

# **An Enquiry into Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith**

**A Master's Thesis in Philosophy**

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**May 2008**

**A brief abstract:**

This Master's Thesis aims at presenting a comprehensive picture of Kierkegaard's concept of faith. It particularly stresses the fact that Kierkegaard argues for faith on an existential basis, and therefore tries to show how faith must not simply be understood as an absolute belief in God, but as a state that has a specific existential function. It argues, furthermore, that this function is to place man in a state of emotional autonomy, which it understands as a state wherein the individual is immune to being adversely affected emotionally by exterior circumstances – it is immune to angst and despair.

**Thanks to them whom thanks are due:**

I would like to thank Professor Kjell Eyvind Johansen for his insightful comments and great patience, I would like to thank Cathrine Felix for her insightful comments and great patience, and I would like to thank my one year old son for his lack of both.

## The roses of the gardens of Adonis

The roses of the gardens of Adonis  
Are what I love, Lydia, those flitting roses  
That in the day when they are born,  
Within that day, die.

The light's for them eternal, because they  
Are born with the sun born already, and sink  
Before Apollo may yet leave  
The visible course he has.

Like them, let us make of our lives one day, -  
Voluntarily, Lydia, unknowing  
That there is night before and after  
The little that we last.

- Ricardo Reis (Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems*, 95)

”Medens nu den rene Tænken uden videre hæver al  
Bevægelse, eller meningsløst faaer den ind med i  
Logiken, er Vanskeligheden for den Existerende, at give  
Existenten den Continueerlighed, uden hvilken Alt blot  
forsvinder.”

- Søren Kierkegaard (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig  
Efterskrift I*, 301)

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# 1 - General introduction

## 1.1 - Main thesis

This Master's Thesis grew out of an attempt to understand Søren Kierkegaard's *Sygdommen til Døden*. More specifically, it grew out of an attempt to understand what it means in that book *not* to be in despair. This state appeared namely to me when I first read it as the natural summit, or culmination, of the thoughts expressed in it. It was the blind spot about which the work as a whole revolved, so to speak. For though it manifestly and explicitly was (and is) an analysis of despair, this analysis is given, as Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus) says in the preface, in order to be edifying.<sup>1</sup> It is given, therefore, in order for it to be left behind, in order for the reader to climb up upon it, and reach the antithesis of the despair that it itself describes. What I am saying, is that upon reading *Sygdommen til Døden* I became convinced that the intention behind the text, was not principally to present a theoretical understanding of despair (which though represents the main bulk, if not the whole bulk, of the text), but to move the reader out of that state of despair that it described, and into this state's natural negation (its natural and complementary opposite). Its purpose was hence not principally to enlighten - to enable the reader to view the phenomenon of despair from a view-point of disinterest, and gain a theoretical understanding of it, but to induce the reader into a form of Freudian catharsis: To make him gain a novel understanding of himself and his subjective nature, and therefrom to catapult him into "a higher level of existence".

Naturally, it was this next level that fascinated me. What was it? I understood it vaguely of course, by means of the contrast that the book set before me. It was the state of *not* being in despair - and despair, roughly speaking, the state of not being what one would like to be. Ergo, the ideal state was the state of being satisfied with oneself (or, more correctly, not dissatisfied), in some manner or other. But seeing Kierkegaard's careful and erudite analysis of the various states of despair, of its workings and causes, I found myself wanting a similar analysis of its complementary

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 2nd.

state. But about this, little, or nearly nothing, was straightforwardly revealed.

This experience was of course disappointing and unsatisfactory. But the frustration it produced grew into a fixation and this fixation led me to immerse myself into a large part of Kierkegaard's textual corpus in search of a positive definition, or description, of this ideal state. Through this wider reading I came to understand that what I sought actually was a kind of half-invisible nexus in Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*. For what always seems to preoccupy Kierkegaard on a general level throughout his numerous writings, whether directly, or indirectly, is a process of gradual psychological transformation, wherein an individual psyche goes from an unwholesome original state and to an ideal and healthy one (goes from a state of despair or angst, to one of bliss). Many of his works can explicitly be seen to map out the various phases, or stages, that a psyche can find itself to be in, in-between this first state and the last. But as with *Sydommen til Døden*, Kierkegaard does not produce these analyses for their own benefit, or for the benefit of disinterested contemplation, and it is, in a manner of speaking, wrong to approach them as if they were written purely as such theoretical pieces. They are instead and always, as are the works of Kierkegaard near contemporary Karl Marx, an admixture of theoretical insight and polemical intention. Kierkegaard did not write solely to furnish us with truths and points of view. He sought to save us, to propel us forward by means of his words into that ideal state that he himself so softly spoke about. Which is the same as what Marx did. But, as regards the nature of the ideal these two authors are engaged with, they are very different indeed. Marx sought the liberation of the proletariat through a negation of capitalist society, while Kierkegaard, he sought to liberate the individual from his worldly concerns, and to deliver him into a personal relation to God. But more than that - and here comes the crux of the matter - for in as much as I became aware of the practical intent behind Kierkegaard's writings, I was lead, naturally enough, to focus upon the practical consequence of the attainment of his ideal: Which is that one develops, what I term, *emotional autonomy*. And by this I mean a state in which one is immune to being adversely affected emotionally by exterior circumstances, such as the behaviour of other people. Alternatively, one could also define it by use of Kierkegaard's concept of despair, as so: Emotional autonomy is a state of not being in despair. Which means,

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edition (Valby: DSL/Borgen, 2003), 165.

according to Kierkegaard's understanding of despair, that it is that state of not being able to experience despair - at all. It transcends (or negates) the very possibility of despair: "...[T]hi kun Den er frelst fra Fortvivlelse, som er *evig* frelst fra Fortvivlelse."<sup>2</sup>

This, then, is the main thesis I propose to defend: Kierkegaard's ideal state is a state of emotional autonomy.

Now, I can easily imagine to myself that this characterization of Kierkegaard's ideal state, as a state of emotional autonomy, may strike the reader already acquainted with Kierkegaard as oddly missing the point. The reason for this, I believe, will be that emotional autonomy manifestly is not what forms the explicit centre of Kierkegaard's sparse discussions of this state. Now, for one, I am not claiming that it is. I fully recognize that Kierkegaard's own explicit notion of his ideal state is as a religious state. A religious state defined as a consciously, subjective and irrational (or absurd) belief in God. My point is simply that this is not all there is to this state. For had that been the case, the religious state could not have been defined as it is - as the state of not being despair. (For it should be quite obvious that an absolute belief alone - which simply is a state of absolute conviction, could not relieve one permanently of despair.) Nor could Kierkegaard have argued for the religious sphere as he does – for example in *Begrebet Angest, Frygt og Bæven*, and *Sygdommen til Døden*, where his argument is, quintessentially, that you ought to believe, as faith relieves you of the possibility of emotional distress - angst, despair.<sup>3</sup> What I am saying, then, is that emotional autonomy has to be a component of Kierkegaard's concept of faith, if faith is to do what Kierkegaard claims that it does. It is as simple as that.

What I propose to do, in order to give due credence to both of the elements of

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<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger: Nogle christelige Overveielser i Talers Form*, 2nd edition (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 2003), 47.

<sup>3</sup> For an easy verification of this point, I refer you to the two following key quotes: "Idet da Individet ved Angesten dannes til Troen, da vil Angesten netop udrydde, hvad den selv frembringer." Søren Kierkegaard, *Begrebet Angest* (DSL/Borgen, 1998), 145. And: "Derimod er denne Modsætning gjort gjældende i hele dette Skrift, der strax i første Afsnit A, A opstillede Formelen for den Tilstand, hvori der slet ingen Fortvivlelse er: i at forholde sig til sig selv og i at ville være sig selv grunder Selvet gjennemsigtigt i den Magt, som satte det. Hvilken Formel igjen, hvorom oftere er mindet, er Definitionen paa Tro." Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden in Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 279. As regards *Frygt og Bæven*, the point will be treated thoroughly in Chapter 3.



Kierkegaard's concept of faith that I have mentioned, is to understand faith, in Kierkegaard's sense, as involving two levels that stand interrelated to each other. The first level being constituted by an absolute belief in God (which may be said to be the more obvious and most central feature of Kierkegaard's concept), the second level of a utilization of this absolute belief to transcend the possibility of despair. And the whole of these two levels is what I will ultimately speak of as "faith" in Kierkegaard's sense, as you cannot really have the one without the other. The first level is what makes possible the second, and the second is what motivates one to attain the first (this will be explained more thoroughly in Section 2.4).

My overall intention in this essay is, therefore, to attempt to show the importance that emotional autonomy plays in Kierkegaard's concept of faith, and to explain how this state of emotional autonomy relates to the absolute belief in God. I will attempt to do this through creating a sort of walkthrough that portrays each step that it is necessary to traverse in order to reach faith proper - which is the state of having an absolute belief in God and utilizing this to avoid despair. I will go about this through two main discussions, one that has as its goal to explain the first level in the concept of faith (Chapter 2), and one that explains the second level (Chapter 3).

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Before I begin, I would like, though, to make some technical remarks about the contents of this enquiry:

When discussing Christianity, I am always referring to Kierkegaard's interpretation of it. I never attempt to approach it in a sense that diverges from this.

As regards the topic of Kierkegaard as a pseudonymous author, I am not going to place too much importance on this fact. Consequently, I will not name which pseudonym is saying what in every quote I present. Mostly, I will simply name Kierkegaard. The reason for this has to do with the nature of my enquiry. I am here after "the big picture" of Kierkegaard's philosophical project, which means that my first interest is not towards the differences between the various pseudonyms, but in what manner they are expressions of the same whole. My conviction is that the

pseudonyms represent, in the form of fictional characters, the various psychological stages that Kierkegaard imagines there to exist in-between man's natural and unwholesome original condition, and the ideal religious state. Therefore, I am not denying that there exists contexts in which it is important to remember whom is saying what (and if this becomes important in my discussion, I will of course bring attention to the fact), but mostly, as my discussion relates to the last stage of the psychological process, the summit of Kierkegaard's philosophical vision – which is the same for all the pseudonyms, as they represent stages of the same process, steps leading up to the same view – I feel it unnecessary to draw attention to which pseudonym is saying what. It is more important to me, and to my case, to bring attention to the fact that though Kierkegaard is a pseudonymous author – it is nonetheless Kierkegaard himself that has created every pseudonym. (In either case, familiarity with the original texts will easily enough disclose to the interested reader which pseudonym is responsible for which quote.)

As a last point I would like to bring to your attention that in quoting every emphasis that appears is Kierkegaard's, unless otherwise noted.

## 2 - The first level of faith; an absolute belief in God

### 2.1 - Introduction

In this chapter, we are going to investigate faith in as much as it is an absolute belief in God. And by that I mean we are going to try to understand how one acquires such a belief - as this is manifestly not easily done. The treatment will not take into consideration everything that Kierkegaard has written about this, but will rely instead on three of the central pieces: *Frygt og Bæven*, *Sygdommen til Døden*, and first and foremostly *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*. It will, furthermore, be an attempt to present the rough main idea of the matter. It will not go into every conceivable detail.

In the three works mentioned, Kierkegaard gives and formulates three seemingly different definitions of faith. And let us begin by taking a brief look at these, as a general point of departure for our general discussion: In *Frygt og Bæven*, Kierkegaard defines faith as an individual's individual and absolute relation to an Absolute. In *Sygdommen til Døden*, it is seen as the state of not being in despair. And in *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, it is seen as the state of consciously having chosen to believe in something objectively paradoxical.<sup>4</sup>

These three definitions, though they may appear to be unrelated, are not contrasting or contesting definitions. They are merely three characterizations of faith that each emphasizes a different feature, or trait, of faith's nature. And, furthermore, no matter which of the three we had chosen to investigate more properly, it would have been the case that the central feature of faith would have been the same. That it is a belief in God that is absolute – and irrational (inherently subjective).

This state of affairs is not coincidental. As there is in Kierkegaard's concept of faith a

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<sup>4</sup> References and quotes confirming these definitions will be given further below in the text, as the definitions are further explained.

necessary connection between irrationality and absoluteness. Not generally speaking, of course. But in relation to God as an Absolute for man, and man's absolute belief in God. This is something I will return to quite often and from several different angles throughout this essay, as it is maybe the most central feature of Kierkegaard's doctrine.

But, before we go begin to go into that, faith, in its simplest sense, is, of course, nothing but a belief in the truth of God and Christianity. So, why, should one ask oneself, does Kierkegaard give such an apparently *unintuitive* definitions of it?

Though I raise this question, I will not give the answer to it directly, as to understand the answer presupposes that one is acquainted with Kierkegaard's views on human nature, with his views on psychology and epistemology, and with his thoughts about what role Christianity ought to play in the lives of men. My intention is instead to treat this question indirectly as I proceed with my enquiry into the nature of faith in this part of the essay, and it will, hopefully, become clearer as to why he gives the mentioned definitions that he does at the end of it.

On the other hand though, it is important to understand right from the beginning that Kierkegaard's doctrine of faith, however one formulates it, is developed as a response to the age-old question of whether God exists, or not - of whether Christianity is true, or not? For it is this question: "How do I become a Christian?" that Kierkegaard himself takes as the defining question in regard to his thought.<sup>5</sup> Now, the answer he gives, which is what we are interested in here, is an ingenious doctrine that emphasizes the importance of the fact that the question of God's existence cannot, rationally, be answered, and that through utilizing a Hegelian mechanism – the principle of negation – shows how this negative fact can be made into a springboard by which one is able to actually acquire an absolute belief in the existence of God – given that one is aware of the nature of one's own epistemic and existential situation.

In essence: One acquires faith, according to Kierkegaard, not through a positive recognition of a fact, but by negating a state of absolute doubt.

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<sup>5</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Synspunktet for Min Forfatter-Virksomhed* in *Samlede Værker Bind 18*, by Søren

Is this paradoxical? That conviction can grow out of a manifest state of disbelief? Yes, in a sense, I believe it is. But I do not believe that it is harmful kind of paradoxicality. And I suggest that we abstain from judging it too harshly until we have explored the whole of the doctrine a little more closely. What I have stated in the paragraphs above, I have formulated so as to be strictly to the point, and, followingly, it presupposes a great deal of knowledge of Kierkegaard to be understood correctly, and judged fairly.

## **2.2 - Concerning the three definitions of faith, and the general nature of despair**

Let us therefore begin our investigation: What is faith?

According to the third and last definition presented in Section 2.1, it is the state of having consciously chosen to believe in something objectively paradoxical. In Kierkegaard's original wording, or one of the wordings that is, it is formulated as follows: "Naar Socrates troede, at Gud er til, da fastholdt han den objektive Uvished med Inderlighedens hele Lidenskab, og i denne Modsigelse, i denne Risiko er netop Troen. Nu er det anderledes, istedetfor den objektive Uvished, er her Visheden om at det objektivt seet er det Absurde, og dette Absurde fastholdt i Inderlighedens Lidenskab er Troen."<sup>6</sup>

What is meant in this quote by the phrase "dette Absurde fastholdt i Inderlighedens Lidenskab er Troen" is best seen if we place the phrase in relation to one of Kierkegaard's other definitions of faith that is also given in *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*: "Uden Risiko ingen Tro. Tro er netop Modsigelsen mellem Inderlighedens uendelige Lidenskab og den objektive Uvished. Kan jeg objektivt gribe Gud, saa troer jeg ikke, men netop fordi jeg ikke kan det, derfor maa jeg troe; og vil bevare mig i Troen, maa jeg bestandig passe paa, at jeg fastholder den objektive Uvished, at jeg i

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Kierkegaard (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1964), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, udgivet med indledning og kommentar af Niels Thulstrup, (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1962), 196.

den objektive Uvished er "paa de 70.000 Favne Vand", og dog troer."<sup>7</sup>

The idea that Kierkegaard is presenting is, therefore, as I have already indicated, that faith is a form of belief that is characterized by its own absurdity. One believes in God, in the sense that one has faith in him, precisely because one cannot *know* God. Because one cannot comprehend and rationally recognize him - this meaning that his presence, or absence, cannot be verified by our limited empirical means. Therefore, one *has* to have *faith* in him instead.<sup>8</sup> And this "has" points to an elementary feature of Kierkegaard's psychology and anthropology, namely that he identifies a basic need for an Absolute in man. (This will be treated later on in Section 2.5.)

Based on these considerations – which we take at face value, at this point – we can see that the human condition can be described, according to Kierkegaard, as characterized by an essential impotence - it needs something that it, in a plain sense, cannot have. It needs an Absolute, God, but it cannot have it using its own natural epistemic resources.

Faith is the answer to this dilemma. For it places, to use the first definition given in Section 2.1 (the one gathered from *Frygt og Bæven*), the individual in an absolute relation to the Absolute. But it does this by going beyond the natural capabilities of man. By venturing in upon a risk. In essence, what happens here is that the subject understands the limitations inherent in his own epistemic capacities, and guided by this knowledge, he chances to leap beyond them. He chooses to believe in God.

This wholly subjective and free choice is what lands him in a relation to an Absolute. And when I say that it "lands him" this does not mean that he actually comes into contact with an Absolute - objectively speaking. No, what happens is that the state of belief that he creates through his act of choosing gains a form of absoluteness by

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<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 190.

<sup>8</sup> There is a natural difference of meaning between "belief" and "faith" that I play upon here (and that Kierkegaard plays upon all the time). This can be seen through the phrase "you ought to have faith", which says that though *you cannot know*, you ought not fear the worst, you ought instead to believe that it is going to turn out for the best. Hence, you ought to believe in something more than you are rationally entitled to. The word "faith", therefore - in one of its meanings - naturally points towards the state of believing in something you rationally ought not believe in (in the sense that you have no rational reasons for it).

virtue of being an autonomous act on behalf of the subject. In virtue of the choice, the belief becomes absolute for him, and the content of the belief becomes followingly an Absolute - *for him*. The point is that the absoluteness does not stem from a source exterior to the subject itself.

Let me expound a little: A normal belief is what we can, using Kantian terminology in a broadened sense, call *heteronomous*. For a normal belief is informed by, and hence, dependent upon, an objective reason to be what it is. It is a response to a fact. And this causes it to be a conditional state of conviction. For had the fact in question not been the case, the belief would not be the belief that it is. Furthermore, if the fact were to change, if new information were to surface that throws a new light upon it and its importance, then the belief would also have to change.

In this manner, a normal state of conviction and belief is dependent upon the grounds upon which it is made, and it is bound to fluctuate with the fluctuation of these grounds. Furthermore, the only manner in which to reach an absolute belief in this sense, is if one would find an absolute fact. One that is guaranteed never to fluctuate. But in relation to God, this is impossible according to Kierkegaard.

In contradistinction to the normal belief that is created through a positive recognition of a fact, faith is not in possession of such dependence. It is a belief created by the subject itself, and hence immune to rational corrections because it is created as something consciously irrational. Something to which rationality does not apply, and it is in this sense that it is absolute. Not because it cannot possibly be wrong, but because rational considerations do not count.

This situation does not make it absolutely independent upon anything whatever, for by being the sole work of the subject itself, it followingly becomes dependent precisely upon the subject. And the stability of the belief becomes a function of the stability of the subject's commitment to it. Therefore, as Kierkegaard states, what is presupposed in order to acquire true faith is "den uendelige personlige i Lidenskab Interessereth"<sup>9</sup>. For in order for the belief to become absolute, the commitment to

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<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 20.

the belief has to be absolute, and therefore fuelled by an absolute need. It must arise out of something that is truly of infinite importance to the individual, so that it is not something in which the individual will waver.

This brings us in relation to the third and last definition mentioned in Section 2.1 - that faith is the state of not being in despair. For the need that I spoke about at the end of the last paragraph, is precisely the need to relieve oneself of one's despair. And this need is an infinite need in so far as the subject in question is concerned, because the need springs out of the very core of the subject's being. That is not to say that a subject is, so to speak, hard-wired to be in despair, and that despair is a plain effect of his constitution. Kierkegaard takes great pains to emphasize this fact, as he says: "Fortvivelse er Misforholdet i en Syntheses Forhold, som forholder sig til sig selv. Men Synthesen er ikke Misforholdet, den er blot Muligheden, eller, i Synthesen ligger Muligheden af Misforholdet. *Var Synthesen Misforholdet, saa var Fortvivelse slet ikke til, saa vilde Fortvivelse være Noget, der laae i Menneskenaturen som saadan, det er, saa var det ikke Fortvivelse; den vilde være Noget, der hændte Mennesket, Noget han leed, som en Sygdom, i hvilken Mennesket falder, eller som Døden, der er Alles Lod. Nei, det at fortvivle ligger i Mennesket selv; men var han ikke Synthese, kunde han slet ikke fortvivle, og var Synthesen ikke oprindeligt fra Guds Haand i det rette Forhold, kunde han heller ikke fortvivle.*"<sup>10</sup>

Let me explain a little: In this quote, it is presupposed that man is seen as a synthesis of the infinite and finite, alternatively, the contingent and the necessary, or the eternal and the temporal. These three are equivalent in rough respects. And that he is such a synthesis, or relation, that inherently *relates* to itself. Man is therefore, in essence, a relation in-between two opposites that relates to itself. And this self-relation on part of the relation is what Kierkegaard defines as man's *self* - man's personal and private relation to who and what he himself is.<sup>11</sup> This basic self-relation is furthermore not a relation in the sense of interior awareness, or interior perception, of oneself. But in the sense of possessing an opinion, or judgement of oneself. What it testifies to, is that man, basically, is a being that has a conscience. A being that is multilayered in the

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<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden in Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 175. My emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden in Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*,



sense that it is an opinionated presence to itself as it also is an opinionated presence to the world at large.

Now it is here, in the relation of this self-reflexivity, that we find despair. And necessarily so, though not "necessarily" in the sense of a natural law, but in the sense of a sociological, or psychological law. A relation of cause and effect that belongs to the workings of the psyche as such, and does not in any way incriminate on the psyche's autonomy over itself, as it describes its very nature, and the way in which it functions. Despair is thus bound to develop, not because of any mechanical regularity in man's constitution (like death is an example of) but because of how the psyche itself is structured: Because man is inherently in the dual position of simultaneously being both the judge of himself and the accused that is judged. He is a standard unto himself. And thereby, when he is called upon to function in this regard, which he inevitably will be, given the nature of human existence, then he will be in the position that he deviates from what he thinks he ought to be. And this is despair. It is the situation of not wanting to be who one is, or, alternatively, of wanting to be someone other than one is. To not be at peace with oneself.

The point of this short and partial exposition on the nature of despair,<sup>12</sup> is so that we have it clear before us how Kierkegaard conceives of despair as being something infinite, or we can say, using more modern terms, *constant*, in regard to an individual. Despair represents a natural and inevitable psychological state. (Beware that I use "natural" here in the sense explained above.)

Faith is the contrast of this state. It is the subjective choice of believing fully in God, made with the interest in mind to escape the state of despair that is man's natural state. As to precisely how a belief in God might relieve man of despair that will be the subject of Chapter 3. Here, we will satisfy ourselves by stating that this is the case.

Let me now introduce, as a bridge to the next section, a new aspect of faith. For though faith is the negation of despair - the state of *not* being in despair - this is not to

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173 - 174.

