

The Dialectical Self:  
Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx, and the Birth of Radical Freedom

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

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This work advances two primary claims. First, it demonstrates that Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard can and should be read together, as they jointly constitute a similar development in 19<sup>th</sup> century thought. Notably, borrowing a model of dialectical subjectivity from their shared predecessor, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, while simultaneously rebelling against the primacy he gives to reason, both attempt to liberate this “dialectical self” so that it can embrace the radical understanding of freedom it embodies. Therefore, this work argues that a similar conception of the self, and the freedom it entails, unites the work of Marx and Kierkegaard, while also serving as a primary normative value orienting their work. However, for Marx, the social mechanics behind inequality serves as the major impediment to emancipation, whereas, for Kierkegaard, our internalization of social norms serves this role. Given that their intellectual projects were based in the praxis of emancipation, this difference explains why their work came to *appear* so different, as they each sought to articulate and overcome a different set of problems. Unfortunately, this also had the effect of obscuring their underlying, and profound, similarity. However, this work argues that these differences are in fact two sides of the same coin, and that

Marx and Kierkegaard reciprocally, or dialectically, illuminate one another, as each teases out nuances and complexities in the other.

Secondly, I advance a normative claim: Marx needs Kierkegaard, just as Kierkegaard needs Marx. That is, Kierkegaard's concern with subjective emancipation without Marx's interest in sociopolitical emancipation remains an unfinished project, whereas Marx's sociopolitical critique without Kierkegaard's subjective emancipation remains an empty one. In other words, freedom pertains both to subjectivity and to the objective world, and unless we remain attentive to both, we risk reinforcing oppression just as we think we are overcoming it. And while Marx is attentive to subjectivity and Kierkegaard to objectivity, each does so insufficiently. Yet, reading them together offers a comprehensive picture of the dialectical self that unites them, while also allowing us to be attentive to the spiritual and ethical dynamics of subjective emancipation as well as the sociopolitical dynamics of objective emancipation. Not only *can* we read Marx and Kierkegaard together, a full understanding of our "dialectical selves" and the freedom they entail, *requires it*.

## Acknowledgements

My experience with political thought properly began as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. There, I was lucky to receive an education for which my descriptions continue to seem inadequate, as they are better described by a poet, perhaps, than by a scholar. It was here where my eyes were first opened, where I was “dragged” from the shadows and into the sun, where I was made to see myself and the world for what seemed the first time, and where I received foundations in political thought that continue to support me today. For this, I have two people to thank. Mark Lippincott, for whose friendship and kindness I continue to be grateful, especially when they endured in dark times. And, to Alkis Kontos, the man around whom our universe revolved, I have yet to find the proper words of thanks; and so, instead, I will offer you those of George Eliot: “... the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”<sup>1</sup> We might lack a Homer, but hopefully, we gave, and continue to give, a poetry of our own.

The present project grew out of my passion for Søren Kierkegaard, and for sparking that passion, I would like to thank Professor Brayton Polka of the Department of Social and Political Thought, at York University. I had known of Kierkegaard before, had read a little of his work, but it was Brady’s course on Kant and Kierkegaard that really opened my eyes to him. In fact, Brady’s insight into questions of faith and reason, and religion and secularity, continue to inform my own evolving understanding. Perhaps most importantly, Brady’s kindness during a time when my academic future was uncertain, and when I was suffering from this uncertainty, was a

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<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 1991). 889.

welcome respite. He provided some much needed care during some difficult days, and for all of this, I remain grateful.

When I finally moved to New York to begin studying at the City University of New York, I took another class on Kierkegaard at the New School, this time with Professor Agnes Heller, who I would also like to thank. Not only was this a wonderfully comprehensive and penetrating survey of his work, but it reassured me that when it came to Kierkegaard, what I saw in him was actually there.

Along the way, I have had the good fortune of twice conducting research at the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College. For this opportunity, I am grateful to Gordon Marino and Cynthia Lund. Gordon is a real model of what a University Professor can be—attentive to his students' spiritual and ethical development to the very last. St. Olaf is lucky to have him, and I count myself lucky to have him a phone call away. I am also thankful that he took the time to read a draft of *Part I* of this work, as there are few with a busier schedule than he, yet he always has time. As for Cynthia, the amazing experience to be had by Kierkegaard scholars at St. Olaf's is in no small part due to her tireless work. From my time of arrival, I feel at home, and this certainly testifies to all that she does behind the scenes.

As a result of my time at St. Olaf's, I also had the good fortune of meeting Jon Stewart, research professor at the Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Copenhagen. Without this fortuitous meeting, we would likely not have become friends, nor would I have found myself visiting the Centre in the summer of 2012, to conduct research there. I am grateful to Jon for reading parts of the present work, and for his invaluable feedback, as it is hard to find such a careful and critical eye. But more so, I appreciate his integrity. He is an example of what a scholar can be.

At The Graduate Center, there have been a few faculty members who have meant a lot to my progress. Susan Woodward possesses one of the sharpest minds and keenest eyes I have yet to meet. Without her invaluable dissertation proposal workshop, I would not have progressed through that challenge with the speed with which I did. But not only did I make great progress, she is one of the people for whom the clarity of my writing (and thinking) owes a great debt. It is striking, yet unfortunately common, for a graduate student to proceed through all of their course work without really knowing how to write. Not only was I unaware I could not write, but I learned to do so in one short semester under her guidance. Granted, the faults of my writing remain my own, but for the sense of clarity towards which I strive, I would like to thank her.

I would also like to thank Corey Robin, whose dedication to students and to social justice is something I admire. Had it not been for Corey, and his advocacy on my behalf, I might have lost a fellowship I had been awarded, a fellowship which saw me through two years of dissertation writing. In a very real way, I might not have gotten here today without his help. I would also like to thank Joe Rollins, the tireless head of our department. I have had the good fortune of working with Joe on several committees, but aside from these, it has been a pleasure to get to know him more informally. For all our collective training in politics, many of us do not spend much time thinking about it as part of the reality in which we live. But Joe does, and it has been heartening to have someone so thoughtful and competent as the person to whom we are supposed bring our problems. He might have to hear (and solve) too many of them, but the department only benefits by having him in charge.

There are also several institutions that deserve mention. I would like to thank St. Olaf College, and its Hong Kierkegaard Library, for twice inviting me to conduct research, and for supporting me while I did—the community they foster is, in my experience, unmatched in any

discipline. I would also like to thank the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center at the University of Copenhagen for providing me with office space while I visited (and to Bjarne Still Laurberg for making the stay so comfortable). Lastly, I would like to thank the City University of New York Graduate Center, for providing me with numerous fellowships over the years, supplemented with grants for research and travel, and without whom this would not have been possible. It has been a wonderful place to study.

I would also like to thank my committee, for allowing me to pursue such an unconventional research project—one in which I continue to have much faith—and whose invaluable advice and feedback have made this project infinitely stronger than it otherwise would have been.

My thanks to Martin Beck Matušík, who has probably written more on Søren Kierkegaard in the sociopolitical world than has anyone, doing so in a spirit much like my own. He had very little reason to accept the burden of sitting on my committee, with all the work it involves; and yet, he did. I am grateful to have met and worked with him, and I am certain that this will be the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship.

When I decided to attend the City University of New York, I knew I would be able to study with Richard Wolin, and opportunities like this are rare. Unsurpassed in his knowledge and understanding of the French and German traditions into which I was delving, he proved an essential guide to the terrain. More than that, the insights he brought to bear on this work helped me situate myself in a much wider panorama of thought, as he initiated me into trends in Continental thought that I otherwise might have missed, and for which my work would have greatly suffered. I remain ever impressed by the clarity of his thought, and the humanity of his work.

While I could not have foreseen the chance of working with Susan Buck-Morss, my luck was truly exceptional when she was hired by CUNY, precisely as I embarked on this project. Helping me delve further into the tradition of Critical Thought, and making me see how natural a fit my work was within it, it was through Susan that I came to find my intellectual home. I also found a real political ally, someone who thought that what I had to say was worthwhile, and who appreciated my own ethical commitments to social justice. It was on Susan's urging that I thought about these commitments in sociopolitical terms that were larger than those with which I began, as she helped draw me into a more sustained engagement with the world of politics, and the forces that constitute it. Without her help, I would have had a much "thinner" engagement with political life, and might have remained blind to the severity of this inadequacy.

On the off chance that one of the few scholars who had written comparatively on Kierkegaard and Marx would respond to a random letter, several years ago I wrote to Jim Marsh, explaining that I too was interested in their relationship—and in a way quite similar to his own. While I hoped he would be interested in talking, I could not have hoped that such a deep friendship would occur as a result, nor did I imagine that I would benefit so much from our many conversations. The sense of charity with which Jim lives his life—his unselfish dedication to others—is a constant reminder of the very best that we, and I, can be. But beyond individual charity, he is an example of the political activity to which our ethical and religious commitments should lead, as he not only betters those around him, but he works to better the world too. His example has consistently, but lovingly, pushed me to be better than I am, and I can think of no higher compliment. Jim has been a good friend, and a real mentor.

And lastly, I would like to thank the Chair of my dissertation committee, and another close friend of mine, Marshall Berman. With the academic world evermore becoming an

institution dedicated to professional training, the type of scholarship we tend to remember—that which intimately helps us make sense of ourselves and our world—seems increasingly marginalized in favor of the topical ephemera that is the latest fashion. As a graduate student, this can make it difficult to keep intellectual interest and excitement alive, as the pressures of the profession argue in favor of conformity, not creativity. Yet, with Marshall, I was lucky to find one of the few for whom a sense of intellectual adventure remains alive. However, more than this, I am thankful for Marshall’s trust in me, as he had to sign on for *my* adventure, and he did so with a smile.

There are not many who embody such an implicit faith in their students, a faith that in its unfaltering support is the real foundation of creative work, but with Marshall I found one. And with him, I can see how such a lived faith is truly the bedrock of democracy, for I know of no one else who so thoroughly embodies the very best of what democracy means. From the start, and for all his remarkable achievements—and I could expound at length about them—he recognized me as an equal. But not because he saw a particular promise in me, although he is always generous with his praise, but because he knows that we have it in each of us to achieve something truly worthwhile. This is *my* Marx and Kierkegaard, it is an example I set for myself with my own students, and this is Marshall. It is difficult to sum up so long a friendship, so that saying anything seems immediately guilty of failing to say something else, so I will end by noting that I am a better person, and a better scholar, for counting him a friend. While I will truly miss working with him, I am certain that our friendship will only grow as this new stage in our relationship begins. I could not imagine a future in which he was not a part.

And to this, I would also like to thank Marshall’s wife, Shellie Sclan Berman. Having little family in New York, Jennifer—my own significant other—and I, were both welcomed into

the “Berman Residence” with an ease that owes a great deal to Shellie’s warmth and care. But beyond that, Shellie has always been a sensitive and thoughtful friend, proving to be equally one half of why the Berman Residence is such a wonderfully intellectual, politically engaged, and loving household. However, the Berman residence would not be what it is without Daniel Berman, who I would also like to thank, for his role in giving us such a happy house full of life to visit. It is easy to see how he carries on the very best of his parents, just as he is unmistakably his own man. It has been a joy to have been a part of their family.

And, of course, I would like to thank all of my friends, who, in the good times, provided a much needed life outside the library, and a real sense of community; and who, in the bad times, made this arduous task much easier to manage. David Palazzo, a fellow scholar, a much needed confidante, and someone with whom complex explanations were always unwarranted as he unfailingly saw what I saw, always managed to give me a chance to relax. For all the value of argument in the academy, it is sometimes nice not to have to. Asaf Shamis, whose warmth and kindness remain untainted by the pressures we face, and whose keen intelligence always reflects those admirable qualities, he has been a bastion of calm in these often turbulent waters. Elaine Young, who tirelessly works to keep our friendship alive from Hong Kong, and whose efforts are an important reminder that friendship is not a passive state, but an active one. She has been a great example for me of what a friend should be. And lastly, Jason Kropsky, with whom long walks made an often lonely city much less so, I am thankful for all the companionship we shared.

As for David Nam, my oldest friend. I began this journey years ago with you in Toronto, and in many ways this is also your dissertation. Not only were many of its ideas developed in conversation with you, but I would not have found political theory at all if not for you—and our

first, and subsequent, encounters on the bench. You have been a great friend, a long-standing interlocutor, a comrade-in-arms, and an iconoclast by birth. I hope you feel that something of this is yours, because it is.

And to my family, I would first like to thank my Uncle Ian, who has read drafts of some of my chapters, and whose interest in my work, and whose insightful and fun conversations were always a pleasure, it has been really nice to be able to go home and share some of what I do outside of it. You have made home even more of one.

To my immediate family, whose support and admiration never faltered, I am grateful for the home you continue to provide. My parents, Dan and Susan, work tirelessly to fill it with happiness and warmth, and I know, and they should know that I know, that they would do anything for me. I am certain that this has strengthened me in untold, and essential, ways. And to my sisters, Lauren and Mallory, my two best friends; I could not wish for two better people with whom to have grown up, and with whom to continue to do so. Lauren, who has been my companion through more than I often wish to remember, troubled times have always been made easier by having you to share them with. And Mallory, who will always be my baby sister, you brought us all together and made our family young again. It is comforting to know that we will always have one another, and I hope you know that I will always be there for you, as I know you will be there for me. I love you all.

Most importantly, to my Jenny, this work is dedicated to you. Until we met, I didn't realize how lonely I was, because when we met, I realized I was lonely no more. You are my partner, my very best friend, and my love. This, and everything, is for you.

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## **Introduction: *The Dialectical Self and The Birth of Radical Freedom***

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, *it was me*.  
(Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*)

Think you're escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.  
(James Joyce, *Ulysses*)

Ours is a fractured age. Born in the crucible of the First World War, the promise of a syncretic philosophy encompassing the totality of our spiritual and sociopolitical lives—a promise last tendered by G.W.F. Hegel—came to seem a fool's crusade at best, and at worst, a rationalization for imperial destructiveness. What began with the First World War only intensified in the decades to follow, as the examples of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, National Socialism and Stalinism, the Cold War and decolonization, all served to reinforce the idea that a new era of rupture had begun. As early as 1920, Sigmund Freud captured something of this *zeitgeist*. Turning to the question of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud offered a clinical analysis for a phenomenon of unfortunate familiarity following the First World War, as he argued that trauma entails a rupture in our very ability to construct a cohesive mental representation of the world.<sup>1</sup> Freud speculated that our attempt to make sense of the world was a necessary developmental step in the growth of personal autonomy, as it aids our instinct for self-

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. James Strachey, trans. James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Ltd., 1961). 33-34.

preservation;<sup>2</sup> however, as our understanding derives its impetus from self-preservation, it is necessarily complicit in domination. We want to understand the world so that we can control it. However, the world is simply too complex for intellectual confinement, and this made radical ruptures—be they personal or sociopolitical—a foregone conclusion.

Freud's insight was not new, if its psychological application was. Prior to the First World War, thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche had long theorized the dissolution of Western thought, seeing within its insistence on reason a hidden will to domination, and thereby creating a body of thought easily adaptable to the lived reality of post-WWI European intellectuals. For Nietzsche, the Western project was itself a nihilistic project, but one that served the developmental role of saving individual autonomy by offering a meaning by which to live—"man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will."<sup>3</sup> If the Western project was little more than a veiled will to power, investing our faith in its promise set the stage for a massive cultural breakdown—a breakdown evidenced by the First World War. Therefore, when Freud offered his post-war theory of trauma, he was offering a clinical correlate to the prophetic claims of 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals like Nietzsche, who saw a cultural breakdown as imminent, as trauma was the acute example of a general problem. The radical claims of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seemed verified by the lived reality of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

If ours is a fractured age—an age in which all pretensions at universal meaning are suspected of domination—the story of 19<sup>th</sup> century thought reinterpreted through 20<sup>th</sup> century events, while an overgeneralization, nonetheless helps to explain how we got here. However, the pervasive sense of vulnerability and loss experienced by Western intellectuals following the First World War—we might say their *trauma*—not only made the insights of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 26-47.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1992), 599.

particularly resonant, it often led to their distortion. Rather than interpreting the criticisms of 19<sup>th</sup> century thought as correctives to the Western project, the tumult of events often led to their stark portrayal. Unsurprisingly, total war is not conducive to sober thought.

What resulted was a deep suspicion of reason, a suspicion often coupled with a fetishism of the unbridled will. If the meaning we used to assert ourselves was a lie, all that truly exists is the will behind that meaning. This seemed verified by the complete breakdown of European norms that allowed the First World War to occur, so that we find the most intense doctrines of the will in this period. Philosophically, we find a foundational example in Heidegger's criticism of the entirety of Western thought as "nihilistic" Platonism,<sup>4</sup> a pronouncement that justifies his turn to ontology.<sup>5</sup> Literarily, we can see something of this in Ernst Jünger's famous war narrative, *Storm of Steel*, in his portrayal of the intellectual clarity that war can bring.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this was all paralleled in the legal and political realms, in thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, who saw radical rupture as revealing the ephemerality of any meaning other than the decisionist will to power.<sup>7</sup> The lesson many drew from the First World War was that the only thing in which to place our faith was our sheer unbridled will.

If Freud likewise recognized the role that meaning plays in self-development, his idea of the self was infinitely more complex than that put forward by those like Jünger and Schmitt. For Freud, meaning might be implicated in an attempt to control our surroundings, but it could only do so if it was somehow true. The better we understand the world, the better we can defend ourselves from it. This is what Freud believed trauma was, after all, as trauma was the result of a

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Bret W. Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007). 185-215.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

psychic attack we *did not* foresee;<sup>8</sup> it did not invalidate truth, it demonstrated its limits. In this sense, what Europe had lived through was not an invalidation of Western ideals, but an attack on the hubris that believed them fulfilled. As Freud himself wrote when reflecting on the war, our disappointment should not lead us to conclude that the promise of a peaceful future is forever invalid, but only that we have not travelled as far as we once thought.<sup>9</sup> Rather than proving these Western ideals wrong, when European intellectuals grabbed hold of 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas to make sense of 20<sup>th</sup> century reality, they were doing exactly what they had always done; they were rendering the world meaningful, even if they were doing it with philosophies of rupture.

The lessons of the First World War were hardly momentary insights. The severity of the century to follow—a severity measured by the Holocaust and Hiroshima, by National Socialism and Stalinism, and by the Cold War and decolonization—solidified these “truths,” as the 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed better proof of the pessimism of Heidegger, Jünger, and Schmitt, than the optimism of earlier ages. While the trauma of war receded, becoming ever more a memory and less a lived reality, what remained of this tumultuous period was its deep suspicion of reason, as the psychological need to fetishize the will had become less immediate—even if we can continue to see something of this in our fetishism of individual difference. All told, we had come to embrace rupture, rather than being surprised by it. However, as Freud indicates, even the very breakdown of meaning helps reveal universal truths about ourselves against which it is hard to argue. We might suspect all universal truths, embracing a contemporary iteration of Nietzsche’s will to “nothingness,” but this very activity proves its own conclusion wrong.

For an age in the midst of a breakdown—an age of unprecedented destruction—moderation, even in thought, is often the first value lost. Nonetheless, in its very attack on truth,

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<sup>8</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: 33.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Timely Reflections on War and Death," in *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005), 174-82.

the intellectual repetitions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century served to prove a truth that was evident to some in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, Freud's work on trauma saw repetition compulsion as a primary mechanism for overcoming trauma, as an individual attempts to gain mastery over the rupture.<sup>10</sup> More generally, the attempt to rebuild a framework for interpreting the world, even if it was a framework of infinite fragmentation, would be something that both Freud and Nietzsche would recognize as the activity of self-construction. And while there is more than a little irony to the fact that relativistic philosophies of rupture should help intellectuals overcome it, the concern of the present work is with this very process itself. However, here, it will be referred to more simply as *freedom*.

For all the rebellions against totalizing theories in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—rebellions intensified by historical events—the last such theory was that of Hegel. Outside of the renewed interest in Hegelian thought among many 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Marxists, an interest that often led to vibrant reinterpretations, this century generally lacked sensitivity in its approach to Hegel, going so far as to demonize him as a proto-fascist.<sup>11</sup> These critics failed to notice that for all of Hegel's problems—and problems do exist—his theory was a theory of freedom. And so, if Hegel suffered from some of the problems latent within Western thought, he was also the most developed repository of its promise. While criticisms of Hegel did not wait until the 20<sup>th</sup> century to begin, evident in the Young Hegelian attacks that occurred in the decade following Hegel's 1831 death, the proximity of Hegel to these earlier attacks, and the prevalence of Hegel's thought in the intellectual and cultural world, meant that his thought was engaged in a more serious way

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<sup>10</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: 9. Even more interestingly, Kierkegaard offers a complex analysis of repetition as the process by which the self is formed, in his aptly titled, *Repetition*. Søren Kierkegaard, "Repetition," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Volume 2, The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971). 30.

than would often be the case in the century to follow. However, it was not until the 1840s that criticism of Hegel's thought received the clarity and philosophical complexity that it deserved, and these criticisms are found in the parallel work of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx.

