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SOREN KIERKEGAARD: Or, How is Human Existence Possible?

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Four weeks ago Dr. Polanyi opened these talks by asking the question: "How is society possible?". My topic today is "How is human existence possible?" And this is at the same time the inseparable companion to Dr. Polanyi's question and its complete antithesis.

Kierkegaard was one of the very few during the 19th century who raised this question; and he was practically alone in answering it. This explains why he was forgotten for a long time; if people knew about him at all, it was as a brilliant prose-writer - writing, however, in Danish, a minor tongue few knew - as a bold psychologist of religious experience, or an aesthetic critic. For all through the 19th century the question: how is human existence possible? was not only highly unfashionable; it was apparently senseless and irrelevant. But this explains also why this Danish philosopher is becoming one of the major figures of our time, now, almost ninety years after his death. For no question is more relevant today and more central than Kierkegaard's: how is human existence possible? On our ability to find an answer to it may depend our future.

As I said, the question: how is human existence possible? was an extremely unpopular one in the century that ended with 1914 and the First World War. For this century was dominated by the other question, the one Dr. Polanyi posed: how is society possible? Rousseau asked it, Hegel asked it and the classical economists asked it. Marx answered it one way, and "liberal" protestantism another way. But in whatever form you ask it, it always must lead to an answer which denies that human existence is possible except in society. You may remember Rousseau's answer which Dr. Polanyi related to us: whatever human existence there is, whatever freedom, rights and duties the individual has, whatever meaning there is in individual life, is determined by society according to the society's objective need of survival. The individual in other words is not autonomous. He is determined by society. He is free only in matters that do not matter. He has rights only because society concedes them. He has a will only if he wills what society needs. His life has meaning only insofar as it relates to the social meaning, and as it fulfills itself in fulfilling the objective goal of society. There is, in other words, no human existence, only social existence. There is no individual, there is only the citizen. You may formulate this thesis in terms of Rousseau's "General Will", in terms of Hegel's concept of history as the unfolding of ideas, or in the Marxian theory of the determination of the individual through his objectively given class-situation.

The result will always be the same as far as the question is concerned: how is human existence possible; there is no such existence, there is actually no such question! The one thing that exists are ideas and citizens, not human beings. And the one thing that is possible is the realization of ideas in and through society.

If you start with the question: how is society possible? without asking at the same time also: how is human existence possible? you arrive inevitably at a purely negative concept of individual existence and of freedom: individual freedom is what does not disturb society. It is the sphere of social indifference that society can afford to neglect. Thus freedom becomes something that has no function and no autonomous existence of its own. It becomes a convenience, a matter of political strategy or a demagogue's catch phrase. But it is nothing vital; indeed, there can only be freedom if the sphere in which it is allowed to operate, is not of vital importance.

To define freedom as that which has no function, is, however, to deny the existence of freedom. For nothing survives in society unless it has a function. But the 19th century believed itself far too secure in the possession of freedom to realize this. Prevailing opinion in the 19th century not only failed to see that to deny the relevance of the question: how is human existence possible? is to deny the relevance of human freedom; it actually saw in the question: how is society possible? a gospel of freedom - largely because it is one of social equality. And the breaking of the old fetters of inequality appeared as equivalent to the establishing of freedom. We today have learned that the 19th century was mistaken. Nazism and Communism are an expensive education - a more expensive one perhaps, than we can afford. But at least we are learning that we cannot obtain freedom if we confine ourselves to the question: how is society possible? It may still be true that human existence in freedom is not possible as is asserted not only by Hitler and the Communists, but by all the other believers in the social determination of man such as those who preach applied social psychology, propaganda or administration to be the means of molding and forming the individual. But at least the question: how human existence is possible, can no longer be regarded as an irrelevant one; for those who profess to believe in freedom there is no more relevant question.

I am not trying to say that Kierkegaard was the only thinker during the 19th century who saw the direction in which Rousseau's question was leading the Western world. That would be obvious nonsense. There were the Romanticists who clearly realized what was coming. There was the futile and suicidal revolt of Nietzsche - a Samson whose gigantic power pulled down nothing but himself. There was above all Balzac who analyzed a society in which human existence was no longer possible, and who drew an Inferno more terrible than Dante's in that there is not even a Purgatory above it. But although those raised the question: how is human existence possible, none but Kierkegaard answered it.