<sup>12</sup> With a view to simplification I have consciously left out some points that would be relevant to a thorough and complete understanding of Kierkegaard's theory of despair.

imply that the state of faith is wholly without its own share of emotional agony. By attaining it, one namely locks oneself into a continually repeated struggle of doubt and conviction. But it is a struggle that frees one from despair, and is of a different nature than it, by being wholly under the control of the subject itself. Despair, in contrast, is not something one has control over in the same sense. It is, as Kierkegaard describes it, a sickness in the self - "Sygdommen til Døden". It is, therefore, something alien to the subject. Or rather, to formulate it more thoroughly, by being the alienation of the self by itself (the state of not being what one wants to be), despair constitutes a divide in the self, and it is this divide, this fragmentation of the self into one part against the other, that is the alien factor. The self is not whole. It is cracked, and this crack is an intrusion into the self of something that does not, ideally, belong there.

With a view to this, we can see that despair also meaningfully can be described as a kind of struggle, but, if so, it would not be of the same kind as the religious one. It would be of a kind that take place *in* the self, with the self as a form of helpless witness to its own agonies. As I have said, it is a struggle of the self against itself, in which one level of the self is attacking and condemning another level for not being what the first level wants it to be. By contrast, the religious struggle is not something that takes place in the self in the same manner. That is not to say that it is not *in* the self in a broadened sense, for it is manifestly an event that takes place in the interior of a person, but the religious struggle is not one of the self against itself. And it is in virtue of this that it does not take place *in* the self in the manner that despair does. The religious struggle is rather a struggle that helps constitute the self as an unbroken whole. Through this struggle, which is a continuous struggle, the self is made into something definite and free of internal contradictions.

Now, in order to move ahead, and to better understand the foregoing, we have to take a closer look on the nature of the religious struggle, and simultaneously, in how it relates to faith as an absolute. More importantly, we have to answer an obvious question that at this point presents itself, namely: How does the struggle of doubt and conviction that I mention as a necessary factor in the religious state, relate to the other fact that I have mentioned, that faith is a state immune to rational corrections?

The problem that underlies this last question is that if faith is immune to rational

corrections, as I have said it is, how can (rational) doubt be an essential factor in its production?

### **2.3 - The first step towards faith**

The answer to this question lies, as a matter of course, in the genesis of faith - in how the subject comes to gain it. In reviewing this process we will come to see two things that are of especial importance: Firstly that the religious state is not something that is gained in one stroke, and then put aside in order to function latently. It is rather something that must be continually upheld and kept mentally in focus. So that if we were to liken faith with a flame, it would not be the case that it burned on perpetually after we had kindled it, it would instead, like any other flame, demand continual maintenance. Meaning in this context: a constant passion and commitment on behalf of the subject. Faith is not something a subject can passively rest in. As it depends upon the subject's own commitment to it in order to be kept in place. Faith is nourished forth from within the subject, and in order to keep it in place, it must be continually nourished.

This need for a continual repetition of the commitment to God, which my metaphor of nourishment represents, can be said to be the *form* of the religious struggle. It's *content* being the opposition between doubt and conviction. And this form of the struggle is a factor that is directly connected to the nature of existence as something that is in continual becoming. Which is the prime feature of existence as such to Kierkegaard. What is meant by it is nothing more than the obvious fact that man is forced to live, when he lives as we do, amidst changing and unstable circumstances. And that, as a consequence of this, his interior mental life is forced to mirror the instability of his surroundings. This in the sense that it is forced to continually respond to something new and something different as the world around it continually becomes new and different. Thus man himself as he appears to himself is locked in a continual process of change and development. For throughout his life, his priorities and his beliefs will tend to change. They will evolve as new factors and new "truths" enter into one's mind in the course of one's accumulation of experience. What was

important to one, and true for one, in one's childhood, was not the same as in one's adolescence, and it will not be the same as when one has grown old. One will change. And if faith is to be absolute, infinite and unconditional, it has to stand against this tendency.

Now, the second thing about faith of especial importance, regards the content of the struggle. This being the opposition mentioned between doubt and the state of faith itself - absolute conviction. For this is not a struggle of the one *against* the other. The struggle is actually constituted by the difficulty of moving *from* the one and *to* other. So when I speak of "a struggle", I am not intending it in the sense of a competition between two comparable forces over which is the strongest (or most rational). The struggle is to overcome the limits of the first state, and reach the next, and this in a purely one-way motion. But it is a one-way motion that must be repeated and repeated, because the religious state, as I said above, is one that must continually be confirmed.

The religious struggle seen in its entirety is therefore two-faced: On the one hand, it is constituted as a continuous and unending process, a battle that must be fought at each and every moment, which in itself, of course, is quite a struggle. And on the other hand, the struggle itself, the *actual* struggle in regard to the religious, is that one has to at each and every moment overcome the mentioned state of doubt by negating it.

Now, in order to be able to accomplish this negation, or as has become Kierkegaard's most famous term for it: "the leap of faith", one has first to place oneself in what I will call: the correct jumping position. For one cannot go through with it wholly spontaneously and after one's own immediate accord from whatever position one is in, so to speak. One cannot just open one's front door and bellow out towards the world: "I believe!" For one thing, if you truly have come to believe, that is, if you truly have acquired an absolute belief in God, it would not matter for you what the world believes that you believe. And the act of proclaiming it would not only be fruitless, but that one has the need to proclaim it thus shows that the belief in question is not at all that absolute. As Kierkegaard states in a very telling passage from *Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed*: "Og saaledes ogsaa med *den* Religieuse, der, om galt skulde være, ikke kunde utholde at aneeses for den Eneste, som ikke var religieus. Thi at

kunne udholde dette er just i Reflexionen den nøiagtigste Bestemmelse af væsentlig Religiositet."<sup>13</sup> As the truly religious person has to his interior mind transcended his mundane and earthly existence, and that includes the social world he is situated in.

Likewise, one cannot just as spontaneously whisper to oneself under one's breath that "I believe!". And the reason for this is that the belief has to spring out of the right kind of circumstance and soil for it to become truly fixed. Remember: Faith is an absolute belief. Its trademark is therefore that it is unable to waver and change. And it gets this trademark by not being a response to a reason, so that, as is likely the case with such spontaneous beliefs as described above, that it originates in some social factor, or other - in a need to be accepted by others, or oneself, as a representative of a certain social type, and this is simply not good enough for a motivating reason. For at one time or another, for example after one has encountered a highly charismatic Atheist, this impetus to believe may lose its momentum and falter, and followingly one doesn't believe. But then, by Kierkegaard's reasoning, one never believed. Faith is absolute, or it is not faith.

The relevant circumstance capable of engendering faith is a state of absolute doubt. And by that I mean a doubt that defies any kind of resolution, and that it is impossible to rationally appease. Followingly, this constitutes what I termed the jumping position, and it is also this that represents the main difficulty in attaining faith - that one has to make a step beyond reason in order to get at it.

But this does of course not represent the only problem. The above mentioned difficulty, represents rather what I term as "the second step towards faith" - the step that actually brings you into it. There is a prior difficulty to this, what I call "the first step towards faith", and it is that of actually reaching a state of absolute doubt. For such a state demands that one is in possession of an absolute paradox, something that is manifestly and incontrovertibly false. But not only that. It must at the same time that it shows itself as manifestly false, also proclaim itself to be the Absolute. For that is, after all, what we are after in this context.

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<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed*. in *Samlede Værker Bind 18*, 101.

It must, therefore, be a self-contradictory Absolute.

According to Kierkegaard, we find such a self-contradictory Absolute as this, that qualifies to both criteria, in the main idea of the Christian Gospel. To quote Kierkegaard: "Den Sætning, at Gud har været til i menneskelig Skikkelse, er bleven født, har voxet, o.s.v., er vel Paradoxet sensu strictissimo, det absolute Paradox."<sup>14</sup> Or as he says at another place: "Christendommen har nu selv forkyndt sig at være den evige væsentlige Sandhed, der er blevet til i Tiden, den har forkyndt sig som *Paradoxet*, og fordret Troens Inderlighed i Forhold til hvad der er Jøder en Forargelse og Græker en Daarskab - og Forstanden det Absurde."<sup>15</sup>

The paradoxicality of the Christian Gospel, as Kierkegaard describes it in the two above quotes, lies then in the fact that they claim that God - the eternal truth, the Absolute itself - has come into being at a specific point in time. That *The Infinite Being* has been born and raised and has died and been resurrected - that it has had a life span akin to a mere mortal, but still is God, still is eternal. Which, we must confess, is a manifest paradox. Seeing as something eternal, or infinite, can never be claimed to have a beginning, for then, by force of logic, there would exist a period in which the object in question did not exist - the period before its beginning, and hence it would not be eternal.

It is important to understand that Kierkegaard does not view this paradox as the product of some misunderstanding on behalf of men in regard to God, or the Bible. No, his claim is that Christianity is not meant as an objective doctrine at all, and so the paradox is intended to be exactly what it is. For Christianity does not want to be believed, or related to, in a rational fashion. Thus, it does not supply one with an undeniable proof of its truth, it instead categorically bereaves one of a way in which to relate to it rationally, by making an absurd claim the main part of its doctrine.

To Kierkegaard therefore this paradoxicality does not represent a defect in the Christian doctrine. It is not the case that it merely invalidates its cogency. Not at all. It places its cogency on another plane, and it is intended to do precisely this. What the

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<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 203.

paradox shows, or points towards, is that Christianity is an existential teaching.<sup>16</sup> It seeks to relate to man on purely subjective and personal level, to the exclusion of objectivity. So that, in relation to man's belief in it, it is not concerned with the objectivity of this belief. With the belief's validity as regards any rational individual imaginable. Its interest lies with the state of conviction itself as it resides in every individual man, and the role that this belief has in view to this man's overall view of the world. As God is the Absolute, the belief in God must be absolute, both in the sense of unwavering and in the sense of forever present.

Now, normally the states of knowing something and being convinced of something are identifies with one another. The state of knowing something is normally see as the state of being rationally convinced of this something's truth. And there is nothing wrong with this picture. But, according to Kierkegaard, we can also meaningfully separate these two states from one another, by acknowledging the fact that knowledge is something necessarily rational and universal - in the sense that for knowledge to truly be knowledge it has to bear equal weight with any rational individual. Truth, in regard to knowledge, is not relative, and that is defining for knowledge as such. Whereas a state of conviction on the other hand, it needs not be rational at all - it could, for example, be an expression of an immense desire, a need to see the world in a certain way, or more relevantly, it could be the expression of faith.

And this is exactly what Christianity values - faith in the above sense. Its message to mankind is simply that one ought to have faith in it - in God. And we can translate this by saying that Christianity, in Kierkegaard's interpretation, seeks to be an existential truth - it seeks to specifically be the object of a wholly subjective conviction. A truth that is a truth specifically for an existent, not a truth in itself, not an objective truth, but a subjective one. Something that in rational terms is not a truth at all. Hence, it also presents itself as a non-truth, as it does not seek to be one.

In regard to this train thought, we must keep in mind that to Kierkegaard, there is no sharp demarcation line between his own philosophy and that of Christianity itself. All that he does is to his own mind to interpret Christianity for us in such a way as to get

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<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 199.

us to relate to it at an authentic level. This has the consequence that the concept of faith that Kierkegaard himself develops is by him seen to be Christianity's concept of faith. Therefore we find in his presentation and reading of Christianity the very concept that he himself is the author of. As is seen above, where Kierkegaard's notion of an irrational state of belief and conviction is traced back to the central and paradoxical tenet of Christianity. Not directly, of course. But is found to be implicated in the paradoxicality, in the sense that in view of his concept of faith, this senselessness actually, on one level - the existential one - makes sense.

Let us therefore, from this point, proceed by doing two things simultaneously. Firstly, we must look closer into the nature of the above mentioned implication. In how Kierkegaard find his concept of faith implicated in the manifest paradoxicality of God's birth in time. Secondly, and closely related to this, we must see in what sense the paradox of Christianity could appear before a subject as being something the subject feels it ought to believe in - even though it is absurd.

This last thought can also be got at by raising the following question, which will be our actual point of departure: When we have understood that Christianity is manifestly absurd, why should we not simply disregard it?

(In a sense I have already presented you with the answer to this, as I have pointed out that paradoxicality is necessary if an individual is to develop an absolute belief. But, in what follows, we are going to investigate this claim a little more closely, and from a new angle.)

#### **2.4 - The paradox of Christianity, the paradox of existence**

The reason that we ought not to disregard Christianity on account of its absurdity is that this absurdity itself, in virtue of its structure, takes on a very important aspect when viewed in relation to the nature of our own subjectivity. The absurdity may seem nothing but nonsensical and as a piece of faulty logic on its own, but when

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 553.



compared to our subjective nature, it discloses itself as an image of the very paradoxicality that we find to be part of ourselves as subjective beings.

The paradox of Christianity is namely structurally identical to the paradox that characterizes and defines our own individual existence.

Before I undertake to prove how this is the case, or at least show how Kierkegaard can come to believe that it is so, I want to make a remark regarding the communicative strategy that Christianity here employs - in Kierkegaard's reading of it. I mean its strategy of supplying us with a paradox that is objectively self-refuting, but that is nonetheless meant to speak to us in virtue of an element that it itself does not supply, or mention - our own subjective condition, as explained above. Said differently: Why does not Christianity, or Kierkegaard, do what I am doing right now - attempting to explain its position meticulously and to the word?

It does not do this for a very good reason, namely in order to enable an individual that approaches it to have the opportunity to relate to it on his own, and not in virtue of an interpretation imposed upon him. As I am now doing to you. For if you come to see that I am right in what I am saying here, then the notion of subjectivity that is crucial to the interpretation of Christianity that is produced here, will not be wholly your own, but will be influenced by mine. And for the intent of Kierkegaard and Christianity to be fully realized, the notion of subjectivity that is involved in the interpretation has to be fully individual to the person that is interpreting. Each and every one of us has to understand and relate to the Christian doctrine in virtue of his own singular and subjective existence. It is because of this that Kierkegaard speaks of Christianity as inherently *existential*.

The thought behind this strategy is therefore the wish to communicate a message, or truth - the truth that God is the Absolute - without overriding the subject that it speaks to. So as to enable the subject to relate to God in virtue of his own singular existence. *Vide* the following quote, for example: "Den subjektive religiøse Tænkning derfor, derfor at være dette har fattet Tilværelsens Dobbeltthed, *indseer let, at den ligefremme Meddelelse er et Bedrag* mod Gud (der bedrager ham muligen for et andet Menneskes Tilbedelse i Sandhed), et Bedrag mod sig selv (som var han ophørt at være

existerende), *et Bedrag mod et andet Menneske (som muligen kun faaer et relativt Gudsforhold)*, et Bedrag, der bringer ham i Modsigelse med hele hans Tænkning."<sup>17</sup> Followingly, it does not want to simply tell a subject the truth, for that would mean that the subject in question would have to relate to this truth as if were an objective truth - as if it were the kind of truth that belongs to the world exterior to the subject, and that it has to conform to in order to relate properly to this world. For any subject, we can meaningfully distinguish reality into two fundamentally different categories: The I and what belongs to the I, and the non-I, or the world at large. The point is that if Christianity presented itself as an objective truth, it would belong to the non-I. And it would cause the subject to relate to it in the same manner that the subject relates to any feature of the non-I. Followingly, *it would not be an existential truth* - a truth inherently valid for the subject by virtue of being the singular subject that it is. The subject would instead relate to it in the degree that the world at large demanded of it that it should relate to it.

In this regard, compare the following quote: "Den objektive Reflexions Vei gjør Subjektet til det Tilfældige og derved Existents til et LigeGYldigt, Forsvindende. Bort fra Subjektet gaaer Veien til den objektive Sandhed, *og medens Subjektet og Subjektiviteten bliver ligeGYldig, bliver Sandheden det ogsaa*, netop dette er dens objektive Gyldighed, thi Interessen er, ligesom Afgjørelsen, Subjektiviteten."<sup>18</sup>

By utilizing the strategy that it does, however, Christianity escapes this scenario. It does not force its truth upon the subject through some exterior authority, instead it attempts to get the subject to recognize itself in the message that it is giving. To make it find itself and its own situation represented in it, and so to get it to relate to it by means of a mechanism of identification. Christianity wants simply to show itself to be of the same nature as the subject, and therefore to naturally belong with it. And it does this by means of the paradox - which, I have said, is structurally identical to the paradox that characterizes subjective existence.

Now, we have seen what Kierkegaard views as the paradoxicality of Christianity - that the eternal truth has come into being at a specific point in time. What then is the

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<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 62 - 63.

paradoxicality of our existence that causes us, or should cause us, to identify with Christianity?

Our paradoxicality is that we are at the one and the same time both infinite and finite, both eternal and temporal.<sup>19</sup> We are finite and temporal in the sense that we are all born at a certain point in time, and that we all die at a later point. But also in the sense that this mortality causes us to have limits on the numbers of experiences that we are able to have, and, dependent on when, and into what kind of society we are born, also on the nature of these experiences. The range of what we can relate to, both emotionally and epistemically, is hence a function of a greater natural and historical totality, to which we belong as a mere contingent atom, and to which we do not stand in a position to fully relate. This last remark is meant to convey the fact that we cannot, epistemically speaking, transcend, or step outside of the limited realm of our actual experiences, and see the whole of reality, both social and natural, perched from a top outside of it. To think that we are able to do this, that we, as subjective beings, are able to disregard our own subjectivity and experience the world objectively, as if we were not a part of it, is a misunderstanding. We, as subjective beings, cannot disregard our own subjectivity, for this would mean that we should disregard ourselves and who we are - which automatically would bring up the question of who then is experiencing the world, since it cannot be us. Which of course brings us back to the point: *We* cannot experience the world objectively, because we, as subjective beings, are subjective. Which is what is meant by Kierkegaard's often quoted adage: "Sandheden er Subjektiviteten."<sup>20</sup>

To appreciate this inherently a skeptical position that Kierkegaard places himself in,

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<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 179. My emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 47 or 80, and Kierkegaard *Sygdommen til Døden* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 173.

<sup>20</sup> In order to see the relationship between the phrase "Sandheden er Subjektiviteten" and Kierkegaard's epistemological views, see the following quote wherein Kierkegaard contrasts his own view with the view that truth is objective, thereby putting the two views on par, and implicitly stating that the phrase is meant (also) in an epistemological sense (it has several senses): "Altsaa Subjektiviteten, Inderligheden er Sandheden; gives der nu et *inderligere* Udtryk derfor? Ja, hvis den Tale: Subjektiviteten, Inderligheden er Sandheden, begynder saaledes: Subjektiviteten er Usandheden. Man forhaste sig ikke. Speculationen siger ogsaa, at Subjektiviteten er Usandheden, men siger det lige i den modsatte Retning, nemlig hen til at Objektiviteten er Sandheden. Speculationen bestemmer Subjektiviteten negativt hen til Objektiviteten." Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 193

take into consideration the following, rather lengthy, quote: "Man hører i vor Tid ofte nok tale om det Negative og om negative Tænkere, og hører ofte nok de Positives Præken i den Anledning og deres Takkebønner til Gud og Hegel, at de ikke ere som hine Negative, men ere blevne Positive. Det Positive i Forhold til Tænkning lader sig henføre til disse Bestemmelser: sandselig Vished, historisk Viden, speculativt Resultat. Men dette Positive er netop det Usande. *Den sandselige Vished er Svig (cfr. den græske Skepsis og den hele Fremstilling i den nyere Philosophie, hvorfra man kan lære saare Meget); den historiske Viden er Sandsebedrag (da den er Approximations-Viden); og det speculative Resultat er Blendværk. Alt dette Positive udtrykker nemlig ikke det erkjendende Subjekts Tilstand i Existenten, det angaaer derfor et fingeret objektivt Subjekt, og at forvexle sig selv med et saadant er at blive og at være narret. Ethvert Subjekt er et eksisterende Subjekt, og derfor maa dette væsentligen udtrykke sig i al hans Erkjenden og udtrykke sig som forhindrende den i illusorisk Afslutning i Sandse-Vished, i historisk Viden, i illusorisk Resultat. I historisk Viden faaer han en Mængde at vide om Verden, Intet om sig selv, bevæger sig bestandigt i Approximations-Videns Sphære, medens han ved sin formeentlige Positivitet bilder sig ind at have Visheden, som dog kun haves i Uendeligheden, i hvilken han dog som eksisterende ikke kan være, men bestandigt ankomme. Intet Historisk kan blive mig uendelig vist, undtagen dette, at jeg er til (hvilket igjen ikke kan blive uendelig vist for noget andet Individ, der atter kun saaledes er uendeligt vidende om sin egen Tilværelse), hvilket ikke er noget Historisk. Det speculative Resultat er forsaavidt Illusion, som det eksisterende Subjekt vil tænkende abstrahere fra at det er eksisterende og være sub specie æterni.*

De Negative have derfor bestandigt den Fordeel, at de have noget Positivt, dette nemlig, at de ere opmærksomme paa det Negative; de Positive have slet Intet, thi de ere bedragne. *Netop fordi det Negative er tilstede i Tilværelsen og er overalt tilstede (thi Tilværelse, Existent er bestandig i Vorden), derfor gjelder det som den eneste Frelse derimod at blive bestandigt opmærksom derpaa. Ved at blive positivt betrygget er Subjektet netop narret.*"<sup>21</sup>

It should, of course, be noted that Kierkegaard, in his skeptical position, is not flatly

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<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvideskabelig Efterskrift I*, 68 - 69. My emphases.

denying the possibility of an objective understanding of the world as such. Only that this cannot be had by existing creatures, but is the purview of divine and purely infinite beings, like God, whom are exempt from existing in the flux of existence - in the state of continual becoming and change that characterizes our lot. For God, the world would appear as a given and closed totality, for he perceives it from the point of view of eternity (infinity), but for us, we who are finite parts of this world, the sequence of events that constitutes it, is not at all closed or finished. We are forced to view it from the restricted perspective that is given to us - and no totality can disclose itself from within a segment of this totality's own development towards its finished state. That would be like if a note in a symphony had the power to hear the full score. For us, therefore, the world is not closed, but is always on the verge of becoming something other than it now is. It is always slipping into the next note, and we with it.<sup>22</sup>

Our *finity* (a neologism, but you catch the drift), therefore, can be said to be constituted by all the possible ways in which there exists boundaries for our avenues of experience, and the ways in which we are forced, by external circumstances, to relate to certain phenomena, and not others, in our day to day life. Finity relates to the ways in which we, as persons, are determined by things that we are unable to control - the ways in which we are given a definite form by exterior circumstances, and are, so to speak, the product of objective physiological and socio-historical factors.