Jointly criticizing Hegel for the role that intellectual life plays in his philosophy, a role they both felt overvalued intellectual life at the expense of lived reality, Marx and Kierkegaard represented a turn away from the abstract realm of philosophy and towards the existential realm in which we live, as they both argued that life itself should be the standard for judging ideas. This was an attack not only on Hegel himself, but more broadly, on the whole of academic philosophy. Hardly dismissing philosophical thinking, as the complexity of their work is of the highest sophistication, both attacked the dispassionate objectivity of intellectuals as being disingenuous. Yet, this attack was not simply lodged against the bourgeois affectations of such intellectuals; it was an attack that asserted that these affectations, this dispassionateness, was itself an indictment of the conclusions of their thought. Life is not simply an object of thought, they argued, thought is itself a part of life. And, unless this premise is acknowledged, unless we acknowledge that we always begin thinking from our very passionate *interestedness*, our conclusions will always be flawed.

Working through a model of what we could call “dialectical subjectivity”—a model for which they both remain indebted to Hegel—both Marx and Kierkegaard came to transform the objectives of philosophy. For Marx, it was not enough for philosophy to have “interpreted the world,” the point was “to change it.”<sup>12</sup> This would be echoed by Kierkegaard, albeit with a focus on individuals rather than the world, as he understood the purpose of his own work as helping

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 5, Marx and Engels: 1845-47* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 5.

people become what he thought they actually were.<sup>13</sup> If Marx wanted to change the world and Kierkegaard wanted to change the individuals within it, and if this concern echoed their shared criticism of Hegel as the culmination of Western philosophy, what they wanted to change us into also ran parallel. Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx wanted us to become free. And yet, this does not go far enough in explaining the significance of their thought; even more than urging us to be free, their radical understanding of freedom not only entailed becoming free, they wanted us to become freedom itself. Freedom, and the dialectical self, were one and the same. Rescuing philosophy from some of the conservative tendencies it had developed, and thereby saving its greatest promise, Marx and Kierkegaard were able to theorize freedom in an unprecedented—and radical—way. What Marx and Kierkegaard therefore represent is a theorization of freedom that anchors 20<sup>th</sup> century critiques, not one that is undermined by them.

With Marx working through freedoms' sociopolitical significance and Kierkegaard developing its spiritual nature, each worked through one part of the larger puzzle of freedom. Yet, owing to their shared location at a uniquely appropriate moment in history, a moment in which Hegel had theorized freedom with unprecedented clarity while he simultaneously accentuated the problems of Western thought, Kierkegaard and Marx could rebel—unbeknownst to one another—in a remarkably similar way. However, as each developed only one part of the puzzle of freedom—its spiritual versus its sociopolitical significance—they need to be united for the fullness of freedom itself to emerge. Nonetheless, latent within each is the other, as each represents a dialectical pole of the very dialectical understanding of freedom that serves as the foundation for their work. As Sartre acknowledges, in the significance of their thought,

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<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," in *The Point of View*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 37.

Kierkegaard and Marx are our very future, they are “the tasks that await us.”<sup>14</sup> The challenge of the present work is to articulate the nature of the freedom that anchors both Kierkegaard and Marx, a *radical freedom* that is both *spiritual* and *political*, so that we can clearly see the *task* of freedom.

## **Religion and Politics**

To date, there exists no major comparative studies of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx.<sup>15</sup> Hegel’s two most important critics, not to mention his two most important appropriators, it is striking that no such work exists. It becomes all the more so when further details are added to this comparison. Born five years apart, both published dissertation that explored ancient Greek thought—Marx on Democritean and Epicurean thought, and Kierkegaard on Socratic irony. Both had a literary penchant (both were lovers of Shakespeare), and then later immersed themselves in more systematic philosophical study—intellectual proclivities that led to their respective attempts to reconcile a more romantic outlook with philosophical idealism. Both began their mature intellectual production circa approximately 1843, with some of their early works containing penetrating, and largely parallel, attacks on Hegel. Neither held an academic post, in large part owing to their respective radicalism, but they both borrowed the very best of the philosophic tradition in which they were raised, while also bringing it outside of the halls of the Academy. Moreover, neither garnered much philosophical attention until their respective

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 98.

<sup>15</sup> My apologies to Jim Marsh, for not acknowledging his own comparative work on Kierkegaard and Marx. He is one of the very few people to recognize this affinity, however, while his broader opus deals with many of the issues at hand, his explicit work on Marx and Kierkegaard is more limited, and amounts to a few, quite insightful, articles. To this we might also add less than a handful of unpublished dissertations, and a few very brief newspaper type articles. However, the present work has a comparative scope beyond any other, to the very best of my knowledge—and research. Regardless, it is an almost untrodden field, which, as we will see, amounts to a quite staggering absence.

intellectual receptions in Germany, following the First World War, where their works then received the philosophical attention they deserved. While this is but a partial list of the very basic details of their lives and thought, even this simple list would seem to warrant serious comparative study. The question, then, is why it has not.

One of the big reasons, as we will further explore in the body of this work, has to do with the nature of their intellectual receptions. We began by talking about the period of crisis in post-WWI Germany, a period of crisis that in many ways endured for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its many crises, and this was not an arbitrary discussion. This period coincided with the rediscovery of Kierkegaard, a rediscovery that threw him into the very highest rank of philosophical thinking. It also corresponded to the rediscovery of Marx's early works, foreshadowed by Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, and these early works helped reveal a philosophical complexity in Marx that many had not previously seen. If Freud and Nietzsche helped many make sense of this era, to this list we need to add the two additional names of Marx and Kierkegaard, for they played no less a role.

What resulted was a burgeoning body of thought deeply indebted to Kierkegaard and to Marx, but for all the fruitfulness of the era, they were often interpreted in irreconcilable ways. Kierkegaard inspired many existential and phenomenological thinkers, with Heidegger and Jaspers owing him a deep debt, while he also helped create a vigorous theological revival, exemplified in the work of Karl Barth.<sup>16</sup> Marx, on the other hand, inspired an entire generation of critical theorists, from Lukács himself through the diverse array of Frankfurt School thinkers. However, these theorists tended to see Kierkegaard as a bourgeois philosopher, whereas

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1979). 269, note 25.

Kierkegaard's disciples often frowned upon Marx for his material worldliness, and these prejudices prevented fruitful comparisons of their thought.<sup>17</sup>

While both Kierkegaard and Marx found themselves on center stage in what was also the 20<sup>th</sup> century's first major philosophical epoch, and keeping in mind all of the attacks that were waged against the "old" categories of thought, in some ways this was a period of time in which lines were being drawn, rather than boundaries crossed—lines that were often just as much political as they were intellectual. As Freud would be the first to note, trauma might teach us about the ephemerality of meaning, but it also meant we needed it more desperately than before. This was no doubt heightened by the rise of National Socialism, as many of those inspired by Marx happened to be Jewish, whereas those inspired by Kierkegaard were sometimes complicit in Nazism, or else, tending towards political quietism. What resulted was that Kierkegaard became a victim of attacks waged against his appropriators, a problem which was likewise true for Marx, as what they actually wrote often became secondary to their role in German intellectual and political life. For all the rich thought they inspired, they also inspired many unwarranted prejudices, many of which—outside of their respective fields of study—continue to endure today, and continue to keep them apart. They were born in the same era, rediscovered in tandem, and then interpreted and misinterpreted through the lens of German interwar strife, so that even the misinterpretations that have kept them apart stand as further reason to put them together.

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<sup>17</sup> This was not true of every one of their interpreters, but it is a generally observable phenomenon. Paul Tillich, for one, engaged in a fruitful synthesis of Marx and Kierkegaard in his 1933 work, *The Socialist Decision*, while Jean-Paul Sartre would engage in a similarly inspired project following the Second World War, in his 1958, *Search For A Method*. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search For A Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968); Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (Washington, DC: University Press of America, Inc., 1977). However, these are exceptions whose singularity helps prove the rule.

Aside from the nature of their receptions, receptions that painted Kierkegaard as a bourgeois philosopher whereas Marx was seen as the critical one, perhaps the greatest impediment to their comparison—and synthesis—has been religion. For all the twentieth century’s embrace of difference, for many people the difference between religious life and secular life continues to seem insurmountable. This is hardly true, as this work will also demonstrate; however, this problem reveals a more fundamental underlying one—we lack the repertoire for thinking about religion *and* politics. While it is easy to oversimplify this point, it seems fair to assert that among sociopolitical thinkers there is often a deep suspicion of anything that suggests religion; a point that is perhaps even truer among many of the diverse disciples of Marx. Marx did famously write that religion “is the opium of the people,” and lines like these seem to justify no end of contempt, as religion is uncritically equated with its conservative sociopolitical forms.<sup>18</sup> Reciprocally, religious thinkers often see the sociopolitical world as something to be ignored, or as little more than an interpersonal realm that can be improved through a private ethics, as they lack the critical tools—or they simply reject them outright—for thinking about our sociopolitical life in a more systematic way. Politics is uncritically understood as a compromise of ethics, not their fulfillment. If religion is an opiate to some, it is as if politics does not exist to others.

Yet, there is a depth in Kierkegaard and Marx that forces us to go beyond this simple opposition. For all of Marx’s attacks on religion, including his pronouncement that it “is the opium of the people,” there is a sophistication to Marx’s understanding of religion.<sup>19</sup> Even within this famous passage, if we read beyond this narrow excerpt, we see Marx is more sensitive than he is sometimes made to appear. As he writes:

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.<sup>20</sup>

For Marx, the deep anguish and yearning expressed in religious discourse is an expression of real anguish and yearning, as is the promise religion makes. For Marx, the problem with religion is not that it is patently untrue, it is that its expressions and promises are the illusory form of something that should be real. Politics will bring the same fulfillment that religion promises, but that it cannot deliver.

As for Kierkegaard, his turn inwards, away from the material world, has seemed to many to be a renunciation of political engagement. Truth is inside, Kierkegaard argues, within subjectivity, and not in the external world. Any political solution to the question of human fulfillment is therefore itself an illusion, and not vice versa, as Kierkegaard seems to swing to the exact opposite pole of Marx. In a passage that approximates Marx's thoughts on religion, albeit in this case, on the question of politics, Kierkegaard writes:

But although "impractical," yet the religious is eternity's transfigured rendition of the most beautiful dream of politics. No politics has been able, no politics is able, no worldliness has been able, no worldliness is able to think through or to actualized to the ultimate consequences this idea: human-equality, human-likeness [*Menneske-Lighed*].<sup>21</sup>

To which he adds:

Ultimately only the essentially religious can with the help of eternity effect human equality [*Menneske-Lighed*], the godly, the essential, the not-worldly, the true, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, "The Single Individual": Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author," 103-04.

only possible human equality; and this is also why—be it said to its glorification—the essentially religious is the true humanity [*Menneskelighed*].<sup>22</sup>

For all his criticisms of politics, he does not dismiss politics outright, he simply calls it illusory—much as Marx spoke of religion. And just as Marx validates the content of religion while criticizing it, Kierkegaard also validates the content of politics—its “most beautiful dream” of “human-equality”—while criticizing it. It is not that the dream of politics is a lie, it is that politics cannot deliver on it—only religion can.

What we find here is a striking opposition between Kierkegaard and Marx—we might say a dialectical opposition—that is hardly the type of antithesis we can easily dismiss. If each simply criticized the other, that would be one thing; however, what we see is that each *appropriates* the other. Religion is only a lie because politics holds religion’s truth; politics is only a lie because religion holds politics’ truth. Ignoring our ideas about what constitutes religion and what constitutes politics, this brief analysis should be more than enough to suggest that beneath the surface of this terminology, something profound is taking place. If Marx’s politics appropriate religion, and Kierkegaard’s religion appropriates politics, this suggests that what they are talking about is actually the same. This would have been little surprise to Hegel, as he developed his religious thought alongside his political thought, seeing them as different expressions of the same truth, but it is likely a surprise to us. Yet, referred to by different names, and developed in different directions that ultimately illuminate its different dimensions, there is a deep unity underneath their work. That unity is freedom.

## **The Dialectic of Freedom**

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 104.

The concern of the present work is to articulate the idea of freedom that unites Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx. It is an idea that continues to provide a foundation for continental thought, yet rarely is it acknowledged with the clarity they brought to it. Instead, it has become an almost unspoken—and even unacknowledged—assumption by many thinkers. This owes more than a little to the radical intellectual break the First World War represents, as do the many violent ruptures that seemingly define the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it became difficult to see any continuity between pre-war and post-war thought—beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s radical critiques. In other words, the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s repetition of 19<sup>th</sup> century thought appropriated the negative critique but not the positive philosophy, it appropriated a suspicion of Western thought without its promise of freedom.

However, Kierkegaard’s and Marx’s criticisms of Western thought were meant to clarify its promise, not to discard it wholesale, so that a return to their thought allows us to marry a radical critique with the promise of a substantive understanding of freedom. Moreover, it is through this understanding of freedom that we can reclaim something of the unity of thought that was lost following the First World War, as the intense polarizations that began there have endured. For all our radical critiques, we seem less able to cross intellectual boundaries than ever, as was the case for someone like Hegel, whose thought spanned religion and politics, history and art, and everything in between. This is why Marx and Kierkegaard prove so promising—they are bastions of freedom, clarified through radical critique. We might think we are free of the Western tradition, but this is only to misunderstand it—and ourselves. It is to misunderstand freedom.

However, Marx and Kierkegaard are not without their own problems; for all their insight into freedom, they each carry but one part of a larger whole. While their respective interests in

religion and politics do not preclude the possibility of a shared sense of freedom, and instead only help reveal a complex unity beneath their work, it does indicate that each developed the importance of freedom in a one-sided way. In other words, religion and politics are consequences of freedom, they do not determine it, as they are ways we have for understanding and developing the complex nature of the freedom that they reflect. So, in order to understand freedom—and ourselves—we need to integrate these back into a whole. Therefore, this work will maintain a commitment to the idea of freedom, first and foremost, so that freedom, rather than Marx or Kierkegaard, dictates its direction.

With this in mind, the trajectory of this work follows a narrative of an individual's appropriation of freedom. *Part One* introduces the idea of the self *as* freedom, but does so by way of a discussion of what *unfreedom* looks like. Contrasting Kierkegaard's concept of despair with Marx's concept of alienation, we will see how these two phenomena approximate one another. If Kierkegaard subjectively deepens our understanding of unfreedom, Marx completes the picture by situating it within a larger sociopolitical whole. *Part Two* finds the narrative moving from unfreedom to *emancipation*. Focusing on Kierkegaard's idea of a leap of faith as a narrative of emancipation, we will see how Marx situates a similar process within sociopolitical reality, thereby helping us understand the nature of revolutionary subjectivity. *Part Three* proceeds to a discussion of *freedom* itself. Beginning with Kierkegaard's metaphysics of freedom, we complicate this metaphysics by situating it historically, before proceeding to situate it communally. We therefore begin with an understanding of freedom as lived by an individual considered alone, move on to a discussion of such an individual if situated historically, before examining what a community of free individuals looks like. Lastly, in *Part Four*, we move on to the questions of *praxis*. It is here where Marx and Kierkegaard most diverge. If freedom unites

their work, their respective focus on religion and politics reflects a choice each made about how best to cultivate it. For Marx, the answer was politics, and for Kierkegaard, religion. We therefore conclude with a discussion of how their respective understandings of praxis explain why their work *appears* so different, yet is nonetheless united by a shared concern for freedom.

If our own interest in freedom is to be complete, we need to learn to be attentive to the spiritual nature of freedom and to its sociopolitical dimensions, to religion and to politics, to Kierkegaard and to Marx. Religion speaks to the subjective dimension of freedom, offering us a full and rich picture of human interiority, while also helping make us aware of our fundamental commitment to those around us; politics helps us think about the nature of that commitment to others, urging us to realize that the impediments to freedom are not solely subjective, as there are overwhelming sociopolitical forces with an interest in maintaining our servitude. It is only by uniting the praxis of religion of politics—by attending to the subjectivity of those around us while simultaneously combatting the objective sociopolitical forces that stand in our way—that freedom will ever come to be. Politics without religion rings hollow, whereas religion without politics is blind; but together, we find truth. That truth is freedom.

## ***Part One: Unfreedom***

I could do the work I like and still be something.  
(Biff Loman, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*)

He envied us. We're not enough to be envied.  
(Louisa Kittredge, in John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*)

### **Introduction**

At first, the families at the center of these two plays seem hardly a match. Arthur Miller's Loman family is a prototypical example of the working class, complete with a tragic narrative of vulnerability and false hope, while John Guare's Kittredge family seems a proper image of the upper class, rife with privilege and the detached attitude privilege affords. Yet, the characters animating these plays suffer similar maladies, a similarity obscured by surface differences.

Specifically, both plays describe characters hopelessly attempting to be that which they are not, as the respective narratives then chart the unraveling of the fantasies by which each live. In Willy Loman's case, rather than face the truth about himself, he takes the final step of escape through suicide; on the other hand, by the plays end, Louisa Kittredge, awakened to the possibility of an authentic existence, seems poised to start her life anew. This seems to demonstrate a charity John Guare had towards Louisa not paralleled by Arthur Miller vis-à-vis Willy, but perhaps it only reveals that one of the most important privileges of *privilege* is the ability to start again.

Nonetheless, at the heart of both plays lies the question of authenticity.

The question of authenticity preoccupied both Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx. Writing in different cities, never having met, and virtually unaware of the existence of the other, they

began writing at precisely the same time. They were also united by an education in Hegelian philosophy against which they both rebelled, but which also provided an enduring schema for their thought. Granted, Marx is often taken to be an atheistic communist and Kierkegaard a devout apolitical (or anti-political) Christian. However, the similarities in their thought are profound, similarities further obscured by the strong opinions many of their readers have of either communism, Christianity, or both. As Paul Tillich notes, the 1840s saw the birth of an entirely new way of thinking about individuals and the world, and this decade was *defined* by Marx and Kierkegaard.<sup>1</sup> Transcending the intellectual categories that had long characterized Western thought, Marx and Kierkegaard ushered in a return to the “existing” individual, as they attempted to describe their lived reality with fresh eyes.<sup>2</sup>

Wealth might have given Louisa Kittredge possibilities unbeknownst to Willy Loman, but these differences become secondary when it comes to understanding the nature of their shared malady; although later they will help complicate matters.<sup>3</sup> This truth also extends to Marx and Kierkegaard; for all their differences, the foundation is much the same. And this only makes for a more dynamic picture once they are put in contact, as they spent their lives exploring shared problems and pointing to similar solutions, but did so in very different ways. In orchestrating a conversation between them, a comprehensive picture of inauthenticity emerges, one in which Marx and Kierkegaard dialectically reinforce one another, and one that simultaneously begins to construct a complex and revolutionary understanding of the self.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, "Existential Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5, no. 1 (1944): 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-46, 51-55.

<sup>3</sup> These differences are certainly not incidental to Louisa or Willy themselves, or to anyone who has suffered like Willy or been blessed like Louisa, but they are incidental to the underlying phenomenon.

## Chapter 1: Necessity

We will begin this work by discussing the question of authenticity, drawing some preliminary parallels between Kierkegaard and Marx. Aside from the parallels between them, we will also begin to note an important. Specifically, for Marx, authenticity is prevented by forces of political necessity. As this work progresses, this understanding of necessity will become deepened, as it presents an important avenue by which to politicize Kierkegaard. Lastly, in this chapter we will also begin exploring the nature of the intellectual receptions of Kierkegaard and Marx, so that we can begin to understand the origins of many misconceptions that pertain to them. All told, as we begin to draw together Marx and Kierkegaard, we will also begin to explore some of the reasons they have been kept apart.

### Marx's Problematic Reception

In London, England, on March 14, 1883, Karl Marx died. Five years later, his lifelong collaborator, Friedrich Engels, published a short work written by a then youthful Marx, entitled *Theses on Feuerbach*.<sup>1</sup> While Marx had written voluminously in his youth, the only work from that time to receive publication had been *The Holy Family*.<sup>2</sup> So, *Theses on Feuerbach* joined that lone work to constitute all that would be known of the youthful Marx, for many decades to come. Yet, despite this absence and the general acclaim Marx's youthful works would later receive, when, a decade after Marx's death, Engels was asked if these early works could be posthumously

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 5, Marx and Engels: 1845-47* (New York: International Publishers, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Holy Family," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 4, Marx and Engels: 1844-45* (New York: International Publishers, 1975).

published, he rebuffed the questioner, making it clear that they were not worth the trouble.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, Engels provided a telling vignette, one that typifies Marx's posthumous treatment at the hands of many of his students.