## II.

Kierkegaard's answer is a simple one; human existence is possible only in tension - in tension between man's simultaneous life as an individual in the spirit, and as a citizen in society. Kierkegaard expressed the fundamental tension in a good many ways throughout his writings. In and through it he develops his psychology, his aesthetics and his ethics. But the essence of his thought shows most clearly in that formulation which describes the tension as one between man's simultaneous existence in eternity and in time. He took this formulation from St. Augustine; it is the intellectual climax of St. Augustine's Confessions. But Kierkegaard gave to this antithesis a meaning that goes far beyond St. Augustine's speculation in logic.

Existence in time is existence as a citizen in this world. In time we eat and drink and sleep, fight for conquest or for our lives, raise children and societies, succeed or fail. But in time we also die. And in time there is nothing left of us after our death. In time we do not, therefore, exist as individuals. We are only members of a species, links in a chain of generations, cogs in the wheel of time. The species has an autonomous life in time, specific characteristics, an autonomous aim; but the member has no life, no characteristics, no aim outside the species. He exists only in and through the species. The chain has a beginning and an end; but each link only serves to tie the preceding links of the past to the succeeding links of the future. Outside the chain it is just scrap iron. The wheel of time keeps on turning; but the cogs are replaceable and interchangeable. The individual's death does not end the species or end society; but it ends his life in time. In time man has therefore no existence of his own; he exists only as a member of society. Human existence in time is not possible, only society is possible in time.

In eternity, however, in the realm of the spirit, "in the sight of God", to use one of Kierkegaard's favorite terms, it is society which does not exist, which is not possible. In eternity only the individual does exist. In eternity each individual is unique; he alone, all by himself, without neighbors and friends, without wife and children, faces the spirit in himself. In time, in the sphere of society, no man begins at the beginning and ends at the end; each of us receives from those before us the accumulated inheritance of the ages, and carries it for a tiny instant to hand it on to those after us. But in the life of the spirit each man is beginning and end. Nothing his fathers have experienced can be of any help to him. It cannot even be conveyed to him; for the experiences of the spirit can be understood only by those who have undergone them themselves. Thus, in the life of the spirit it is only the individual who has existence. In awful loneliness, in complete, unique singleness he faces himself as if there were nothing in the entire universe but he and the spirit in himself. In eternity only the individual exists. Human existence is thus existence on two levels, existence in tension.

There is no point on which Kierkegaard is more insistent than on that of the antithesis between time and eternity. It is impossible to even approximate eternity by piling up time; more time, even infinitely more time, will still only be time. And it also is impossible to reach time by subdividing eternity; for eternity is inseparable and immeasurable. You might as well try to obtain a pear by piling up apples as to reach eternity by piling up time. It is not, as St. Augustine had said, that time is within eternity, created by eternity, suspended in it. The two are on different planes. They are antithetic and incompatible with each other; yet it is only in simultaneous existence on both planes, in existence in the spirit and in existence in society, that human existence is possible.

It is this answer that constitutes Kierkegaard's essential paradox. To say that human existence is possible only in the tension between existence in eternity and existence in time is simply saying that human existence is only possible if it is impossible. For what existence on the one level requires is forbidden by existence on the other. For instance, existence in society requires that the society's objective need for survival determine the functions and the actions of the citizen; Dr. Polanyi has clearly shown that in this talk four weeks ago. But existence in the spirit is possible only if there is no law and no rule except that of the completely isolated individual unto himself. Because man must exist in society, there can be no freedom except in matters that do not matter. Because man must exist in the spirit, there can be no social rule, no social constraint in matters that do matter. In society man can only exist as a social being; as husband, father, child, neighbor, colleague, fellow-citizen. In the spirit man can only exist a-socially; alone, isolated, completely walled in by his own consciousness; as Kierkegaard quotes from Luke 14:26: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." Mind you, the gospel of Love does not say: love those less than you love me; it says: hate.

Existence in society requires that man accept as real the sphere of social values and beliefs, rewards and punishments. But existence in the spirit, existence "in the sight of God" existence in eternity requires that man regard all social values and beliefs as pure deception, as vanity, as untrue, invalid and unreal. To say that human existence is possible only as existence in time as well as in eternity, is thus to say that it is possible only one crushed between two irreconcilable ethical absolutes. And that means - if it be more than the mockery of cruel gods - that human existence is possible only as existence in tragedy. Human existence to Kierkegaard is existence in fear and trembling; in dread and anxiety, and above all, in despair.