Our infinity, on the other hand, is the element that is fixed and permanent throughout all of the changes that we undergo in our lives. Increasing age and exposure to differing social milieus, the varying amount of use expected of our bodies, intellectual and artistic influences, changes in fashion, in customs and in other social institutions,

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<sup>22</sup> As regards Kierkegaard's view on the nature of existence that is presented here, the following passage from *Afsuttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* is very informative: "I Virkelighedens Sprog forholder nemlig hele Abstraktionen sig som en Mulighed til Virkeligheden, ikke til en Virkelighed indenfor Abstraktionen og Muligheden. *Virkeligheden, Existentsen er det dialektiske Moment i en Trilogie, hvis Begynden og hvis Slutning ikke kan være for en Existerende, der qua Existerende er i det dialektiske Moment.* Abstraktionen slutter Trilogien sammen. Ganske rigtigt. Men hvorledes gjør den det? Er Abstraktionen saadan Noget, eller er den ikke den Abstraherendes Akt? Men den Abstraherende er jo en Existerende, og som Existerende altsaa i det dialektiske Moment, hvilket han ikke kan mediere eller sammenslutte, mindst af Alt absolut, saa længe han er existerende.", 303 - 304. My emphasis. As regard God's possibility of absolute and objective knowledge of the world, see

and in our more general rank and position in the larger order of the social hierarchy - all of these factors, in addition to more of their kind, cause us to change from year to year, physically and mentally. They cause us to view things from new perspectives, to gain new opinions, to find beauty in objects that we before thought of as bland and uninspiring, and to find that old things now have grown so worn and so familiar that we cannot obtain a single spark of enjoyment out of contemplating them. We become, plain and simply, different persons, and we experience that we, in regard to our attitudes and propensities, vary throughout the space of our life. And yet, we still in an important sense remain the same. It is, more or less, as if all of these changes take place in a fixed medium, and as if they are modifications of a self-identical substance. A primordial *I* if you will, or more to the point, the form and framework of an *I* that is given its content through its interaction with the world. So that if were to draw an analogy and speak of the *I*, or the self, as a painting: The infinite would be the canvas, while the finite would be the colours. And as the colours fade and change with time, or maybe are painted over, there can still be said to be a sense of continuity to the object in itself - and this continuity is what I believe Kierkegaard to term "the infinite". The part of us that does not change, and that is capable of cloaking itself in an endless number of appearances. It is the part of us that allows us to grow different from ourselves, while still remaining the same.<sup>23</sup>

Let me now quote from a relevant passage in the journals, which is the most straightforward remark I have found Kierkegaard to make on the matter at hand - though mind you, in this remark Kierkegaard does not keep strictly to the description of human nature as a synthesis of the finite and infinite, but speaks of it both as a synthesis of the metaphysical and the contingent, and as a synthesis of the divinely necessary and the contingently finite, but all of these syntheses amounts to the same, as they all are relations between something anchored and something coincidental, something fixed and something fleeting - that is, when seen abstractly, they have an

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Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 106.

<sup>23</sup> It is worth to notice that Kierkegaard's use of the concept of infinity here, as I interpret it, mirrors how Hegel employed it in his early Jena logic. Where "the infinite" denotes the totality of life understood as a process of continual change and development. And could hence be said to be the medium in which change takes place, and the category we have to apply, according to Hegel, in order to understand the dialectical structure of the constant changing relations that makes up life's reality. For a more thorough exposition of this, see Jean Hyppolite's essay *The Concept of Life and Consciousness of Life in Hegel's Jena Philosophy* in Jean Hyppolite, *Studies in Marx and Hegel* (Harper & Row, 1973).

identical structure: "Denne Eenhed af det Metaph: og det Tilfældige ligger allerede i Selvbevidstheden, det er Personlighedens Udgangspunkt. Jeg bliver mig paa eengang bevidst i min evige Gyldighed i min saa at sige guddommelige Nødv:, og i min tilfældige Endelighed (at jeg er dette bestemte Væsen, født i dette Land, til denne Tid, under alle disse vexlende Omgivelsers mangeartede Indflytelse). Og denne sidste Side skal ikke oversees og ikke vrages, men Individets sande Liv er dens Apotheose, der ikke bestaaer i, at det tomme indholdsløse Jeg ligesom lister sig ud af denne Endelighed, for at forflygtiges og bortdunste paa sin himmelske udvandring, men at det Gudd. iboer og finder sig ind i Endeligheden."<sup>24</sup>

The passage relates, as you see, only incidentally to our discussion, as its full content concerns Kierkegaard's view on *how one ought to live* ("Individets sande Liv") to put it bluntly, and this will not concern us, at least not yet. In the context of our discussion, the important thing to notice is how the different concepts are used to describe human nature, and how they are correlated to each other. The finite is correlated to the contingent socio-historical factors ("dette Land", "denne tid", "disse vexlende Omgivelsers"), while the metaphysical is correlated to one's eternal surety (of one's own being) by force of one's, so to speak, divine necessity ("min evige Gyldighed i min saa at sige guddommelige Nødv:"), and, moreover, to what he speaks of as our empty, blank I ("det tomme indholdsløse Jeg"). And he also says, right at the beginning of the passage, the these two contradictory components are together the mainspring of the personality ("Personlighedens Udgangspunkt").

All of this corroborates nicely with the picture I was attempting to draw of the meaning of finity and infinity as the two complementary components of the human being. One factor that is contingent and beyond the control of the subject itself, and which, moreover, is the one that properly defines the subject as a specific someone - the finite. And another factor, the infinite, which is the substance in which the former factor resides and evolves.

Further textual evidence of this picture can be found in *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, where Kierkegaard at one point states the following: "Den Negativitet der

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<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Dagbøger i Udvalg 1834 - 1846*, 2nd edition (DSL/Borgen, 1999), 268 - 269.

er i Tilværelsen, eller rettere det eksisterende Subjekts Negativitet (hvilken hans Tænkning maa væsentligen gjengive i en adæqvæt Form), er grundet i Subjektets Synthese, at det er en eksisterende uendelig Aand. *Uendeligheden og det Evige er det eneste Visse*, men idet det er i Subjektet, er det i Tilværelsen, og det første Udtryk derfor er dets Svig og denne uhyre Modsigelse, at det Evige vorder, at det bliver til."<sup>25</sup>

Again, the passage relates only incidentally to our discussion, but that aside, we again find that the remarks he makes regarding human nature add up to the picture presented. The subject is in the passage described as an existing infinite spirit, and the infinite is, coincidentally, described as the only thing that is absolutely certain for the subject. This relates to the fact that the infinite is that in us which always stays the same, no matter how much we change. It is what allows a subject to recognize itself throughout the great deal of different guises that one develops. It is, quite simply, the factor of our constitution that enables us to be self-conscious.<sup>26</sup> This connection between the infinite and selfhood can, moreover, be verified by something that Kierkegaard states in the passage that precedes the passage just quoted, where he says: "*Intet Historisk kan blive mig uendelig vist, undtagen dette, at jeg er til* (hvilket igjen ikke kan blive uendelig vist for noget andet Individ, der atter kun saaledes er uendeligt vidende om sin egen Tilværelse), hvilket ikke er noget Historisk."<sup>27</sup> For as one puts these two quotes together, it becomes clear that one's infiniteness and the bare fact of one's existence are the only two things that one can know for certain. Which is, of course, because they are, in a sense, the same. My infinity being that which provides me with a fixed, but empty, self-identity, and that thereby lets me relate to my dynamic and plastic existence as always my own.

The first passage quoted above from *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* in this context goes, furthermore, on to state that since a subject is part infinite, and simultaneously is existing, it finds itself to be in an enormous contradiction. For in as much as it is infinite it is eternally self-identical, and in as much as it is existing, it is locked in a process of continual becoming and change. It is therefore something

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<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 69. My emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> As regards this role of the infinite, see Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 188.

<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 69. My emphasis.



unchangeable that continually changes. It is at the one and the same time both the one, and the other. Both something firm and something plastic. Which is impossible, but nonetheless the case.

There are two things to remark in regard to this: Firstly, we here again see the dichotomy between the finite and the infinite, and their particular roles and functions, that I described earlier. But secondly, we see that the paradox of the Christianity - that the eternal has come into being at a specific point in time - is structurally the same as the paradox of our existence. As both paradoxes are made up of an eternal, or infinite element, and a temporal, or finite element, that are fused into a solid, but contradictory whole. One states that God, that is infinite, has come into being at a specific point in time. The other that we, who also are infinite, are locked in a state of continual becoming and contingency. The point of both is that something atemporal has been made a part of the realm of the temporal - which is impossible, but nonetheless the case.

Having established this point of intersection in between Christianity and the nature of existence, let us next ask ourselves the questions: What does it mean? And what impact does Kierkegaard imagine this structural correspondence to have?

## **2.5 - The Absolute**

The answer to both of these questions is found in relation to the Absolute, to every individual's need for an Absolute, and to the *prima facie* lack of an Absolute in every individual's life - which is another way of approaching the phenomenon of despair that I have described earlier on.

If we now were to follow Kierkegaard in his existential and epistemic depiction of human nature as I have outlined it for you, we could formulate the kernel of his picture as the thought that human beings are naturally unwhole. They are, or *we* are, partly of the same substance as God. We are infinite. But simultaneously by virtue of our finiteness and existence, we are forced to be part of a world that vastly exceeds

our power of comprehension and our ability to control the objects around us. We are hence limitless in our relation to ourselves (that is to say that we are something that we ourselves cannot fall out of touch with, as there is nothing that is able to limit our own relation to ourselves. This is not to imply that our own psyche is perfectly transparent to us - Kierkegaard would categorically deny such a view), and simultaneously limited in our ability to influence and know the greater totality that we form a part of, and which invariably form a part of who we are. We are, to use a metaphor, like a solid piece of rock that just barely rises above the surface of a constantly raging sea, far away from any coastline. All that we can see and relate to are the clouds that skim over us far above, and the waves that perpetually rise and fall with chaotic motions all around us. There is nothing fixed for us to lock ourselves in on other than ourselves. All is change and motion, except for our own existence. So that we as an individual always seem to outlive whatever object we happen to come into an emotional relation with. *We can find no stability in our surroundings that matches our own.*

This state of our nature has the effect that we at the one and the same time know what the Absolute is without actually possessing it. As we ourselves are intimations of an Absolute, given our constant and unchanging presence to ourselves, and there is nothing we can find exterior to us that complements our own constancy. We are like the rock, something enduring, forced into relationship with ephemeral waves and fleeting clouds.

Our unwholeness is our lack of an infinity that complements, or completes, our own. And because a complementary infinite is lacking, whatever we then identify ourselves with, whatever we erect as an ideal for what we want to be, it involves something finite. It is of the nature of the waves or the clouds. And it is just this ephemeral and transitory nature of our ideals, and our consciousness of them as being ephemeral and transitory, that could be said to be the mainspring of despair.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Highly relevant to the above reading of Kierkegaard is the following passage: "Medens nu den rene Tænken uden videre hæver al Bevægelse, eller meningsløst faaer den ind med i Logiken, er Vanskeligheden for den Existerende, at give Existensen den Continueerlighed, uden hvilken Alt blot forsvinder. En abstrakt Continueerlighed er ingen Continueerlighed, og det at den Existerende existerer, forhindrer væsentligen Continueerligheden, medens Lidenskab er den momentvise Continueerlighed, der paa eengang holder igjen og er Bevægelsens Impuls. For en Existerende er Bevægelsens Maal Afgjørelse og Gjentakelse. Det Evige er Bevægelsens Continueerlighed, men en

Kierkegaard, in *Sygdommen til Døden*, gives the example of a girl that despairs out of love. She despairs because her beloved is dead, or has been her unfaithful - the exact nature does not matter he says. The point is that no matter why she despairs, she does not in any case really despair over the loss - she despairs over herself. That she fails her ideal, which was to be this man's beloved. She despairs because she still sees herself as his beloved, because this has become her *self* - the ideal by which she relates to herself. Yet she knows that she is not this man's beloved. Hence she is not who she wants to be. She is despair.<sup>29</sup>

And she is despair, because she identified herself with something treacherous - another person. She constructed her self on the basis of him, who is categorically different from her in view of her singularity, and who is, from her epistemic and existential situation, a part of the totality of the world that encloses her. He is of the substance of the waves and the clouds, to use the metaphor I used above. Of course, it needed not happen that he betrayed her. There was no necessity in this. And the particular despair she experiences is nothing but an effect of this contingency. But, as Kierkegaard remarks, even if she had got him, even if she had become who she wanted to be - his beloved, she would still be despair.

Quote: "... dette Selv er hende nu en Plage, naar det skal være et Selv uden 'ham'; dette Selv, der var blevet hende, *forøvrigt i en anden Forstand ligesaa fortvivlet*, hendes Rigdom, er nu blevet hende en motbydelig Tomhed, da 'han' er død, eller det er blevet hende en Afsky, da det minder hende om, at hun er bedragen."<sup>30</sup>

And she would have been despair, whether she succeeded, or not, whether she got to be his beloved, or not - because the possibility would always exist that she woke up one morning and was it no longer. The structure of her self would dependent be upon another person - on something exterior to herself that lies outside of her control, and that is the target of influences that she cannot hope to know the full extent of. It is, as

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abstrakt Evighed er udenfor Bevægelsen, og en concret Evighed i den Existerende er Lidenskabens Maximum." *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 301. My emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 179.

<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 179. My emphasis.

I have mentioned earlier, that the state that negates the state of despair is a *categorical* negation. It negates the very possibility of despair. So that if that possibility still exists, if the mere possibility exists that one will fail one's own ideal - one still is in a state of despair: "Det ikke at være fortvivlet maa betyde den tilintetgjorte Mulighed af at kunne være det; hvis det skal være sandt, at et Menneske ikke er fortvivlet, maa han i ethvert Øieblik tilintetgjøre Muligheden."<sup>31</sup>

The main point of the above is that one will always have that possibility of falling into despair if one's ideal is tied up with the world exterior to one. As Kierkegaard attests: "Men det er en Modsigelse at ville absolut noget Endeligt, da det Endelige jo maa faae en Ende, og der altsaa maa komme en Tid da det ikke mere kan villedes."<sup>32</sup> There is nothing Absolute in this world, and hence there is nothing in it that is able to complement the infinity that remains a part of our nature.

In order to get around this, and find something secure that one can relate to oneself by without running the risk of falling into despair, one has to find an ideal that does not depend upon anything worldly or social. One has to transcend the finite. But how does one do that? Especially seeing as one cannot, according to Kierkegaard, transcend, and leave behind, the perspective offered one as a part of one's existence. It is a part of one, for good or for worse. And it is, actually, a form of despair to attempt to ignore it. For one would then erect an ideal for oneself that would be manifestly contradicted by every one of one's experiences. As one actually is finite, and one actually is caught up in the horizon of one's own particular existence.

The answer to this is that one has to have faith. And faith is an unconditional and irrational belief in a transcendental Absolute - in God. To Kierkegaard, this represents the only possible access that an existent being can have to something infinite. And it is a purely indirect access, a negative leap.

Now let us see if we can imagine to ourselves how an individual might be drawn towards Christianity with the preceding reflections in mind, and I believe it would take place as something along the following lines: If a person that is aware of his own

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<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 175.

epistemic and existential situation approaches Christianity, he will come upon a doctrine that structurally corresponds to his own situation. As the paradox at its core is structurally identical, in the explained sense, to the paradoxicality inherent in himself. Furthermore, he will come upon a doctrine that claims to be absolute, but that has no pretensions about appearing to be absolute. No, quite to the contrary. It appears instead as manifestly absurd. But by being this, it would, I imagine, strike this individual as being first and foremost honest. As he knows that he cannot relate positively to an Absolute given the nature of who and what he is. So, in response, it would appear to him, that this doctrine does not attempt to convince him of it either. Instead it sets up faith for faith's sake as the ideal by which it judges him. It is not interested in reasons, and in reasons for belief - as science and philosophy are. But in the state of belief itself, and in belief as an absolute condition - an ideal state of the psyche, the state of not being in despair. The Christian doctrine gives him a picture, in which the important is not how, or why one believes - but in *that* he believes. And, what is more, in that *he* believes. It reasons to him on the level of his existential situation. Not on the level of objectivity. It gives him, quite plainly, an alternative to the state of lacking an infinite counterpoint, by introducing the notion of faith. The notion that he, just as that, should believe in such an Absolute as it gives him. No questions asked.

The impetus that moves us to faith, that motivates us to immerse ourselves in the paradox of Christianity, and not to disregard it, is thus not a consequence of having come to grips with some truth - it is not a response to a reason that is intersubjectively accessible. It is done because we have come to see that we need an Absolute in order to remedy our own subjective existential plight. And it is in this sense, an act that is utterly subjective.

But because the choice is made in view to relieving ourselves permanently of despair, the choice of Christianity as an Absolute, will to an impartial observer - and to us here and now that are attempting to understand this process - invariably appear as arbitrary. Arbitrary, in the first instance, because it is by no means uniquely Christianity that can fulfil this function as a remedy. And arbitrary, in the second instance, because the

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<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 384.

choice of Christianity rests upon a wholly contingent historical situation, in which the subject happened to stumble upon exactly this doctrine, and not any other. For even though Christianity, as I have tried to show by elaborating its paradoxical structure, has a certain affinity with the subject's existential situation, and thereby is in a position to relate to the subject by making him, or her, identify with it - this does by no means qualify it as the only possible solution to the subject's fundamental problem. Once one relates to the whole picture, and sees the mechanisms that are at work here, one will also come to the understanding that even if faith, understood as an absolute belief, is the answer, the question: "Why should it be a Christian faith? And why not another form?", remains unanswered.

This might seem like a devastating objection against Kierkegaard's project. But I believe that Kierkegaard would have said, had he spoken as I openly as I am now attempting to, that the presence of this arbitrariness is necessary. For without it as a component, the commitment given by the individual would not be wholly free. It would, on some level, instead be guided by a reason. An influence that persuades it that the individual ought to choose Christianity. And this would make the belief that the individual acquires rational - which would mean that it is a conditional belief, and hence, not absolute. It would not be faith.

In order to acquire faith, the choice of what one believes in has to be, objectively speaking, arbitrary, for it has to be an essential expression of one's own subjectivity. And what better to believe in then, than the most absurd doctrine imaginable? If one first has to focus, I mean, on the act of belief, instead of the object, or the propositional content of the belief, why not believe in something that objectively and under no sane circumstances should be believed? The mere foolishness of such an attempt may actually cause one to become able to see it through - by bringing out the devil in one. I mean, it is not uncommon for people to become incited by the prospect of being able to do something that it is thought cannot be done. That's how the highest mountains are climbed, and experimental theses formed. And just this sort of obstacle is present here, as it is rationally thought that such a doctrine as Christianity cannot be believed, and shouldn't be believed. So, defy rationality. Make a spontaneous step, but make it without qualms or second-thoughts, make it whole-heartedly and defiantly in face of reason, and make it passionately, as an expression of who one is and what one

is capable of. Such a step is a leap of faith.

But, it is not the case, as it might seem to be, that this demand for arbitrariness makes Christianity into any more of an obvious choice for a man consciously seeking an Absolute. I mean, one could certainly find doctrines that are just as paradoxical and absurd as it is, and which it would be just as foolhardy to believe in. And in the end, I believe there is nothing more to be said about this dilemma, other than that it is a necessary dilemma, and that it cannot be resolved. For there is no rational reason to believe in Christianity. Christianity cannot objectively be believed to be true, and it possesses no trait that makes it understandable that one would choose it over any other form of transcendental Absolute. Had there existed such a trait, or been objectively clear that it was the truth, then faith would be impossible - and, as Kierkegaard says in *Frygt and Bæven*, Abraham would be lost. The absoluteness of faith presupposes instead that the choice to believe is made from a position of absolute doubt. It is this origin that secures that the belief created becomes impossible to contest - and hence, absolute. And it gains this attribute, not because every contesting view is guaranteed to be false, as would be the case with an objective Absolute, but because it becomes meaningless to contest it. The faith is absurd, just as absurd as the doctrine that it is a faith in, and to say of it that it is manifestly false is to be correct, furthermore, the man of faith knows that already. It is, for him, redundant to draw attention to it. The point is no longer whether the belief is correct, or not. It is not a question of correctness. It is a question of having an Absolute, or not. And if the only possible way to gain it is by irrational means, and you truly comprehend your existential situation, you truly comprehend how you are thrown to despair if you lack it, then the irrational is a lesser evil.

As you see, it is quite easy to objectively understand the need for an Absolute, hence the need for faith. But what is impossible to understand, and by that I mean to place under a general law of behaviour, is the actual subjective situation of gaining faith, of choosing to believe in the Christian God and mythos - because this invariably is an arbitrary choice, as it is not informed by a reason that necessitates it.

Faith is an irrationality, because it is built on an irrationality, and it is this irrationality that gives it its absoluteness.

## 2.6 - The problem of the necessity of the irrational

I hope that the preceding pages have made it more evident as to why Kierkegaard believes that the paradoxical structure of Christianity ought to fascinate an individual, and not make him disregard it. As I have said, it ought to fascinate because its paradoxical structure corresponds to the one that characterizes the individual's own existence, so that an individual ought to feel a kind of kinship between himself and it. Furthermore, I also hope I have made it sufficiently evident to which degree the process of faith can be objectively understood at all. As I have said above, one can understand the reason that an individual is drawn towards faith, but one cannot understand why he chooses actually to believe absolutely in anything specific. That is, one can understand the subject's need for an Absolute, but one cannot objectively understand how the subject can actually come to take Christianity, or anything else, as an Absolute. And we cannot understand this, because there objectively speaking does not exist anything objectively true for the subject as we understand it. The subject being, as I have said, always epistemically limited by the horizon of his own finite existence, and therefore forever closed off from direct contact with anything infinite and eternal (other than its own infinity, of course). This means that even though we can understand the subject can come to feel a kind of attraction to Christianity, we also understand that this attraction is not rational. For had the subject in question been confronted by another doctrine other Christianity, but one that was formed just as Christianity is formed upon an essential paradox between the infinite and the finite, the subject would have, to use the vocabulary of infatuation, fallen for that doctrine instead.

But, remarkably enough, this situation yet again constitutes a paradox of a like nature as the one we find in the subject's existential situation and in the doctrine of Christianity itself. A paradox formed by something infinite being coupled with something finite, something necessary with something contingent. For the fact that one chances upon Christianity, and furthermore that one chances to be taken in by it - something that is far from easy, given the nature of this whole chapter - and that, in addition to this, this event, which is nothing if not a contingent event, should then lead



up to the individual acquiring a relation to an Absolute, that is paradoxical. It is paradoxical because such an event would mean that something Absolute - something eternal, infinite and unlimited, resulted out of a process that only involved finite, limited and contingent elements. It would mean, to reason by analogy, that the conclusion reached by no means was contained in the premises. A situation that corresponds to the one depicted in the New Testament where the Eternal God is born out of a mortal woman's womb, for the conclusion was here also, by no means a product of its premises. To sum up: Again, one has a paradox based upon a relation between the temporal and the atemporal. And of the type that one is to expect to encounter when a finite being attempts to relate to something infinite. Just the type of paradox that Christianity draws attention to.

Now, I would hesitate to say that this new paradox makes it any more rational to believe in Christianity, or brings something new into the imagined subject's relation to Christianity. But what it does do, is give us a strengthened sense of the elegance that inheres in the Christian doctrine as Kierkegaard portrays it. The manner in which it makes sense of the nonsensical. As it manages to make the element of arbitrariness into a necessary part of its theory of faith, Christianity gains a power of attraction that should not be underestimated. It becomes at the one and the same time an object that rationally repulses the subject, and that attracts because the arbitrariness and irrationality can be seen to be elements of a greater totality that actually makes sense.

I believe that we ought to see this situation of a simultaneous attraction-repulsion to Christianity along the following lines: It repulses one in as much as one realizes the absurdity of every one of three paradoxes involved. *But it attracts one in as much as one understands the fact that Christianity counters the claim that it is absurd and paradoxical, and that coming to believe in it is absurd and paradoxical, by claiming that this absurdity and this paradoxicality is wholly necessary in order for the subject to gain an Absolute, given the nature of the subject's existence.*

This then, presents us with our last difficulty - at least the last one I will treat here. And it is something that I touched upon at the end of the preceding section, where I spoke of the problem that the Christian doctrine of faith makes a virtue out of its own absurdity, and thereby subordinates the irrationality of the choice to a greater *rational*

whole.