Unfortunately, this vignette is telling because, until recently, Marx's intellectual legacy has been characterized by what his students have left out. For instance, lacking access to many of the works now considered essential to Marx's oeuvre, early Soviet sectarian debates proceeded unenlightened by Marx's true complexity.<sup>4</sup> This oversimplification had the added benefit of making it easier to adapt Marx's thought to narrow political interests. The "Marxism" that often existed behind the Iron Curtain was less a thoughtful, mature, philosophy than it was an instrumental ideology.<sup>5</sup> This might have been ironic, given that Marx explicitly criticized the "reification" of concepts, a process whereby complex concepts are transformed into ideological tools; however, the word irony fails to do justice to the crimes committed on behalf of those willful deceptions. As Marshall Berman has written of the intellectual life within the Iron Curtain's political bureaucracy, "for most of the twentieth century ... any candidate for advancement in Communist organizations was expected to know certain passages and themes from Marx's writings ... [a]nd expected *not* to know many other[s]."<sup>6</sup>

While the publication of Marx's *Collected Works* during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might have been expected to correct this misunderstanding of Marx, especially beyond the Iron Curtain where less was at stake, it was at this time that a burgeoning Western scholarship began denying the relationship between Marx's early "philosophical" and

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964). 363.

<sup>4</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1971). 1.

<sup>5</sup> Erich Fromm, "Marx's Concept of Man," in *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2004), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall Berman, "Tearing Away the Veils: The Communist Manifesto," in *The Communist Manifesto* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2011), 1.

“humanist” works, and his later so-called “mature economic” works.<sup>7</sup> Less invested in a narrow reading of Marx, but nonetheless committed to one, it is hard to imagine that these intellectual positions could have emerged had it not been for the long publication gap in Marx’s work, which had thereby allowed Marxian thinking to develop in a narrow and stunted way.<sup>8</sup> The image of Marx that remained, unfortunately, was a Marx in which his deep humanism was expunged, a humanism which expressed Marx’s very reason for writing in the first place.

Shlomo Avineri makes an excellent case when he points out that, biographically, Marx was much more predisposed to the sensitive philosophical ruminations that characterized his youth, a predisposition that never left him, while Engels was the one more naturally inclined to economic matters.<sup>9</sup> Later in life, Marx’s correspondence with Engels reveal that he viewed economic studies as a distraction from other interests, but a necessary distraction as economics constituted the “practical side of philosophy.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, this vision of a complex Marx, a philosophically sophisticated Marx for whom economics was an essential but limited dimension of his thought, does not well serve the dogmatism, beginning with Engels, that has pervaded his legacy. And given that Soviet political history attempted to derive legitimacy from Marx’s writing, with each passing day, the circumscribed picture of Marx was invested with an increasingly heavy burden. Marx’s name was used to justify much at which he would have been horrified, and granted, much at which he would have been glad, but as history progressed, it

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Daniel Bell, "The "Rediscovery" of Alienation," in *Marx's Socialism*, ed. Shlomo Avineri (New York, NY: Lieber-Atherton, Incorporated, 1972); Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York, NY: Verso, 1996). For very different reasons, Bell and Althusser make very similar arguments. Trying to disprove the “humanity” of Marxism so that it can be discarded as a viable political philosophy, Bell tries to disassociate the early works from the later ones. Trying to disprove that same “humanity,” but in the interest of supposedly “saving” Marx from it, Althusser makes much the same claim.

<sup>8</sup> Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society. Second Edition.* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1976). 217-20. Ollman is charitable towards such early Marx/late Marx debates, arguing that oftentimes both sides of such debates were right, and would realize this if their readings of Marx were not so circumscribed. Charity aside, his overall conclusion is the same; most debates within Marxism, and/or about Marx, have stemmed from narrow and/or exclusionary readings.

<sup>9</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 3.

<sup>10</sup> Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*: 340.

became increasingly difficult to disassociate Marx from all that he was being used to support. In tandem, many of Marx's defenders as well as many of his attackers increasingly associated Marx with Soviet politics, neither faction of which had much interest in a richer picture of the man in which they had invested so much.

Marx's defenders have become few and far between, and this has offered his denigrators the status of unquestioned victors. As Mark Lilla's recent obituary for Daniel Bell attests, in the minds of many (including Lilla himself), the association of Karl Marx's thought with the political history of those who claimed to act in Marx's name has all too uncritically endured.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Lilla is able to unflinchingly assert the "truth" that Bell's criticism of the Soviet Union "was based on the intellectual insight that the nineteenth-century aspiration to interpret society with a single set of laws was *in principle* misconceived."<sup>12</sup> In one fell swoop Lilla affirms Bell's attempt to equate the richness of Marx's thought with the reductionist attempt to "interpret society with a single set of laws," while he simultaneously ascribes this revisionist "Marx" as the patron saint of the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> And so, for Lilla, those early works that most clearly articulate Marx's humanism, those works that need to be dismissed if an uncritical understanding of Marx is to be maintained, amount to nothing more than "a patina of humanism" atop Marx's "unforgiving materialism."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, given the prevalence of this caricature of Marx, such claims have become the conventional wisdom, making it extremely difficult to have real conversations about what Marx actually wrote.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Lilla, "Daniel Bell (1919-2011)," *The New York Review of Books*, April 7 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Many of my arguments for a more sophisticated understanding of Marx parallel those of Erich Fromm, in spirit if not in content. As Marx's fuller oeuvre began being published in English in the late 50s and early 60s, Fromm introduced the first American publication of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* with a similar plea. Fromm, "Marx's Concept of Man." While we will soon see that a vital and sophisticated understanding of Marx

If the early/late Marx debate was often a veil for political battles, this hardly discounts the fact that drastic changes in personal and intellectual commitments are possible; after all, the dramatic transformation often referred to as a “spiritual rebirth” provides a model for the comparison of Marx and Kierkegaard in *Part Two*. However, if Marx had such an experience, it was not upon his discovery of economics, it was upon his discovery of Hegel, a discovery that predates all of his seriously considered work. In an 1837 letter to his father, Marx describes what many of his biographers call his “conversion” to Hegel, an experience described by many other scholars in similarly “religious” terms.<sup>16</sup> Marx wrote to his father that he had no idea he “would mature ... from an anemic weakling into a man of robust bodily strength,” that “[a] curtain had fallen, my holy of holies was rent asunder, and new gods had to be installed,” he later “ran about madly in the garden by the dirty water of the Spree, which “washes souls and dilutes the tea,”” and then “rushed off to Berlin and wanted to embrace every street-corner loafer.”<sup>17</sup> If there was a moment when Marx became “Marx,” this moment certainly serves as a better stand-in than does his gradually increasing focus upon economics. But, as both Marx and Kierkegaard will soon demonstrate with their shared model of transcendence, even if Marx became Marx at that moment, he had only become what he always in fact was. Yet, regardless of this point, as times pass and scholarship amasses, it is increasingly clear that had a complete record of Marx’s work been available from the beginning, the impetus most certainly would have been to reconcile any perceived changes in Marx’s thought, rather than the unequivocal dismissal of a

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developed within some intellectual camps, the popular misconception of Marx endured, and any traction Marx might have gained in the academic sphere has, of late, dwindled to a trickle.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Francis Wheen, David McLellan and Isaiah Berlin all refer to this experience as a “conversion,” seeing it as a greatly transformative event. Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2001). 27; Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His life and environment*, 4 ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998). 52; David McLellan, *Marx Before Marxism* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1970). 46-52.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, "Letter from Karl to His Father in Trier: Berlin, November 10 1837," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 1, Marx: August 1835-March 1843* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 18.

whole section of it. Fortunately, within Marx scholarship this reconciliation has been the major trend over the last several decades, helping advance an image of Marx that is both complex and deep. With this image in mind, Marx would have been less easily lent to the endless series of political rationalizations that continue to obscure his work, and tarnish his name. However, claims like Lilla's help demonstrate that even as the Cold War has become an ever receding memory, for many, Marx continues to be a totem upon which our fears of totalitarianism are uncritically affixed.

### **The Necessity of Work**

While Marx's youthful writings are extensive, at the heart of these controversies was often a single text, his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.<sup>18</sup> Unpublished until 1932, and not translated into English until 1959, they were an essential source of vitality for Western Marxism, playing a major role in the intellectual development of The Frankfurt School, the New Left, and within dissident groups behind the Iron Curtain. While the scope of these manuscripts touches on many subjects, their most recognized contribution was their discussion of the concept of alienation. Marx's systematic critique of capitalism, most thoroughly explored in his end of life work, *Capital*, found a subjective corollary in his concept of alienation.<sup>19</sup> In other words, alienation was Marx's critique of capitalism viewed from the position of the single individual's subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> The kind of subjective complexity that Marx demonstrated in this work, and the inclusiveness of the politics derived therefrom, were hardly a good match for reductionist and dogmatic political agendas.

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975).

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Capital, Volume 1," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 35, Vol. 01, Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society. Second Edition.*: 157-69, 233.

In a brief section of these manuscripts, manuscripts alternatively known as the *Paris Manuscripts* for their city of composition, the 26 year old Marx posited that alienation was the consequence of working under the dehumanizing conditions of a capitalist economy. While this dehumanization is both complex and difficult to perceive, its cause is simple: individuals need to work in order to live. Within a capitalist economy, workers have to sell their labor for the money they need to buy that which they need to live. Or as Marx would put it a few years later, “labour-power is a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to the capitalist. Why does he sell it? It is in order to live.”<sup>21</sup> Writing at a similar time, Charles Dickens would evoke the intensity of this necessity in such works as *Hard Times*, making it easy to see that Marx meant his claim quite literally. Bounderby’s factory conditions, an apt example of 19<sup>th</sup> century working class life writ large, leave little to the imagination, while Gradgrind’s pedagogical adherence to the “facts,” perhaps motivated by care, provide the town’s youth with an education devoid of all joy which is all the better for them to “work.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, while a useful evocation, the Dickensian oeuvre is not necessary in order to imagine what Marx meant, for nowhere are 19<sup>th</sup> century labor conditions held as an example of anything but their inhumanity, except perhaps of their productivity. Destitution and even death were a proximate and immediately perceivable consequence of unemployment for much of modern industrialization (and continues to be so, in many parts of the world), and it is from this fact that Marx begins.

In defining the cause of wage work in this way, however, Marx was not limiting himself to 19<sup>th</sup> century factory labor. Descriptively it might seem so, but conceptually, Marx was speaking in terms that factory life hardly exhausts. The complexity of today’s labor market might

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<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 9, Marx and Engels: 1849* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 202.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times: An authoritative text, contexts, criticism*, 3 ed., Norton Critical Editions (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., Ltd., 2001).

seem to admit a myriad of distinctions, but Marx's analysis admits none of them, except insofar as they appear as equivocation. Through the lens of having to work to live, the *cultural* significance usually affixed to labor, such as that between blue and white collar work, manufacturing and service work, or manual labor and intellectual work, melt away.<sup>23</sup> As Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, a few years after the *Paris Manuscripts*, the bourgeoisie, via capitalism, "has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, similarly to the cultural distinctions within what Marx defines as the "working" class writ large, relative income levels further lend themselves to the illusion of class difference by affording a relatively higher standard of life to some.<sup>25</sup> However, while this standard is not to be scorned, until a source of income is derived from the labor of others i.e. until you become a purchaser of labor rather than a seller, one's own labor remains the means by which survival is achieved. For Marx, under capitalism class difference is simple: either one owns the means of production (i.e. the material that workers need to work), and

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<sup>23</sup> These, and other, distinctions are at the heart of Walter Benn Michaels critique of contemporary intellectual "leftism." In the contemporary left's focus upon identity, the question of class is transformed from one of actually existing material inequality, and the actual exploitation upon which it rests, into a question of cultural "inclusion." In other words, what makes membership in a class difficult is not the necessity under which labor occurs, or the consequences derived therefrom, but the cultural stigma attached to certain classes. This, to him, makes the contemporary left incapable of addressing exploitation as an actual practice, because its concern has been to make membership in the exploited class more socially acceptable, rather than eliminating the inequalities and exploitation that materially characterize the class. And so, a more culturally inclusive society emerges, which itself is certainly a good, but inequality and its attendant miseries remain. See, Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How we learned to love identity and ignore inequality* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the end of history* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 06, Marx and Engels: 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 487.

<sup>25</sup> Marx often speaks of the middle class as a distinct entity from the proletariat, i.e. the working class as it is traditionally conceived. This has led to narrow readings of Marx whereby the proletariat, and only the proletariat, come to be viewed as the sole exploited and alienated class (and therefore the only revolutionary class). When Marx makes such divisions, however, he is not excluding the middle class from the category of the working class writ large. Rather, he is typically making the claim that because of the relative destitution of the proletarian class, it is easier for them to see the exploitation of capitalism in general. The middle class, in benefiting from capitalism, relatively at least, have more at stake by an awareness of their own exploitation. See, for instance, Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 219.

thereby makes their living by paying others to work for them, or else, they sell their labor power to those who need it.<sup>26</sup> Better wages, therefore, amount to “better payment for the slave.”<sup>27</sup>

With this in mind, Marx’s analysis of class is really an analysis of capitalism seeking to reveal one thing: power. The history of capitalist societies is a rich one, as by their very nature they are adaptable and diverse; and yet, underlying this diversity is a structural power relationship upon which this diversity rests. This is what makes Walter Benn Michaels’ critique so trenchant; without an understanding of the unequal power relations upon which capitalism relies, many critical schools of thought fail to challenge it, even as they believe they do. And so, Michaels can argue that the intellectual preoccupation with diversity has often come at the expense of an analysis of inequality, to the great detriment of progressive politics.<sup>28</sup> This argument testifies to the influence of Marx, as for Marx, what truly makes wage work what it is, is that deriving its necessity from the need to survive, it involves the selling of labor to stay alive. In other words, the buying and selling of labor reveals the underlying power dimension of capitalism. And this is the unjust inequality at the heart of capitalism. With the exception of a select few, the rest of us really do *need* to work, regardless of how our relative level of remuneration, or the cultural subclass to which we belong, might make it seem. Some might stave off destitution longer than others, but our dependency on the sale of our labor is absolute; a point that, John Guare similarly makes in *Six Degrees of Separation*, when he explains that many of those who appear rich, such as the Kittredge’s, are actually just “[h]and to mouth on a higher

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<sup>26</sup> This, in a nutshell, is Marx’s description of the capitalist class structure. Either you live off of your own labor, or you live off the labor of others. See, for instance, Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital,” 214-15.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” 280.

<sup>28</sup> Michaels does not frame diversity and inequality as mutually exclusive, even if his critics sometimes believe this to be so. Rather, he is only counseling that an analysis of inequality should accompany any discussion of diversity, if that analysis wants to consider itself truly critical. Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How we learned to love identity and ignore inequality*.

plateau.”<sup>29</sup> They are hoping for a million dollar art sale, the commission of which will relieve the anxiety they have over the precarity of their lives; but without it, they could lose all that they have.

And so, contrary to appearances, wage labor is “... not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*.”<sup>30</sup> Even the ability to seek a new job is only an illusion of freedom atop this necessity, as it does not alter the underlying compulsion that necessitates wage labor as a category; nor is this necessity altered by any satisfaction derived from some forms of labor, as any satisfaction is, at best, secondary. Perhaps, not secondary in the laborers mind, but secondary to the reason the job exists, i.e. because in paying for labor, the purchaser of labor is able to make a profit. All of these distinctions, such as cultural subdivisions within a class, relative remuneration, the ability to find a new job, and job satisfaction, are important from the point of view of specific workers, but none help arrive at an understanding of the structural dimensions of capitalist society. Nor do any of these distinctions potentially prescribe a change to the underlying necessity of wage work; nor do they affect the reality that all specific forms of paid labor exist solely because the purchaser of labor is making a profit.<sup>31</sup> Given this class similarity, the necessity of labor is joined by a perpetual downward pressure on wages, as wages are an expense taken directly out of the capitalist’s potential profit, and an expense that only bottoms out with the basic subsistence level required to keep the worker physically alive.<sup>32</sup> In this light, training and education, aside from the personal subjective value it offers the individual, aims at the procurement of higher wages by attempting to fill a specialized niche in the labor market. The harder it is to replace a worker, the

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<sup>29</sup> John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation* (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1992). 43.

<sup>30</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 274.

<sup>31</sup> Public sector workers are a strange and interesting anomaly, and a particularly germane one at this point in time. Profit is not made off of their labor (not directly, at least), as they are paid solely by the taxpayer. However, the recent global wave of austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis helps demonstrate that the “taxpayer” can act every bit as exploitatively as the capitalist, in demanding more work for less pay.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 235.

more that worker can procure for their labor; and yet, wages continue to equal the *minimum* an employer can pay.

And so, discussions of work or class without a recognition of the underlying necessity driving work made such talk, for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, at least, as he commented on a similar situation, a “good question for slaves to discuss within earshot of their masters, but ... not suitable for reasonable and free men who seek the truth.”<sup>33</sup> In Marx’s own words, wage labor is not the work it *appears* to be, it is “... not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.”<sup>34</sup> Rather than satisfying a need implicit in the labor itself, in working for the external goal of wages, work has become a means to an end.<sup>35</sup> As Willy Loman’s boss tells him right before firing him, “you gotta admit, business is business.”<sup>36</sup> And in the broader context, when the reason the job exists is accounted for, i.e. to create a profit for the labor purchaser, the greater end is not even the workers own. But before turning to the phenomenon of alienation to which the necessity of work leads, it is time to turn to Kierkegaard.

### **Kierkegaard and Guilt**

A young child named Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, eventual father to Søren Aabye, alone one day on Denmark’s Jutland Heath, looked to the sky and cursed God.<sup>37</sup> As he grew up, Michael would eventually become convinced that he, in turn, was cursed by God, a curse he believed meant that he was destined to outlive each of his children, none of whom would live

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Basic Political Writings*, ed. Peter Gay (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 38.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 274.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1980). 58.

<sup>37</sup> Thorkild C. Lyby, "Peter Christian Kierkegaard: A Man with a Difficult Family Heritage," in *Kierkegaard and his Danish Contemporaries, Tome 2: Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: sources, reception, and resources* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 189-90.

beyond the age of 33, the age when Jesus Christ died.<sup>38</sup> While Søren and his brother Peter Christian would outlive this age, Michael Kierkegaard's household would experience more than its fair share of tragedy. By the time Michael died in 1838 at age 82, he had outlived his wife, and five of his seven children, none of whom lived beyond their "fated" age. While there are doubts about the veracity of this story, as we will see, the story of a family living under Michael's curse gets at something of the somber heaviness that weighed over Kierkegaard's childhood.

Given this story, it should be little surprise that Michael Kierkegaard was prone to bouts of severe depression, a trait he had in common with his son Søren. In fact, as his journals reveal, in his early adulthood there were times when Søren teetered on the verge of suicide.<sup>39</sup> In the case of Michael, his chronic depression seems to have found a complement in the superstitious faith by which he maintained that he had been cursed. Given Michael's origins, his superstitiousness seems not out of place. Born on a small farm in the middle of rural Denmark's Jutland Heath, Michael had a peasant upbringing, the kind of semi-feudal life that, in Europe at this time, was often associated with religious superstition. However, by age 11, goaded by poverty and the dismal returns from the farm, Michael made his way to Copenhagen.<sup>40</sup> There, over the course of several years, he proved himself a shrewd and adept merchant, quickly becoming one of Denmark's wealthiest men.<sup>41</sup> And all of this was at a time when Copenhagen's culture was flourishing. The passionate conviction with which Michael maintained that he had been cursed, and cursed for the seemingly forgivable sin of youthfully cursing God, matches less well the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon Marino, "Despair and Depression," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney, *Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 122.

<sup>40</sup> Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8.

image of a calculative businessman savvy in the ways of international trade, living in a “Golden Age” of Danish culture, who, through his own ingenuity, raised himself from a poverty-stricken shepherd boy into one of Denmark’s richest merchants. Stranger stories have no doubt been told, but as it turns out, there may have been much more to this one.

Søren Kierkegaard’s biographer, Joakim Garff, surmises that what may have driven Michael’s superstitious piety was his guilt over a youthful visit to a brothel, as it may have led to the contraction of syphilis, which he later feared transmitting to his family.<sup>42</sup> In fact, not only had enough time passed without symptoms before he eventually married, but also, he likely visited doctors too, all of which would have provided him with enough reassurance that he was healthy.<sup>43</sup> While Garff’s interpretation relies on a great deal of speculation, his story as well as the story of Michael’s curse on the Jutland Heath, are both attempts to make sense of an incident that is actually recorded in Kierkegaard’s journals. While the specific details are unclear, nearing his death, Michael Kierkegaard made an “alarming” confession to his son Søren, and this confession served to shatter his son’s image of his father.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the effect on Søren makes another of Kierkegaard’s biographers, Alastair Hannay, skeptical of any claims that this indiscretion was sexual in nature, as the young Søren was “an intellectual aesthete who consorted with poets and actors” and for whom such indiscretions, while surprising for his father, would hardly be the stuff to warrant such a response.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of what the revelation was, Søren’s father, a fiercely devout, yet loving (in his own way) father, a man that defined Søren’s world, was revealed to be other than he appeared. For a son as sensitive as Søren, this was no doubt traumatic.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 344-45.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>44</sup> Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003). 120.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 124.