## III.

This seems a very gloomy and pessimistic view of human existence, and one hardly worth having. To the 19th century it appeared as a pathological aberration. But before we dismiss Kierkegaard, let us see where the optimism of the 19th century leads to. It was the very essence of all 19th century creed that eternity can and will be reached in time; that truth can be established in society and through majority decision, that permanence can be obtained through change. This is the substance of the belief in Progress which was the representative belief of the 19th century and its very own contribution to the thinking of humanity. You may take the creed of Progress in its naivest - and therefore its most engaging - form: the confidence that Man automatically and through his very sojourn in time becomes better, more perfect, more closely approaching the divine. You may take the creed in its more sophisticated form: the dialectical schemes of Hegel and Marx in which truth unfolds itself in the synthesis between thesis and antithesis - each synthesis becoming in turn the thesis of a new dialectical integration on a higher and more nearly perfect level. Or you may take the creed in the pseudo-scientific garb of the theory of evolution through natural selection. In each form it has the same substance: a fervent belief that by piling up time we will attain eternity; by piling up matter we will become spirit; by piling up change we will become permanent; by piling up trial and error we will find truth. For Kierkegaard the problem of the final value was one of uncompromising conflict between contradictory qualities. For the 19th century the problem was purely one of quantity.

Where Kierkegaard conceives of the human situation as essentially a tragic one, the 19th century overflowed with optimism. It always saw the millenium just around the corner. Not since the year 1000 when all Europe confidently expected the second coming of the Messiah, has there been a generation which saw itself so close to the fulfillment of time as did the men of the 19th century. Sure, there were impurities in the existing fabric of society; but the Liberal confidently expected them to be burnt away within a generation or, at the most, within a century, by the daily strengthening light of reason. Progress was automatic; and though the forces of darkness and superstition might seem to gain at times, that was pure deception. That it is always darkest just before the dawn is a truly liberal maxim - and one incidentally as false in its literal as in its metaphysical sense. The final apogee of this naive optimism was the book which a famous biologist, Ernst Haeckel wrote just at the turn of the century, and which predicted that all the remaining questions would be finally and decisively answered within a generation by Darwinian biology and Newtonian physics. It is perhaps the best commentary on the fate of the 19th century creed that the book sold by the millions in the generation of our grandfathers - you still find it everywhere in attics and on old bookshelves - while at the same time the very universe of Darwinian biology and Newtonian physics disintegrated almost overnight.

To those whom the naive optimism of Liberalism or Darwinism failed to satisfy Marx offered the more complicated but also infinitely more profound vision of a millenium that had to come precisely because the world was so corrupt and so imperfect. You cannot understand Marx or his unique place in the modern world unless you realize that his is a truly mystical message in which the impossible, the attainment of the permanent perfection of the classless society, is promised precisely because it is impossible. In Marx the 19th century optimism thus admits defeat - only to use defeat as a proof of certain victory.

In this creed of imminent perfection in which every progress in time meant progress toward eternity, permanence and truth, there was no room for tragedy, the conflict of two absolute forces, or of two absolute laws. There was not even room for catastrophe. You can see everywhere in the 19th century tradition how the tragic is exorcised, how catastrophe is suppressed. This shows in the attempt - so very popular these last few years - to explain as cataclysmic a phenomenon as Hitler and Hitlerism in terms of "faulty psychological adjustment"; that is, as something that has nothing to do with the spirit but is exclusively a matter of techniques. Or, in a totally different sphere, compare Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra with Flaubert's Madame Bovary and see how the essentially tragic "eros" becomes pure "sex" - psychology, physiology, even passion, but no longer a tragic, i.e., an unsolvable conflict. Or you might, as one of the triumphs of the attempt to suppress catastrophe, take the more or less official Communist explanation of Nazi-fascism as "just a necessary stage in the inevitable victory of the Proletariat". There you have in purest form the official creed that whatever happens in time must be good, however bad it is. Neither catastrophe nor tragedy can exist.