For if it is the case, as I have now portrayed it, that the Christian doctrine should cause a subject to believe in it precisely because Christianity itself has succeeded in incorporating in its doctrine the difficulties that arise in regard to believing in it, because it makes the arbitrariness - which is the difficulty in question and which it is necessarily a victim of - into a presupposition for gaining faith, then would not this arbitrariness turn, paradoxically enough, into something necessary? For would it not give the subject ample reason to embrace the arbitrariness, by showing him that this is the only way he could ever reach an Absolute? Followingly, would not the choice he makes in the leap of faith - where he chooses to believe in God - be guided by his desire for the Absolute and his awareness of his own finite existence, so that this absolute belief that he achieves through the choice actually becomes conditioned upon this desire and this understanding of his own finite existential situation? The end result being that the choice loses its arbitrariness and irrationality?

In one sense this does happen. The choice of faith is guided by an understanding of the nature of one's own existence and by an understanding of the necessity of making a free and irrational choice and commitment in order to acquire true faith. But what we have to keep clear to ourselves here, is that the choice of faith is a commitment to believe in the truth of Christianity. It is a commitment to believe in God. And as one stands before this question: "Does God exist?", one does not win any advantage by being aware that one cannot possibly know this, and furthermore, by being aware that all that one can hope for in regard to any kind of resolution to this question, is to reach a state of irrational conviction. And of course, the choice of faith is made guided by the desire to reach this state, and by a knowledge of its nature. But this does not help one in the actual choice. God does not win any more reality by being necessary in order for a subject to escape despair. It is not given that the subject is meant to. What we see here is instead the reason that motivates the subject into making the choice - he wants to escape despair - not a reason that informs that choice. And the difference is crucial.

The reason that motivates is a kind of meta-situational conviction. The conviction that one has to have faith in order to escape despair, and that it therefore is necessary to

believe in God. But, and this is the important part, this does not make it any more evident that it is objectively rational to believe in the existence of God and the truth of his teaching. God does not become any more true, just because we need him. And that one chooses to believe in him is still objectively a paradox - but subjectively understandable.

Connected with this is of course also the consideration that it is Christianity itself that, at least to Kierkegaard's own mind, puts forward the theory of faith that he expounds. The idea of a state of absolute belief not created as a response to a convincing reason, but through a free choice and commitment - for remember, Christianity itself has at its heart a fundamental paradox that makes it rationally impossible to objectively believe in its truth. Nonetheless, it claims to be the truth - with a capital "t". And also to deliver unto man the highest good attainable - the state of blessedness. Which is the state of not being in despair, *vide*, for example, the following quote from *Sygdommen til Døden*: "Muligheden af denne Sygdom er Menneskets Fortrin for Dyret; at være opmærksom paa denne Sygdom er den Christnes Fortrin for det naturlige Menneske; at være helbredet fra denne Sygdom den Christnes Salighed."<sup>33</sup> In which the sickness he speaks of is despair, and where he explicitly states that the advantage that a Christian attains by being Christian, by believing in God, is to escape this sickness.

The end result being that Christianity itself holds within it precisely the idea that we here describe of the absurdity and simultaneous necessity of faith. And it is here that the elegance and the attraction of Christianity lies. That it presents itself with full awareness of the impossibility that it demands, that you should believe in its truth, but that it succeeds in presenting this impossibility as a rational reaction to the existential plight that every subject necessarily finds itself to be in.

But still, this self-awareness on part of the Christian doctrine and the fact that it accurately captures the subject's existential situation, does not make the reality of God any more objectively certain. It only opens up a natural route whereby one can come to connect to it on a personal level, as one would connect to a person that shows himself to be sufficiently similar to oneself.

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<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 174. My

This, I hope, is sufficient to answer the question raised. The leap of faith does make sense in as much as it is seen as a reaction to despair. And in accordance with the fact that faith becomes absolute, becomes faith, only if it originates in a free and arbitrary choice, this arbitrariness does become, in a sense, necessary in order to avoid despair. But this does not in any way settle the matter that is primarily at stake in the leap of faith, namely the existence of God. For even though one realizes that there are benefits connected to a belief in God, these benefits are incidental to the question at hand, and they are in no foreseeable manner able to function as premises to the effect that God exists. Hence, the choice to believe in the existence of God is still a free choice. It is not informed by any relevant reason.

## **2.7 - The second step**

This brings us at last to the second step in what I have called the twofold process of faith. We have up to this seen, firstly, what constitutes the first step, which is to immerse oneself into a state of absolute doubt. A state in which one is torn between one's existential need for the Absolute, and one's rational conviction that it is impossible to relate to anything Absolute. Secondly, we have investigated the question as to why one would immerse oneself in such doubt, and the effect that the answer to this question has for the process of faith itself. We have also seen how it is crucial to faith that it originates through a wholly free choice. Since it is this freedom, this lack of dependency upon rational grounds informing the choice, that secures the outcome as absolute and unchangeable - immune to correction from further evidence. And, lastly, we have seen that it is in order to enable the subject to make this wholly free choice that the state of doubt is necessary.

In this section, it is the actual act of making this free choice that I propose we look at.

Now, as we have already been made aware, though the choice to believe has to be a free choice, it is nonetheless not a wholly spontaneous choice, which can be made

whenever and wherever. It has to grow out of a specific circumstance. Namely, the circumstance that one commits to a belief without the guidance of a reason that informs the belief and secures its validity. For it is in this very sense that the commitment is "free", that it is an independent act on behalf of the subject vis-à-vis his own understanding and the objective world surrounding him. It is a wholly subjective undertaking and, hence, only dependent upon the subject for its realization, which is what secures that it becomes absolute, as the subject's commitment to it is absolute.

This need to free oneself from reason has itself a specific reason. Namely, the fact that in accordance with reason, nothing can become absolute for an existent being. To quote Kierkegaard: "...objektivt er der ingen Sandhed for eksisterende Væsener, men kun Approximation..."<sup>34</sup> A state of affairs that makes it possible to view our limited power of reasoning as the thing that actually separate us from an Absolute. I.e. we are not able to comprehend an Absolute because we are finite, and have finite powers of cognition. But followingly, because we are hindered in reaching an Absolute by virtue of our limited reason, there becomes a possibility that we can reach it, if we find a way to transcend our reason, and believe against it. For if reason cannot comprehend an infinite, cannot acknowledge anything as infinite - cannot, therefore, something become infinite *for us* if we understand this limitation and consciously believe in something that our reason *cannot comprehend*. For thereby this that we so believe in, gets at least a chance at being Absolute - which is more that we can say of any belief that we entertain by virtue of our understanding. We cannot know whether this *truly* is infinite, but we can know that *we cannot know this*, because we can know that we are not, nor can ever be, in a position to understand such a thing. The point is that it may appear as an infinite to us, because of the mere possibility that it truly is infinite. And therefore also be infinite *for us*, not because we understand it, but because we do not understand it, and we understand that we do not understand the infinite.

Such an act of defiance against reason is done by making a manifestly absurd idea the object of one's belief - the Christian mythos (I believe that the arbitrariness of this choice of Christianity has been given enough attention already, and I refrain from any

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<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 204.

further remarks). But even though we have made up our minds to believe against our own better judgement in this way, it still is the case that it is our own better judgement that we are going to attempt to believe against. And that is no easy task. For it is not as if we are going to *act* against our better judgement, in a normal sense of this phrase. Something that would typically involve that we allow ourselves some immediate pleasure, that we succumb to the inclinations and desires that we have at a specific moment, even though we know that these do not accord with what we know to be the best the course of action. To act against one's better judgement is, in a typical case, to make a conscious deviation from the standard, or ideal, that one holds oneself to. For example, one lights up one last cigarette, even though one is aware that one quit the day before yesterday, or, one allows oneself just one more piece of cake, even though one already has had one's fair share. To believe against one's best judgement on the other hand, in the manner that Kierkegaard speaks of, is the blatant antithesis of this. It is not to make a conscious deviation from the ideal one holds oneself to - it is to erect a new ideal by which one wishes to judge oneself. So, it is not so much to do something one knows to be wrong, as it is to transcend one's common understanding of wrong and right, rational and irrational in favour of an absolute and consciously irrational commitment to God and his standards<sup>35</sup>. And, to repeat, this commitment is not, and can never be, a commitment to something verified. Hence, it cannot become rational. And therefore it becomes the case that the state of belief that one creates in this manner is *not* a positive state - a state that is what it is in virtue of some positive fact that it mirrors. It is instead an *essentially* reactionary state, it is a willed negation of doubt - a parasitical state created as a pure counter-reaction to a state of doubt and despair. Which means that if it is interpreted at a rational, communal and intersubjective level, it does not make sense. The ideal that the subject chooses for himself in this manner becomes instead a wholly private ideal, not something he deems to be universally valid, but something that is an Absolute only for him. Hence it is not rationally absolute, but subjectively absolute. And therefore, to oppose it on rational grounds is meaningless, at least to the eyes that belong to this state. For it is precisely chosen with a view to rationality's limitations, and in order to step beyond them.

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<sup>35</sup> As regards the nature of these standards, the topic is very complex, and I refer you to the whole of Chapter 3 in this essay, and especially Section 3.2 for a more thorough, but not the least exhaustive, discussion.

In the above description of the scenario we are investigating, "the leap of faith" would denote the act of consciously transcending, or *negating*, the state of doubt and despair. Which is state one reaches by means of what I have called the first step of faith. And where one is locked in a state of despair by simultaneously recognizing one's existential need for an Absolute, and one's epistemical inability to relate to such an Absolute. Furthermore, it is the consciousness of this manifest contradiction that is a part of one's being that allows one to perform the leap, and attain an absolute belief. And this state is needed for the leap because without the objective impossibility of an Absolute - I mean without the fact the one has finite epistemic capabilities, and are unable to rationally see some belief as absolute, one would not have the opportunity to reach it negatively. One would namely not be in a position to believe against one's reason - meaning, to consciously believe in something that one's reason rejects, precisely because it rejects it. To make this rejection into the very fact that guides one towards what one believes, because one knows that one's reason is unable to recognize something as Absolute, and one needs an Absolute. Therefore one consciously believes in this something that one's reason is unable to recognize as true.

As a small digression, I would like to take the opportunity to say that in addition to his psychological insights, the genius of Kierkegaard lies, in effect, hidden beneath the main idea of the paragraph above. That he finds and elucidates a way in which one can relate to an Absolute, when the very thought of an Absolute has been rationally ridiculed. When God, or the thought of a greater whole, has been rejected as speculative in the name of science, and the notion of "thinking rationally" has been equated with analysing every process into its smallest constituents and mirroring the manner in which these co-operate in order to produce the process in question,<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard finds a manner in which man can re-connect to the Absolute. That is, with something that stands above man, a higher meaning, and not below him as the natural processes must be said to do - as they are something he can manipulate and control, while God and the Absolute is something that he must bow down to. And even though it might seem contradictory, it is in this sense that the theist Kierkegaard's thought can be seen to be related to that of the atheist Nietzsche. For

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<sup>36</sup> See the first chapter of Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton University

both these thinkers' attempts to re-introduce the thought of a higher meaning in the life of man. They both recognize, albeit for different motives and reasons, that the common man of their time has lost belief in a governing value and in something Absolute. In something, to put it bluntly, besides his own self-preservation that has self-evident worth. Science has made the common man nihilistic. The new bourgeois way of life has made him superficial and estranged. And in the society of their day (and this may be said to be even more true of our day) the common man himself has become the centre of his own life - in a social sense. He has always been this in an existential sense – that is trivial. But now man does not longer belong as he used to do, to a family, a clan, a farm, or a religion. He is, typically, not entwined in a social formation that dominates every part of his life. Instead, he is forced to be a kind of chameleon that tiptoes between numerous different roles and different standards of behaviour. And followingly, he does not inherently see himself as a part of a greater whole. For there is no such greater whole.<sup>37</sup> At least not in a social sense, seeing as the social world he experiences is fragmented and compartmentalized. By virtue of this, man finds that the meaning of his existence is now contained within his particular social boundaries - that unique sphere that is the crystallization of the sum of his positions in the numerous social networks that he partakes in: His work, his leisure time activities, his family, and on and so forth. Through this he becomes for himself the measure of all things - for he is invariably the sole centre of his world. And ultimately, the meaning of his existence thus simmers down his subjective reaction to it, to his degree of contentment.

But, according to Kierkegaard, without an Absolute he cannot truly be content. He can believe himself to be, of course. But that does not mean that he is.<sup>38</sup> One is always in a state of despair and malcontent if one is not in possession of an infinite ideal by which one is able to relate to oneself - unless, therefore, one has faith.

To leave this digression and return to where I left of, I there described the leap as a

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Press, 1968), and especially page: 23.

<sup>37</sup> This is attested to by Kierkegaard in *En literair Anmeldelse* when he says that modern society is not organized about a common ideal, but rather comes together in a big disorganized and unstable mass which he terms "the public": "Og desuagtet bliver Publikum, naar Tiden er lidenskabsløs og reflekteret og udviskende Alt det Concrete, det Hele, som skal omfatte Alle." Søren Kierkegaard, *En literair Anmeldelse in Samlede Værker Bind 14* (Gyldendals Bogklubber, 1991), 83 – 84.

<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden in Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 182 - 183.



movement of negation, in which one negates, or transcends, a state of absolute doubt, and reaches its antithesis, a state of absolute certainty. Now, for those of us whom have read Hegel, this pattern cannot fail to appear familiar. And in order to proceed with the explanation of the nature of the leap, and to bring out its underlying *rationale*, I want to present it in relation to Hegel's theory of the negative. In the following I will therefore give a cursory explanation of Hegel and his philosophy in regard to this concept. By no means an exhaustive and definitive explanation, but enough so that we gain a rudimentary understanding of the matter, and become able to appreciate the main point at hand.

The core of the Hegelian philosophy is the dialectics. And at the core of the dialectics lies the idea that natural development is always done in the form of a negation. Change is always to Hegel, we can say, *revolutionary*. It is the overturning of one state into its natural opposite, both of which are contained within the being in question which undergoes the change. Mind you, Hegel speaks of this in an utterly general and metaphysical sense. So to him, every single change exemplifies this pattern. Which means, as a consequence, that each and every being must contain, potentially, the polar opposite of its current state of being (that is, if it has not played out every possibility inherent in it). As he states at one point in what has become known as his "shorter Logic": "...everything actual contains opposed determinations within it, and in consequence the cognition and, more exactly, the comprehension of an object amounts precisely to our becoming conscious of it as a concrete unity of opposed determinations."<sup>39</sup> And what happens in the process of change is that the currently dominant feature of a being, the actual state of it, is overturned and sublated by this feature's antithesis, which rebels and rises to the state of dominance. This process is the process of negation, and negation is the actual movement in-between these two states - the leap from one actuality and into a new. As Hegel also calls it, the dialectical moment.

Let me quote a piece from Hegel in order to explain this at greater length: "It is of the highest importance to interpret the dialectical [moment] properly, and to [re]cognise it. It is in general the principle of all motion, of all life, and of all activation in the

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<sup>39</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (Hackett Publishing Company Inc.,

actual world. Equally, the dialectical is also the soul of all genuinely scientific cognition. In our ordinary consciousness, not stopping at the abstract determinations of the understanding appears as simple fairness, in accordance with the proverb 'live and let live', so that one thing holds and the other does *also*. *But a closer look shows that the finite is not restricted merely from the outside; rather, it sublates itself by virtue of its own nature, and passes over, of itself, into its opposite.* Thus we say, for instance, that man is mortal, and we regard dying as having its ground only in external circumstances. In this way of looking at things, a man has two specific properties, namely, that he is alive and *also* mortal. But the proper interpretation is *that life as such bears the germ of death within itself, and that the finite sublates itself because it contradicts itself inwardly.*"<sup>40</sup>

Now, the leap must be understood, in my view, as a form of rebellion against one's own finite nature on behalf of the infinite in us. As we will remember, the leap is done, as I have explained it, at bottom to acquire a complement to our own infinity, so that we become able to relate to ourselves by means of an ideal that does not involve finite and transitory categories, and thereby escape despair.

This computes into the state of affairs that not only is the leap of faith related to the concept of negation in the sense that it is a transcendence of a given state for the benefit of its antithetical state, it also is a response to a given contradiction that exists within a being. What I have called the paradox of existence.

The only difference that exists, as I see it, and which is a major difference, is that the leap of faith is a free choice, and not a necessary development according to the nature of the being in question. The leap of faith is not, as Hegel depicts death to be in the passage quoted above, something that lies germinating in the interior of a being and that slowly rises to the surface as a natural development. It is a willed occurrence, in the sense that it is not something that *had* to develop in a man over the course of time and in accordance to strict laws of development, it is something that the man in question made happen.

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1991), 93.

Before we go further with this, I would like to remark that this difference between Hegelian negation and the Kierkegaardian leap actually coincides with one of Kierkegaard's main objections to the Hegelian system: The objection that it is impossible to make change into a logical category. Followingly that the Hegelian system is at its very core constructed about a fundamental misunderstanding, and is, in reality, nothing but a phantom of the imagination. For as we have seen, the dialectic that is the heart of Hegel's thought utilizes the negative as its main ingredient, and it is impossible to make this dialectic work without it - the very notion of such an attempt is, in fact, manifestly nonsensical.

The problem with the negative, as Kierkegaard sees it, is that it belongs to a different sphere than that of thought. For what Hegel attempts to do with his logical system is to describe the nature of existence and the world in a Platonic sense. To see it objectively and *sub specie aeternitatis*. Now, what remarks Hegel in his attempt to describe the world in this metaphysical sense, is that he acknowledges that to do this, one has to make the negative, or change, into a factor of the system itself. This is his way of going beyond a strictly Platonic metaphysics, in which essences are eternal and atemporal, by making essences themselves into something dynamic and evolving. To Hegel an essence is a composition of opposed forces that develop along a trajectory that is decided through the struggle of these forces that makes it up.

What he does not see, according to Kierkegaard, is that though this is correct, in the sense that the negative, or change, is the essential characteristic of existence, it is impossible to represent this in thought. Because if you attempt to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis* - from the point of view of eternity, that is, outside of time - then change is inconceivable. As Kierkegaard himself says: "At tænke Existents sub specie æterni og i Abstraktion, er væsentligen at ophæve den, og Fortjenesten ligesom den udbasunede med at hæve Modsigelsens Grundsætning. Existents lader sig ikke tænke uden Bevægelse, og Bevægelse lader sig ikke tænke sub specie æterni. At udelade Bevægelsen er just ikke noget Mesterstykke, og at faae den ind i Logiken som Overgang, og med den Tid og Rum, er kun ny Forvirring."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, 128 - 129. My emphases.

And it is only confusion, because as Kierkegaard goes on to say: "*Forsaavidt al Tænken imidlertid er evig, er Vanskeligheden for den Existerende. Existents er ligesom Bevægelse en saare vanskelig Sag at omgaaes. Tænker jeg den, saa hæver jeg den, og saa tænker jeg den ikke.*"<sup>42</sup>

What I believe Kierkegaard is aiming at, is that thought has the property that anything captured by it is *infinitized*. (And I will explain what I mean by that.) For example, say you are thinking of a tree, the tree right in front of you as you have halted your stroll through the park, if so, then you are not, actually, thinking of *that* tree. The tree right in front of you. You are entertaining a thought of a tree of *the kind* that are in front of you, so much is true, but nothing separates this thought that you are entertaining at this exact instance, from a thought entertained at another instance, in front of another tree, but one of the same type as the first one. For thought, according to Kierkegaard, deals exclusively in *types*: "Men at existere betyder først og fremmest at være en Enkelt, og derfor er det, at Tænkningen maa see bort fra Existents, fordi det Enkelte ikke lader sig tænke, men kun det Almene."<sup>43</sup> And it is in this sense that thought is infinite. In the sense that it does not involve finite and particular objects with a limited and unstable existence, but only types. And types are infinite in the sense that they themselves never undergo change. They are eternal in the sense that they are *not* a part of existence, and existence is what is temporal. For whereas every particular object will wither and change and decay, for every particular object is finite, a thought will always be the thought that is. It does not, in itself, contain an impetus to change.

This has to do with the fact that thought, as Kierkegaard conceives of it, is a medium of pure possibility. And what is meant by that, is that thought, in its nature as something inherently general, is a natural contrast to the real, which is precisely a medium of actuality. (The adverse of possibility.) For though thought represents the real, and thereby relates to it, it represents it as something the real is *not*. It represents it in the form of a type, of a composite concept made up of the general features of the object in question. As Kierkegaard states it in *Sygdommen til Døden*: "...man kan ikke

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<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 297. My emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 297. My emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 315 - 316

tænke et enkelt Menneske, men kun Begrebet Menneske."<sup>44</sup> This makes thought in a very important sense independent of the real. For thought never involves itself with what makes up the real as such - particular objects. It cannot, as we have seen, think a particular, but must always render the particular as a type. In this sense, thought is always, in a manner of speaking, a false rendition of the real. Thought is in its nature a fictitious, or imaginary medium. Something forever *unreal*. For it does not merely copy the real as it is, our thought does not revolve around separate and isolated impressions that stand unrelated to each other before our mind's eye, it infinitizes the real, and makes it into types. And a type never refers solely to one particular representative of its nature. It refers to all, and therefore to none in particular. And can accordingly be said to be an eternal possibility, because it relates to the real as possibility relates to the actual. As something that is, but is not the realized case.

Kierkegaard formulates this as follows: "Abstraktionen afhandler Mulighed og Virkelighed, men dens Opfattelse af Virkeligheden er en *falsk Gjengivelse*, da Mediet ikke er Virkeligheden men Muligheden. Kun ved at ophæve Virkeligheden kan Abstraktionen faae fat paa den, men at ophæve den, er netop at forvandle den til Mulighed. Alt, hvad der i Abstraktionens Sprog indenfor Abstraktionen siges om Virkelighed, siges indenfor Muligheden."<sup>45</sup>

These reflections bear directly on the issue of change that we began with in the following manner: Change is inherently a discontinuity. It is a process by which an object becomes different from what it was while still, in a sense, remaining the same. A process, through which, a possibility that lies immanent within the object in question is definitely realized, or actualized. It is hence an exclusion of a current actuality (together with a number of other different possibilities) on behalf of one chosen possibility. And in this sense it is something antithetical to thought. For in thought, nothing is definitely realized, but everything is conceived of according to its general nature. In other words, in view of all the inherent capabilities and possibilities that the object in question has. While it is exactly through the process of change that a particular object differentiates itself from its ideal type, and becomes an object with a specific set of properties. For it is through its specificity, through the fact that it has

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<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden*, in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 268.

developed a limited set of the possibilities inherent in it, that it diverges from the ideal type. Its singularity and particularity consists in - *for* thought - a limitation of its general nature and potential.

Hence it is in this sense that change, the negative, which is something that belongs to existence, is impossible to think. For it is a process antithetical to the medium of thought, in which nothing is definitely realized to the exclusion of something else, but which is precisely the world viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, outside of change.

To return to there we left of, the manner in which the leap of faith exemplifies Kierkegaard's critique of the Hegelian negation, is that in it we can clearly see the principle of negation, but it is now used in a manner that contrasts with Hegel's. Kierkegaard does not seek to describe reality through his concept of the leap. The leap is instead exactly the point at which his own theory comes to an end, for whereas Hegel's theory is built upon, and begins with, the notion of negation, Kierkegaard's thought can be said to, not begin with it, but lead up to the negation. His project is to make people perform the leap, as it is through the leap that one wins faith. The leap is, therefore, nothing that takes place *in* his theory, as negation takes place *in* Hegel's. The leap can only be realized in a particular individual.