While the specific confession remains unknown, from Søren's point of view, in discovering his father's lie, Garff is right to say that he discovered the "hidden side of piety: the lies, the injuries, the pain of hypocrisy ... which not even the most contrite piety could manage to conceal."<sup>46</sup> Underneath his father's bourgeois façade of piety lay a guilt that could not but devour him evermore with each passing day, a guilt he could only acknowledge near to his own death. With each passing day, a day in which Michael remained hidden, the need for his façade only grew in strength. Michael may once have succumbed, in a moment of weakness, to a sexual temptation, or he might once have cursed god, but as Kierkegaard would soon explore in his own work, it was not in this that his cure truly lay. In lying to cover up his transgression, Michael committed a second act with much graver consequences, proving himself too weak to admit the truth to others, and likely also, to himself. Through this latter weakness, he destined himself to a life of duplicity.<sup>47</sup>

For Marx, while lacking an obvious connection to economics (which is not to say that one does not exist), Michael's hypocrisy is phenomenologically approximate to the loss of the self we will soon see in Marx's concept of alienation. But Michael's story dotes upon a detail that, while it exists in Marx, is not given much analysis. Michael did not abdicate his self because of economic necessity, as is the case for Marx; he abdicated his self because he shamefully did not want to face who or what he was or had done. In Kierkegaard's language, his father's "sin" was to "will to be rid of oneself."<sup>48</sup> By becoming the Michael Kierkegaard of his lie, he could avoid facing the reality of the Michael Kierkegaard who he was. So, of the moment

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<sup>46</sup> Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*: 349.

<sup>47</sup> While it is likely that Michael Kierkegaard did not subject his children to an actual threat, even if his doubt made it appear so, Michael's duplicity was a willed duplicity born out of his inability to admit the truth about himself, i.e. that he had real sexual needs. It was this duplicity that harmed all of his relationships, including that to his son, Søren.

<sup>48</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). 20.

when workers *accept* the necessity of wage labor, Kierkegaard lays claim. Regardless of the necessity that attends wage labor, complicity is often a shameful act. A truer responsibility to the self is abdicated in exchange for the means of survival, or more apparently, for material comfort.<sup>49</sup> And this initial shameful complicity does not end with a single act, for this single act is the beginning of a life lived according to the will of another, a life lived with this complicity ever-present, and in which actions of “questionable” ethical value are often required. After all, “business is business.”<sup>50</sup> With this shame comes a guilt that only grows ever greater the longer responsibility is shirked.

This, for Kierkegaard, is not called alienation; it “is the formula for all despair.”<sup>51</sup> In stressing the role of individual will in Marx’s account, a role he takes for granted but does not take time to develop, the individual’s investment in their oppression becomes clearer, as shame and guilt act as countervailing pressures against a recognition of the truth. If overcoming exploitation depends, in large part, on an awareness of it, Kierkegaard complements Marx by starkly demonstrating how the exploited are psychologically and spiritually invested in the very system under which they suffer, because it depends upon their own wills for its maintenance. Rousseau posited that the arts and sciences made individuals reluctant to rebel, in that our fetters became beautified.<sup>52</sup> Kierkegaard, on the other hand, argues that our guilt guides our will more reliably than does our superficiality.

### **Kierkegaard’s Problematic Reception**

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<sup>49</sup> Both Kierkegaard and Marx imagine the self as an ethical self that entails ethical responsibility. While it will take much work to articulate the complexity of this ethical self, for now, it is enough to posit that it exists for both of them. In other words, both Kierkegaard and Marx define “sickness” in contradistinction to “health.”

<sup>50</sup> Miller, *Death of a Salesman*: 58.

<sup>51</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 20.

<sup>52</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts,” 3.

Kierkegaard's focus upon individual will has fed the enduring misconception that he lacked a social or political imagination. For instance, Marx's focus on the economic necessity that weighs upon us all allows for a social and political theory that unites individuals, whereas Kierkegaard's focus on the individual will easily feeds a libertarian politics bent upon keeping individuals apart. However, just as Marx's intellectual legacy is colored by misinterpretations arising from historical contingencies, so too is Kierkegaard's. Like Marx, Kierkegaard radically broke from the tradition of German Idealism from which they both came. We can even see this in Kierkegaard's choice of Danish as the language for his writing, as it virtually ensured his work would be cloistered in Denmark—at least temporarily. This proved all too successful, as international recognition of Kierkegaard was long delayed. In fact, Georg Lukács' brilliant 1910 essay, "The Foundering of Form against Life: Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen," was perhaps the first major philosophical analysis of Kierkegaard, written some 55 years after his death.<sup>53</sup> Enlightened by his prior fascination in Henrik Ibsen, who himself rendered dramatically many themes borrowed from Kierkegaard, Lukács came upon Kierkegaard already deeply immersed in the world of Kierkegaard. And while, in the decades leading up to Lukács' essay the critic Georges Brandes introduced the name of Søren Kierkegaard to a wider European audience, prior to Lukács, interest in Kierkegaard lacked the seriousness his oeuvre warranted. In fact, travelling to Heidelberg in 1910, Lukács participated in Kierkegaard's first large scale reception, that which occurred in Germany in the 1920s.<sup>54</sup>

The interwar years in Germany witnessed Kierkegaard's arrival on the intellectual stage. However, just as Marx was long interpreted through the lens of Soviet politics, Kierkegaard was

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<sup>53</sup> Georg Lukács, "The Foundering of Form Against Life: Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen," in *Soul and Form*, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1980).

<sup>54</sup> Heiko Schulz, "Germany and Austria: A Modest Head Start: The German Reception of Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard's International Reception: Tome I: Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009).

likewise interpreted through this period, and its growing fascination with fascist thought. The spiritual crisis Germany experienced following the First World War found in Kierkegaard's philosophy a useful salve.<sup>55</sup> However, this did not lend itself to the most unbiased interpretations. After all, for a nation in despair, the preeminent philosopher of despair seemed a natural match. This creative misinterpretation was also aided by the fact that Kierkegaard was often interpreted as engaged in the same project as Nietzsche, a point best demonstrated by Karl Jaspers' 1935 work *Reason and Existenz*.<sup>56</sup> While Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had many thematic similarities, for instance, their shared focus on questions of will, guilt, conscience, and Christianity, this connection greatly obscured Kierkegaard's compassionate and communal sensibility, a sensibility best embodied in his passionate commitment to, and embodiment of, neighborly love.

As the story of Kierkegaard's father demonstrated, despair was linked to weakness; therefore reciprocally, it seems as if the remedy for despair might be through the exercise of individual will. This remedy proved palatable to many German intellectuals humiliated by Versailles, a perfect example of which can be found in Ernst Jünger, whose novel *Storm of Steel* typified the romanticism of an unflinching will, for an entire generation of Germans.<sup>57</sup> For Jünger, *Storm of Steel* was a reconstruction of his war experiences, experiences in which he increasingly distinguished "between those who suffered the war and those who mastered it by the sheer force of their courage."<sup>58</sup> Very much the voice of a generation, or at least, a large segment of one, the clash of wills in war became an eternal value, one in which the everything else melted

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures* (New York, NY: Noonday Press, 1955).

<sup>57</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). 57.

away as a mere appearance.<sup>59</sup> These ideas became further codified in such political theories as Carl Schmitt's *decisionism*, a political theory that makes an explicit claim to Kierkegaard's lineage.<sup>60</sup> And so, Kierkegaard became increasingly used for ends which, we will soon see, he would have been the last to approve. The promise of a spiritual rebirth through individual will was a tempting solution for a national malaise that tied into a sense of weakness born from defeat (or capitulation, as many Germans were wont to say), and one that fed quite easily into the promise of fascism. However, this was certainly not Kierkegaard's remedy. In fact, Kierkegaard would recognize in the romance of the will a particular form of despair, the despair of defiance, a form characterized by its attempt to overcome feelings of insecurity by way of false strength.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's reputation long became linked to a kind of proto-Nietzschean will to power. And if there was a social or political dimension to his thought, it was long believed to be fascist (or at the very least, elitist) in its expression. This is even more remarkable given that Kierkegaard was unambiguously Christian, and saw in Jesus Christ both the highest ethical standard and the foundation for true human equality. However, just as Michael Kierkegaard constructed a fiction to avoid the truth, the German reception of Kierkegaard, while it had its fascinating intellectual highpoints, did much to obscure him. Luckily, just as Marx benefited from the careful scholarship that eventually helped resuscitate his name, in recent years, several scholars have engaged in the project of demonstrating that Kierkegaard was not the radical individualist he is often made out to be.<sup>62</sup> As Bruce Kirmmse

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>60</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). 15.

<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 67-74.

<sup>62</sup> Merold Westphal and Bruce Kirmmse are responsible for some of the most revealing work in this vein. See, for instance, Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Bruce H. Kirmmse, "Psychology and Society: The Social Falsification of the Self in *The Sickness unto Death*," in *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, Harold A. Durfee, and Gloria H. Parloff, *Psychiatry and the Humanities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

eloquently argues, what Kierkegaard had in mind when he wrote of despair was not the individual glorification of will, but the critique of a particular modern malaise he witnessed among the Copenhagen bourgeoisie.<sup>63</sup> Not limited to that time and place, it will become clear that Kierkegaardian despair is more widespread than ever, and is a malaise well described by Holden Caulfield when he said, “[y]ou never saw so many phonies in all your life.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard was deeply concerned with the ways in which social life distorted selfhood. However, a central concern of his oeuvre was to make his readers aware of the moment of freedom upon which complicity depends, as that moment helped reveal a possibility for liberation. In turn, this made him shy of overly dotting on social or political details, for fear of bolstering the very forces working against true selfhood. Freed from some of these pervasive misinterpretations, and with Kierkegaard’s concept of guilt filling in a gap in Marx’s understanding of necessity, it is now time to turn to that which this necessity leads: alienation.

### **The Importance of Objectification**

The labor that characterizes capitalist societies is instrumental in that, rather than serving a need itself, it serves the will of another, i.e. the owner of capital. Even when producing goods that meet a real need, the reason for their production is not that need, but rather, that in serving such a need, profit can be made. And if Marx locates the *logical* cause or necessity (rather than the *historical* cause or origin) of instrumental labor in survival, however distant that survival may sometimes appear, his concept of alienation becomes a study of the effect that this cause has on the lives of workers.

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<sup>63</sup> Kirmmse, "Psychology and Society: The Social Falsification of the Self in *The Sickness unto Death*," 178.

<sup>64</sup> J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2001). 164.

In the separation of means and ends, capitalism is able to organize work according to its own instrumental logic. However, for a number of reasons, this does not always seem so. For instance, workers often identify with the substance of their work, to the detriment of an awareness of the reason their job exists, i.e. to make profit for another, or else, workers often subjectively internalize the instrumental logic of capitalism, thereby obscuring what might otherwise be obvious.<sup>65</sup> While the ways this occurs are interesting as are the respective contents of “false consciousness,” these specifics aside, it is the *fact* that this occurs that is most important. The fact that conscious life can be disassociated from empirical existence betrays exactly the type of alienation that concerns Marx.

In his *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx details a fourfold alienation resulting directly from the nature of capitalist work. While they are dynamically interrelated, through work, workers become alienated from the objects they create, from the activity of labor itself, from their species being (i.e. from human nature), and from one another.<sup>66</sup> As the term alienation implies a prior state of possession, each of these also details a specific facet of the *loss* experienced as a result of capitalist work. Therefore, taken as a whole, alienation is a materialist explanation for how human beings and the world in which they live become divested of meaning. Most tragically, workers become alienated from the very generative process behind the creation of meaning itself; so, to the general loss of meaning is added a sense of *despair* about the futility of restored meaning. In sum, Marx is articulating the ways in which loss has come to pervade modern life.

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<sup>65</sup> Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society. Second Edition.*: 199. Ollman is hardly alone on this point. There is a comprehensive literature on the subject of false consciousness, all of which speaks to this point. However, the prototypical example is Georg Lukács. See, Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971).

<sup>66</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 275, 77.

Marx's awe of capitalism is evident in many of his works, and is demonstrated in lines like the following, from the *Communist Manifesto*. The bourgeoisie, as the active agent of capitalism, "... has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing the Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades."<sup>67</sup> In liberating labor from the confines of medieval life, in coupling it with scientific and industrial advances, labor's transformative power was unleashed. The world was remade anew; a statement hardly metaphorical, in that the last few hundred years has seen an unprecedented transformation of the material world. However, under capitalism, workers do not work for themselves, and so these transformations created *by* them are not created *for* them. Marx's awe of capitalism therefore extended as far as its quantitative possibilities; however, when examined qualitatively, the situation was hardly admirable.

According to Marx, in appropriating material from the empirical world, labor is able to transform this material into "objects;" objects which, in a materialist departure from Kant and Hegel's abstract understanding of objects, are nothing but the objectified products of human labor. "The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which his labour is realised, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces."<sup>68</sup> While objectification has acquired a suspect tone to the modern ear, specifically if it connotes the objectification of the *other*, Marx has no problem with this type of objectification, recognizing it to be essential to human nature, and to human life.<sup>69</sup> After all, human beings have no choice but to externalize (i.e. to objectify, or create as an object *for* an other) their internal, subjective, lives if any kind of self-expression, or the resulting

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<sup>67</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 487.

<sup>68</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 273.

<sup>69</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 97-105.

communication, is to occur. Art, therefore, is perhaps the purest example of what Marx had in mind.

For Marx, objectification is exactly what labor is supposed to do: “[t]he product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour.”<sup>70</sup> So, given that labor is the process of objectification, i.e. the process of creating objects, alienation from objects occurs precisely because workers have no recognized claim over what they produce. Rather than the obvious connection that might otherwise exist between a worker and their object, i.e. if this process freely occurred it would embody something of that worker’s *free* subjectivity, the detachment of the object from the workers subjectivity via the instrumentality of work births it as a different kind of object, that is, as private property. In making work instrumental and thereby transforming the worker into something interchangeable, what workers invest in their labor is not something of their own unique subjectivity, but only their time.<sup>71</sup> This does not mean that workers do not grow as a result of this work, as among other things, this alienating experience can empower workers by demonstrating the potential of work, but objects come to lack the richness of their expressive potential. The product, therefore, likewise becomes something instrumental and interchangeable, something that is created by a capitalist to serve a transactional role, rather than something created by a worker out of a subjective need. Capitalists do not produce for sentimental reasons; they produce what they are able to produce for sale.<sup>72</sup> As Bertell Ollman puts it, private property is alienated labor “viewed

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<sup>70</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 272.

<sup>71</sup> It might be said that workers possess different skills and different training, and that this uniqueness is a more personal contribution the worker makes. However, skills and training are external to the worker, as they are acquired so as to become more competitive in the labor market, and so, anyone with those same skills and training could produce those objects. The type of labor they are capable of has become more scarce, but this does not mean they are investing their subjectivity into their work, only that they are able to conform themselves to an ever more specialized job.

<sup>72</sup> Certainly some producers are emotionally attached to the types of products they sell. However, Marx is outlining a capitalist typology, i.e. he is defining the necessary and sufficient criterion required of capitalists. Their

from the angle of ... [its] product.”<sup>73</sup> Or in Marx’s words, “[p]rivate property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of alienated labour, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.”<sup>74</sup> Rather than a quality later affixed to an object, private property, as a specifically modern form of object, arises from the way that objects are produced in the first place. Human beings with subjectivities to express are not only superfluous to capitalist production, but in their potential to make demands, they are, in fact, liabilities. Such human beings might potentially demand that work express their subjectivities, but barring this revolutionary demand, the more subjectivity a worker brings to their job, or really, the more a worker demands that their subjectivity is *freely* expressed in their work (rather than instrumentally expressed in it), the harder it is for them to conform to it.

And so, the loss of the object (its alienation) occurs not only in the culminating act of labor, an act in which the capitalist appropriates the finished object for the purpose of its sale, but also, in the very act of work, insofar as the object, as private property, is always at a distance from the workers true subjectivity. All told, this alienation also amounts to something much greater; it amounts to the loss of the meaningful world. With each day of work, a day that should render the world more meaningful, the reverse becomes true, and the worker lives in an increasingly impoverished world, as more of the sensuous empirical world is transformed into something to which the worker no longer has access. This prompted Marx to write that “[t]he *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing* value of the world of things.”<sup>75</sup> The net result is that workers live in a world with greater human input than ever

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sentimentality is not an essential component of what they do, and can often be a hindrance. Corporations that fail to adapt because of an attachment to what they sell, do not last long, making such sentimentality a liability and not an asset.

<sup>73</sup> Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society. Second Edition.*: 158.

<sup>74</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 279.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Estranged labor section

before, and yet, it is a world that belongs to those for whom they work. Or, according to Marx, “the product of labour does not belong to the worker ... it confronts him as an alien power ... because it belongs to some *other man than the worker*.”<sup>76</sup> Just as workers gave up the “Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals” to the Pharaoh’s, Caesar’s and King’s for whom they labored, the “wonders far surpassing” them, are now given to the purchasers of labor, the bourgeoisie.<sup>77</sup> But far from being a simple matter of ownership, the very creation of objects as private property, rather than truer objectifications of workers subjectivities, means that the world, regardless of who owns it, is forever at a distance.

To better understand this, it is helpful to return to the idea of artistic production as a “purer” alternative to alienated labor. While the art market is just that, i.e. a market, the conventional wisdom holds that artists who create art solely for its transactional value are not artists at all. In becoming “commercial,” they have alienated their labor, making their “artistic” labor a means to a “financial” end, and thereby producing, not art, but commodities. In producing instrumentally, such “artists” alienate themselves, producing what they think they can sell, rather than creating what a subjective need prompts them to create. The changing nature of Andy Warhol criticism is a telling example of this distinction. Given his subject matter, there were times when he was dismissed for his commercialism. And yet, as this impression gave way to the recognition that commodities and commodification were the subject matter of his art, and that the practices of industry were appropriated *by him* rather than practices to which he was subject, he was increasingly accepted into the art world. Warhol is therefore the perfect example, as he helps demonstrate that many of the productive practices of capitalism are not alienating in themselves, a point Marx’s admiration for capitalism also makes clear, but that the productive

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>77</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 487.

potential of capitalism needs to be “liberated” so that it serves human subjectivities, rather than making use of them.

Theoretically, Horkheimer and Adorno capture this distinction as a broader social phenomenon, in their great lament for the loss of true artistic production in favor of artistic production by the “culture *industry*.”<sup>78</sup> To the discerning eye, and even to the less discerning eye, such commercial products are often easy to distinguish. Subjective expression is what makes some works deeper and richer than others, allowing for a subjective connection between artist and appreciator (not to mention how art can make the world itself seem richer), while those works produced solely for commercial reasons, tend to offer the pleasure of consumption, but often, not much else.<sup>79</sup> And yet, recognizing subjective expression depends upon interpretation, i.e. we have to see subjectivity *in* an object, it is easy to make mistakes, as was often the case with Warhol. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno would often apply their critique injudiciously, conflating “high culture” with true artistic production, a conflation that indicated an unwillingness to recognize the true artistry of many mass appeal artists. None of which is to say that even in the case of “true” art, art does not later become “commodified,” a commodification that anyone with a copy of a Beethoven symphony or Dostoevsky novel should appreciate.

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<sup>78</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>79</sup> Walter Benn Michaels is one of the best at extending a Marxian logic to the world of art criticism. Specifically addressing literary criticism, Michaels makes the claim that unless an appreciation of the artists' activity (and intention) is taken into account (i.e. their subjectivity), the critic is essentially treating the work of art as a commodity, and a level of alienation, or distance, will always pervade the critics' understanding. In other words, such critics will never understand what that art is, insofar as it is art and therefore an expression of subjectivity. While he does not use explicitly Marxian terms, his argument amounts to the same. See, Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the end of history*.

However, the essential distinction is that with art, this *a posteriori* process of commodification is the exception to labor under capitalism, not the rule.<sup>80</sup>

Before continuing with Marx's concepts of objectification and alienation, it is useful to note yet another parallel with Kierkegaard, this time by way of Kierkegaard's discussion of aesthetics. Writing in *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard has this to say:

The age of revolution is essentially passionate, and therefore it essentially has *form*. Even the most vehement expression of an essential passion *eo ipso* has form, for this is the expression itself ... Only for a completely external and indifferent dialectic is the form not the alter ego of content and thereby the content itself, but rather an irrelevant third something. For example, every letter that bears the mark of inwardness in the expression of an essential passion has *eo ipso* form.<sup>81</sup>

In using the classical aesthetic terms of *form* and *content*, Kierkegaard is clear that form and content are one and the same. That is, any true expression is an expression of passion, that is, of interiority/subjectivity, and is therefore content filled. Correlating to this, *form* is the form that such content takes, as the subject searches for the best way to express their expression, that is, the best objectification. Aesthetics is a particularly useful way of looking at Marx on objectification, one which G.A. Cohen used when he described Marx's social revolution as the "conquest of form by matter," leading to a vision of human activity under Communism in which "the form is now just the boundary created by matter itself."<sup>82</sup> It is also interesting to note that Kierkegaard levies a critique in this section, much the same as Marx's own. When form is detached from content, that is, when the way we express ourselves is indifferent to the content

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<sup>80</sup> Recognizing the peculiarity, Walter Benjamin's work remains the classic exploration of the commodification of art. See, Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, NY: Schocken Books Inc., 1969).