There has never been a century of Western history so far removed from an awareness of the tragic as that which bequeathed to us two world wars. It has trained all of us to suppress the tragic, to shut our eyes to it, to deny its existence. Not quite 200 years ago - in 1755 to be exact - the death of 15,000 men in the Lisbon earthquake was enough to bring down the structure of traditional Christian belief in Europe. The contemporaries could not make sense of it, they could not reconcile this horror with the concept of an all-merciful God, they could not see any answer to a paradox of catastrophe of such magnitude. Now, we daily learn of slaughter and destruction of vastly greater numbers, of whole peoples' being starved or exterminated, of whole cities' being levelled overnight. And it is far more difficult to explain these man-made catastrophes in terms of our 19th century rationality than it was for the 18th century to explain the earthquake of Lisbon in the terms of the rationality of 18th century Christianity. Yet, I do not think that these contemporary catastrophes have shaken the optimism of those thousands of committees that are dedicated to the belief that permanent peace and prosperity will inevitably issue from this war. Sure, they are aware of the facts, and are duly outraged by them. But they refuse to see them as catastrophes.

Yet, however successful the 19th century was in suppressing the tragic in order to make possible human existence exclusively in time, there is one fact which could not be suppressed, one fact that remains outside of time: death. It is the one fact that cannot be made general but remains unique, the one fact that cannot be socialized but remains individual. The 19th century made every effort to strip death of its individual, unique and qualitative aspect. It made death an incident in vital statistics, measurable quantitatively, predictable according to the actuarial laws of probability. It tried to get around death by organizing away its consequences. This is the meaning of life insurance which promises to take the consequences out of death. Life insurance is perhaps the most representative institution of 19th century metaphysics; for its promise "to spread the risks" shows most clearly the nature of this attempt to make of death an incident in human life, instead of its termination.

It was the 19th century which invented Spiritualism with its attempt to control life after death by mechanical means. Yet death persists. Society might make death taboo, might lay down the rule that it is bad manners to speak of death, might substitute "hygienic" cremation for those horribly public funerals, and might call grave diggers morticians. The learned Professor Haeckel might hint broadly that Darwinian biology is just about to make us live permanently; but he did not make good his promise. And as long as death persists, man remains with one pole of his existence outside of society and outside of time.

As long as death persists, the optimistic concept of life, the belief that eternity can be reached through time, and that the individual can fulfill himself in society can therefore have only one outcome: despair. There must come a point in the life of every man when he suddenly finds himself facing death. And at this point he is all alone; he is all individual. If he lives in an existence which is purely existence in society, he is lost; his existence becomes meaningless. Kierkegaard who first diagnosed the phenomenon and predicted where it would lead to, called it the "despair at not willing to be an individual". Superficially the individual can recover from this encounter with the problem of existence in eternity. He may even forget it for awhile. But he can never regain his confidence in his existence in society; basically he remains in despair.

Society must thus attempt to make it possible for man to die if it wants him to be able to live exclusively in society. There is only one way in which society can do that: by making individual life itself meaningless. If you are nothing but a leaf on the tree of the race, a cell in the body of society, then your death is not really a death; it is only a part of the life of the whole. You can hardly even talk of death; you better call it a process of collective regeneration. But then, of course, your life is not a real life either; it is just a functional process within the life of the whole devoid of any meaning except in terms of the whole.

Thus you can see what Kierkegaard saw clearly a hundred years ago: that the optimism of a creed that proclaims human existence as existence in society, must lead straight to despair, and that the despair leads straight to totalitarianism. And you can also see that the essence of the totalitarian creed is not how to live, but how to die. To make death bearable, individual life has to be made worthless and meaningless. The optimistic creed that starts out by making life in this world mean everything, leads straight to the Nazi glorification of self-immolation as the only act in which man can meaningfully exist. Despair becomes the essence of life itself.

The 19th century thus reached the very point the pagan world had reached in the age of Euripides, or in that of the late Roman Empire. And like antiquity, it tried to find a way out by escaping into the purely ethical, by escaping into virtue as the essence of human existence. Ethical Culture and that brand of liberal Protestantism that sees in Jesus the "Best man ever lived", the Golden Rule and Kant's "Categorical Imperative", the satisfaction of service - these and other formulations of an ethical concept of life became as familiar in the 19th century as most of them had been in antiquity. And they failed to provide a basis for human existence as much as they had failed two thousand years ago. In its noblest adherents the ethical concept leads to a stoic resignation which gives courage and steadfastness but does not give meaning either to life or to death. And its futility is shown by its reliance upon suicide as the ultimate remedy though to the stoic death is the end of everything and of all existence. Kierkegaard rightly considered this position to be one of even greater despair than the optimistic one; he calls it "the despair at willing to be an individual".