At the outset of this section I voiced the thought that since we can know that it is impossible for us to enter into a conventional epistemic relation to the Absolute, to God, this knowledge itself actually opens up of us a manner in which we *can* come to relate to the Absolute - paradoxical as that may seem. The manner in which this may come about is that this knowledge allows us to identify the Absolute with that which we are not, with that which is *other* than ourselves and is not of us. The reasoning here can be understood along the following lines: We cannot directly relate to the Absolute because the Absolute is infinite, and we are finite - or, at least, not wholly infinite, but a middle term in-between the wholly infinite and its counterpart. We are a synthesis of the infinite and finite. But as such a synthesis, it is our finiteness that causes us to *not* be of the nature of the infinite. So, in regard to the infinite, we are finite. As such, we are categorically separated from the Absolute. We are different

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<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 303. My emphasis.

from it. But that correspondingly means that the Absolute is different from us - it is that which we are not. It is our negation.

This puts us in the position of being able to relate to the Absolute, not as a positive given entity, but as a contrast to ourselves which we do know. We cannot know what the Absolute is exactly, that much is given, but we can know what it is not. So by acting against ourselves, by leaving what defines us as whom we are behind, and stepping out beyond ourselves, we can throw ourselves into a relation with the Absolute. We know, namely, that the Absolute is that which is beyond us, and so we make this step out beyond ourselves in order to reach it. And in this context, where what is at stake is a belief, a state of conviction, what we do in order to make this step beyond ourselves, is to believe against ourselves. We make the criteria of being rationally unbelievable into the criteria of what we are to believe in. Hence, what fuels faith is that it is absurd: "... thi det Absurde er netop Troens Gjenstand og det Eneste, der lader sig troe."<sup>46</sup>

And as Kierkegaard says later on: "Saasnat Uvisheden ikke er Vishedens Form, saasnat Uvisheden ikke bestandigt holder den Religieuse svævende, for bestandigt at gribe Visheden, saasnat Visheden ligesom plomberer den Religieuse, ja saa er han naturligviis ifærd med at blive Masse."<sup>47</sup>

Hence, to have faith is to have a belief that one is not entitled to have, in a rational sense. It is to believe in something more than one is capable of believing in, to be afloat, as Kierkegaard phrases it, beyond the certain and the rational.

What is taking place here, through this step, this leap into faith, may be difficult to comprehend. I certainly find it difficult to put clearly into words, but, in essence, the movement from the state of doubt and to the state of absolute belief - to faith - is not done, as I have frequently emphasized, through a rational progression, through the understanding of some fact or reason, but by a negation of this doubt - by a stepping beyond of the elements that makes the doubt actual. And this negation of the doubt and of the elements that fuel it is, in a sense, also a negation of oneself, and one's own

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<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 197.

nature. It is the act of embracing what cannot be known by us as we are, precisely because it cannot be known by us. The subject in making this step does not act upon an understanding of the Absolute he seeks to embrace, but acts upon an understanding of what it is not. The Absolute is the negation of himself. Hence the subject goes against himself in order to acquire it. For by negating itself, the subject reaches the negation of itself, which is the Absolute.

In this stepping beyond, we see perfectly exemplified the main thrust of the Hegelian principle of negation. A principle that holds that a new state of being is got at through a contradiction of the current state. Not through a simple causal relation. The new state is not the effect of a cause that in some sense contains the effect in question as a possible outcome. Something that can, for example be said of a simple mechanical reaction, wherein the movement that is caused is contained within the movement that causes it. The movement of one billiard ball moves another billiard ball. Movement causes movement - the effect is contained within the cause. In contradistinction to this, Hegel holds that change takes place through a dialectical relation. Through a revolutionary reaction, where the effect is precisely *not* contained within the cause, but where the effect is the negation and contradiction of the prior the state. And faith is precisely such a revolution, as it is defined for the subject that acquires it, not as a positive state in itself - as a response to a reason - but as the contrast to the skeptical doubt that is his by force of his nature. The leap of faith is the overturning of the doubt, and it gets its meaning and becomes what it is by being precisely this. It has not positive meaning as such. It is the antithetical and complementary *other* of this doubt. And it is got at by the free choice of the subject, as the subject chooses to believe against himself, chooses to transcend the doubt and reach God negatively.

Herein lies the fact that faith is a continual process, and not something that is acquired definitely once it is acquired. For faith cannot exist other than as the negative of the state of doubt that is a human being's natural condition, or rather is the definite expression as regards knowledge, of a human being's finite nature. Faith is, followingly, not stable in itself, but requires the contrast of doubt to always be what it is. Hence, to have faith, is to live in an eternal repetition, an eternal struggle between

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<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 499.



doubt and conviction. It is, so to speak, to live in the leap without ever landing.

## 2.8 - Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to formulate an understanding, in the form of a two-step process, of how one is to acquire an absolute belief in God in Kierkegaard's sense. My idea has been that this state of belief is achieved, *not* through a rational development, but through a negative and irrational leap, or dialectical moment, as Hegel would have called it. A negative leap wherein the extreme of one position (absolute doubt) overturns into its natural opposite (absolute conviction) through the free choice of the individual itself.

The reason that this belief becomes absolute is to my mind two-fold: Firstly, it is because the state of belief in question is consciously and intentionally irrational. Hence, it is immune to further rational correction, not because it is rationally indisputable, but because it is *simply* indisputable - it has no rational ground that validates it, and therefore there exists no basis upon which one can rationally approach it. Nor, and connected with this, is it a belief than one should feel the need to intersubjectively defend and argue for. By being what it is, it is an essentially subjective belief. And one must bear it all by oneself.

Secondly, it is absolute because what keeps the individual committed to the belief is his, or her, wish to escape despair - despair being a constant (and thereby infinite) concern for the individual, as it is a natural consequence of the nature of the individual's being, and something the individual is unable to escape by any other route.

As to how faith enables one to escape despair, that is the topic of the next chapter.

### 3 - The second level of faith; faith as emotional autonomy

#### 3.1 - Introduction

One of the definitions of faith that I gave in Section 2.1 was that faith was the opposite, or negation, of despair. This feature of faith was also, moreover, what I presented as the prime motivating factor as to why someone should wish to acquire an absolute belief in God (see Section 2.5). But still, on the basis of the whole Chapter 2, one does not learn just as to how faith is the state of not being in despair, as to how a belief in God succeeds in relieving one from this emotional agony. This I wish to treat in this chapter.

What I did say about the matter in Chapter 2 was that faith supplied one with an infinite ideal by which one could relate to oneself, so as to avoid relating to oneself through finite and unstable ideals. For despair is viewed throughout this essay as the state of not being what one wants to be, i.e. of not conforming to the ideal that one has for oneself (see especially Section 2.5).<sup>48</sup> What I seek to do here, is to deepen just what is meant by this. For contrary to what may be the obvious interpretation, it is not the case that one automatically gains God and the Christian ethics as the ideal that one holds for oneself by gaining faith. The reason for this is that what I speak of as an individual's ideal, though related to the sphere of ethics proper, first and foremost concerns one's own relation to oneself and who one is - in the sense that one's ideal is the identity that one feels that one ought to have. One's ideal is an expression of the

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<sup>48</sup> For those of you that are already familiar with Kierkegaard's main treatise upon despair (*Sydommen til Døden*) my talk of "ideals" might seem a bit confusing, as this word is not used by Kierkegaard himself. Though that it is true, it is nonetheless a concept that he uses implicitly (that is, at least, my conviction). In order to see this, I refer you to the pages 173 and 233 of *Sydommen til Døden* (as found in *Frygt og Bæven; Sydommen til Døden; Taler*). On page 173 it can be seen that Kierkegaard explicitly states that a man's self is created (Kierkegaard uses the Danish word "sat") by something other than itself, and that in relating to itself, man's self also relates to this other. What is more, he says that it is the relation to this other that makes it possible for a man to "fortvivlet at ville være sig selv". Which is to say that it is this relation that makes it possible for a man to experience the form of despair that it is to want to be someone that he knows that he is not. The form of despair brought on by having an ideal that one fails to conform to. (That it is here spoken of simply as a "form of despair", and not as despair itself, can be ignored as the relations between the different forms of despair in question are dialectical – they are defined on the basis of each other, and represents inherently the same thing.) On page 233 Kierkegaard goes on to explicate the idea that man's self is a self that is created in relation to an exterior standard – i.e. an ideal. It is on the basis of these passages that I use the concept of an ideal.

person that one feels one ought to be. Now, it easy to see how this does relate to ethics, that is, how it relates to our relationships with other people, as who one wants to be, and followingly appear as, invariably influence how one behaves towards others. But it is not in this sense that we are interested in it here. Here we are interested in one's ideal in the sense of one's own relation to it and to oneself. In a private, personal and interior sense, that is.

A person's ideal, as defined above, is inseparably connected with a person's identity. One cannot, for example, remove the ideal of being a brilliant author from the mind of William Faulkner, had this been possible, and then imagine that one would be confronted by the very same individual as before this operation. The ideal of being a brilliant author is constitutive, we must imagine to ourselves, of what it is like to be William Faulkner - as he was a quite ambitious and self-conscious author. And it is not just in the sense that without this ideal, Faulkner would not have become the man he became. It is, more importantly, in the sense that without this ideal Faulkner would not be the man that he actually was at any point of his career. What is at stake here is not the fact that who a person becomes is a function of who he wants to become, together with the pressures and opportunities inherent in the social field that he belongs to. What is at stake is the fact that who a person wants to be is an actual part of who a person is here and now. It is one of the basic truths of every normal person's psychological structure that he inherently relates to whom he is, and what he wants to be. So that who we are, generally speaking, is partly made up by our *relation to* whom we are and who we want to be. To see this point in relation to Kierkegaard, compare the definition of a human being that is given in Section 2.2, where it is defined as a relation between the finite and the infinite that inherently relates to what itself is.

Now, Christianity does not wish, nor attempt, through faith, to change our identity and personality. That it is not its aim. What it wishes to do is save us from despair. That is, save us from the possibility of not conforming to our own ideal for ourselves. And how it does this is what we will look into in the following.

### 3.2 - Kierkegaard's defence of the parable of Abraham and Isaac

The passage that is going to be the main element in my argument is located near the very beginning of *Frygt og Bæven*, where it forms a part of the section entitled "Foreløbig Expectoration". Now, this section is meant as a general introduction to the topics and thoughts that Kierkegaard intends to treat in the book as a whole, but in addition to this it also contains some of Kierkegaard's most lucid treatments of the nature of what he sees as the religious state. And, in contrast to what we have already seen of this state, it is not as to how one attains the state that he is interested here, but as to what psychological consequences the attainment of the state has for the individual in question. For the religious state does not end with one's absolute belief in God. No, when this matter is settled and one has performed the first motion, there comes a second phase, and one has to perform an additional motion. (These two motions each comprising one level of the two levels of faith that I spoke in the introduction [see Section 1.1].) Kierkegaard himself, of course, never treats this explicitly, and he never, to my knowledge, speaks of two motions of faith in this sense, nor of "a second phase". This is my way of interpreting the nature of the religious state. But it is not spurious and an expression of something wholly subjective on my part. I regard this interpretation as a natural consequence of attempting to understand Kierkegaard's ideal state. For Kierkegaard does always emphasize that the religious man gains a peculiar kind of boon by force of his conviction. As he formulates it in *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*: "Altsaa dette er det evig Visse, at hvad der behager Gud lykkes den Fromme. Men nu det Næste; hvad er det, der behager Gud? Er det Dette eller Hiint, er det denne Livsstilling han skal vælge, denne Pige han skal ægte, dette Arbeide han skal begynde, dette Foretagende han skal opgive? Ja maaskee, og maaskee ikke. Er dette ikke ironisk nok? Og dog er det evigt vist, og der er Intet saa vist, som dette, at hvad der behager Gud det lykkes den Fromme. *Ja, men derfor skal den Religiøuse ikke saa meget bekymre sig om det Udvortes, men eftertrægte de høieste Gøder, Sjælens Fred, sin Sjæls Frelse: dette behager altid Gud. Og det er vist, o saa vist som at Gud lever, at hvad der behager Gud, det lykkes den Fromme.*"<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift I*, 498 - 499. My emphasis.

Peace of mind - that is the boon that the religious man gains. Or, as we have spoken of it earlier on, he becomes immune to despair. But, as I have mentioned, it is not clear, certainly not on account of the discussion contained in Chapter 2, just as to how faith makes one immune to despair. And this process, I postulate, the process of becoming immune, necessitates an additional and new motion that the individual has to perform. (By the old motion, I mean to denote the process of actually gaining faith - the leap.) The reason that I postulate this, has to do with how Kierkegaard describes the man of faith in the relevant passages of *Frygt og Bæven*. For there he describes the truly religious man - the Knight of Faith, as he names him - as a man capable of going through a peculiar sort of movement, or motion. A motion that enables him, on the one hand, to resign from the world and to empty it of emotional significance, and on the other, to win it back. But not through a renewed faith in it as it is, and an accompanying novel emotional attachment to it. No, he wins back his relation to the world through his relation to God. For the Knight of Faith, God becomes a mediating factor in-between himself and world, so that even if the world grossly mistreats him, he has confidence that it will turn out for the best - in the end. In short, this is actually how one escapes despair. Through faith in God, one does not regard what happens in the world as having direct significance for one, because one knows, that it in the end, God will set it aright. And because of this, one will never truly fail one's ideal, as whatever happens, it will all end in a satisfactory manner when the last note has been sung.

This is, I confess, a rather crude way of formulating the matter, and in what follows I will expound upon it, and show how Kierkegaard thinks that it is possible to attain this kind emotional autonomy vis-à-vis one's surroundings in more technical terms. But before we begin with this, let us first situate our coming discussion in relation to the contents of the book as a whole.

The book, *Frygt og Bæven*, is in essence a discussion of how one is to interpret the parable of Abraham and Isaac. Where the emphasize is placed upon the ethical dilemmas that attach to the figure of Abraham, and to the parable as such in which this figure resides. For in the parable, Abraham is given a trial of faith, though he does not himself know that what he undergoes is merely a trial - a test of his devotion. As he experiences it, he is simply one day commanded by God to sacrifice his only son

Isaac. That is, he is commanded to perform, what in ethical terms is, a murder. In response to this command, Abraham sets out from his home accompanied by his son, and fully intending to actually kill Isaac on God's behalf. He has no awareness of the fact that God does not intend to let him go through with it. He is set on performing as God wishes. Now, as it happens, God does not wish for Abraham to fulfil the command. And he stops Abraham from seeing it through, so that Abraham does not kill Isaac. Instead, the story ends with Abraham and Isaac offering a ram to God that God himself brings forth before them, in order to praise God's benevolence.

The problem with this tale (of which you were now only presented with the essential details) is that, though Abraham is stopped by God before he actually performs the misdeed of murdering Isaac, Abraham was fully willing to perform it, and would have performed it, or so the story indicates, if God had not intervened. As a consequence, Abraham potentially killed in the name of God, and fully intended to kill. Which is a highly problematical feature in someone that is presented, in Kierkegaard's words, as the father of faith<sup>50</sup> - as the epitome of all that Christianity stands for. Seeing as to fully intend to murder someone is a decidedly immoral act. And it is therefore questionable if someone willing to murder another person, let alone his own son, is worthy of reverence. For he is certainly not worthy of reverence in a moral sense.

Moreover, because of the dubious nature of its content, the parable itself becomes a problem. For what does it mean to preach Abraham's willingness to perform this misdeed? And what is it meant to convey to hold this willingness up as an ideal from which one should learn? Learn what? That to murder in the name of God is acceptable? That one should be willing to do anything, absolutely anything, for one's faith, even what one knows in an ethical sense one ought *not* to do? This furthermore, as anyone can see, does not relate well to the rest of the Christian doctrine. Especially to its emphasis on compassion, brotherly love and the innate worth of every human being, even of the ones that it categorizes as "sinners", and in this context, the parable becomes a problem. It is safe to say that its role in Christian dogmatics has been much disputed over the years.

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<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 21

Kierkegaard's intention is to defend this parable. And in order to defend it he has to prove to us that there exists a sense in which Abraham's behaviour is not something abhorrent. What is more, in order for it to be an ideal for us - for Abraham to be a sort of religious hero and paragon, which is precisely what Kierkegaard intends for him to be, as he speaks of him as a Knight of Faith, or as *the* Knight of faith<sup>51</sup> (a knight being the quintessential romantic hero) - Kierkegaard has to prove to us that there exists a sense in which his behaviour actually is commendable.

This intention reveals itself especially well at the end of the introductory part of the book where Kierkegaard writes as follows: "Det er da nu min Agt af Fortællingen om Abraham i Form af Problemata at uddrage det Dialektiske, der ligger i den, for at see, hvilket uhyre Paradox Troen er, et Paradox, der formaaer at gjøre et Mord til en hellig og gudvelbehagelig Handling..."<sup>52</sup>

The way in which he goes about this project, is to argue that there takes a place a teleological suspension of the ethical in view to the story of Abraham. Which is to say that what rescues Abraham to Kierkegaard's mind, is that Abraham does not perform an act that belongs to the ethical sphere at all. This in the sense that it is neither ethical, nor unethical - it is beyond the bounds of the ethical. So that the validity of the ethical is suspended with regard to it. At the same time, it is not an *aesthetical* act either, in Kierkegaard's strict sense of this term (see below). That is, it is not performed for the sake of some calculated gain in order to satisfy a subjective desire. Nor could it have been, if it were to escape the ethical. For aesthetical sphere does not lie beyond the ethical sphere - it lies below it, according to Kierkegaard. It is that which the ethical negates in order to be what it is.

What I am referring to now in speaking of the ethical and the aesthetical as rigidly defined "spheres", is what is known as Kierkegaard's theory of "the stages". Which I here will give a cursory explanation of, as an elementary acquaintance with this theory is needed for the overall understanding of *Frygt og Bæven* that I am formulating later on. The stages are, essentially, examples different forms of *Weltanschauung* - world-views. And there are, roughly speaking, three main spheres

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<sup>51</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven in Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 73.

according to Kierkegaard that one can live in and be a part of: The aesthetical, the ethical and the religious. In saying that, it should at the same time be noted that there are not many people in the world that actually belong solely and deliberately to only *one* of the spheres in question. Most of us, are not nearly self-conscious enough to pull this off, nor is the single-minded determination needed a very common attribute among men. Instead, the multitude belong latently and half-heartedly a little to the one, and a little to other, and really, in a strict sense, to none of them (the one and the other being the ethical and the aesthetical - as the third sphere, the religious, does not allow entry for dabblers and half-hearts). The reason that I say that they do not, in a strict sense, belong to any of them, even though there is a sense in which they are connected to them, is that a prerequisite for clearly belonging to a sphere is that one consciously relates to oneself as a participant in that sphere in question, one has to have made a conscious commitment to it, and as I said above, such a conscious relationship to one's own existence is lacking in the common multitude, therefore they fail to qualify by default. Instead it can be said to be the case that the forces the spheres represent work latently and haphazardly in them, without they themselves attempting to bind up a strict continuity in their behaviour along any of the trajectories inherent in the given spheres.

For what it means to belong to a sphere, can precisely be approached by this metaphor that it is to follow a certain defined trajectory through life. As what characterizes a sphere is that it represents a certain way in which an individual can find a meaning with his existence. Each sphere representing a driving force that potentially propels an individual in certain direction through his life if he commits to it. A sphere is therefore something that provides an individual with a goal and a standard by which he can relate to his own life, and give it direction. The aesthetic, for example, places an ultimate value on his own purely subjective condition, on his feelings, moods and desires, in the sense that he always acts in view to satisfy his earthly needs, and make the most out of his emotional states. (Though not in a vulgar fashion, as Kierkegaard's aesthete is not animal-like in procuring for his needs, he is rather a connoisseur in the field, one that willingly puts himself through great hardships in order to experience an even sweeter prize.) In contradistinction the aesthete, the ethicist on

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<sup>52</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 52.



the other hand, steers himself consciously *not* in regard to his desires, but always with a view to what is ethical. And the religious, in the contradistinction to both of the foregoing, behaves in accordance with his private and wholly subjective relation to the Absolute itself - God.

In addition, it must be mentioned that the three spheres are ordered hierarchically, with the religious being at the top, and the aesthetic being at the bottom, the ethical forming a sort of middle in-between these. As to the reason behind this ordering, this will become apparent as we proceed with the general discussion in this section. At this point it is just important to keep it in mind that such an ordering exists. Also, I have actually already mentioned, at the end of the paragraph that led up to this little excursion over Kierkegaard's theory of the stages, an important factor in the interrelation between the spheres, namely the fact that the ethical is what it is by being *a negation* of the aesthetic, which means that it is what it is by being what the aesthetic is *not* - the ethical is a complementary contrast of the aesthetic.

This can, for example, be gathered from the following quote: "For *den ethiske Betragtning af Livet* er det da den Enkeltes Opgave, at *afføre sig selv Inderlighedens Bestemmelse og udtrykke denne i et Ydre*. Hver Gang den Enkelte krymper sig derved, hver Gang han vil holde sig tilbage i eller smutte ned igjen i Inderlighedens Bestemmelse af Følelse, Stemning o.s.v., da forsynder han sig, da ligger han i Anfægtelse."<sup>53</sup>

The term "the inner" is in this quote (as it also is in Kierkegaard's thought generally speaking) related to emotion, passion and mood. Which are all prototypical subjective elements - the elements that belong to the sphere of aesthetics proper. In opposition to this, the quote places "the outer", which is the ethical. Now, the *rationale* behind this dichotomy, and the manner in which it is formed, is that the ethical is, by Kierkegaard, defined as the inherently universal: "Det Ethiske er som saadant det Almene, og som det Almene Det, der er gjeldende for Enhver, hvilket fra en anden Side lader sig udtrykke saaledes, at det er gjeldende i ethvert Øyeblik."<sup>54</sup> It is that which inherently has validity for every one of us despite subjective differences.

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<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 66. My emphasis.

Despite, precisely, what is subjective in us. The ethical is, therefore, by virtue of its definition opposed to the aesthetical - it is the non-subjective, the objective, the universal. And to act ethically in an authentic sense becomes to act in a manner that is opposed to acting aesthetically. For in acting ethically, one has to act by virtue of what is universally valid, by virtue of what is one's duty, and therefore not by virtue of one's inclinations. And one's duty is, moreover, something that is of a contrasting nature than that of one's inclinations, as one's inclinations is something particular to oneself and hence subjective, duty (the ethically right thing to do), on the other hand, being universal.

As you may notice, in view of Kierkegaard's definitions above, Kierkegaard's concept of the ethical in *Frygt og Bæven* is markedly Kantian. As also Kant, in his ethical theories, defines acting ethically as precisely *not* acting on behalf of one's subjective inclinations - but as acting out of an understanding of the Categorical Imperative (which is to say, of what is universally right).<sup>55</sup>

So, in light of what has been said so far, it should become clear that in order for there to exist a suspension of the ethical, Abraham has to act in accordance with a sphere that lies beyond the ethical, as the ethical lies beyond the aesthetical. Which means that he has to act in a manner that is not informed and motivated by his subjective inclinations and desires, nor by what is his ethical duty. By what then, you ask? Kierkegaard's answer is his faith in God. And Kierkegaard's proposition by saying so is that the religious sphere is a sphere that lies beyond the ethical one, like the ethical lies beyond the aesthetical, so that an act done religiously would be suspended from an ethical judgement just as an ethical act would be suspended from an aesthetical judgement. (It should be quite clear that an act truly motivated by the ethical makes no sense from an aesthetical point of view, as it makes no reference to subjective inclinations, but only to universal duty. Hence it is suspended from aesthetical judgement. Which means that seen from the point of view of the aesthetical it is pure absurdity. For the aesthetical will never be in a position to understand it.)

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<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 53.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2007), 71 - 72.