<sup>81</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age, A literary Review*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978). 61.

<sup>82</sup> G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). 129, 31.

being expressed, form is instead expressing an “external and indifferent dialectic.”<sup>83</sup> Rather than expressing individual subjectivity, such expressions, form-filled but content-empty, express something external instead of something internal. This externality is likewise “indifferent” owing to its lack of connection to the individual’s subjectivity. Much as alienated workers express their alienation in their work, rather than their true subjectivities, Kierkegaard hits upon much the same phenomenon, if he lacks the social analysis to link it to capitalist production. Interestingly, Georg Lukács’ groundbreaking work on Kierkegaard was precisely on the question of form, and its relation to life.<sup>84</sup> For the young Lukács who had yet to discover Marx’s similar analysis, one which linked this type of superficial “alienated” existence to capitalist production, Kierkegaard’s thoughts on form and content allowed him to think about the subjectivities he lived amongst, without yet linking them to capitalism.

Turning back to Marx, it is at this point that the fourth form of alienation emerges, joining with the first; while objectification at first appears in the guise of self-expression, objectification is in fact a two-way street. After all, what for me is my objectified subjectivity, is for you, an experience of another. In another section of the *Paris Manuscripts*, entitled *Private Property and Communism*, Marx details this complementary dimension of objectification.<sup>85</sup>

While my own self-objectification serves a need within me, it also serves a social role:

Just as only music awakens in man the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music has *no* sense for the unmusical ear – is [no] object for it because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers – it can therefore only exist for me insofar as my essential power exists for itself as a subjective capacity; because the meaning of an object for me goes only so far as my sense goes (has only a meaning for a sense corresponding to that object) – for this reason the *senses* of the social man *differ* from those of the non-social man.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age, A literary Review*: 61.

<sup>84</sup> Lukács, "The Foundering of Form Against Life: Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen."

<sup>85</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 297-306.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

Marx argues that human development occurs in response to stimulation, or more simply, we grow as a result of experience. In its most basic sense, the sense of hearing, for example, is nothing more than an ability to perceive auditory cues. And yet, oftentimes, listening to a piece of music it is possible to detect emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually rich subtleties and complexities that a less developed ear might miss (or might not care about). In repeatedly experiencing complex subjectivities not our own, we become increasingly capable of empathizing with them through the objects they create. In sum, our capacity to detect (and experience) new dimensions of the human condition grows. That is, in learning to listen to others, we grow, so that the next time someone tries to explain something similar, we are better able to hear.

So, for Marx, the process of objectification is a process whereby the world is increasingly rendered human; reciprocally, this increasingly humanized world increasingly humanizes its members. Marx is at his most poetic when he discusses the richness of subjectivity that occurs as a result of human interaction.

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental sense, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.<sup>87</sup>

Human history, as the social experience of one another, is the gradual humanization of humanity; it is humanity's education into true community. Hardly a dogmatically teleological assertion, Marx instead places his faith in our ability to learn to know one another. However, recalling alienation, and the fact that our own objects become something external to us, and therefore, the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 301-02.

objects of others appear that way too, we relate to objects only crudely, as private property, thereby stunting our own developmental response by losing our intimate interaction with others. “In the place of all physical and mental senses,” that is, the humanized senses, has come a single sense, “the sense of having.”<sup>88</sup> And so, in experiencing objects as private property, we lose their communicative ability and thereby any real *human* community.

With an unfortunate ubiquity, many of the ideas born of Marx and Kierkegaard endured at the expense of the deep humanity of their authors, a humanity well expressed by Marx in the above section of the *Manuscripts*. For instance, taken phenomenologically, the existential-psychologist R. D. Laing quite clearly distilled the relationship implied by objectification in his experience/behavior dichotomy.<sup>89</sup> Laing distils human interaction into the reciprocal relationship of behavior and experience; others experience our behavior, while we experience their behavior. This is nothing more than a restatement of the idea that humans relate via objectification, if objectification is taken in the broad terms of Marx, who considers language to be objectification too.<sup>90</sup> But rendering Marx phenomenologically removes the sensuous connection from this relationship, that is, it removes Marx’s claim that the sensual interaction of human beings makes them better human beings, as there is an element of permanent interpersonal distance created in Laing’s account. In fact, this distance is partially what Laing is trying to prove, i.e. that such a distance always and necessarily exists between people, that is, it is impossible to know someone fully. Granted, Laing’s purpose is noble, in that by demonstrating this distance, he is trying to dispel the prejudice he believes characterizes almost all human relationships. However, in Marx, the relationship of objectification is not what keeps people apart, but what brings them together. In other words, objectification is a gift upon which community relies, not a curse that ever

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>89</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1967). 17-45.

<sup>90</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 304.

separates individuals. If looked at dispassionately, it is easy to see how Laing concluded as he did; but looked at through Marx's sensuous philosophy, it is hard not to see how our most cherished bonds are created through our intimate experiences with others. All of which is to say that there is a warmth in Marx that is as much his goal as is anything else.

It is often remarkable how much of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought is a reformulation of ideas that owe their most pronounced elucidation to Marx (and Kierkegaard); yet, just as in this case, it is their humanity and compassion that was often lost. This example furthers another point too; while Marx's and Laing's account are much the same, they employ them to different ends. The difference between human community and insurmountable isolation would seem to depend on an act of will; but before turning to the will, it is important to lay a foundation by way of Kierkegaard's exploration of self-reflection.

### **Kierkegaard on Self-Reflection**

While Marx's discussion of alienation is situated within the context of a capitalist economy, it also exists upon a foundation that is itself an anthropology of the self, a point Kierkegaard helps articulate. To see this, context helps: Marx's idea of alienation has many similarities to Hegel's concept of alienation, a concept Marx appropriated but also greatly modified. For Hegel, alienation was found in the intellectual gap between the empirical world and a thinking subject who had yet to make sense of it.<sup>91</sup> The world was therefore rendered meaningful, and alienation from it was overcome, through the development of the intellect; an activity which Hegel further imagined historically, as the development of world history.<sup>92</sup> That is, the culmination of world history was marked by the conscious apprehension of the world, a

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<sup>91</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 97.

<sup>92</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Section 341-60.

culmination that thereby ended alienation from it.<sup>93</sup> For Marx, however, the world, which he also believed was becoming more meaningful through the process of history, was not doing so because of collective intellectual development, but because it was being materially humanized. Objectification was the reason it was possible to interpret the human world, and if consciousness was being expanded along a historical trajectory in the manner Hegel believed, it was not because of a process that was solely intellectual, but because there was more of the world to understand and to provoke us, making us more sophisticated human beings as a result. All of which is nothing but the historical expression of Marx's faith in intersubjective experience.

A point of unity between Hegel and Marx, however, can be found in the original location in which they imagined history to have begun. In a point that Albert Camus would appropriate and make the fulcrum of his own doctrine of the absurd, for Marx, of necessity the pre-labor world does not speak to us at all (except, perhaps, as a uniform realm of possibility).<sup>94</sup> However, Marx does not much theorize the pre-labor world, even though it is a necessary assumption of his thought (insofar as the world must have been meaningless before labor made it meaningful); ultimately, this question falls outside his concern insofar as it is a subject that can only be

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Section 360.

<sup>94</sup> "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world." Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays* (New York: Vintage International, 1983), 28. It is a shame that Camus had an antipathy (and ambiguously, also a sympathy) for Marx. Having lived in a world characterized by the Cold War, a world in which he witnessed the nefarious purposes to which Marx was put, most egregiously by Stalin and Stalinism, his relationship to Marx is understandable. Nonetheless, Camus' reliance on art as humanity's meaning creating activity is remarkably similar to Marx's concept of labor. See, Albert Camus, "The Artist at Work," in *Exile and the Kingdom* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991); Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An essay on man in revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1984), 253-78. However, unlike Marx, Camus believed that the original confrontation with the world eternally endured, so that meaninglessness was a pervasive and eternal condition with which humanity continually struggled, just like Sisyphus. Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," 119-23. In Marx's account, however, Sisyphus's labored climb is different and richer the second time around, and ever more so with each repetition, as each attempt humanizes his mountain a little more. In other words, it gets harder to be lonely the more our world is transformed into a human world. Had Camus spent more time exploring Marx's idea of alienation, had he rethought the "meaningless" confrontation with the world as a social product of capitalism, rather than positing it as an eternally true relationship, he might have overcome some of his antipathy to Marx, and perhaps also, some of the sense of loneliness that pervades his work.

explored via pure speculation. For Marx, therefore, it is the type of detached rumination that might endlessly delight professional philosophers, but it is a question entirely divorced from historical reality and human existence. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that he structures this disjuncture similarly, not only to Hegel, but more importantly, to Kierkegaard. In fact, both borrow the narrative structure of the biblical *fall* to explain the birth of the human world, even if Kierkegaard explicitly borrows it and Marx only assumes it. Specifically, the transition from the pre-human to the post-human world is a radical break, an *expulsion* from one world into another, as the existence of labor immediately transforms the entirety of the sensuous empirical world into something meaningful (i.e. into *possibility*). This is a transition so radical, it makes sense to think of it as a *leap*, which is exactly what Kierkegaard does.<sup>95</sup> In this shared account, however, labor (or for Kierkegaard, the more general capacity of free action) is not the punishment after the fall, but the cause of it.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard makes original sin, and therefore also the story of Adam's fall, his central concern.<sup>96</sup> In Adam's fall, Kierkegaard sees a model for a type of

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<sup>95</sup> This is not Kierkegaard's better known leap to faith, but his leap to sin that later necessitates the leap to faith. However, Kierkegaard is no greater fan of speculative thought than is Marx, and so he locates the pre-labor world not in pre-history, but in childhood. See, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Reidar Thomte, trans. Albert B. Anderson and Reidar Thomte, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980). 32. Furthermore, it is more accurate to think of Kierkegaard's leaps as leaps to, rather than leaps of. A leap of faith presupposes faith before the leap, a presupposition that thereby transforms the leap into something quite easy. Instead, what makes the leap a leap, is that following the leap you attain faith, making of the leap something extremely perilous from the point of view of someone who has yet to find faith. This is actually a leap, rather than the colloquial use of the term leap of faith, which is really more of a walk in the park.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. For Kierkegaard, it really was *Adam's* fall, and not Adam and Eve's. In fact, he goes so far as to write Eve out of the story entirely. While the truth he is trying to explicate requires this, in that he is attempting to argue that in The Garden of Eden human beings lacked unique subjectivities, and therefore even Adam did not really exist (or the word Adam referred to the species, and not the individual, because even if two human beings existed, lacking unique subjectivities, one word would suffice to refer to them, not two). Yet, it is easy to read into this story Kierkegaard's notoriously complex (and problematic) relationship with women. As Sylviane Agacinski famously observed, Kierkegaard's published and unpublished writings are rife with references to his father, but not a single reference is ever made to his mother. Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark, Kierkegaard and Post-Modernism (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1988). All this being said, as the second and ninth chapter will help demonstrate, Kierkegaard's philosophy is very much a maternal one, much in the same way that Socrates' was, insofar as Socrates referred to himself as a midwife of the soul. Plato,

alienation necessarily experienced by each individual in the process of growing up. Kierkegaard begins his analysis by explaining that “[t]he narrative of Genesis . . . gives the correct explanation of innocence. Innocence is ignorance.”<sup>97</sup> In equating humanity’s pre-fall state of innocence with ignorance, Kierkegaard is attempting to demonstrate how self-reflection is a foundational quality of human beings, and how this self-reflective capacity throws us into a moral world (and therefore, a world devoid of innocence). In other words, if human beings were *incapable* of self-reflective consciousness, self-knowledge would be impossible, and our state would therefore be one of ignorance. In such a state, we would likewise be innocent; lacking the ability to understand ourselves and our actions, our actions would proceed from us immediately (or at least they would seem to do so), that is, they would be unmediated by self-reflection. In such a condition, a condition in which actions do not truly have alternatives (and are therefore more akin to behavior, than action, per se), we would exist in an amoral (or pre-moral state), and therefore, we would truly be innocent, in the fullest sense of the word. However, with self-reflection is born the moral universe, and with it, innocence is left behind.

Recalling the subject of the title of Kierkegaard’s book, *anxiety* is born out of the confrontation between amoral (or pre-moral) unreflectiveness and (moral) self-reflection. Before the development of self-reflection, and therefore also before the will can exercise itself morally by way of the possibilities self-reflection reveals, the state of innocence is characterized by anxiety.<sup>98</sup> Yet this anxiety is born from a peculiar confrontation, as true innocence and true

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"Theaetetus," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 167-68. 150b-151d. All this makes Kierkegaard’s ideas about gender extremely complex, spurning extremely insightful scholarship on the subject. See, for instance, Julia Watkin, "The Logic of Søren Kierkegaard's Misogyny, 1854-1855," in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh, *Re-Reading The Canon* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Sylvia I. Walsh, "On "Feminine" and "Masculine" Forms of Despair," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

<sup>97</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*: 37.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

ignorance necessarily lack any comprehension of morality or knowledge, respectively. It is therefore a confrontation with *nothing*.

In this state there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety. This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety.<sup>99</sup>

Two questions emerge from this: If Adam is imagined as a human being, as the biblical story would have it, and if innocence is a lack of self-reflection, what, then, might it mean for a human being to lack this capacity? And secondly, why does the absence of self-reflection necessarily imply the existence of anxiety? To the first question, Kierkegaard's answer is simple; "anxiety belongs so essentially to the child that he cannot do without it."<sup>100</sup> Removing the pre-conscious amoral state from a speculative moment in prehistory, the exact place where Hegel located it, Kierkegaard locates this state squarely within childhood. The answer to the second question, however, is a little bit more complex, and for now, it will have to wait.

By locating innocence in childhood, pre-consciousness is not banished to a speculative moment in prehistory, but to a specific biographical moment we each experience. This has the added benefit of offering the doctrine of original sin as one to which everyone can relate, rather than a doctrine imposed externally to which everyone must submit. In Kierkegaard's words, "[j]ust as Adam lost innocence by guilt, so every man loses it in the same way."<sup>101</sup> With this in mind, Kierkegaard is not arguing that children lack self-reflection, which, if self-reflection is an essential criterion of human beings would irretrievably distance our childhoods from our adult lives. Instead, for Kierkegaard, childhood is intimately related to adulthood, but not by way of a simple linear trajectory. Rather, it takes times for the innate quality of self-reflection to emerge,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 35.

or in other words, it is only after we have lived a little that we learn to reflect upon that life we are living. And it is not until this occurs, that we begin to distinguish ourselves from others.

This helps explain Kierkegaard's perplexing pronouncement that "Adam and Eve are merely a numerical repetition. ... Nature does not favor a meaningless repetition."<sup>102</sup> For Kierkegaard, self-reflection is the medium that allows for human individuation. And while Marx would seem to favor a materialist explanation of individuation, as individuation seems to follow the material process of experience, like Kierkegaard, the individuation Marx is after is actually subjective. That is, experience might have a material reality, a material reality that offers each of us a unique set of experiences, but the *truth* of experience gains its truthfulness *from* subjectivity, as the content of any specific objectification is born of subjectivity.<sup>103</sup> In other words, for Marx, what makes the ear a humanized ear is its ability to distinguish the subjective content within sounds. And given this, what Marx is actually detailing is not a change in the ear itself, but in our consciousness of sound. And so, Kierkegaard's point becomes clear, as does his complementarity; until consciousness is born, specifically, until self-consciousness (i.e. consciousness of subjectivity) is born, fully humanized human beings cannot yet exist. Marx might speak to the pedagogical process that happens once self-consciousness is born, i.e. self-consciousness's increasing awareness of the subtleties and nuances of human subjectivities, but Kierkegaard supplements this by arguing that the birth of self-consciousness is a biographical experience we each experience, and one that is a prerequisite for Marxian experience. In other words, we both develop in response to the historical opportunities our particular location in

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>103</sup> Kierkegaard's famous pronouncement that "truth is subjectivity" begins to become clear here. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). 189. Often taken as a unique feature of Kierkegaard, one that many critics use to paint him as a radical individualist, it seems that Marx also adheres to a similar epistemology, and yet is free from that critique.

history provides, but also, this development adheres to a personal structure of “growing up” that also needs to be taken into account if self-development is to be understood.

One last problem arises regarding the biblical narrative and the question of self-reflection, and it is a problem the answer to which helps demonstrate that self-consciousness is an essentially communal phenomenon for both Marx and Kierkegaard. Recalling God’s injunction against eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it is easy to see in the biblical narrative a trap set for Adam by God; after all, if Adam existed in a pre-moral state, a state in which he lacked the self-reflection that is necessary for moral action, what might the injunction to avoid an action mean to him?<sup>104</sup> Not much, obviously, as at best he might avoid eating the fruit out of the fear that God’s voice might instill in him.<sup>105</sup> To this, Kierkegaard responds: “The imperfection in the narrative – how it could have occurred to anyone to say to Adam what he essentially could not understand – is eliminated if we bear in mind that the speaker is language, and also that it is Adam himself who speaks.”<sup>106</sup> Language, or symbolic representation if taken more broadly, is a necessary element of any type of reflection. That is, human beings think symbolically. Kierkegaard’s take on the divine injunction is to read it as a linguistic act, and one for whom an anthropomorphized God is not necessary. Just as it might be expected that babies eventually babble of their own accord, it is in human beings nature to invent language and other symbolic mediums for thought. Kierkegaard even finds biblical evidence for his anthropological argument, as he refers to an early passage in Genesis, a passage chronologically prior to God’s injunction, whereby God brings animals to Adam so they can be

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<sup>104</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*, trans. New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Genesis 2:17.

<sup>105</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*: 45.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

named.<sup>107</sup> As soon as language arises, so too arises the medium by which human beings are brought out of innocent immediacy into a world mediated by consciousness, because with consciousness, self-consciousness can also begin. This does not happen at birth, but just as children inevitably begin thinking symbolically, and just as they inevitably begin to reflect on themselves, they are inevitably ushered into a moral world from which amoral innocence is precluded. That is, in the recognition that they are individuals, necessarily comes the recognition that their actions (and responsibility for them) are their own. This also begins to explain why unreflectiveness is characterized by anxiety; there is a simplicity to unreflective life that can be a great comfort, but as self-reflection grows, this simplicity is increasingly threatened by the possibilities freedom affords. Unreflectiveness might not know what is coming until it is too late, but nonetheless, it has an *anxious* feeling of foreboding. After all, for the unreflective individual, the capacity for self-reflection exists, albeit in an incipient state.

As for the communal dimension of self-reflection, ever since his first major reception, Kierkegaard has garnered the exact opposite reputation, i.e. that of a radical individualist. In analyses like these, focusing as he does on the birth of individual self-consciousness as an individual act, it is easy to see why this would be the case. However, to read this section in this way precludes a more sensitive analysis of what Kierkegaard is saying. If Adam was alone, at least insofar as individual subjectivity did not yet exist, and if his own linguistic act brought about his subjectivity, Kierkegaard seems to be saying that we become conscious (and self-conscious) in isolation. However, “if we bear in mind that the speaker is language, and also that it is Adam himself who speaks,” we can begin to see that there is a way in which Adam is not

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<sup>107</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*: Genesis 2:19.

alone.<sup>108</sup> If the speaker is language, Adam is being spoken to by the very symbols he has created; Adam is both speaking *and* spoken to. And this is precisely the point: in becoming self-conscious, we relate to ourselves *as if* we were another, that is, we create a community (or relationship) with ourselves. Furthermore, while learning how to relate to ourselves, we also develop the capacity to relate to others, as we can recognize in others subjectivities like our own. Furthermore, we are likely to impose on others the same limitations we impose on our own self-understanding, as the way we understand our own subjectivity becomes an assumption we use to apprehend the subjectivities of others. If the term self-consciousness is read a little differently than it usually is, this point is implicit in the concept. Not only is self-consciousness consciousness of *our* self, it is consciousness of *selves*. In creating a community with ourselves, a community with others becomes possible.

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<sup>108</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*: 47.