In most cases, however, the ethical position does not lead to anything as noble and as consistent as the Stoic philosophy. Normally it is nothing but sugar-coating on the pill of totalitarianism. This at least is my feeling about the position of the young Marx as related to us so beautifully by Mr. Mundershausen, a position in which the pious hope that man will find individual fulfillment in the ethical goal of making his neighbor happy, is regarded as sufficient to offset the reality of totalitarianism. Or the ethical position becomes pure sentimentalism - the position of those who believe that evil can be abolished, harmony be established by the spreading of sweetness, light and good will.

And in all cases the ethical position is bound to degenerate into pure relativism. For if virtue is to be found in man, everything that is accepted by man must be virtue. Thus a position that starts out - as did Rousseau and Kant 175 years ago - to establish man-made ethical absolutes must end in John Dewey and in the complete denial of absolutes and, with it, the complete denial of the possibility of an ethical position. This way there is no escape from despair.



## IV.

Is it then our conclusion that human existence cannot but be existence in tragedy and despair? If so, then the sages of the East are right who see in the destruction of the self, in the submersion of man into the Nirvana, the nothing-ness, the only answer.

Nothing could be further from Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard has an answer. Human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy - it is possible as existence in faith. The opposite of Sin - to use the traditional term for existence purely in society - is not virtue; it is faith.

Faith is the belief that in God the impossible is possible, that in Him time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful. In my favorite among Kierkegaard's books, a little volume called "Fear and Trembling", Kierkegaard raises the question: What is it that distinguishes Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, from ordinary murder? If the distinction would be that Abraham never intended to go through with the sacrifice, but intended all the time only to make a show of his obedience to God, then Abraham indeed would not have been a murderer, but he would have been something more despicable: a fraud and a cheat. If he had not loved Isaac but had been indifferent, he would have been willing to be a murderer. But Abraham was a holy man; and God's command was for him an absolute command to be executed without reservation. And we are told that he loved Isaac more than himself. But Abraham had faith. He believed that in God the impossible would become possible; that he could execute God's order and yet retain Isaac. If you looked into this little volume on "Fear and Trembling" you may have seen from the introduction of the translator that it deals symbolically with Kierkegaard's innermost secret, his great and tragic love story, and that he talks of himself when he talks of Abraham, and of his love when he talks of Isaac - a love he had slaughtered although he loved it more than he loved himself. But this meaning as a symbolic autobiography is only incidental. The true, the universal meaning is that human existence is possible, only possible, in faith. In faith the individual becomes the universal, ceases to be isolated, becomes meaningful and absolute; hence in faith there is a true ethic. And in faith existence in society becomes meaningful too as existence in true charity.

This faith is not what today so often is called a "mystical experience" - something that can apparently be induced by the proper breathing exercises, by fasting, by narcotic drugs or by prolonged exposure to Bach with closed eyes and closed ears. It is something that can be attained only through despair, through tragedy, through long, painful and ceaseless struggle. It is not irrational sentimental, emotional or spontaneous. It comes as the result of serious thinking and learning, of rigid discipline, of complete sobriety, of humbleness and of subordination of the self to a higher, an absolute will. It is something few can attain; but all can - and should - search for it.

This is as far as I can go. If you want to go further, if you want to know about the nature of religious experience, about the way to it, about faith itself, you have to read Kierkegaard. Even so you may say that I have tried to lead you further than I know the road myself. You may reproach me for attempting to force into a rigid philosophical system the thought of a man as bitterly opposed to systems as was Kierkegaard. You may reproach me for trying to make Kierkegaard accept society as real and meaningful whereas he actually repudiated it. You may even say that I have failed in relating faith to existence in society. All those complaints would be justified, but I would not be very much disturbed by them - at least not as far as the purpose of this talk is concerned. For all I wanted to show you is the possibility of human existence in faith and the need for it. Today in the totalitarian eras we have a philosophy which enables men to die. Do not underestimate the strength of such a philosophy. For in a time of great sorrow and catastrophe such as we have to live through, it is a great thing to be able to die. But it is not enough. Kierkegaard too enables men to die; but his faith also enables them to live.