As Kierkegaard states in this relation: "Troen er nemlig dette Paradox, at den Enkelte er høiere end det Almene, dog vel at mærke saaledes, at Bevægelsen gjentager sig, at han altsaa, efterat have været i det Almene, nu som den enkelte isolerer sig som høiere end det Almene."<sup>56</sup> (As I stated a little while back, Kierkegaard identifies the ethical with the universal, that is, "det Almene".)

Later on in the text following the passage just quoted Kierkegaard expounds on the above: "Troens Paradox er da dette, at den Enkelte er høiere end det Almene, *at den Enkelte, for at erindre om en nu sjeldnere dogmatisk Distinction, bestemmer sit Forhold til det Almene ved sit Forhold til det Absolute, ikke sit Forhold til det Absolute ved sit Forhold til det Almene.* Paradoxet kan ogsaa udtrykkes saaledes, at der er en absolut Pligt mod Gud; thi i dette Pligtforhold forholder den Enkelte som den Enkelte sig absolut til det Absolute. Naar det da i denne Forbindelse hedder, at det er Pligt at elske Gud, saa siges dermed noget Andet end i det Foregaaende; thi er denne Pligt absolut, saa er det Ethiske nedsat til det Relative. Heraf følger dog ikke, at dette skal tilintetgjøres, men det faaer et ganske andet Udtryk, det paradoxe Udtryk, saaledes at f.Ex. Kjærlighed til Gud kan bringe Troens Ridder til at give sin Kjærlighed til Næsten det modsatte Udtryk af hvad der ethisk talt er Pligt."<sup>57</sup>

The best manner in which to understand the idea that Kierkegaard is presenting here, to understand how the religious can succeed in being beyond the ethical, and thereby succeed in justifying acts contrary to what is ethically thought of as right and which, moreover, are seen to be *more* right, to actually outweigh the ethical in sense of importance, the best manner in which to understand this, is, I believe, to try to understand the full meaning of the particular part of the quote above that I have emphasised. Which means in a more general sense that we have to try to understand how the three mentioned spheres - the aesthetical, the ethical and the religious - each relate to the Absolute (and how they differ from one another in this regard).

If you now re-read the part of the quote that is emphasised, you will see that in it Kierkegaard defines the difference between the ethicist and religious, by how the two

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<sup>56</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 54.

<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 66 - 67. My emphasis.

relate to the two concepts of the Absolute and the universal. The ethicist relates to the Absolute by virtue of his relationship with the universal. A fact that must be understood in the sense that it is through the universal that he gains an absolute. So that, to the ethicist, it is precisely the ethical that is the Absolute. As the ethical is the medium that conveys absoluteness to him by being the conduit through which he can come into contact with it. Followingly, the ethicist does not stand in a direct relationship to the Absolute, but in a mediated relationship. A relationship that is mediated through the universal (the ethical is, as you will remember, defined as the universal - as what is universally valid). Making this mediating level into what appears to the ethicist to be the Absolute.

Were we to illustrate this idea metaphorically, we could use Platonic imagery, and say that an ethicist is like a man who has always been trapped inside a darkened room - a kind of Platonic cave. A room that has only one window, and in which this window is small, and perched high up on the wall, so that the man inside of the room is unable to look directly through it. Outside of the room there is light. Which, of course, filters through the window and into room. But to the man, whom has never been on the outside of this chamber, there is no light source beyond the window itself. He, we have to imagine, identifies the light with the medium that conveys it. And this situation is structurally identical to how the ethicist, I believe, identifies the universal with the Absolute. As it is the universal that places him in a relationship with the Absolute, and that he is, moreover, unable to otherwise interact with it, just as the man in the darkened room relates to the light as something that originates with the window, as he cannot know what lies beyond the walls that entrap him. None of them, not the ethicist, nor the man in the room, are able to place themselves in a direct relation with the source of their respective *illumination*, and they interact with this source through a mediate level, which for them takes on the aspect of being this source, as they are unable to separate the two from their given position.

I am now leaving the metaphor of the room behind, so as to turn to the situation of the religious. For here the metaphor is no longer fully representative of what is taking place. Its isomorphism extends only to the situation of the ethicist. Now, as regards the religious, he can be said to invert the general scenario that the ethicist finds himself to be in as described by Kierkegaard in his quote. That is, he relates to the

universal by virtue of his relationship with the Absolute, and not the other way around. To him, followingly, the Absolute is not something inherently universal. It is something he interacts with directly as the subject that he is, unmediated by any third category. Which implies that the Absolute, for the religious one, is a subjective Absolute. In the sense that the religious Absolute is private and personal and has validity uniquely for the religious individual alone. It is, therefore, something that cannot be explained or defended, not even formulated into a communicable principle. It cannot even be represented in thought: "Troen er netop dette Paradox, at den Enkelte som den Enkelte er høiere end det Almene, er berettiget ligeoverfor dette, ikke subordineret, men overordnet, dog vel at mærke saaledes, at det er den Enkelte, der efter at have været som den Enkelte det Almene underordnet, nu gennem det Almene bliver den Enkelte, der som den Enkelte staaer i et absolut Forhold til det Absolute. Dette Standpunkt lader sig ikke mediere; thi al Mediation skeer netop i Kraft af det Almene; det er og bliver i al Evighed et Paradox, *utilgængeligt for Tænkningen*."<sup>58</sup>

To be religious, then, is to stand isolated in a direct relationship to the Absolute. Hence it is to stand in a subjective relationship to the Absolute, since the entity that possess the direct relationship in question precisely is a subject. And what a subject relates to directly, or, we can say, *immediately*, it, followingly, relates to subjectively. To be religious is therefore to have a privileged and private access to the Absolute, in the same sense as we all have a privileged and private access to our own thoughts and emotional states. And analogously, just as we cannot *speak our emotions*, that is, cannot materialize our actual, particular emotions in speech and share them directly with somebody else, but only speak *about* them, represent them mediated by a third category, language - and the difference here, though obvious, is crucial - we cannot express the religiously Absolute. For what is subjective cannot become universal without losing precisely its subjectivity - without becoming objective: "Saasart jeg taler, udtrykker jeg det Almene, og naar jeg ikke gjør det, saa kan Ingen forstaae mig."<sup>59</sup>

What lies implicit in this is the thought that we can only communicate to one another

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<sup>58</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 54. My emphasis.

that which is shared by the both of us. And emotions are, by their very nature, intrinsic to a subject. They are directed at a specific subject, and exist only as this specific subject's emotions. They, as exactly the particular emotions that they are, cannot be experienced by anyone else. They are not something shared. Analogously, the religious Absolute is also bound to a specific subject in the same manner. Like an emotion it cannot be shared directly through speech, but what is more, if one attempts to represent it through speech, to make it into something one can share in, something universal, then it stops being what it is. Now this kind of sharing is actually possible with emotions, but if one attempts it with the religiously Absolute, then this Absolute becomes mediated by the universal, and thereby, it attempts to become expressed at what is an ethical level. Which is impossible. As it would then betray its inherently subjective nature and stop being the religiously Absolute.

Let me illustrate with the case of Abraham and Isaac: If Abraham, who is in the religious sphere, were to attempt to straightforwardly defend his own conduct by explicitly referring to his religious Absolute, he would end up making an ethical fallacy. For he would attempt to express his Absolute through thought and words, which we have already seen, are universal, that is, he would attempt to express his Absolute mediated by the universal. But then he would, *pr. definition*, enter into the ethical sphere, which is precisely the sphere of the Absolute interpreted universally (interpreted by the universal). And he would, moreover, make a statement that runs counter to the ethical as such. For as it is the command to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, that he attempts to defend, this cannot be understood as an expression of universal duty, followingly the ethical condemns it. Quoting Kierkegaard: "Saasnart da Abraham vil udtrykke sig i det Almene, saa maa han sige, at hans Situation er en Anfægtelse, thi han har intet høiere Udtryk af det Almene, der staaer over det Almene, han overtræder."<sup>60</sup>

In sum this means that the justifications open to the religious state cannot be properly expressed through language, and therefore not at all, as the justifications come out of an inherently subjective and personal relationship with the Absolute. The character of the religiously Absolute is to be a subjective Absolute.

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<sup>59</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 58.

Let us now for a moment leave both the ethicist and the religious aside, and turn to the aesthetician. The aesthetical is namely man's natural sphere, in the sense that the aesthetical forces are the ones that naturally dominates his behaviour, and shines through as the motivating factor for his actions - just think of children, and their impulse-based conduct. This make it a natural starting point for a wider investigation into the interrelations of the spheres and their different relations to the Absolute, with the final goal in mind to get a clearer picture of the specific relationship between the ethical and the religious.

Starting off, we must first of all observe that in contradistinction to both the ethicist and the religious, the aesthetician does not relate to the Absolute at all. As the aesthetician is foremostly occupied with his own subjective emotional states - he is an hedonist, of sorts. Though not necessarily a barbaric and crude one in the spirit of a run-of-the-mill Bacchus, or Dionysus, for Kierkegaard's typical aesthetic lives as much through his imagination as he does through actual behaviour, and he takes as much pleasure from imagined pleasures as he does real ones - that is, he gratifies his needs as much through imagined narratives, as he does real acts, but no matter what he does, and how he does it, the point stays the same that to him everything revolves around his own subjective state of contentment. We can actually say that for the aesthetician it is his own state of pleasure that is his Absolute. But we must then also understand that this is a false Absolute. Considering that this state has none of the characteristics that the Absolute has: It is not infinite, nor is it categorical. It is not something we could hope to capture with the metaphor: "a fixed and stable point", nor something we could speak of as "unchanging". As a matter of fact, it is the opposite of these descriptions. As an emotional state is something inherently unstable. Something that necessarily changes with the changing circumstances that the individual finds himself to be in, and that naturally passes over as time goes on. As such, the aesthetician does not seriously relate to anything Absolute, even if he attempts to, by treating his own state of satisfaction as the meaning of his life. And as a consequence, he leads a flickering life - always in the grip of whatever contingently happen to dominate him at a specific moment.

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<sup>60</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 58.

This nature of the aesthetical character is clearly pointed out to us by Judge Wilhelm (an ethicist) in a section of *Enten/Eller* where he, in an address to the aesthetician A, attempts to draw a psychological profile of A: "Du er en Hader af Virksomhed i Livet; meget rigtigt, *thi for at der skal være Mening i denne, maa Livet have Continuitet*, og det mangler Dit Liv. Du beskjeftiger Dig med Dine Studier, det er sandt, Du er endogsaa flittig; men det er kun for Din egen Skyld, og skeer saa lidet teleologisk som muligt. Forøvrigt er Du ledig, Du staaer, ligesom hine Arbeidere i Evangeliet, ledig paa Torvet, Du stikker Hænderne i Lommen og betragter Livet. Nu hviler Du i Fortvivlelsen, Intet beskjeftiger Dig, Du gaaer ikke af Veien for Noget, "om man rev Tagsteen ned, jeg gik dog ikke af Veien." Du er som en Døende, Du dør daglig, ikke i den dybe alvorlige Betydning, hvori man ellers tager dette Ord, men Livet har tabt sin Realitet og "Du beregner altid Din Levetid fra den ene Opsigelses-Dag til den anden." Du lader Alt passere Dig forbi, det gjør intet Indtryk, *men nu kommer der pludselig Noget, der griber Dig, en Idee, en Situation, et Smil af en ung Pige, og nu er Du "med"*; thi som Du ved visse Leiligheder ikke er "med", saa er Du til andre Tider med og i alle Maader til Tjeneste. Overalt hvor der er en Begivenhed, der er Du med. Du bærer Dig ad i Livet, som Du pleier at gjøre i Trængsel, "Du arbejder Dig ind i den tætteste Klynge, seer, om muligt, at blive trykket op over de Andre, saa Du kommer til at ligge ovenpaa dem, er Du først deroppe, saa gjør Du Dig det saa beqvemt som muligt, og saaledes lader Du Dig ogsaa bære igjennem Livet." Men naar Trængselen har ophørt, naar Begivenheden er forbi, saa staaer Du atter paa Gadehjørnet og seer paa Verden."<sup>61</sup>

As you can see, what Wilhelm chastises A for, is, as he puts it, his lack of continuity. The fact that A's behaviour is not an expression of an invariable code, of a true commitment, but is a pure function of his circumstances. He lacks, we can say, a deep-rooted and clearly defined will that steers him in a fixed direction. Instead, he dances in tune to whatever happens to dominate him at a certain moment. As Judge Wilhelm writes a little bit later on in *Enten/Eller*: "Det æsthetiske Individ betragter sig selv i sin Concretion og distingverer nu *inter et inter*. Han seer Noget som tilfældigt ham tilhørende, Andet som væsentligt. Denne Distinction er imidlertid yderst relativ;

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<sup>61</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Enten/Eller II*, 9th edition (Gyldendalske Boghandel, 2004), 183. My emphasis.



thi saalænge et Menneske blot lever æsthetisk, tilhører Alt ham egentlig lige tilfældigt, og det er blot Mangel paa Energi, naar et æsthetisk Individ fastholder denne Distinction."<sup>62</sup>

The step out of the sphere of the aesthetic and into the ethical is a conscious reaction to this frivolity that characterizes the aesthetic condition - to its lack of seriousness and direction. One makes the step, if one comes to see that in placing one's own emotions at the centre of one's life, one is forced vacillate as they vacillate in tune with the world surrounding one. One makes the step, therefore, if one grows tired of the continual eruption of despair that invariably comes over one each time the emotional pendulum swings, and the moment of joy passes. One makes the step, if one begins to reflect on the fact that one has structured oneself about something inherently fleeting and impermanent - one's emotions - and one seeks to compensate for this.

As the state the aesthician is in is caused by his devotion to his own emotional satisfaction, it is only natural that in order for him to compensate for this, the aesthician devotes himself to something inherently different from what he is now devoted to. That is, as an act of compensation, he goes from being devoted to what is truly subjective in him, his emotions, to what is *not* subjective at all - to the universal. That is, the ethical. In order to remedy his plight, he naturally seeks out the negative complement of his current ideal, so as to definitely escape it. And this means in the case of the aesthician that he replaces a standard that is subjective and capricious, with one that is communal and constant. Thereby, he wins an Absolute. And everything he does, so long as he holds himself to his new standard, will be the expression of a stable code. Judge Wilhelm expresses this as follows: "Den, der lever ethisk, har seet sig selv, kjender sig selv, gjennemtrænger med sin Bevidsthed sin hele Concretion, tillader ikke ubestemte Tanker at pusle om i ham, ikke fristende Muligheder at adsprede ham med deres Gjøgleværk, han er ikke sig selv som et Hexebrev, der snart kan komme Eet ud af, snart et Andet alt eftersom man vender og dreier det."<sup>63</sup> And as he notes a few pages before that passage, but in exactly the same vein: "Om det ethiske Individ kan man sige, at han er som det stille Vand, der har den

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<sup>62</sup> Kierkegaard, *Enten/Eller II*, 240.

dybe Grund, hvorimod Den, der lever æsthetisk, blot er overfladisk bevæget."<sup>64</sup>

In passing we can note that the mechanism that here is in play, when the aesthete becomes an ethicist, is again nothing other than a Hegelian negation. A movement of change by virtue of contradiction, wherein one extreme is exchanged for this extreme's radical other.

Now in order to relate this to the next step of the process, to the step from the ethical and into the religious, I want to re-introduce two terms that I used before without placing overtly much weight on them. Namely, that in forming part of the aesthetical sphere, a subject is in his outlook on life mainly directed towards his own *interior*, or *inside*. As he in regard to his own behaviour judges what he ought, and ought not to do, with references to its emotional effects upon him. In contradistinction to this, in virtue of gaining admittance to the ethical sphere, a subject is directed out beyond himself, to what is *exterior* to him, or *outside* of him. As I am going to say, he is directed towards his *outside*, as opposed to his inside. The reason for this, is that it is now in regard to how one universally ought to behave that he makes his personal judgements about what he is to do, and not with reference to anything immanent within his subjectivity. (As he is a subject, and hence, is in himself something particular, what is universal is naturally something different from what he is, and hence, it is something that could be said to be outside of him, as it does not belong to him, in an immanent sense.)

In the first instance, the standard to which he holds himself is, therefore, interior to him in an unproblematic sense, and in the second, this standard is once removed from him, as it does not relate directly to him as the particular subject that he is, but relates to him in virtue of him falling under the category of a general moral agent. We can formulate this as follows: in the aesthetical sphere the subject relates to himself as the subject that he is, but in the ethical he relates to himself in virtue of the fact that falls beneath the ethical domain. In the aesthetical, the subject relates to himself on an immediate level, in the ethical, on a mediate one - he relates to himself in virtue of belonging to a general category.

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<sup>63</sup> Kierkegaard, *Enten/eller II*, 239.

Let me give a quote from Kierkegaard that highlights the matter: "Først naar Individet selv er det Almene, først da lader det Ethiske sig realisere. Det er denne Hemmelighed, der ligger i Samvittigheden, det er denne Hemmelighed, det individuelle Liv har med sig selv, at det paa eengang er et individuelt Liv og tillige det Almene, om ikke umiddelbart som saadant, saa dog efter sin Mulighed. Den der betragter Livet ethisk, han seer det Almene, og Den der lever ethisk, han udtrykker i sit Liv det Almene, *han gjør sig til det almene Menneske*, ikke derved, at han affører sig sin Concretion, thi saa bliver han til slet Intet, men derved, at han ifører sig den og gennemtrænger den med det Almene. Det almene Menneske er nemlig ikke et Phantom, men ethvert Menneske er det almene Menneske, det vil sige, ethvert Menneske er anviist den Vei, ad hvilken han bliver det almene Menneske. Den der lever æsthetisk, han er det tilfældige Menneske, han troer at være det fuldkomne Menneske derved, at han er det eneste Menneske; *Den, der lever ethisk, arbejder hen til at blive det almene Menneske.*"<sup>65</sup>

This way of viewing the matter lets us see that though the subject by becoming an ethicist gains an Absolute and thereby wins continuity in his existence, which is to say that he rises above the instability and despair that belongs to aesthetical sphere, his conduct has, instead, a stable mainspring in the ethical, he, nonetheless, is now forced to deal with a new problem: The subject in question has namely invariably become alienated from itself. For in winning the ethical, it binds itself to a standard that is, as I have noted, *outside* of it and that, moreover, directly contrasts with who it is, subjectively speaking. So that it by relieving itself of one state of tension, the one that comes from not relating to any form Absolute at all, it now gains another such state - which is that it continually must bow down to an impersonal Absolute, and relate to itself as a general category, even though the subject is manifestly a particular and incommensurable someone.

The reality of this situation is, curiously enough, attested to by Judge Wilhelm himself, when he says the following: "Seer man det Ethiske, udenfor Personligheden

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<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard, *Enten/eller II*, 237.

<sup>65</sup> Kierkegaard, *Enten/eller II*, 236 - 237. My emphasis.

og i et udvortes Forhold til denne, saa har man opgivet Alt, saa har man fortvivlet."<sup>66</sup> Though his point, in the context he is speaking, is that the ethicist precisely does not have the ethical outside of himself: "Det ethiske Individ har da ikke Pligten udenfor sig, men i sig..."<sup>67</sup> But this is nothing but a misconception on his part - that is, at least, my understanding of it. For it must be remembered in all dealings with Judge Wilhelm that he is a convinced ethicist. He has committed himself categorically to the ethical. And if he is to uphold this categorical commitment he cannot, of course, find any faults with it. If so, there would invariably and necessarily come a time when he doubted it, but then, with this doubt, he would lose the main pillar of his existence, and be thrown head over heels into the bleakest form of despair. Followingly, he does not find any flaws with the ethical. He is blinded towards it because of all that he has invested in it. It is the meaning of his life.

To see that what Judge Wilhelm says in the above, that the ethical does not represent something essentially at odds with the subjectivity of man, to see that this is *not* the general approach that Kierkegaard adheres to, one can consult the book that is (probably) meant as the religious complement to the aesthetical and ethical views featured in *Enten/Eller*, namely: *Frygt og Bæven*. (All three books were published in the year 1843.) For here Kierkegaard states through the voice of Johannes de silentio, whom is a religious author, and therefore, in accordance with the understanding proposed here, he is not committed to the ethical, and in virtue of this able to give a more neutral treatment of it, he states: "Det Ethiske er som saadant det Almene, som det Almene er det igjen *det Aabenbare*. *Den Enkelte er som umiddelbar sandselig og sjælelig bestemt den Skjulte*. Hans ethiske Opgave er da den, at vikle sig ud af sin Skjulthed og blive aabenbar i det Almene."<sup>68</sup>

Hence, it is simply not the case what Judge Wilhelm upholds, that individual can become truly one with the ethical. For the ethical is the universal, and therefore, it is what is accessible to all and *revealed* to all, it is what is *intersubjective*. It is precisely not subjective. And any individual whatever is, in his very essence, a subject, something turned in upon himself - something hidden from everyone else. A fact that

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<sup>66</sup> Kierkegaard, *Enten/Eller II*, 236.

<sup>67</sup> Kierkegaard, *Enten/Eller II*, 237.

<sup>68</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 77. My emphasis.

maybe gets its most powerful attestation in *Begrebet Angest* where Kierkegaard writes the following: "Først naar Begrebet af det Enkelte er givet, først da er der Tale om det Selviske, men uagtet der har levet talløse Millioner af saadanne Selv'er, saa kan ingen Videnskab sige, hvad det er, uden igjen at udsige det ganske almindeligt. Og dette er Livets Vidunderlighed, at ethvert Menneske, der agter paa sig selv, veed, hvad ingen Videnskab veed, da han veed, hvo han selv er..."<sup>69</sup>

That we can know ourselves in a sense that no science can know us, and that is to say, in a sense in which no other person can know us, attests to the fact that we are disclosed to ourselves on a level that remains essentially hidden from the world at large. We have an immediate relation to who we are, that is not shared by any other finite being whatsoever. As they always relate to us, as we relate to them, and that is to say mediately, by means of one's perception and cognition. Now, it is true that we are not wholly transparent to ourselves, and that there exists motives and impulses in us that escape us, that are part of our unconscious, so that we also have to relate to ourselves empirically on some issues. But that is not what is at issue here. The point is that we have an immediate and constant access to our own being. As we are that very being to which we relate to. And we are never separated from ourselves in the sense that we are separated from every other thing in the world, and nor do we relate to ourselves through the epistemical apparatus that guides our movements among these things.

What is implied in this, in our special relation to ourselves, is that we stand in an immediate relation to ourselves as the particular object that we are - it is, furthermore, precisely this relation that makes us into a subject. The relation is what secures that we have an "interior", a private space to which only we have access, as the "space" in question is nothing other than the closed relationship of ourselves to ourselves.

What this means, to Kierkegaard, is that we stand in a position to relate to our own singular uniqueness. And only we stand in this position. No one else can relate to us in this sense. As we in turn can relate to no other being's singular uniqueness. For in

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<sup>69</sup> Kierkegaard. *Begrebet Angest*, 73.

as much as we relate to other particulars, and in as much as others relate to us, the relationship in question is one in which an existent relates to another and separate existent. Which in no sense can be an immediate relationship, as one in a relationship to an other totally lacks the constancy that we find in one's relation to oneself. Instead one's relation to a separate being is mediated by one's perception and one's understanding. It is formed out of a limited set of empirical data which one interprets and forms an understanding of. Therefore, we do not relate to a particular that we encounter as it is *in itself*, but we form an opinion of what this particular is - what its essence is. And thereby we subordinate it to an universal. (An essence is an universal.) And this is really what Kierkegaard is saying in the following quote, that I have given once before, but that it is pertinent to give also here: "...man kan ikke tænke et enkelt Menneske, men kun Begrebet Menneske."<sup>70</sup> Which is to say that you cannot relate to a particular man that is different from yourself, without necessarily thinking of him as "a man" - which is to subordinate him to the concept of man, to identify him with an universal.