## Chapter 2: Selfhood

With some of these preliminaries out of the way, and with a discussion of authenticity underway, we can now begin to articulate a more complex understanding of the self. It is by drawing out a philosophical anthropology of the self that we can best see the unity between Kierkegaard and Marx, as they largely rely on the same model, while we can further see how their respective understandings of inauthenticity approximate one another and relate back to this shared model. Articulating a model of dialectical subjectivity that relies on both our self-reflection and our will, we will therefore see the nature of the self that grounds their respective thought—and the nature of the self from which they believe we are estranged.

### Marx and the Importance of Free Will

In his Deutscher Prize-Winning book, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, István Mészáros compares Marx's concept of alienation with a similar concept, Rousseau's concept of socialization, as it appears in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*.<sup>1</sup> In that discourse, Rousseau constructs a mythical history charting humanity's fall from its origin in nature, a fall that could easily be described as a process of alienation *from* nature, in his own take on the narrative of the biblical fall.<sup>2</sup> For Mészáros, what characterizes Marx's advance over Rousseau is that Marx does not describe alienation as being from nature *qua* nature; it is an alienation from a distinctly *human* nature.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Rousseau laments the distance that socialization creates between human beings and the natural world from which they come, while Marx laments the

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<sup>1</sup> István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London, England: The Merlin Press Ltd., 1986). 105-08. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Basic Political Writings*, ed. Peter Gay (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality."

<sup>3</sup> Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*: 107.

distance between human beings and themselves. While this might also seem true for Rousseau, in that he does not counsel a return to nature but a communion with the nature that is inside human beings, for Mészáros, Rousseau's so-called *human* nature is identical to nature *qua* nature. What Rousseau is lamenting, therefore, is the gap between human consciousness (i.e. self-reflection), as the faculty that allows human beings to live differently than nature proscribes, and human biological nature, from which, Rousseau believes, humans have much to learn. In other words, Rousseau recognizes the distance that reflective consciousness creates between human beings and the world, but rather than recognizing this as a constituent element of a distinctly human nature with which we need to reconcile ourselves, an element of nostalgia for the lost connection to nature pervades his work. For Rousseau, therefore, alienation is overcome through a reconciliation of consciousness and nature, a feat that is impossible in absolute terms so long as consciousness (or really, the freedom it allows) exists, but which can nevertheless serve a regulative function for a transition from a worse to a better approximation.

In Rousseau's narrative, Mészáros recognizes the pervasive dualism between the mind and the body that Marx would later overcome.<sup>4</sup> For Marx, consciousness and biological nature might be constituent elements for an anthropology of the self, but they do not exhaust it. Insofar as Marx refers to ““man's own nature” [he] *necessarily implies* the ontologically fundamental self-mediation of man with nature,” that is, in referring to man's own nature, Marx implies that the reconciliation of humanity's dualism of consciousness and nature, or mind and body, is possible *by* humanity, and in a uniquely human way.<sup>5</sup> In other words, if human anthropology contains both a biological element and a conscious element, the necessary implication of a concept of *human* nature is that such a nature entails some sort of synthesis or relationship,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 108.

which itself constitutes an additional part.<sup>6</sup> The project, therefore, was not to identify wholly with either the mind or the body; it was to become *self-identical*. Hegel extensively theorized the importance of the spirit (or will) as the synthesizing element of the self, a tripartite model of the self that is then borrowed by Marx.<sup>7</sup> However, Hegel ultimately subjects the spirit to consciousness by arguing that alienation is overcome intellectually, thereby submitting the element of the self that transcends the mind and the body to the mind, a point he poetically evokes in his famous phrase that “[w]hat is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational.”<sup>8</sup> Appropriating this structure, Marx and Kierkegaard rescue it from its subjugation to reason, while also making it an essentially human part of the self. This is a point that Mészáros recognizes, as, for Marx, the uniqueness of the human species resides neither within biological nature nor within consciousness, but within a third, essentially creative dimension of the self.

Incidentally, if Marx’s anthropology did happen to end with this dualism, he would be defenseless against the “vulgar Marxists” who assert that Marx devolves consciousness to a

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<sup>6</sup> The foreshadowing of Kierkegaard (in terms of this chapter’s comparison, not any implied historical relationship) could not be more pronounced. It would be hard to deny that Kierkegaard’s definition of the self from *The Sickness Unto Death* could not be used interchangeably to describe Marx’s own structure, when Kierkegaard writes that “A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite ... A synthesis is a relation between two ... this relation is a positive third, and this is the self.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). 13. If infinity is a quality of consciousness and finitude of the body, it is clear Kierkegaard is identifying the self with a third element. And while this quotation is fairly abbreviated in order to prove a point, and its full complexity will be developed shortly, the parallel is nonetheless striking. It helps demonstrate exactly how indebted both Marx and Kierkegaard were to their Hegelian legacy, and just how amenable Hegelian thought was to appropriation and development.

<sup>7</sup> Mészáros is too curt in his treatment of Rousseau, in that the will (and the human freedom it allows) play a defining role in Rousseau’s thought. Nonetheless, he is right in stressing that the tripartite model does not come into its own until Hegel, and is not emancipated from its idealist baggage until Marx (and Kierkegaard). In developing the tripartite model to its fullest, and thereby demonstrating that our will “has a mind of its own,” Marx and Kierkegaard are able to fully theorize situations in which the ethical choice is known, but not followed. In other words, Kierkegaard and Marx are now able to theorize a world in which the truth is apparent, an assumption they both take for granted. Following from this, untruth is not something that exists on the path to truth, but a willful choice made to avoid the truth (recall Michael Kierkegaard, for instance). However, in failing to recognize Rousseau as a forerunner of this idea, specifically in his recognition that the will often refuses freedom and therefore needs to “be forced to be free,” Mészáros does Rousseau a disservice. See, Rousseau, “On the Social Contract,” 150.

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Preface.

function of the social order. That is, those who assert that Marx views human consciousness as a direct reflection of an individual's class position within society. While the reductionism of this argument is refuted by even the most cursory reading of any number of Marx's works, including the *Paris Manuscripts*, it affords a useful contrast. Economic determinism rests upon the same dualist framework, the transcendence of which, Mészáros argues, was one of Marx's most profound contributions. In positing that social class determines consciousness, such theorists implicitly assume that the body, or material life, unidirectionally affects consciousness. In turn, this means that there is no room for any additional intervening variables – such as an individual's freedom. And yet, in the basic fact that Marx spends so much time establishing the necessity behind alienated labor, a necessity that acts by impressing itself *upon* human agency, he *de facto* assumes a more complex anthropology. After all, to argue that such necessity “coerces” workers into accepting alienated labor is to assume they have a choice, a choice that in turn demonstrates a self that is more complex than a simple duality. In the context of this particular necessity, Marx is highlighting the negative action of this third part of the self, i.e. not its autonomous activity, but its submission to an overpowering force. Alienation is the abdication of the self, not its authentic activity; its servitude, not its freedom.

On this point, Marx himself could not be more direct. “The whole character of a species – its species-character – is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species-character.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than in nature or in consciousness, in body or in mind, it is in spirit, the active element of the human species, that its nature is found. In activity, that is, in free labor, the body and the mind are unified in an outwardly directed cooperative activity. In other words, the body (that which exists pre-fall) and consciousness (that which exists post-fall),

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 276.

are unified in freedom. In this way, objectification takes on a new, and even more profound sense, as it now becomes the essential capacity of the human species, and therefore, our primary expression of freedom. After all, the objectification of subjectivity, insofar as it is an activity that depends upon the subjectivity and self-control that self-reflection itself affords, is a compelling description of freedom as it is a description of truly self-generated and self-controlled activity. In other words, when our actions (our objectifications) truly emanate from our own unique subjectivities, only then can we consider ourselves free. Without humanity's fall, therefore, we cannot become what we are: "free, conscious" individuals.

If this type of alienation is contextualized together with the prior form of alienation, i.e. the alienation of objectification (both our own and that of others), a dynamic image of the self begins to emerge. In this light, two types of selves emerge: species being, or our innate, essential quality of free objectification, and the specific individual we become as a result of our experiences of our own and others' objectifications. In other words, universally conceived we are free, conscious individuals, but particularly conceived we are the specific selves we develop as a result of living. These two selves, or ways of conceiving the self, do not conflict; species being is a prerequisite for our individual lives, and there is no reason why the fact that we each develop into particularly unique individuals needs to overshadow our enduring freedom. In fact, our particularity is an expression of our freedom, its proof, and not its eclipse. However, because of our particularity we have the unique capacity to turn against our freedom, to develop in such a way that we refuse to express it, and for Marx, *this* constitutes the history of the world. In times of unfreedom, freedom is a normative value. In times of freedom, it is our foundation.

This helps explain why an analysis of capitalism, rather than other forms of oppression, is the essential analysis of oppression in modernity. While Marx has often been critiqued as an

opponent of freedom, it should be clear that freedom was his highest value, in that objectification, or work, is *active* freedom. Following from this, as capitalism is a system in which its classes are defined by nothing but work, i.e. either you work for another or others work for you, it is a system in which oppression is distilled to its essence. In other words, underlying all other forms of oppression lies an attempt to control what others do, that is, to make others work for somebody other than themselves. But in other forms of oppression, this relationship is masked, whereas with capitalism, it is its central purpose. In Marx's words, the bourgeoisie's greatest accomplishment is that "for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation."<sup>10</sup> This makes of capitalism, conceived as its ideal rather than as a diverse historical phenomenon, the universal form of oppression, and therefore an essential constituent element in all other forms of oppression. In other words, what makes non-capitalist forms of oppression oppressive, is that they try to make the freedom of some subject to the freedom of others.<sup>11</sup> And it is this inequality, a very real material inequality, that rests at the heart of all forms of oppression. Furthermore, it is an analysis of oppression that focuses upon what it accomplishes, i.e. on what it actually does, rather than on what its constituent members believe, or what they are made to believe, lending this analysis a clarity that is still refreshingly insightful 150 years later.

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 06, Marx and Engels: 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 487.

<sup>11</sup> Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this logic was more apparent to the left. Specifically, the idea that the actual material inequalities and exploitation undergirding various forms of oppression is what made those forms of oppression oppressive. For instance, in questions of sexism or racism, there is not anything essentially unequal about different sexes or races, so what makes membership in such groups problematic is the way in which freedom is restricted for them, i.e. the way in which their work is made to serve others. One of the few contemporary voices articulating this positions is Walter Benn Michaels. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How we learned to love identity and ignore inequality* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006). His work has come under repeated attack for foregrounding class at the expense of race and sex, but much of this criticism is unwarranted, and born from the over-identification of oppression with a particular form. Michaels' argument is never to make light of racism or sexism, but only to ensure that when combatting them, the oppression at their core is accurately targeted. That being said, Michaels does critique the benefits of cultural diversity too much, failing to see in it the potential for humanization that Marx might see in it.

Furthermore, if humanity's essence is found in its freedom, and specifically in "free, conscious activity," alienation from species being is perhaps the most tragic form of alienation. Not only is meaning generated through the acts of will that humanity's species-character allows, but this creative act is also the act whereby anything considered "new" must come. That is, if all *creation* happens through acts of will, and if the will is that from which capitalist labor alienates us, it is no wonder that despair is as prevalent as Kierkegaard finds it to be. After all, without the will, the world is necessarily experienced as an endless process of cessation, an experience best captured by Heraclitus, when he recognized that you cannot step into the same river twice.<sup>12</sup> Marx might see in this alienation, as he focuses upon the actual thing that we lose, but if the *experience* of this loss is described, there seems no better word than despair.

Finally, to return to a point from the prior section, self-reflection was seen to be an essential element in Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety. In awakening children to a much wider world, anxiety understandably sets in. However, it is not self-reflection that does this, per se, but the capacity that self-reflection allows, i.e. free activity. What makes the child anxious is not the diversity of individuals in the world that it is now able to imagine, but the possibilities it is now able to imagine for itself. In other words, what makes the child anxious is the dawning recognition that these possibilities proceed from nowhere but *itself*. Anxiety is therefore born of the realization that ultimately individuals are responsible for their own actions; anxiety is an expression of the fear freedom instills in the not yet free. Or, in Kierkegaard's vernacular, God's

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<sup>12</sup> Heraclitus, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary*, ed. Charles H. Kahn, trans. Charles H. Kahn (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 53.

“prohibition [e.g. language] induces ... anxiety ... for the prohibition awakens ... freedom’s possibility ... – the anxious possibility of *being able*.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Kierkegaard’s Definition of the Self**

So, like Marx, “the anxious possibility of being able” helps demonstrate that Kierkegaard also places individual will at the center of what he understands human beings to be. Furthermore, Kierkegaard clearly explicates a full anthropology of the self, with the will at its core, and by way of which it becomes easier to conceptualize inauthenticity at the level of the individual. In what is perhaps his most quoted passage, writing in *The Sickness Unto Death* under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard offers a definition of the self.

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.<sup>14</sup>

Anyone familiar with Hegelian thought will recognize this type of language, but here, the scholar Gregory Beabout asserts, Kierkegaard uses this language, in part, to poke fun at its obtuseness.<sup>15</sup> This is not hard to imagine, as in true Kierkegaardian spirit, a spirit often lost on many of his interpreters, Kierkegaard’s playfulness often shines forth, a playfulness that might translate this

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<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Reidar Thomte, trans. Albert B. Anderson and Reidar Thomte, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980). 44.

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 13.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory R. Beabout, *Freedom and Its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1996). 85.

excerpt into a parody of the self-seriousness of the German philosophic tradition. But more than simply poking fun at Hegel's expense, Kierkegaard liberates this language and provides an eloquent, if complex, definition of the self. It is a definition well worth the time it takes to unpack.

Kierkegaard begins his definition with extremely difficult language: "the self is a relation that relates," it is the "relation's relating," and then to avoid confusion, he quickly states what the self is not, i.e. it is "not the relation," before recapitulating what the self is, i.e. "the relation's relating itself to itself." Now, the full content of Kierkegaard definition does exist in this early sentence, even within the simple phrase the "relation's relating." However, as we will soon see, *The Sickness Unto Death* is a peculiar text, as are many of Kierkegaard's texts, in that Kierkegaard's concern is more often with articulating what he thinks his readers need to hear, than what he himself believes. This does not mean that Kierkegaard lies, but only that his texts can rarely be taken at face value, and need to be illuminated in light of the larger *telos* of self-development in which he is aiding his readers. And so, Kierkegaard does not leave his readers stranded, having to decipher the meaning for themselves; rather, he momentarily leaves this definition aside, and begins again, more simply this time.

His next tack is to define several of the constitutive elements of the self: the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity. Each pairing provides both a limit and a freedom, detailing the ways in which we are bounded and the ways we are limitless. Given these dualisms, the self is necessarily "a synthesis." However, Kierkegaard is clear that a purely logical synthesis posited because a relationship of some sort must necessarily exist, "is still not a self." So, Kierkegaard takes this one step further, recognizing that the activity of thinking about the self reveals something important. "[U]nder the qualification of the psychical the relation

between the psychical and the physical is a relation.”<sup>16</sup> While thinking about the self is insufficient to constitute a self, the thought itself does constitute a real relation; such an individual has now created a mental relation between the physical and the psychical, within the psychical itself. This sounds more complex than it is, but what Kierkegaard had in mind was simple. Specifically, through the act of self-reflection a representation of the self is created, and this representation constitutes something new, even if it resides within consciousness. In other words, in thinking about ourselves we construct a self-image. It should be easy to see how *The Sickness Unto Death* picks up where *The Concept of Anxiety* left off.

In fact, Kierkegaard is highlighting what modern Western thought had tried to achieve before him. Operating within the context of the mind-body dualism, a dualism which for Kierkegaard refers to essential components of the human being (i.e. our consciousness and our embodiment are constitutive elements of the Kierkegaardian self), Western philosophy’s answers have typically seen the will as determined by either the mind or the body. That is, our actions either proceed as a result of thought or of biological impulse, and through this duality the alternative positions of rationalism and empiricism can be understood. However, neither of these positions grant the will an independent position in its own right. But more importantly, Kierkegaard sees in both positions an intellectual predisposition towards consciousness. Specifically, self-definitions that favor either the mind or the body *both* favor the mind, as they both presume that liberated by the conceptual truth of their respective definitions, such a self will then self-legislate according to this “conceptual” definition. This claim is explicit within rational philosophies, as they explicitly aim to aid self-legislation, but this claim is implicit in empiricist philosophies, as without the pretension of the possibility of self-legislation (and the consciousness upon which self-legislation relies), there is no reason for such philosophy to exist

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<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 13.

in the first place. And so, while each favors either the mind or the body as the determining agent of the will, through the act of philosophizing both seek to create a self-image by which the self can be legislated. In Kierkegaard's words, self-reflection creates "a relation" "under the qualification of the psychological." However, in this case, "the relation is the third as a negative unity." In other words, Kierkegaard actually believes that this relation, this self-image, in some way transcends the dualism of mind and body, even though it would seem to exist wholly within consciousness, and that whatever this third thing is happens to constitute a third autonomous part of the self. However, this third part has not yet come into its own; it is only a "negative" third.

Recalling Mészáros's analysis of Marx, Kierkegaard is beginning to demonstrate that, like Marx, the self is found in a third characteristic of human beings, one that has been heretofore neglected by philosophy. Furthermore, he is also beginning to demonstrate the inherent inadequacy of representational thought when it comes to self-understanding. As Kierkegaard continues, it becomes increasingly clear what he meant when he called self-representations "negative" unities. The self is not found in the representation itself (i.e. it is not the relation), even if the individual might identify with their self-representation. Rather, in creating a self-representation, a third feature of the self has been awakened. Specifically, behind the representation exists a part of the self that is creating the representation itself, a part of the self that is neither physical nor psychological, neither body nor mind, and this constitutes a "positive third," i.e. it is an actually existing and autonomous third part of the self. This part is not the "relation," but is the "relation's *relating*," that is, it is the activity behind the relation. This perfectly parallels Kierkegaard's earlier claim that anxiety is not a result of consciousness per se, even if consciousness is essential for it. Rather, anxiety exists because of the essentially creative will that lies inside each of us, a will brought into its own by the possibilities that consciousness

reveals, a will that is also the driving force behind our thinking itself, and it is a will from which our lives truly proceed. In this light, it is easier to come full circle to his initial definitions of the self, to see that this is what he had in mind from the start. The self as “a relation that relates,” as the “relation’s relating,” or as “the relation’s relating itself to itself” seem extremely apt description of an entity that defies direct description. Each definition seeks to highlight the creative activity behind any particular self-representation, the activity that creates self-representations in the first place, while simultaneously avoiding becoming a self-representation itself. But more on this last point shortly.

The complexity of Kierkegaard’s two paragraph description is not only explained by the complexity of the self, it also helps demonstrates Kierkegaard’s deep interest in the self-development of his readers, or what he often calls “upbuilding.” In fact, Kierkegaard is intentionally attempting to define the self *without* defining the self. Written in the interest of pedagogy rather than conceptual elucidation, this will not be the first time it is necessary to see Kierkegaard’s words from such a point of view. In reflecting upon the constituent elements of the self, and in attempting to prompt his readers to do the same, Kierkegaard is trying to draw attention to that *thing* doing the reflecting (or the relating, which amounts to the same thing). That is, he wants his readers to access their own self and to become self-identical with it, rather than proffering them a definition *through* which they might relate to themselves, but which would thereby serve to keep them from becoming self-identical.<sup>17</sup> In an eloquent article on Kierkegaard’s self, referring to Kierkegaard’s definition that is not quite a definition, Judith Butler explains that the earlier portions of Kierkegaard’s definition of the self are “transformed”

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<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, this task is achieved by a leap *to* faith, which is Kierkegaard’s corollary to Marx’s idea of *human* emancipation. This is the subject of the Chapter 3..

and “transcended” (*aufgehoben*) by later portions.<sup>18</sup> While this analysis treats his definition more conceptually than pedagogically, it more than hints at the sense of movement within in his definition. Through the use of negation, Kierkegaard is able to draw attention to the self as agent by demonstrating that the will lurks behind any particular image of the self we might have. Ultimately, “the self is *not* the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself.”<sup>19</sup> A perfect example, Kierkegaard first draws attention to something simpler to grasp, i.e. the self as a representation, only then to negate the representation. This negation, for a sincere and dedicated reader, can help gain access to the self that is doing the relating, by removing the content of self-reflective thought, with the intention of leaving the reader with the genitive force behind such thought. In other words, Kierkegaard wants his readers to not only understand, but to become self-identical with, the very agent behind any of our attempts at self-construction. Lying behind these representations is an agent, and it is an agent that is hardly disinterested.

For some, this might conjure up images of Immanuel Kant’s transcendental ego. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

“It must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all my representations ... That representation which can be given prior to all thought is called intuition. All the manifold of intuition has, therefore, a necessary relation to the “I think” in the same subject in which this manifold is found. But this representation is an act of *spontaneity*; that is to say, it cannot be regarded as belonging to sensibility. I call it *pure apperception* ... because it is that self-consciousness which, while generating the representation *I think*, (a representation which must be capable of accompanying all other representations, and which in all consciousness is one and the same), cannot itself be accompanied by any further representation. The unity of this apperception I likewise entitle the *transcendental* unity of self-consciousness...”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, "Kierkegaard's Speculative Despair," in *The Age of German Idealism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *Routledge History of Philosophy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 367.

