises not out of any particular ethical theory, nor even out of any particular ethical intuition – in fact, the question itself points to the absence of a theory, and suggests the unreliability of mere intuition. It arises, rather, immediately out of the situation of existing subjectivity: ‘Take the individual . . . and place him in existence – then ethics immediately confronts him with its requirement, whether he now deigns to become, and then he becomes – either good or evil’ (CUP, p. 421). The freedom that this standpoint presupposes is, in its first specification, only the most abstractly conceived capacity for choice. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ begin as place holders, as do ‘eternal happiness’ and ‘eternal unhappiness’. The primary issue is not the purported content of these notions, but rather the idea that there be some such disjunction. His claim is not that the content of the notion of evil (*what* counts as wrong) presented by the immanent conceptions is inadequate or false,

but rather that they present no second term of the disjunction at all, indeed deny that there can be such a second term.

He makes this point most explicit in a discussion of the project of *Philosophical Fragments*, claiming that its question, ‘How can something historical be decisive for an eternal happiness?’ could just as well have been posed the opposite way: ‘How can something historical be decisive for an eternal unhappiness?’ (CUP, p. 94). Immanent thinking, he claims, is able to think the one thought only if it denies the other, ‘and yet this one thought and that other . . . they are one and the same. If time and a relation to a historical phenomenon within time can be decisive for an eternal happiness, they are *eo ipso* that for the decision of an eternal unhappiness’ (CUP, pp. 94–5). If there is no second term, then there is no disjunction – and if there is no disjunction, there is nothing that has not already (eternally, as it were) been decided. If what one does, the ‘how’ of one’s existence, cannot be decisive one way or the other, then it cannot be decisive at all.

This reply means, of course, that Kant’s eventual answer to the question of why we should take ourselves to be free (in the incompatibilist sense both presuppose) is not available to Kierkegaard. The latter must provide some other *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, some other reason for taking seriously the question raised in an immediate manner by the situation of existing subjectivity. He does have such an account, although the aim of this chapter has not been to rehearse it. The objection, however, can be countered decisively even without a rehearsal of that account. For the presupposition of the objection has one unfortunate entailment: that if we do not know (already) what the correct criterion of ethics is, then we cannot inquire about it, for we lack, *ipso facto*, the only possible ground for thinking we are free in the sense that is required to make any such inquiry sensible in the first place. If, in the absence of such a criterion, we have no grounds for believing that we are free, and if, in the absence of such grounds, we are not justified in seeing ourselves as standing under moral imperatives to begin with, it follows that it is senseless to ask, ‘What am I supposed to do?’ Either we know the answer already, or we lack the presupposition – freedom – that gives it force. This, we can say in Kierkegaard’s defence, is a good reason not to take the objection very seriously. For ethical inquiry is in fact possible, its results non-trivial, and the claim that such inquiry would be incoherent were we committed to denying freedom of choice is not a particularly radical one.

The final objection is the following. Given the opacity of grace and the resulting lack of any verifiable sufficient condition for one criterion’s

being the true one, it must seem that Kierkegaard is left with a purely voluntarist, indeed properly speaking existentialist, notion of value – or that such a notion of value is the only one he can legitimately claim. If one can (objectively) see revelation nowhere, then one could in principle (subjectively) see it practically anywhere. This at least suggests that where one ‘sees’ it might simply be a matter of where one decides to see it. It suggests, that is, a commitment to moral subjectivism. This position is not only undesirable. It is self-defeating – not only in general philosophical terms, but in Kierkegaard’s own terms as well. For if what is ‘of value’ simply amounts to what I want, what I choose to believe, then we are back to the aesthetic immediacy of *Either/Or*, I.

Kierkegaard is certainly not a religious pluralist, yet he does not consider this to be a difficulty. Here there is but one thing to be said in his defense. Faith, whatever it actually is, does not at any rate purport to be simply a matter of choosing to hold one belief over another, to be merely an arbitrarily chosen fundamental commitment. That in which the Christian has faith is the truth of Christianity – not that he has decided to take it as true, but that it *is* true. This, that it is in fact true, is of course not verifiable. The notion of faith incorporates, essentially, the notion of grace, and indeed the notion of grace as opaque. One cannot oneself know whether what presents itself as a revelation from God does so because of an act of grace on God’s part, or because of an act of madness on one’s own part. If one could know this sort of thing, faith would not be called for. We might think notion of faith is indefensible, but there we would find ourselves in agreement with Kierkegaard himself. For he does not think the notion is a rationally defensible one. He thinks it is a desperate way out of the situation in which we must all, in its absence, find ourselves.⁵

Notes

1. John Silber gives an excellent account of this tension, and of the limitations of Kant’s conception of evil, in ‘The Ethical Significance of Kant’s *Religion*’, printed as part of the editors’ introduction to Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).
2. Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902–1910), pp. 36, 37.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, p. 226.
4. See the 24th lecture of the Berlin version of the introduction to the philoso-

phy of revelation, F. W. J. Schelling, *Schellings Werke*, II/1 (Munich: Beck, 1927), pp. 553–90.

5. For raising these and other objections, and for comments upon an earlier draft of this chapter, I should like to thank Taylor Carman, Manfred Frank, James Giles, Theodore Korzukhin, Charles Larmore, Wolfgang Mann, Frederick Neuhauser, and Wayne Proudfoot.