The essence of this discussion leads up to the following: We are, everyone of us, singularly unique. And we, and only we ourselves, can and must relate to our own uniqueness. This is a part of our nature as beings endowed with subjectivity. But, and here comes the difficulty with regard to the ethical: "...Den, der lever ethisk, arbejder hen til at blive det almene Menneske."<sup>71</sup> Thereby, the tension and despair that belongs to the ethical sphere is given by necessity. For we are not universal, we are particular, unique and singular, and the ethical will followingly always be something that stands opposed to our given nature. It is an outside to our inside. And if we live ethically, as Judge Wilhelm inadvertently attests to, we live in despair - as we live as something we are not.

The religious sphere then, is a response to this tension and despair inherent in the ethical. And it can be said to lie beyond, or to exceed, the ethical - and thereby escaping the despair that belongs to it - by allowing a subject to come into a direct relationship with the Absolute, unmediated by the universal. In virtue of this, it is a sort of synthesis of the two foregoing spheres that avoids the flaws of both. It is the

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<sup>70</sup> Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden in Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 268.

sphere of the subjective Absolute. A sphere in which one is, as one is in the aesthetical sphere, directed towards one's subjective self, while at the same time being in possession of the Absolute, like one is in the ethical sphere.

This has a couple of consequences that I would like to draw attention to: Firstly, that, as we have already been made aware of, a religious justification of one's action is, in virtue of being a religious one, *incommunicable*. This comes, for example, clearly to the fore in the following quote: "Hvorledes existerer da Abraham? Han troede. Dette er det Paradox, ved hvilket han bliver paa Spidsen, *hvilket han ikke kan gjøre tydeligt for nogen Anden*, thi Paradoxet er, at han som den Enkelte sætter sig i et absolut Forhold til det Absolute. Er han berettiget? Hans Berettigelse er igjen det Paradoxe; thi dersom han er det, er han det ikke i Kraft af at være noget Almeent, men *i Kraft af at være den Enkelte*."<sup>72</sup> A religious justification is, as we see, essentially tied up with the subjective level, and therefore also necessarily tied up with a specific subject. As the subjective level only exist in specific subjects, and not in any way universally. Hence, such a justification is only accessible through a specific someone's interior, which makes it a wholly private affair. Something we, that are different from this subject, are incapable of relating to. Just as, to remind you of an analogy that I used a little while back, we cannot in a straightforward sense feel this person's emotions. As Kierkegaard says: "...den, der gaaer Troens trange Vei, ham kan Ingen raade, *Ingen forstaae*."<sup>73</sup>

The second consequence that I would like to draw attention to is what this inherently subjective character of the religious sphere has to say in relation to how one is to judge the nature of Abraham's actions, and to how it relates to the interpretation of the parable of Abraham and Isaac as such. For to remind you of Kierkegaard's strategy, what saves the parable is that it is not meant to be interpreted ethically. What Abraham does is suspended from the ethical as the act is an expression of a sphere of existence that lies beyond the ethical one. What Abraham does is the result of a personal communion with God. He acts upon a personally given command that has the paradoxical quality of being absolute, as it originates with the Absolute - God -

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<sup>71</sup> Kierkegaard, *Enten/eller II*, 237.

<sup>72</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 60. My emphasis.

<sup>73</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 64. My emphasis.

and yet valid only for him. The command given is something that has to be obeyed unconditionally just like Kant's Categorical Imperative, but unlike this Imperative, it is not something valid for anyone besides Abraham himself. As it is an expression of Abraham's subjective relation to the Absolute.

It is in this that we can see how the religious is beyond the ethical. In that it allows for an individual to interact with the Absolute on a personal basis, so that it does not demand of it that it sacrifices its inherent individuality in order to appropriate a stable continuity in its existence. Which is precisely what it must do in the ethical - as it there must realize itself as "det almene Menneske". Instead, in the religious, it gains this stability and continuity through its personal relationship with God. (In this regard it interesting to note that the standard by which one judges the three different spheres up against each other is how well they let the individual individually express the Absolute. The aesthetical does not have an Absolute, but it has individuality. The ethical has an Absolute, but at the cost of one's individuality. While the religious is the ideal sphere where the Absolute and the individual coincide. And really, the whole of Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* can be seen in this light, as a body work that attempts to reconcile man's subjectivity with the presence of an unconditional Absolute. For it must of course be clear to anyone that has thought seriously about the matter that such an Absolute has to be a negative vis-à-vis a subject itself. As it has to be something different from the subject - if it were not, that would mean that the subject itself in some manner *would be* the Absolute, something we have seen not to be the case through Kierkegaard's portrayal of the aesthetic. It does not belong to the inherently subjective to be absolute. Therefore, the Absolute will be something that is different from the subject, and that yet has an utmost significance for it. The Absolute will therefore be something that limits and constrains the subject, that forces it to conform to a certain standard, which is systematically different from the subject's own will. And the whole of Kierkegaard's problem may be to find a way by which such a standard is not an outside to a subjective inside. His answer being the religious.)

Now, in the context we are here, the thing to observe is the inherently private and subjective nature of the religiously Absolute. For whatever one learns through this relationship, it will be an example of a truth of what one has to do that is valid only for a specific subject alone. That is, religiously speaking Abraham's actions are not



something worthy of emulation. Not because Abraham is not a hero of the religious, but because emulation makes no sense in the religious sphere. What Abraham does is an expression of *his* relationship with the Absolute. And this can say nothing of our potential relationship with it, and what it will demand of us.

This state of affairs is attested to by Kierkegaard in the following quote: "Man indbilder sig vel, at den Enkelte kan gjøre sig forstaaelig for en anden Enkelt, der er i samme Casus. En saadan Betragtning var utænkelig, hvis man ikke paa saa mange Maader i vor Tid søgte at snige sig lumskelig ind i det Store. *Den ene Troens Ridder kan slet ikke hjælpe den anden.* Enten bliver den Enkelte selv en Troens Ridder derved, at han tager Paradoxet paa sig, eller han bliver det aldrig. Compagniskab i disse Regioner er aldeles utænkeligt. *Enhver nærmere Explication af hvad der skal forstaaes ved Isaak kan den Enkelte bestandig kun give sig selv.* Og hvis man endog nok saa nøie kunde bestemme, almindeligt talt, hvad der skulde forstaaes ved Isaak (hvilket da forøvrigt vilde være den latterligste Selvmodsigelse, at bringe den Enkelte, der netop staaer udenfor det Almene, ind under almindelige Bestemmelser, idet han skal handle netop som den Enkelte, der er udenfor det Almene) saa vil den Enkelte dog aldrig kunne forvise sig derom ved Andre, end ved sig selv som den Enkelte."<sup>74</sup>

But this means that, when read correctly, the parable of Abraham does in no way condone murder. That murder becomes religiously justified in the parable, does, for one, not override that it ethically is murder. The religious does not change the ethical, it steps beyond it.<sup>75</sup> And, at the same time, that Abraham is commanded to perform murder in the name of God cannot mean anything to us, religiously speaking. For to think that it does, would be to interpret the parable in the sense that it sets forth some universal principle that is valid for all in virtue of their belonging to the religious sphere. But there exists no such universal principles in the religious sphere. The religious exists only for isolated individuals. There is no community, and no shared dogma, at this level of existence. There is only yourself and God. And to doubt the commandments that are given you, religiously, is to doubt God.

This, I believe, is the essence of Kierkegaard's defence of the parable of Abraham and

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<sup>74</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 68. My emphasis.

Isaac. What Abraham does takes places beyond the ethical, that is, beyond our intersubjectively accessible categories of good and evil, and beyond what we can relate to communally. That he is right in doing as he does is, therefore, something only accessible to him. We cannot relate to his justification. Followingly, his action cannot become justified for us. We can see it as a religious act, and thereby believe that it ultimately is justified in a sense private to him, but we cannot make more sense of it than that. It stops there. We cannot even be absolutely certain that he is religious in doing what he does. That is also something only accessible to him. To quote Kierkegaard: "Om den Enkelte nu virkelig ligger i en Anfægtelse eller han er Troens Ridder, det kan kun den Enkelte selv afgjøre."<sup>76</sup>

The essence of this is the fact that what Abraham does it belongs to Abraham to do. Not to us, not ethically, and not religiously either. He is, by being a Knight of Faith, in a state of perfect isolation: "Den sande Troens Ridder er altid den absolute Isolation..."<sup>77</sup>

Now, a consequence of Kierkegaard's interpretation is that the religious is capable of justifying the unethical as something right. Though not right in an ethical sense, but right in a religious sense, which outweighs the ethical without being commensurable with it. The thing to understand, paradoxical as it may seem, is that *that* does not tell us anything general about the religious, as it is nothing general to tell. The religious, by being defined as something inherently subjective, does not have any general characteristics, other than that of not having any general characteristics. The consequence of this is that Kierkegaard cannot be taken to defend *the general conclusion* that it is right for the religious to murder in the name of the religious. That would be to say too much. It would be to interpret the parable of Abraham and Isaac as a general statement about the nature of the religious sphere, and what is allowed within it. Which is to not understand the nature of what the religious is. All we can say in this regard is that what is done religiously takes place beyond the ethical, and in relation to it the ethical is suspended. That is all. What it contains of positive laws and decrees is not for anyone to know, other than in himself, and in his own sense. Which

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<sup>75</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 67.

<sup>76</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 74.

<sup>77</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 74.

is his alone and not valid for anyone else.

Now, to push these considerations one step further down the path that we have set out to follow: Seeing as we have come upon an understanding that lets us see Abraham's actions in a different light than the ethical, so that we suspend our ethical judgements in relation to him, the next question becomes: What are we to positively admire in him?

The problem that we started out with was that it is a dangerous game to admire Abraham, as it comes close to admiring murder (or admiring the intention to kill). The solution to this, that I have presented, is that Abraham's actions does not belong to the ethical sphere, it is done in accordance with a sphere that lies *beyond* the ethical, and so, what Abraham does, though ethically a murder, is not murder, if viewed correctly and in accordance with the inner machinations that produce the action in question. To express it figuratively, he is acting in accordance with a sphere of existence in which different "rules and regulations" apply than the ethical ones. And I speak of this as a *figurative* way of expressing it, because there does not really exist anything that we meaningfully can call "rules and regulations" in this sphere at all. Everything that is done, is done by virtue of a direct and personal relationship to God. And in as much as one belong to the sphere, one does not relate to anything else *than* God. As a religious individual one lives in perfect isolation from others and the general world surrounding one. One's reasons for acting and reacting belong to oneself, and to God, and no one else.

It is this that is meant by that phrase that I have quoted often enough: "Troen er nemlig dette Paradox, *at den Enkelte er høiere end det Almene...*" To be religious, is to be beyond the universal, to be beyond what it is possible to interact with on an intersubjective, or communal, basis. And so, it is to be isolated from others. But this isolation is much more radical than a mere inability on the part of others to understand the motives for what one is doing. It must be remembered that in virtue of belonging to the religious sphere, one has left behind one both the ethical *and* the aesthetical. Which means that what one does, when performing some action, is neither motivated by a concern for one's emotional well-being, that is, it is not aesthetically motivated, and nor is it motivated by an understanding of what is ethically right. It is not

dependent upon one's simple subjective drives, nor upon the inherently communal, but springs out of one's personal relationship to the Absolute itself. One acts and reacts, as a religious person, in virtue of a wholly private relationship with God. One has bound up one's life with a something that is beyond everything else. And one becomes, therefore, as a consequence of this, irresponsive both to the immediate world that surrounds one - which one relates to emotionally - and to the ethical.

And here we have the answer to the question I just asked: In admiring Abraham, this, and precisely this, is what one admires: His isolation. The fact that his actions and responses does not seem to directly spring out of his interaction with the world surrounding him, nor with what we know to be ethically right, but seems instead to spring out of something other than this. Something to which we cannot immediately relate. Which is what betrays his faith. As Kierkegaard says: "Om den Enkelte nu virkelig ligger i en Anfægtelse eller han er Troens Ridder, det kan kun den Enkelte selv afgjøre. Imidlertid lod der sig dog ud af Paradoxet konstruere nogle Kjendetegn, som ogsaa den kan forstaae, der ikke er deri. Den sande Troens Ridder er altid den absolute Isolation..."<sup>78</sup>

If we now were to go a little more deeply into the story of Abraham and Isaac, and expound upon the personal details involved, specifically of Abraham's love for Isaac, the isolation that belongs to the religious sphere would come starkly to the fore. Abraham's reaction pattern, and by that I mean his reaction upon being given the command to sacrifice his son, his reaction to having to collect the knife needed, and gather the wood necessary, to having, moreover, to ride beside Isaac for many days - Isaac all the time oblivious to what is taking place, asking questions, and so forth - and, at the very end, and contrary to all Abraham's expectations, to not having to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's reaction to all of these extreme happenings is namely one of calm and detachment. Which is to say: Abraham has faith. Abraham is, as I will say, isolated. For there is a sense in which all of these things does not truly concern him, even though nothing concerns him more, as he has unflinching faith that God will set things aright in the end.

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<sup>78</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sydommen til Døden; Taler*, 74.

Let me give a rather lengthy quote from Kierkegaard to attest to what I have now stated: "Hvis jeg da (i Qualitet af tragisk Helt; thi høiere kan jeg ikke komme) var bleven tilsagt til en saadan extraordinair Kongereise som den til Morija-Bjerget, jeg veed vel, hvad jeg havde gjort. Jeg havde ikke været feig nok til at blive hjemme, havde heller ikke ligget og drevet paa Landeveien, havde heller ei glemt Kniven, at der kunde blive lidt Sinkeri, jeg er temmelig forvissset om, at jeg havde været paa Klokkeslettet, havt Alt i Orden - maaskee var jeg snarere kommen for tidlig, at det snart kunde være overstaaet. Men jeg veed tillige, hvad jeg fremdeles havde gjort. Jeg havde i samme Øieblik, som jeg besteg Hesten, sagt til mig selv: nu er Alt tabt, Gud fordrer Isaak, jeg offerer ham, med ham al min Glæde - Dog er Gud Kjærlighed og vedbliver at være det for mig; thi i Timeligheden kan Gud og jeg ikke tale sammen, vi have intet Sprog tilfældes. Maaskee vil En eller Anden i vor Tid være taabelig nok, misundelig nok paa det Store, til at ville indbilde sig og mig, at hvis jeg virkelig havde gjort dette, da havde jeg gjort det endnu større, end hvad Abraham gjorde; thi min uhyre Resignation var langt mere ideal og poetisk end Abrahams Smaalighed. Og dog er dette den største Usandhed; thi min uhyre Resignation var Surrogatet for Troen. Jeg kunde da heller ikke gjøre mere end den uendelige Bevægelse for at finde mig selv og atter hvile i mig selv. Jeg havde da heller ikke elsket Isaak, saaledes som Abraham elskede. At jeg var resolut til at gjøre Bevægelsen, kunde bevise mit Mod menneskeligt talt, at jeg elskede ham af min ganske Sjæl er Forudsætningen, uden hvilken det Hele bliver en Misgjerning, men jeg elskede dog ikke som Abraham; thi da havde jeg holdt igjen selv i det sidste Minut, uden at jeg derfor var kommen for silde paa Morija-Bjerget. Jeg havde fremdeles ved min Adfærd fordærvet hele Historien; *thi hvis jeg havde faet Isaak igjen, da havde jeg været i Forlegenhed*. Det, der faldt Abraham lettest, vilde falde mig svært, det igjen at være glad ved Isaak! thi den, der med hele sin Sjæls Uendelighed, *proprio motu et propriis auspiciis*, har gjort den uendelige Bevægelse og ikke kan gjøre mere, han beholder kun Isaak i Smerten.

Men hvad gjorde Abraham? *Han kom hverken for tidlig eller for sildig. Han besteg Æslet, han reed langsom hen ad Veien. I al den Tid troede han; han troede, at Gud ikke vilde fordre Isaak af ham, medens han dog var villig til at offre ham, naar det forlangtes*. Han troede i Kraft af det Absurde; thi menneskelig Beregning kunde der ikke være Tale om, og det var jo det Absurde, at Gud, som fordrede det af ham, i næste Øieblik skulde tilbagekalde Fordringen. Han besteg Bjerget, endnu i det Øieblik

da Kniven blinkede, *da troede han - at Gud ikke vilde fordre Isaak*. Han blev da vel overrasket ved Udfaldet, men han havde gennem en Dobbelt-Bevægelse naaet hen til sin første Tilstand, og derfor modtog han Isaak gladere end den første Gang."<sup>79</sup>

The thing to admire in the story of Abraham is, therefore, not that he is willing to sacrifice Isaac for his faith, it is that he is willing to sacrifice Isaac without resigning his love for him. That he is able to get him back with exactly the same heart as he gives him away. It is this paradox of his psyche that we admire. That he can perform, what seems to us as, something paradoxical with utter conviction. That he is willing to sacrifice Isaac, and yet he does not believe that Isaac will be sacrificed. As this points towards Abraham's isolation from the world we know, and his devotion to something beyond us. To the Absolute in itself - to God. (Though it does not, of course, prove such a relation - for that would be to make the religious intersubjectively accessible, which it is not. It merely points towards it, as I have said. And it is, in the end, forever ambiguous as to whether Abraham is a saint or a madman and murderer.<sup>80</sup>)

This concludes what I have to say on the matter of *Frygt og Bæven* in general. As we have now come up to the point wherein my explanation of *Frygt og Bæven* touches upon the matter that started us down this path in the first place - the theme of emotional autonomy.

I hope I will not raise any eye-brows by re-introducing this term at this point. For to me it is quite clear that Abraham's isolation, the fact that he acts and reacts in virtue of his personal relation to the Absolute, and not in virtue of anything else, entails that he is in a state of emotional autonomy, generally speaking. Now this is not to say that he does not react and respond to what takes place in the world surrounding him. Manifestly, he does. But he does not do this in a sense that is straightforwardly emotional - that is aesthetical, nor ethical, but precisely religious. As Kierkegaard says of Abraham: "Han handler i Kraft af det Absurde..."<sup>81</sup> He relates to his

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<sup>79</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 35 - 36. My emphasis - except the Latin which stands thus in the original.

<sup>80</sup> As to this inherent ambiguity in regard to Abraham, see for example: Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 55.

<sup>81</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 55.

surroundings, and responds to them, with a view to what he believes is the ultimate truth of their reality - that God exists and that he will secure that everything falls into their right and proper place in the end. Which means, in effect, that whatever happens, Abraham has complete faith that it will turn out for the best. As a consequence, his will never be thwarted by his surroundings. (It will, at least, never be experienced as thwarted by him - which is subjectively the same thing.) Something I interpret as he being in a state of emotional autonomy - as he being in a state wherein it is impossible to adversely affect his emotions from the outside. And how could it be possible to affect him thus? That would mean that he has lost faith, that he suddenly does *not* believe that it all will turn for the best. But he does believe this, or else he is not religious.

### **3.3 - The double movement; or, fixation, resignation - faith**

"Abraham gjør nemlig, som tidligere tilstrækkelig udviklet, to Bevægelser. Han gjør Resignationens uendelige Bevægelse, og opgiver Isaak, dette kan Ingen forstaae, fordi det er et privat Foretagende; men dernæst gjør han i ethvert Moment Troens Bevægelse. Dette er hans Trøst. Han siger nemlig: dog vil det ikke skee, eller hvis det skeer, da vil Herren give mig en ny Isaak i Kraft nemlig af det Absurde."<sup>82</sup>

The above quote illustrates the rough features of the motion that I spoke of in the introduction to Section 3.2 as the additional motion of faith - the first motion being the one treated in Chapter 2, through which one actually appropriates an absolute belief in God. This new motion, on the other hand, being the one that secures one relief from the possibility of experiencing despair. Which is, as I have said all along, the crown benefit that one appropriates by becoming religious.

As you can see, in the quote Kierkegaard speaks of two motions, which put together form what he in other passages speaks of as a double-motion: Firstly: there is a resignation. Secondly: a motion of faith. Through the first motion Abraham resigns his love for Isaac, through the next, he wins him back. But not, of course, in the same

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<sup>82</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 105.

sense that he "had" him the first time. If we were to imagine to ourselves what this concretely would look like in view to Abraham's emotional relations to Isaac: The double-motion would mean that Abraham, firstly, detaches himself from Isaac. That he gives him up, as Kierkegaard phrases it in the above quote, and withdraws the emotional investment that he has placed in him. So that Isaac loses what he has of significance for him. If we want to relate this to a comparable situation, I think it is pertinent to think of what takes place in a lover that has been wronged so many times by his (or her) significant other, that, as her (or she) is wronged yet again, the lover in question simply freezes all of the emotions that he (or she) has and quits - leaves, and is over and done with the whole affair. This is not to imply that the two situations are completely comparable and isomorphic. They are not. As Abraham in no way is wronged by Isaac. The aspect in which they are alike though, is as regards the element of resignation - of giving up the beloved party. And in this, I do believe that they are expressions of the very same phenomenon. Now, this act of resignation may be the finale of the whole affair for our unnamed lover, but not so for Abraham. For next and almost at the very same instant in which Abraham resigns, he turns this motion around and re-appropriates his emotional bond to Isaac. Not, though, in the sense that he simply re-activates the bond that he just severed. If he first had what we might call *an immediate emotional bond* to Isaac, he now gets a *mediate* one, as he re-activates his relation to Isaac through his relation to God. Described in different terms, he loses an aesthetical relation to his son, an immediate subjective relation, and wins a religiously mediated one. In which his immediate relation is with God, and where this relation in turn is the basis for his relation to his son. In virtue of this, whatever happens to Isaac, whether by his own volition, or by cause of exterior circumstances, it has no consequences for Abraham's relationship to him. As Abraham is in the paradoxical state of being detached from him and involved with him, both at the one and the same time. Both isolated and committed. Which is the Kierkegaardian ideal: "At existere saaledes, at min Modsætning til Existenten i ethvert Øieblik udtrykker sig som den skønneste og tryggeste Harmoni med den..."<sup>83</sup> This, again, to remind you, is why I speak of this state as one of emotional autonomy. For no matter what happens, that is, even if the worst happens, that Isaac becomes lost, sacrificed, it has no emotional significance for Abraham. For Abraham lives in

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<sup>83</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 49.



the belief that, if so, then God will bring him back. "Han har fattet den dybe Hemmelighed," as Kierkegaard says of another Knight, but no mind, for what he says of the individual in question counts for Abraham as well, "at ogsaa i at elske et andet Menneske bør man være sig selv nok."<sup>84</sup> For make no mistake, it precisely this that is the general effect of Abraham's belief in God. That he relates to Isaac, not in view to the real Isaac - the Isaac that dies, if we follow our imagined course of events - but in view to an ideal Isaac that God guarantees for him. If Isaac dies, Isaac is not lost to Abraham, for he knows that God will restore him to him. Followingly, that Isaac definitely dies and is lost *cannot* happen to the Isaac that Abraham relates to. Why? Because God would not allow it. Because the Isaac that Abraham relates to is given him through his belief in God. He has resigned from the real Isaac (the first motion of the double-motion here under discussion). And all that Abraham now has is this idealization of Isaac that is powered by his belief in the divine. And this makes him self-sufficient, even in view to loving another. (And how else, one should asks oneself, could one become self-sufficient in regard to love?, which is the *explicitly* stated ideal, other than by precisely divorcing the object in question of its independent reality, and turning it into an element of one's own interior.)