<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 13. Italics Added.

<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003). 152-53.

Those who surmise a similarity would be entirely correct.<sup>21</sup> In fact, through this comparison, Kierkegaard's point is drawn more starkly. When Kant writes that "I think" is itself a representation, but a representation that does not belong to "mere sensibility," which, if it was the case, would mean that the "I think" was solely something perceived and therefore external, Kant helps gain access to that which Kierkegaard had in mind. The "I think" is a representation of something for which we have sensible information, i.e. we experience ourselves as thinking and represent it in the words "I think," but we are also that "I" doing the thinking. In other words, the moment that my "I" reflects upon itself, it creates a distance from itself, and in this way, the "I" which I think is never the same as the "I" doing the thinking. Or, in the language of *The Concept of Anxiety*, "it is Adam himself who speaks."<sup>22</sup> Kant recognized this original "I" as a precondition for all representations, be they representations of the external or the internal world, and upon this he built an epistemology. Hopefully, this also recalls images of the narrative of the biblical fall insofar as Kant is making the familiar claim that subjectivity births "the world," or reciprocally, that representation depends on subjectivity, albeit Kant makes this claim without the aid of a narrative. This perhaps also helps explain why Kant's political theory can make pretensions towards universality, as lacking a historical notion of self-development, what we are is what we always were, and what we will always be. However, Kierkegaard's project is not primarily epistemological, as was Kant's, but ethical and religious. Therefore, he reconstitutes the "I" as a willful "I" rather than a perceptive "I," thereby asserting that more

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<sup>21</sup> The connection between Kant and Kierkegaard is a fascinating one. As much as the Hegelian influence is present in Kierkegaard, there are profound ways in which Kierkegaard is working within a Kantian framework. Therefore, there are ways in which the connection between Kierkegaard and Kant is even more illuminating than that between Hegel and Kierkegaard, in that Kierkegaard dismisses very little of Kant (as he constantly critiques Hegel), even if he does take Kant further than Kant himself went. For some of the best work exploring this connection, see, R. Z. Friedman, "Kierkegaard: First Existentialist or Last Kantian?," *Religious Studies* 18, no. 2 (1982); Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*: 47.

important than its perceptive qualities is its intentionality.<sup>23</sup> With this reconstitution, the questions that follow are radically transformed; while Kant asked how might the truth be known, Kierkegaard asked why it is that we do not *believe* it.<sup>24</sup>

And so, while both Kant and Kierkegaard recognize that we are constantly in a relationship with ourselves, and that this belies an original “I,” they differ when it comes to determining the significance of this, particularly when it comes to ethics.<sup>25</sup> For Kant, as he transitions from epistemology to ethics, the problem is straightforward. On the one hand, for Kierkegaard, self-reflection itself often serves to mask the self, on the other hand, for Kant, self-reflection, and the self-legislation that it allows, is not a problem to be overcome, but a given to be accepted. In other words, Kant’s categorical imperative is precisely an attempt to find an ethical formula by which self-legislation is truly both ethical (in the specific action it legislates)

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<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard makes the claim that the dispassionate subjectivity at the heart of Kant’s epistemology is, at best, *willfully* naive when it comes to ethical life. This ethical view is embodied by Kierkegaard’s character Judge William, the pseudonymous author of the pseudonymously edited, *Either/Or, Part II*. See, Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 2, Kierkegaard’s Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987). This ethical stance comes under severe critique as the main subject of *Fear and Trembling*. See, Søren Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). However, it is unclear if Kierkegaard extended this critique to the possibility of the dispassionateness required for a Kantian epistemology of the “natural,” i.e. external, world. Regardless, Marx does make this case, in a fashion entirely consistent with Kierkegaard. Writing in the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx has this to say: “Nature is man’s *inorganic* body . . . nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die.” Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” 276. Furthermore, “*nature* is the immediate object of the *science of man*: the first object of man – man – is nature.” *Ibid.*, 304. In other words, nature itself, the supposed object of dispassionate study, is intimately connected to human beings as the very medium upon which we rely for our lives, making of science a necessarily *human* study. This does not invalidate the study of the natural world, only the presupposition that this can occur without an interested human subjectivity.

<sup>24</sup> *Ad Hominem* argument is typically viewed as a suspicious form of reasoning, and yet, if the self is a willful entity that oftentimes guides what we think, it is an indispensable type of reasoning. Perhaps most evident in Marx’s class analysis, in which class position helps reveal the “true” content of its members arguments, by way of this anthropology of the self a philosophical justification for *ad hominem* critique emerges. Specifically, if our thoughts are the product of our will, then failing to take into account the person who is doing the thinking necessarily means that the content of that thought is misunderstood. *Ad Hominem*, therefore, is not a means to discount what someone says without thinking about it, but it is an essential, if not *the* essential, method of discovering what their words actually mean. This is clearest when someone is trying to express something but cannot find the words, as in such a case, they want us to use *ad hominem* reasoning; but in cases where words reveal more than their author intends, *ad hominem* begins to look suspect.

<sup>25</sup> I am using the term ethics quite broadly, in order to refer to the general tenets by which we live. This definition is quite consistent with Kierkegaard (and even Marx), whose project entails an attempt to return to the authentically human, which is imagined as innately ethical, without legislating the specific minutia of individual actions.

and universal.<sup>26</sup> It is its universalizability, after all, that makes it ethical, and not its relation to the self that employs it. But rather than simply *being* the self, Kant's understanding of ethics requires constant self-legislation, and therefore requires the maintenance of a permanent self-reflective distance from oneself. For Kierkegaard (and Marx), this is a distance common to the Western philosophical tradition, a distance illuminated with stark clarity in Kant, but one that needs to be overcome. Hegel would try to overcome this self-reflective distance by including all of human history within it, i.e. by creating a self-representation that included the past, the future, and our self-development through it; but while he managed to make our self-representation more expansive than ever, in remaining wed to a self-representation, he only managed to extend self-alienation to its extreme limit.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, Kant never questioned the one assumption that would have helped him see what Kierkegaard later revealed. As ethical legislation, his categorical imperative depends upon people who *want* to be ethical. Ethical failure is therefore a failure of knowledge, not of will. Recalling the story of Michael Kierkegaard, the ethical lapse of lying to his family occurred out of weakness, not ignorance.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, at some level, he knew all too well what he was doing, so that his guilt only compounded his lapse.<sup>29</sup> For Kierkegaard, the self *is* an ethical

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<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, 3 ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1971). 8-12.

<sup>28</sup> His father's sexual encounter is a different matter, as there is little reason to think that paid premarital sex was something that would register much in Kierkegaard's ethical world. Certainly not at the level his father's deceptions did. While Kierkegaard's sexual life was likely non-existent, a fact that testifies to deep, personal ambivalences surrounding sex, Kierkegaard wrote of sexual life often. His main concern seemed to be a life devoted to sex, not a life in which sex was a part.

<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. around 124 check the quote – not accurate. In Kierkegaard's reliance upon guilt and conscience Kierkegaard closely parallels Nietzsche, who would soon echo these tropes. For this reason, Georges Brandes tried to introduce Nietzsche to Kierkegaard's work in 1888, but it was a suggestion proffered too late, as Nietzsche received it soon before his writing career ended. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4 ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974). 125. Kierkegaard never asserts that guilt or conscience is ahistorical, and therefore not created, he only asserts that they are eternal. However, in Kierkegaard's understanding, the quality of eternity does not mean that something has always existed, only that

entity, to which his father's guilt testified, just as it had to be for Kant even if he left this unnoticed and/or unexamined. But this problem stretches back beyond Kant, all the way to Socrates, as "Socrates explains that he who does not do what is right has not understood it."<sup>30</sup> Whereas, Kierkegaard finds camaraderie in Christianity, for "Christianity goes a little further back and says that it is because he is unwilling to understand it, and this again because he does not will what is right."<sup>31</sup> A point that, for Kierkegaard, demonstrates that Christianity, in its doctrine of sin (i.e. willed ethical lapses, rather than those of ignorance), has gone beyond the Greeks.

### **Kierkegaard and Despair**

While Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety supplements Marx's concept of alienation by helping reveal dimensions of the self atop which it rests, Kierkegaard's concept of despair is a much fuller counterpart. It also helps bring this analysis full circle, by shoring up an enduring problem in the Marxist account of alienation. Specifically, Kierkegaard can help explain why capitalism has lasted so long. If, for many in the West, the consequences of capitalist necessity have been eased, that is, for many, destitution and death are a relatively longer way off, why has not this relative ease made it easier to resist capitalist necessity? Certainly at one level this is obvious, i.e. the more comfortable capitalism makes us feel, the less troubling it appears to be,

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once it exists, it transcends history. See, Søren Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987). Nietzsche makes a similar claim, although he finds it harder to reconcile himself with the moral sense that humanity developed. This constitutes their main difference; Kierkegaard maintains that Christian love can continue to instruct, while Nietzsche thinks its time has passed. And yet, even on this point their difference is not so clear. When Nietzsche writes that "[w]hatever is done from love always occurs beyond good and evil," it would be easy to mistake this for an expression of Kierkegaardian faith, as we will soon see. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1992), 280.

<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 95.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

logic which is at the heart of Marx's own analysis of the middle class.<sup>32</sup> However, the history of capitalism is rife with crises, and yet rarely is this capitalism's image. Destitution and death may have receded by 1840s standards (although, even this depends on *where* you look), but looking beyond our immediate experience of capitalism, the obviousness of capitalism's iniquities has grown, as in each passing day further examples accrue. All of which is without mentioning the persistence of the inherent inequality of the employer/employee relationship, an unchanging exploitative inequality upon which capitalism itself rests.

Despite the fact that capitalism is not as new for those of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in Marx's day, capitalism seems stronger than ever. In the United States, for instance, among many, there is a cultural nostalgia for the post-World War II era, a time when the promise of capitalism seemed accessible and egalitarian. Yet, strikingly, this nostalgia increasingly compensates for a lived experience in which very few have benefited from economic stability or prosperity, regardless of their socioeconomic position. Even if the questioning of capitalism did not take a Marxist form, the sheer absence of questioning is staggering. So, then, what explains the dogged persistence of this system, a persistence that in no small part depends on the intransigent faith in it? To answer this question, Kierkegaard's critique of Socrates is an excellent starting point. The will, after all, is the essential criterion for ethical action, not the mind. In other words, what we think about capitalism says more about what we want to think about it, than about capitalism itself. In turn, this makes Kierkegaard's explanation of capitalism's endurance quite simple: we have not fought for more freedom because we do not want more freedom. And this, *is* despair.

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 5, Marx and Engels: 1845-47* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 219.

*The Sickness Unto Death* is Kierkegaard's most direct exploration of despair.<sup>33</sup> Divided and subdivided into numerous sections, each new section repeats and reformulates the analysis from earlier ones, thereby allowing each subsequent pass to increase the complexity and significance of his concept of despair. Nevertheless, all despair can be summarized according to one formula: "... to will to be rid of oneself – this is the formula for all despair."<sup>34</sup> In speaking about the loss of self, it should already be apparent that this parallels Marx on alienation, even if it locates its causality differently. Michael Theunissen helps reveal this further, as of Kierkegaard's claim he writes that despair therefore means "we do not will to be what we are in our pre-given Dasein."<sup>35</sup> Or reciprocally, "we will to be what we are not."<sup>36</sup> Ignoring the Heideggerian connotation of Theunissen's language as it can confuse the issue, what he means by Dasein is the inalienable and universal self of which we all, as human beings, partake.<sup>37</sup> More specifically, he uses the term to distinguish between this idea of the self, and the more particular and unique selves each of us develop as a result of our lives, i.e. what Marx might say is a result of our "experience."<sup>38</sup> Like Marx's conception of the alienation of species-being, despair is a phenomenon pertaining not to our particularity, but to our universality as human beings, a universality they mutually define by a creative will. And so, Kierkegaard's equivalent of Marx's alienation of species being occurs not by way of capitalist necessity, but as a result of our own desire, i.e. *willing* to be rid of the self. That is, because we do not want to be what we are, we try

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<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, ed. Harry Frankfurt, trans. Barbara Harshav and Helmut Illbruck, Princeton Monographs in Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> There is a long list of literature exploring the relationship between Kierkegaard and Heidegger. It is becoming increasingly clear that Heidegger owes a huge debt to Kierkegaard. See, Vincent McCarthy, "Martin Heidegger: Kierkegaard's Influence Hidden and in Full View," in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, ed. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011). However, this debt has come at Kierkegaard's expense, as it often serves to reinforce the interpretations of Kierkegaard that arose in 1920s Germany, interpretations that often sacrifice his deep ethical sensibility.

<sup>38</sup> Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*: 7.

to be what we are not. But before arriving at this destination, it is important to build towards it, just as Kierkegaard does.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard subdivides despair into three subcategories, the first of which is most relevant here.<sup>39</sup> As the latter two forms characterize a self struggling towards authenticity they are therefore better contextualized as part of a process of self-development, a process that is the subject of the *Part Two*. As far as the first form of despair is concerned, Kierkegaard sets his sights on what he calls the “Philistine Bourgeoisie,” a group of the Copenhagen bourgeoisie who constituted a majority subset.<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard sees these Philistine Bourgeoisie as united in the first, and lowest, form of despair, a form of despair he calls *Aandløshed* (spiritlessness).<sup>41</sup> This despair is characterized by a kind of thoughtlessness in which individuals fail to realize they are a self; and so, what defines this despair is its lack of *self-consciousness*.

And yet, for Kierkegaard, self-consciousness is *the* decisive element of despair.<sup>42</sup> In turn, this prompts him to first exclude this group from despair proper, only to change his mind and include them soon thereafter.<sup>43</sup> The later forms of despair, forms that are more sophisticated cases, are forms that are more self-consciously willed. And “self-conscious willing” is the essential quality of *not* willing to be oneself, insofar as not willing to be oneself occurs by willing to be a self that one is not. One must therefore be conscious of either oneself, or the self one wishes to be, while also engaged in the activity of willing. But in the case of this unreflective class of people, Kierkegaard’s initial reluctance to include them helps him demonstrate that they

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<sup>39</sup> It is the “first” form of despair in terms of how they are experienced, not in terms of the order Kierkegaard discusses them.

<sup>40</sup> Bruce H. Kirmmse, “Psychology and Society: The Social Falsification of the Self in *The Sickness unto Death*,” in *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, Harold A. Durfee, and Gloria H. Parloff, *Psychiatry and the Humanities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 178-79.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 30.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 44.

seemingly lack this essential prerequisite of despair. After all, this class is unreflective when it comes to themselves, and so they *seem* to simply *be*; rather than willing to be something or other, rather than struggling with matters of the self, they simply *are*. They therefore seem more *selfless* than despairing, prompting Kierkegaard to liken them to Adam.<sup>44</sup>

This also prompts Michael Theunissen to call this despair “inauthentic despair,” for it does not seem to be despair, in truth.<sup>45</sup> However, by later including these people, Kierkegaard is attempting to demonstrate, by way of their exclusion and then inclusion, that this form of despair, seemingly qualified by its lack of self-consciousness, is actually self-conscious (and willing). With this rhetorical move, Kierkegaard warns his readers not to be fooled; this group of unreflective individuals, content and uncritical of their lives, is both conscious of their lives and actively willing them, even if they might lack sufficient self-consciousness to *acknowledge* this fact. Specifically, the culture of which they unthinkingly partake, and from which they derive their identities (i.e. their selves), exists only as the consequence of their wills. After all, if the selves that they happen to be are inauthentic, and therefore lacking in a “natural” origin, the continued existence of these selves can only be maintained as a result of the will. It just so happens that those selves they will blend seamlessly into society, making it appear like they lack the autonomy that marks a self-conscious will. These people are, therefore, in despair, even if their lack of individuality makes them poor, if ubiquitous, examples of it. Thoughtlessness, it seems, is not as shallow as it appears.

Speaking of this first form of despair, Kierkegaard writes:

Now this form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world ... The despair that not only does not cause one any inconvenience in life

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>45</sup> Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*: 14-15.

but makes life cozy and comfortable is in no way, of course, regarded as despair ... we say that one regrets ten times for having spoken to once for having kept silent ... Because the external fact of having spoken can involve one in difficulties, since it is an actuality ... by not venturing it is so terribly easy to lose what would be hard to lose, however much one lost by risking ... namely, oneself ... Moreover, what if by not venturing at all in the highest sense (and to venture in the highest sense is precisely to become aware of oneself) I cowardly gain all earthly advantages – and lose myself.<sup>46</sup>

Speaking of the comfort provided by uncritically accepting one's social position, Kierkegaard indicts his fellow bourgeoisie for the "sin" of *willing* to be the bourgeoisie. And it is a sin, not a matter of ignorance, as they will to be this way. And as the beginning of a contemporary social commentary, it is also easy to see how this promised comfort has extended more widely than it was in his day, insofar as only ten percent of the population was "lucky" enough to suffer this despair in Kierkegaard's day. Rather than locating the cause of inauthenticity in a material necessity, as does Marx, Kierkegaard makes inauthenticity an object of temptation, rewarded with social inclusion and the benefits this affords, and punished by social exclusion. This might indicate a lack of compassion, if extended unhesitatingly on those for whom the weight of material necessity does fall, but in Kierkegaard's case, he certainly had in mind those members of society who had options other than succumbing to the pressure of conformity. Similarly, as capitalist necessity has somewhat receded for many in the West, Kierkegaard is already demonstrating a way forward, by placing more of the responsibility for authenticity on the shoulders of individuals.

It is also easy to see how well Kierkegaard's critique of the unreflective individual maps onto the Hegelian conception of society. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel writes:

The states, nations, and individuals involved in this business of the world spirit emerge with their own particular and determinate principle, which has its interpretation and actuality in their constitution and throughout the whole extent of their condition. In their consciousness of this actuality and in their

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<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 34-35.

preoccupation with its interests, they are at the same time the unconscious instruments and organs of that inner activity in which the shapes which they themselves assume pass away, while the spirit in and for itself prepares and works its way towards the transition to its next higher stage.<sup>47</sup>

While Hegel contextualizes his social thought in the guise of a teleology of world history, it is possible to remove his historical optimism and see his argument as a trenchant explanation of social conformity. What Hegel is saying, according to Theodor Adorno's nuanced interpretation, is that any state or nation has an often unacknowledged direction to its activities, a spirit, and that this direction progresses by way of the embodiment of its ideals in its citizenry, i.e. it works "through them," even if this citizenry is likely unaware of its role.<sup>48</sup> In other words, social conformity is not simply a matter of adopting an "idea," but rather, it runs more deeply, as we become products of our societies, through and through, and thereby recreate these societies by our very existence, by our very wills. Speaking in a Hegelian vein about his own encounters with the Nazi regime, Adorno demonstrates that the level of inhumanity normalized by the Nazi's speaks to how deeply we actually *become* what our societies would have us be, as the normalization of the extreme inhumanity of the Nazi's could not occur by way of an intellectually accepted ideology, but only by way of a citizenry that had deeply internalized such an ideology.<sup>49</sup> This is clear with Marx too, as alienation is very much a phenomenon in which we *become* what we *do*, i.e. we become alienated because our activity is alienated. As for Kierkegaard, this is much the same, making inauthenticity the consequence of an essentially *active* will, even if he lacks the explicit capitalist content that Marx provides. Kierkegaard speaks a much more universal language of socialization, well demonstrated by his locating the cause of

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<sup>47</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*: Section 344.

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009). 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

inauthenticity in our universal capacity for language, whereas Marx prefers to speak about the particular inauthenticity endemic to our unique historical moment.

In light of Hegel, Kierkegaard is levying a claim that all truly Hegelian individuals, i.e. those that “fit” within their societies, are not simply being determined by their societies, they are actively willing their inauthentic selves. In other words, these selves can only be maintained as long as the individual continues to will them into existence. However, the individuals within this first category of despair are so completely lacking in self-consciousness when it comes to this activity, that they fail to understand that alternative lives and alternative selves are possible, and this is the very criterion for any kind of meaningful self-reflection. This further reinforces why Kierkegaard likens this form of despair to the anxiety of Adam in Eden; while both are conscious in the sense that all human beings are conscious, they have yet to become aware of their self-consciousness, and the possibilities it allows.<sup>50</sup> And yet, the Philistine Bourgeoisie does have a kind of self-consciousness, a self-consciousness wholly derived from society and that therefore lacks only in self-critical reflection, and so, they are like Adam in appearance only. Such a despairing individual is trying to will innocence, itself impossible, as their act of willing innocence indicates the prior loss of actual innocence. The “self-consciousness” of the Philistine Bourgeoisie is actually that of their society, but having become so ingrained it appears their own, it appears both normal and natural. But insofar as it is derived, and not self-generated, it is not their self that they will to be, but some other self.