This interpretation may, at first glance, seem too fantastic to be an accurate reading of Kierkegaard. And I concur in that it may seem that way. But that is only a piece of *Schein*. The truth is that an interpretation of Kierkegaard must take a stand in regard to this view, extreme as it may seem, and I will now attempt to argue as to why. I will go about this by going through, step-by-step, Kierkegaard's most detailed account of the double-movement spoken of above. And thereby show that the Knight of Faith, in becoming a Knight of Faith, precisely binds his emotions to idealizations instead of real beings – as I have chosen to explain the process – idealizations that get their reality *for him* (and only him), through his relation to God.

As mentioned at the very beginning of Section 3.2, the passage in question is to be found in "Foreløbig Expectoration" which is a part of the opening sections of *Frygt og Bæven*. And it details a quite romantic - in the sense of being something typical of the Romantic movement - scenario about a poor young man that falls in love with a

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<sup>84</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 44.

princess. An impossible match, by all standards. The kind of thing that only happens in fairy tales. Which is precisely the heart of the scenario, as this is what confronts the young man as he grows conscious of his own feelings: That the object of his love is completely ludicrous and fantastic for a man in his situation. It is, quite frankly, an impossible love. But it does not go from here to become a story about how the poor man wins the impossible, the princess, something that truly would be typically romantic, it is a story about how one is to live with the impossibility of winning. (Note the connection that arises to what I have said about despair and the religious as a natural antidote against this - the story explains how one is to live with the fact of failing to conform to one's ideal for oneself.) Kierkegaard's point with it is to portray how a true Knight of Faith would deal with this kind of situation, if he were the young man in question - or, alternatively put, how the young man in question would deal with the situation if he were a Knight of Faith.

There are three main elements, or we can say, steps, stages or motions, to the Knight of Faith's reaction: Firstly, there is a stage of fixation. This is a stage that is new to the example in question. Kierkegaard does not mention it in relation to Abraham. And it consists in a sort preparatory action that lays the ground for the actual double-movement. So that after this first stage, there follows successively the second and third stages, the motions that I have already spoken of in relation to Abraham: resignation, and the motion of faith. We will here follow the process through the whole logic of its unfolding.

The first step, fixation, takes place after the young man learns of his desire, and simultaneously with this, of its impossibility. It consists of a process whereby the young man, firstly, evaluates his emotions, making sure that they are an expression of a need that he truly cannot let go unfulfilled without failing to somehow realize his own subjective nature, and, secondly, he verifies that his wish actually is unrealizable. This means that he, in this stage of the overall process, *fixates* upon the dilemma that constitutes his situation so as not to harbour any illusions or faint hopes in regard to it. He focuses simply on the bare and naked facts: The significance that the desire for the princess has for him as a person, and the objective impossibility of satisfying it. And he furthermore focuses his recognition of this state of affairs into a conscious state of concentrated despair. Despair, because he comes to see that he has developed an ideal

for himself – that of being in a love relation with the princess – that he cannot succeed in conforming to. (That it is a personal ideal, and not merely some impulsive fling, is what he verifies through the emotional evaluation I mentioned above.) What he does at this stage is, therefore, to force himself to look the situation straight in the eye with a view to its full significance. From this position, he then, afterwards, performs the second motion - that of resignation.

But before we come to that, let me quote from Kierkegaard in order to illustrate this first step: "En Ungersvend forelsker sig i en Prindsesse, og hele hans Livs Indhold ligger i denne Kjærlighed, og dog er Forholdet et saadant, at den umulig lader sig realisere, umuligt lader sig oversætte fra Idealiteten til Realiteten... Han forvisser sig først om, at den virkelig er ham Livets Indhold, og hans Sjæl er for sund og for stolt til at ødsle det Mindste paa en Ruus. Han er ikke feig, han frygter ikke for at lade den snige sig ind i hans lønlige, hans mest afsides Tanker, at lade den snoe sig i utallige Slyngninger om ethvert Ligament i hans Bevidsthed - bliver Kjærligheden ulykkelig, da vil han aldrig kunne rive sig ud af den. Han føler en salig Vellyst ved at lade Kjærligheden gennemgysle hver hans Nerve, og dog er hans Sjæl høitidelig som Dens, der har tømt Giftbægeret og føler, hvorledes Saften gennemtrænger hver en Blodsdraabe, - thi dette Øieblik er Liv og Død. Naar han da saaledes har indsuget hele Kjærligheden i sig og fordybet sig i den, da mangler han ikke Mod til at forsøge og vove Alt. Han overskuer Livets Forhold, han sammenkalder de hurtige Tanker, der som slagvante Duer lyde hvert hans Vink, han svinger Staven over dem, og de styrte sig i alle Retninger. Men naar de nu alle vende tilbage, alle som Sorgens Bud og forklare ham, at det er en Umulighed, da bliver han stille, han takker dem af, han bliver ene og da foretager han sig Bevægelsen. Dersom hvad jeg her siger skal have nogen Betydning, da gjælder det om, at Bevægelsen skeer normalt. Ridderen vil da for det første have Kraft til at concentrere hele Livets Indhold og Virkelighedens Betydning i eet eneste Ønske... Dernæst vil Ridderen have Kraft til at concentrere hele Tanke-Operationens Resultat i een Bevidstheds-Akt."<sup>85</sup>

And from this position, he performs the act of resignation. As we have seen in relation to Abraham, this means that he gives her up - he accepts the impossibility, and

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<sup>85</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 41 - 43.

withdraws the emotional investment that he has placed in her, thereby making her lose her significance for him. But, though he severs his bonds to the actual person in question, the actual living and breathing princess, the Knight of Faith cannot simply, Kierkegaard says, leave behind what he has identified as his *raison d'être* - as his ideal. So, in order not to completely fail himself, he keeps what he can of the princess, and makes it into a point never to lose sight of his memory of her. That is, as he consciously resigns from the exterior person, he simultaneously redirects his feelings and emotions towards his own inner image and thought of her. Thereby enabling himself to keep the love relation in question alive, abstractly, or I could say imaginatively, as a relation to a figure that is confined to the interior of his own mind. He comes therefore, through this step, to cherish and adore the thought and image of the princess, independently of the actual person. A thought and image which thereby becomes something we can straightforwardly denote as a signifier divorced of its signified. He cuts his bonds to the princess, thereby distancing himself from the signified of his thought, but holds on to this image and thought itself, the signifier, and continues his relation, therefore, purely symbolically, that is, through his imagination.

As Kierkegaard says: "Ridderen gjør da Bevægelsen, men hvilken? Vil han glemme det Hele; thi ogsaa deri ligger jo en Slags Concentration? Nei! thi Ridderen modsiger ikke sig selv, og *det er en Modsigelse at forglemme hele sit Livs Indhold og dog blive den samme*. At blive en Anden, føler han ingen Drift til, og anseer det ingenlunde for det Store. Kun de lavere Naturer glemme sig selv og blive noget Nyt. Saaledes har Sommerfuglen aldeles glemt, at den var Kaalorm, maaskee kan den igjen glemme, at den var Sommerfugl saa aldeles, at den kan blive en Fisk. De dybere Naturer glemme aldrig sig selv og blive aldrig til Andet end hvad de vare. Ridderen vil da erindre Alt; men denne Erindren er netop Smerten, og dog er han i den uendelige Resignation forsonet med Tilværelsen. Kjærligheden til hiin Prindsesse blev for ham Udtrykket for en evig Kjærlighed, antog en religiøs Charakter, forklarede sig i en Kjærlighed til det evige Væsen, der vel negtede Opfyldelsen, *men dog atter forsonede ham i den evige Bevidsthed om dens Gyldighed i en Evigheds-Form, som ingen Virkelighed kan fratage ham*. Daarer og unge Mennesker snakke om, at Alt er muligt for et Menneske. Det er imidlertid en stor Vildfarelse. Aandelig talt er Alt muligt, men i Endelighedens Verden er der Meget, der ikke er muligt. Dette Umulige gjør imidlertid Ridderen

muligt derved, at han udtrykker det aandeligt, men aandeligt udtrykker han det derved, at han giver Afkald derpaa. *Ønsket, der vilde føre ham ud i Virkeligheden men strandede paa Umuligheden, bøies nu indefter, men er derfor ikke tabt, heller ikke glemmt.* Snart er det Ønskets dunkle Rørelser i ham, der vækker Erindringen, snart vækker han den selv; thi han er for stolt til at ville, at det, der var hele hans Livs Indhold, skulde have været et flygtigt Moments Sag. Han holder denne Kjærlighed ung, og den tiltager med ham i Aar og i Skjønhed. *Derimod behøver han ingen Endelighedens Anledning til dens Fremvæxt. Fra det Øieblik, han har gjort Bevægelsen, er Prindsessen tabt.* Han behøver ikke disse erotiske Nervezittringer ved at see den Elskede o.s.v., han behøver heller ikke i endelig Forstand bestandig at tage Afsked med hende, *fordi han i evig Forstand erindrer hende,* og han veed meget godt, at de Elskende, der ere saa forhippede paa endnu engang til Afsked at see hinanden for sidste Gang, have Ret i at være forhippede, Ret i at mene, at det er sidste Gang; thi de glemmer snarest hinanden. Han har fattet den dybe Hemmelighed, at ogsaa i at elske et andet Menneske bør man være sig selv nok. *Han tager intet endeligt Hensyn mere til hvad Prindsessen gjør,* og netop dette beviser, at han har gjort Bevægelsen uendeligt."<sup>86</sup>

As you well may imagine, the new aspect of the motion of resignation, that I now have expounded, is crucial to my overall understanding of the religious state. How the Knight resigns by diverting his feelings from the actual person, and towards his thought and image of the person instead. For it is here that one can see how the object of the religious love comes into being. This object is namely not, as I have pointed out in relation to Abraham, the actual person (if it be a person at all, but let us for simplicity's sake suppose that it is). It cannot be, as the religious is oblivious to any event that befalls this person, therefore he cannot meaningfully be said to have an emotional relation to this someone. (Remember: even if Isaac is lost, he is not lost to Abraham, and Abraham is not affected by it.) Therefore, as I expressed myself in that foregoing context, the religious person relates to an *idealization* of the person he loves, and not to that person as he actually exists separately from him. And what we see here is exactly the kernel of what this idealization really is.

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<sup>86</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 43 - 44. My emphases.

The full idealization is created when the thought and image of the princess, towards which the young man in question is lovingly devoted at the stage of resignation, becomes animated by God's assurance that this imaginary relation will become something definitely realized. This transformation takes place through the performance of the motion of faith, that is, it takes place when the young man forms a belief in spite of his better judgement, and in virtue of the absurd - that everything is possible for God - that it will become so. The princess will become his, God will see to it.

The image and thought of the princess thereby becomes something more than a mere empty signifier belonging to the dimension of the imaginary. It gains a peculiar form of confirmation that places it above being a mere fantasy. A form of confirmation that is categorically different from the normal kind, that is, the empirical kind whereby an idea is verified – if it is verified – by being seen as an adequate representation of reality. For it is not an adequate representation of reality, nor does the young man believe it to be. In reality, he does not relate to the princess. Yet he knows with absolute certainty that this *will* become the case. He will win her. For after having resigned his love for her, and given himself over to a melancholy love directed at his memory of her, satisfied in his dissatisfaction, so to speak, he now regains her, not through interaction with the girl herself, but by his belief in God.

Kierkegaard: "Vi ville nu lade Troens Ridder give Møde i det omtalte Tilfælde. Han gjør aldeles det samme, som den anden Ridder, han giver uendeligt Afkald paa den Kjærlighed, der er hans Livs Indhold, han er forsonet i Smerten; *men da skeer Vidunderet, han gjør endnu en Bevægelse, forunderligere end Alt, thi han siger: jeg troer dog, at jeg faaer hende, i Kraft nemlig af det Absurde, i Kraft af, at for Gud er Alting muligt.* Det Absurde hører ikke til de Differentser, der ligge indenfor Forstandens eget Omfang. Det er ikke identisk med det Usandsynlige, det Uventede, det Uformodede. *I det Øieblik, Ridderen resignerede, da forvissede han sig om Umuligheden, menneskelig talt, dette var Forstandens Resultat, og han havde Energi nok til at tænke det.* I uendelig Forstand var det derimod muligt, det er ved at resignere derpaa, men denne Besidden er jo tillige en Opgiven, men dog er denne Besidden for Forstanden ingen Absurditet; *thi Forstanden vedblev at beholde Ret i, at i den Endelighedens Verden, hvor den hersker, var og blev det en Umulighed.* Denne

Bevidsthed har Troens Ridder ligesaa klar; det Eneste, der altsaa kan frelse ham, er det Absurde, og dette griber han ved Troen. *Han erkjender altsaa Umuligheden og i samme Øieblik troer han det Absurde*; thi vil han uden med al sin Sjæls Lidenskab og af sit ganske Hjerter at erkjende Umuligheden, indbilde sig at have Troen, da bedrager han sig selv, og hans Vidnesbyrd har intetsteds hjemme, da han end ikke er kommen til den uendelige Resignation."<sup>87</sup>

The key part of this quote in view to the interpretation that I am defending here - that a Knight of Faith does not relate to the actual object of his love, but to an idealization of it instead - is when Kierkegaard says that the Knight of Faith never stops believing that in a finite sense a relationship to the princess is impossible, but that he, nonetheless, in an infinite sense believes that he will win her. As Kierkegaard sums it up in the quote: "Han erkjender altsaa Umuligheden og i samme Øieblik troer han det Absurde; thi vil han uden med al sin Sjæls Lidenskab og af sit ganske Hjerter at erkjende Umuligheden, indbilde sig at have Troen, da bedrager han sig selv, og hans Vidnesbyrd har intetsteds hjemme, da han end ikke er kommen til den uendelige Resignation."<sup>88</sup> Which means, clearly, that the Knight of Faith relates to the princess in *two ways*: He simultaneously relates to the fact that he cannot get her, in as much as she belongs to the finite, and the fact that he nonetheless will win her, in as much as she belongs to the infinite. Therefore, he has, in one sense, given her up. He has given her up in as much as she belongs to the finite, which is to say, in as much as she belongs to the earthly sphere - *the real*. And yet, he knows full well that she will be his. His desire for her will be satisfied, his ideal for himself will be realized. Because she is guaranteed him in an infinite sense, that is, in a sense that contrasts with the real (which is the finite). The way in which she is his, or will be his, is, therefore, in an ideal (non-real) sense, and the way in which he relates to her, is as an *idealization*, seeing as he has given her up in as much as she belongs to the finite. And now, solely relates to the infinite.

The point is this, the Knight of Faith does in no manner of speaking reverse the resignation he undergoes as the first part of the double-movement, he wins the princess back at "a higher level" instead. Therefore, the princess he wins "back" is not

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<sup>87</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven in Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 46. My emphases.

the actual, real, living, breathing human being, which only is to be found at "the lower level". It is his image of her animated by the divine.

One can see the whole thing this way: The young man's original state, before venturing out upon this three stage process, is one in which he experiences a strong desire for the princess. In this state his relation to her is aimed directly at her. It is a normal sort of love relation, of the type wherein one of the involved is unaware of the other's amorous feelings (not to mention his mere existence). Now, seeing as the young man understood precisely this, that a realization of the love relation that he so much covets is impossible, he resigned. But seeing as he also understood that his love and desire for the princess was so strong that it would be impossible for him to simply abandon it, and never deal with it again, he, simultaneously while withdrawing his emotions from her, diverts them inward towards his memory and image of her. He starts to love her, therefore, just as if she had been definitely lost to him - like a person that is involved in a more regular relationship, would love his beloved if she died, and was now only to be found in his own imagination and memory. This is the state of things after the resignation. Through the next step, the motion of faith, this image and thought of her that he now so much covets *in itself*, and not in view to what they are the thought and image of, regains a kind reality for him, by being related, not to the empirical world around him, but to the assurance he gains by his belief in God that his love will be realized.

It should additionally be noted that his relation to the idealization he gains through the motion of faith in no way distorts his view of the empirical reality surrounding him. The religious sphere is not a form of psychosis. This can be seen through the fact that the motion of resignation is a prerequisite for gaining faith, together with the fact that the motion of faith in no way disturbs the resignation that is undertaken in order to get to it. This meaning that the Knight of Faith is always fully aware of the state of things at the level of the real. He knows that the princess is a *finite* impossibility for him. It is precisely therefore he undertakes the motion of faith. Securing her for himself on a different level than that of the real.

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<sup>88</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 46.



Kierkegaard: "...saaledes at leve glad og lykkelig hvert Øyeblik i Kraft af det Absurde... det er Vidunderligt."<sup>89</sup> (*Nota bene*: happy by virtue of the absurd, not by virtue of anything real or rational.)

### 3.4 - Conclusion

The main ambition of this chapter has been two-fold: It has sought, firstly, to understand how it is possible to become emotionally autonomous in the sense that I have spoken of throughout the essay. Secondly, it has sought, through the realization of the first part of the ambition, to indisputably establish that emotional autonomy is a real feature of Kierkegaard's concept of faith. (Additionally, and connected with these, I have attempted to explain Kierkegaard's defence of the parable of Abraham and Isaac.)

The manner in which I have gone about realizing the ambition has been to expound and explain two stories that are central to the argument of *Frygt og Bæven*: the story of Abraham and Isaac, and the story of the young man and the princess. Both of which are meant by Kierkegaard to illustrate the religious condition. What I have shown, or what I have tried to show, is that the common feature of these stories is that the protagonist of both (Abraham, the young man) is in an important sense indifferent as to what happens to the person he loves. I have explained this feature by the hypothesis that the two Knights of Faith, by virtue of their faith, do not truly relate to the actual object of their love (they have resigned their love for them), but instead relate to idealizations of these objects. By an "idealization" I mean the thought of the object in question as one perceives it, not in reality, but in the manner that one knows – through one's faith – that God will deliver it unto one. My point is, therefore, that through his faith the Knight of Faith does not respond emotionally to reality as it is, but to a divine idealization of it.

And my general point is that given such a state of affairs, as it represents a general feature of the Knight of Faith, this places the Knight of Faith in a state of emotional

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<sup>89</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 49.

autonomy. It does this because it becomes impossible to adversely affect the Knight of Faith by exterior means, i.e. by changes in the "actual" or "real" object of his love (by which I mean the original object of his love, the one belonging to the world "out there", the non-I). He is, quite simply, emotionally closed off from the world surrounding him.

Let me present you with one last quote so as to verify this point, a third and as of yet unmentioned example of a Knight of Faith: "Underveis tænker han paa, at hans Kone vist har en apparte lille Ret varm Mad til ham, naar han kommer hjem, f.Ex. et stegt Lammehoved med grønt til. Hvis han mødte en Ligesindet, da kunde han vedblive lige til Østerport at samtale med ham om denne Ret med en Lidenskab, der vilde passe for en Restaurateur. Tilfældigvis eier han ikke 4 Sk., og dog troer han fuldt og fast, at hans Kone har hiin lække Ret til ham. Har hun den, da skal det være et misundelsesværdigt Syn for fornemme Folk, begeistrende for Menigmand at see ham spise; thi hans Appetit er stærkere end Esaus. Hans Kone har den ikke - besynderligt nok - *han er aldeles den Samme.*"<sup>90</sup>

The point is also here, though here in relation to a trivial point in the man's life and not something of utmost importance as in the case of Abraham and the young man, that circumstances in the real world are unable to adversely affect the Knight of Faith.

In regard to how one attains emotional autonomy, my hypothesis is that it is attained through a three-step process of fixation, resignation and faith, as illustrated in the story of the young man and the princess. The gist of this process is that an individual that undergoes it first withdraws his emotional investment from the original object of his attachment, diverts the feelings purely into the memory and thought of this object, and then, secondly, through his faith in God gains certainty that the object will become his in a more than imaginary sense – as I have explained it earlier on, the individual wins his heart's desire, not in the real world, but through God and confidence in his omnipotence.

The way in which this state of emotional autonomy saves us from despair, that is,

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<sup>90</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Frygt og Bæven; Sygdommen til Døden; Taler*, 40.

saves us from the possibility of not conforming to our own ideal for ourselves, is by making the objects that we depend upon to realize this ideal (whatever they may be) guaranteed to us by God. Hence they partake in God's infiniteness and become something infinite by which we can relate to ourselves.

## **4 – General conclusion**

### **4.1 – At the end of the tether**

I said in my general introduction that I would attempt to present Kierkegaard's concept of faith as involving two theoretically separate levels: One level which was concerned with faith as the state of absolute belief in God, and another level which was concerned with faith as the state of emotional autonomy. I have done this in the form of presenting two separate motions of faith, both of which it is necessary to perform in order to reach faith proper – in order to secure that faith is both an unconditional faith in God, and the negation of angst and despair. The first motion, detailed in Chapter 2, is a two-step process by which one reaches a state of absolute belief in God through what I have called a negative leap; the other motion, detailed in Chapter 3, is an even more complex psychological process whereby an individual isolates himself emotionally from the mundane world by, essentially, redirecting his emotional attachments from the original (and mundane) objects in question, and unto divine simulacra of these objects.

The main thought behind this essay has been to emphasize this last part of the concept of faith – what I have termed emotional autonomy – by delineating its role in the overall concept as it is found in Kierkegaard. I have found this important because it is this that in the last instance should motivate an individual, according to Kierkegaard's argumentation, to develop faith in God. As I noted in the introduction, Kierkegaard has a practical intent with his writings, they are not meant as disinterested, scientific pieces that simply investigate certain interrelated theological and psychological topics, they are – though Kierkegaard at many points explicitly denies this – messianic in their nature. They are meant to save us. They analyse our existential condition, identifies an essential shortcoming, or weakness with our nature, and sets before us the solution to our misery – which is a religious solution. As I said in Chapter 2, man chooses to believe in God in order to escape despair. But this has, if we think about it, the effect that the significance of the religious for man is dependent

upon an existential need. Now, I have no doubts as to the fact that Kierkegaard's ideal in regard to the religious, is that it should be an unconditional devotion to God. But as I have shown in Chapter 2, this devotion both is and *is not* unconditional. It is unconditional in the sense that no rational factor informs the Kierkegaardian subject's belief in God – the belief is acquired through a wholly subjective leap of faith. At the same time, though, it is conditional in the sense that the subject's devotion to God is fuelled by an infinite (constant) existential need – the need to escape despair. My point by bringing attention to this fact now is that through this nature of the Kierkegaardian scheme, the religious does not *really* acquire an unconditional significance for the individual, but has an existential significance – as it is the elementary existential need that secures one's devotion to the religious. My further point, with this in view, is that there is an important difference between it having an independent significance for the individual, and a significance that is derived from the individual's existential situation. For in as much as the significance is derived, this means that when we are to understand the religious, and what the religious is in regard to an individual, we have to understand it on the basis of its existential consequences.

In other words, contrary to what may strike one as the obvious, Kierkegaard's ideal state is not what I would speak of as primarily a religious state. This is because the belief in God that characterizes the state as religious is merely a means to attain an existential end – to free oneself from despair. God is not what is sought in Kierkegaard's ideal state, emotional autonomy is. And this is ultimately why I, in the general introduction, stated that the main thesis of this essay is that Kierkegaard's ideal state is a state of emotional autonomy. As it is this that constitutes the soul of the state, and not the belief in God. The belief in God is put in place in order to achieve this end. It should be remarked though that I am in no way denying the presence of the religious elements involved in this state, I am merely attempting to shift the focus away from the religious, and to what I find to be the true heart of the matter.

END

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