If Kierkegaard defines the self as will, in much the same way that Marx uses the term species-being, than in the obvious contradiction of willing to abdicate the will lies the crux of despair. But given the obvious impossibility of willing to abdicate the will, what these despairing people are abdicating is not the will. Rather, as the will cannot be abdicated, and certainly not as

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<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 44.

the consequence of the will, what they are abdicating is *responsibility* for the will. In identifying with a socially determined self, that self, or really the society it represents, takes on the burden of responsibility for the actions that follow from it. In other words, in adopting such a self, a host of socially acceptable actions are also adopted, all of which can be engaged without having to take the ethically serious stance of placing the burden of responsibility on oneself. So, if we accept Marx's case that capitalism is the dominant modern social system, adopting a self that is derived from this society allows actions that are consistent with capitalism to occur, without the individual having to question them. In other words, whenever capitalist logic, or really, any other "external" logic is used to explain a particular action (and usually to explain why something that seems unethical is actually unavoidable), what we are witnessing is the abdication of personal responsibility in favor of the social self.<sup>51</sup> This despair is therefore truly the attempt to will innocence, despite its impossibility; it is an attempt to reclaim a not yet fully mature state, it is an attempt to return to childhood. Imagining this situation in reverse further helps explain why this is such a temptation; not only is responsibility a burden in its own right, but when individual responsibility pits the individual against the logic of their society, it is much easier to simply accept the interminability of that logic, than to stake an ethical claim that alienates the individual from their society. In other words, it is hard to be an ethical individual, and this difficulty in no small part explains why we *want* to submit.<sup>52</sup> And this, is the essence of despair.

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<sup>51</sup> This is an argument given interesting life in the documentary *The Corporation*. Specifically, it argues that the corporation is an institution created to seek profit, but insofar as it exists by way of the individuals who constitute it, the corporation comes to serve the role of rationalizing the specific unethical actions of its constituent members, upon which it relies. Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, "The Corporation," (Canada2003).

<sup>52</sup> It is easy to see why Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were so often compared in Kierkegaard's German reception. For instance, if these ethical claims are viewed from the point of view of hiddenness and revelation, it is easy to see why Pontius Pilate's injunction to *Ecce Homo*, or "Behold the man!" could come to fascinate both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. "The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha," ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), John 19:5. After all, social conformism offers a place to hide, and autonomous action is a self-revelation. And yet, on the question of Christianity, Kierkegaard sees in it the ultimate liberation (and revelation), and Nietzsche, the ultimate servitude (and duplicity). But perhaps a resolution can

## Marx and Kierkegaard's Overlapping Critiques

As Bruce Kirmmse has argued, Kierkegaard's concept of despair was, in part, a social critique of the Copenhagen bourgeoisie, that wealthy ten percent of the population to which Kierkegaard belonged.<sup>53</sup> This seemingly makes Kierkegaard's critique the exact opposite of Marx's concept of alienation, focusing as he did on a category that is mutually exclusive of the working class, if this relationship is understood in Marx's terms. And yet, according to a Marxist analysis of society, these two social categories make a social totality; that is, they are the two constituent classes of capitalist societies, potentially making Marx and Kierkegaard's social critique's better complements than Kirmmse makes them appear. However, the picture is more complicated, as Marx's understanding of class is really a sophisticated analysis of power within capitalism, an analysis that is all but absent in Kierkegaard. When Kierkegaard analyzes his fellow Danes, Danes who *happen* to be of the bourgeois class, he is not analyzing them from the point of view of the power they exercise, power which, for Marx, defines them as a class; rather, Kierkegaard is analyzing them because of the culture that they share. And if there is a common denominator to this culture, it is that it is a culture of wealth.

Granted, Kierkegaard did not imagine despair as a phenomenon of wealth, nor should wealth be seen as determinative of despair. Rather, its role is more indirect. For Kierkegaard, despair is a willed abdication of the self, albeit a willed abdication that occurs under the dual pressure of temptation and fear. Specifically, it occurs under the temptation of social inclusion and irresponsibility, reinforced by the fear of isolation. What made the Danish bourgeoisie such

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ultimately be found by way of Kierkegaard's vehement critiques of Christendom, i.e. his critiques of what Christianity had become, rather than what it was in its essence. See, for instance, Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>53</sup> Kirmmse, "Psychology and Society: The Social Falsification of the Self in *The Sickness unto Death*," 178.

an excellent example of despair was that insofar as they lacked an experience of Marx's necessity, that is, insofar as they were free from the necessity of having to work, their form of inauthenticity was fully the result of their own will and not that of others. In other words, because they were wealthy they were free to be inauthentic as a result of their own will, and not because of capitalist necessity. Whereas the origin of their wealth was essential for Marx, concerned as he was with exposing the intricacies of social domination, this origin is largely irrelevant for an analysis of despair. What matters is that free from material restrictions, they were *free* to be inauthentic in a privileged way. And this is precisely what Kierkegaard takes aim at: a superficial culture, unreflective, and lacking in ethical seriousness. If the working class wants to be free, but cannot be, the bourgeois class can be free, but does not want to be.

This is a point that Marx also understands, but one on which he spends less time, concerned as he was with helping the exploited class emancipate itself. For instance, in making work instrumental, and thereby subjecting the working class to the will of capitalists, Marx recognized that capitalists were not necessarily living more authentic (or less alienated) lives than were their counterparts. Specifically, because work itself is aimed at the production of commodities and not self-objectification, capitalists materially benefit from this work arrangement more than workers do, but their individual subjectivity is not expressed in their work anymore than is that of workers. Bertell Ollman can therefore argue that the productive lives of capitalists and workers are subject to exactly the same instrumental logic, if only they are less dominated by its necessity in their day to day lives.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the production of commodities is an essentially alienating activity for all involved, even if the material benefits are awarded disproportionately to some, while the necessity is experienced by others. This also helps

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<sup>54</sup> Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society. Second Edition.* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1976). 154.

explain why the laws of economics seem to take on the dimensions of inalienable laws, as within a capitalist society, the logic behind the production of commodities governs everyone's lives much the same.<sup>55</sup> Capitalists and workers might relate as oppositional classes within this system, but insofar as they are involved in exactly the same activity, i.e. the use of alienated labor to produce private property, and insofar as their social existence depends on this activity, they are mutually subservient to it and *its* requirements. However, as Marx and Kierkegaard help demonstrate, the subservience of the worker is one of necessity, and therefore speaks to a power relationship, while that of the capitalist is one of choice, and thereby speaks of privilege.

In the context of 1840s Europe, Marx and Kierkegaard's analyses largely overlapped, as wealth accrued to those who bought labor, and poverty was the fate of those who sold it. However, the development of capitalism has seen some of its benefits distributed to the working class writ large, making the starkness of the class difference less apparent. All of which helps to explain why Marx placed the faith that he did in the class that he did; membership in the working class was apparent to its members, as powerlessness was rewarded with a logical compensation: poverty. Marx did recognize that as wealth increased, people become more "comfortable in their alienation," but it is hard to believe that he imagined a world in which membership in the working class would be so occluded by wealth and the possibilities it affords, that the power of the underlying necessity became almost invisible, or rather, that people would become unwilling to recognize (and challenge) the place that power truly resides.<sup>56</sup> As Kierkegaard helps demonstrate, the world of wealth delivers its own form of inauthenticity, a form that overlaps, complements, and reinforces the underlying alienation, but it is one that is *willfully* maintained,

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<sup>55</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 107-08.

<sup>56</sup> Engels had some of the sharper writing on this point, as can be found in *The Conditions of the Working-Class in England*, but Marx was hardly unaware. See, Friedrich Engels, "The Condition of the Working-Class in England," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 4, Marx and Engels: 1844-45* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 322-23.

and therefore not a simple matter of appearances. It is not that the working class writ large does not see its own exploitation, it is that it does not want to see it. Marx might have been right to place his faith in the working class, but in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world, to get to the working class, despair need also be overcome.<sup>57</sup> As our quality of life increases, and the necessity under which we labor becomes less apparent, our shared subservience to capitalist logic is increasingly reinforced by our role in willing that logic by way of willing inauthentic selves, and this increasingly defines our subjective lives.<sup>58</sup> Recalling John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation*, Louisa Kittredge is a fine example of this problem. Her life has many of the trappings of privilege, and yet, she is also subject to the necessity of working in order to live, and the necessary alienation that occurs as a result. She becomes something she is not because she needs to be, but also, because she wants to be. And *wanting* to be other than the self serves to reinforce a system predicated on the *need* to be other than the self. It adds temptation to necessity, all of which is reinforced by the fear of social exclusion that results from being an authentic self. And so, Biff Loman's lament for a society that never was, one in which "[he] could do the work [he] like[s] and still be something," becomes increasingly lost because we are

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<sup>57</sup> For example, an implied understanding of this theoretical problem exists in the sociopolitical work of David Harvey. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey attempts to understand the nature of postmodern culture against the backdrop of the political forces it serves. Specifically, postmodernism's concern with appearance at the expense of any underlying narrative is a politically useful ideology, as it prevents an analysis of the political forces promoting it. However, this ideology is promoted largely through the vibrant culture it provides for our consumption. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

<sup>58</sup> This should not be construed as a detached, abstract, process. For instance, Niall Ferguson, speaking about the massive increase in home ownership in the West over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has said that the policy of "encouraging home ownership ... [has created] a political constituency for capitalism" Niall Ferguson, "The Ascent of Money Episode 3: Risky Business," in *The Ascent of Money*, ed. Adrian Pennink (2009). Home ownership does not change the underlying exploitation and alienation of the employee/employer relationship, but to the extent that home ownership is a desirable good, capitalism seems necessary (to that end). A similar logic seems to be at play in the case of the mass democratic support for the austerity measures that have followed the recent 2008 financial crisis. In this case, the situation is even clearer, as the austerity measures will inevitably harm the very people supporting them (i.e. the democratic polis). The fear that our dependency on capitalism has created has become so severe that the self-evisceration inherent in austerity measures has come to appear as a logical option.

no longer interested.<sup>59</sup> Or worse yet, because we have *willfully* come to think that such a world is what we have.

Thus far, the analysis has focused on Kierkegaard's first form of despair, as the latter forms are best discussed in the context of the subject of *Part Two* on self-development. Nonetheless, a brief mention of these latter forms is warranted, if for no better reason than to foreshadow coming chapters. In looking at the last two forms of despair, it is perhaps not surprising that some commentators have been prompted to speak of Kierkegaard as an "unhappy consciousness," the term within the Hegelian system that refers to those who have transcended their societies' norms, and who thereby point towards a higher social synthesis.<sup>60</sup> For Kierkegaard, the latter forms of despair speak to a growing unhappiness with the socially determined self, but they continue to suffer in despair in that they have yet to find the self that transcends these determinations. In other words, while free from the basic form of despair, they have yet to become free and autonomous. This further helps indicate the centrality of God to Kierkegaard's work; after all, if despair is overcome by overcoming the socially determined self, the self must necessarily have found an ahistorical, or in Kierkegaard's language, an eternal, source for itself. According to Agnes Heller, this also helps explain Lukács' interest in Kierkegaard, as through God, Kierkegaard helps explain how it is possible to feel superior to the society in which one is born; a feeling Heller herself witnessed in Lukács, and which she admiringly called Lukács' "haughtiness."<sup>61</sup> As for the question of the unhappy consciousness,

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<sup>59</sup> Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1980). 18.

<sup>60</sup> Jean Wahl, the noted French scholar and popularizer of Kierkegaard, was the first to call Kierkegaard "an unhappy consciousness," in his *Études Kierkegaardiennes*, a point noted by Alastair Hannay. Hannay criticizes this assertion, because even though an unhappy consciousness has broken free from social constrictions, it continues to derive its meaning from an "external" system. That is, it is a term that makes sense only *within* the Hegelian framework. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, ed. Ted Honderich, *The Arguments of the Philosophers* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982). 19.

<sup>61</sup> Agnes Heller, "Georg Lukács and Irma Seidler," in *Lukács Reappraised*, ed. Agnes Heller (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), 50-53.

where Kierkegaard therefore differs from Hegel is that Kierkegaard believes it is possible to transcend the Hegelian system of social determination, once and for all. That is, an unhappy consciousness can become happy, without thereby replicating the same problem with which it began. Not incidentally, this is Marx's dream too, as he proffers a new understanding of society, one in which the problem of social conformity has been overcome.

Finally, as we will soon see, not only is there an interest in individual emancipation (rather than just social or political emancipation) in the work of Karl Marx, albeit not as fully developed as in Kierkegaard's work, but also, this type of individual transcendence is a prerequisite for social and political liberation. As James L. Marsh argues in one of the very few comparative works on Kierkegaard and Marx, sociopolitical revolution presupposes the type of emancipated individuals that are supposed to compose it.<sup>62</sup> Rather than the biblical solution for transitioning from political servitude to freedom, i.e. allowing those accustomed to servitude to die in Sinai before moving on, Kierkegaard and Marx point a new way forward, by emancipating individuals before a transition, and not afterwards.<sup>63</sup> If revolution is to be revolutionary and not counter-revolutionary, revolutionaries must be those worthy of living in the society they seek to create. In the words of Octavio Paz, the task is to "deserve your dream."<sup>64</sup>

## Childhood

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<sup>62</sup> James L. Marsh, "Marx and Kierkegaard on Alienation," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 164.

<sup>63</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*, trans. New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Numbers 14:35.

<sup>64</sup> Octavio Paz, *Eagle or Sun?*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York, NY: New Directions, 1976). 121. I am grateful that Alkis Kontos believes in this.

In Genesis 2:19, God brings his creations before Adam to see the names he will give them.<sup>65</sup> It is from this that Kierkegaard believes anxiety begins.<sup>66</sup> In opening a space for symbolic thinking, the mental faculty by which socialization takes hold is brought into being. In the context of the type of society that attempts to determine the identities of its constituent individuals, i.e. a society contemplated along Hegelian lines, individual inauthenticity appears inevitable. For Kierkegaard, therefore, lacking Marx's political optimism, we must despair before we become free. This is true for Marx too, but only as a historical problem and not as an individual one. That is, once the scarcity underlying capitalist necessity is overcome, the necessity can likewise be overcome. A wealth of questions emerges in this difference, each of which points the way forward, to the next chapter and beyond. What if Marx is right, and at its core, alienation occurs not because of an essential quality endemic to humanity, but because of the necessity that has historically coerced work? Given Marx's vision of the liberating power of technology, a liberation that has not occurred because under capitalism technology is used to benefit a few rather than the many, can we not now imagine a society in which alienation is avoided?

What if we imagine language differently? What if we replace Kierkegaard's pessimistic assumption about language's alienating function with a more optimistic vision of language? After all, Marx's process of objectification offers another way to understand Genesis 2:19. Instead of interpreting this as the beginning of alienation, could not Adam's act of naming be a creative act? An act whereby he begins to express his subjectivity, and thereby, he begins to know himself by that which he creates? Kierkegaard himself devoted his life to the written word, leaving behind one of the most thorough records of self-conscious exploration ever. Does this

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<sup>65</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*: Genesis 2:19.

<sup>66</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*: 47.

not begin to point the way towards a better future? One in which the consequence of God's expulsion of Adam and Eve is not the division of Cain and Abel, but their community? After all, a vision of language as creative and expressive would seem to bring Adam closer to God, not further; that is, it would bring Adam closer to God as a fellow creator. All this being said, for those of us born into *this* world and not a future world, the question is different. For us, born into the world of Cain and Abel, the question is not one of maintaining a society, but of overcoming one.

## ***Part Two: Emancipation***

It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom.  
(Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*)

Now I'm beginning to understand everything.  
(Nora Helmer, in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*)

I rebel—therefore we exist.  
(Albert Camus, *The Rebel*)

### **Introduction**

In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer, loving wife of Torvald, gradually awakens to the role that socialization has played in cultivating her own inauthenticity, while simultaneously uncovering a desire to know, and develop, her *true* self. The drama climaxes as her husband is made to choose between the comfort of social class and the love of his wife, and to Nora's despair, he chooses comfort. Distilled to the briefest of moments, the social roles in which Nora had once enjoyed playing, those roles that had so far defined her life, became suddenly transformed; from avenues of life that once provided fulfillment, they now stood empty, revealed to be both oppressive and alienating. In that moment, Nora further came to understand that her whole life had been defined by others; in this particular case, by men. As she explains, she passed from her "father's hands" into her husbands, simply exchanging the formers opinions for those of the latter, living now as a "doll-wife ... just as at home ... [she] used to be papa's doll-child."<sup>1</sup> For them, she was nothing more than a plaything; an object for their amusement, one who derived affirmation to the extent she could live according to their wishes,

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<sup>1</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992). 66-67.

while simultaneously recognizing no wishes of her own—nor even that she had any. And so, casting off the veneer of her old life, Ibsen’s drama ends as Nora stands poised to begin her life anew.

As might be expected, her husband Torvald protests, reminding her that her “holiest” duties are those of being a wife and a mother.<sup>2</sup> What will become of her children, after all? However, Nora now realizes that *before* being a “wife and a mother” she has a “sacred” duty towards herself, because, in fact, “. . . before all else [she] is a human being.”<sup>3</sup> That is, to be a good mother she must first be a good person. Perhaps she will find her way back to her family, and perhaps not—Ibsen’s drama ends in ambiguity. What is clear, however, is that in the transformative moment in which Nora chooses truth over falsity, a moment in which an authentic self can finally begin to emerge, returning to her old life increasingly appears impossible. That is, even if she does return to Torvald, now, subjectively transformed, such a return would first require the radical transformation of their marriage. In a complete reversal, rather than conforming herself to its requirements, it must now fit her. In Nora’s own words: “I am going to see if I can make out who is right, the world or I.”<sup>4</sup>

It is no secret that Ibsen was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard,<sup>5</sup> however, in the case of Nora Helmer, it is another one of Kierkegaard’s heirs who sheds the most light: Albert Camus. Camus’ philosophical magnum opus, *The Rebel*, is precisely an attempt to theorize the meaning

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars continue to debate the depths of the debt Ibsen owes Kierkegaard. For instance, Georges Brandes essentially charged Ibsen with having plagiarized Kierkegaard. While both unfair and uncharitable, Kierkegaardian themes abound in many of Ibsen’s plays. For a comprehensive survey of the literature on this connection, one that includes reference to Brandes’ charge, see, Thor Arvid Dyrerud, "Norway: "You Have No Truth Onboard!" Kierkegaard's Influence on Norway," in *Kierkegaard International Reception: Tome 1: Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 146-52.

of the moment of rebellion, the very moment at the climax of Ibsen's play.<sup>6</sup> Early in his work, Camus narrates a stylized slave revolt that distills this moment to its essence; it is a moment in which the rebel "does a complete turnaround. He acted under the lash of his master's whip. Suddenly he turns and faces him."<sup>7</sup> In this way, the slave "demonstrates, with obstinacy, that there is something in him which "is worthwhile ..." and which must be taken into consideration."<sup>8</sup> As such, "every act of rebellion tacitly invokes a value."<sup>9</sup> And, as a result of this value, a larger political position emerges, as "[t]he very moment the slave refuses to obey the humiliating orders of his master, he simultaneously rejects the condition of slavery."<sup>10</sup> While the slave tolerated their slavery until this moment, in rebellion they both discover a value in themselves (in an act of self-awareness), and also assert that value by challenging the injustice they suffer (in an act of self-actualization). And so, this discovery involves not only a personal transformation, but insofar as the existing sociopolitical world must now conform itself to the rebels' specifications, rather than the reverse, it involves an ethical imperative towards political transformation. This model of revolt perfectly parallels Ibsen's narrative of Nora.

The vividness of Camus' description of rebellion also makes it easy to imagine that he might have had in mind actual slave narratives, such as that of Frederick Douglass. For instance, Camus' dramatic description of revolt parallels how Douglass describes his own such moment, a moment in which he writes that he truly became a man, "the turning-point" in his "career as a

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An essay on man in revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 13

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

slave,” a “rekindling” of his last “few expiring embers of freedom,” and a revival of his own “sense” of “manhood.”<sup>11</sup> Douglass further writes:

I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.<sup>12</sup>

No mere rhetorical device, for Camus, rebellion is just such a deeply personal, *lived*, experience. And it is precisely from experiences such as these, experiences most starkly demonstrated in stories like that of Frederick Douglass, but common to Nora Helmer too, that Camus posits that the *felt* experience of such moments of freedom reveals a self-worth that is the inalienable, and also, the universal value of humanity. That is, in the discovery of this self-worth is simultaneously revealed a foundation for community, a discovery that prompts him to distil his own philosophy into the simple phrase: “I rebel—therefore we exist.”<sup>13</sup>

With this moment in mind, it might be tempting to read Camus’ account as yet another in a long line of modern narratives of servitude and emancipation. As Susan Buck-Morss has argued, from the Enlightenment onwards, Western political philosophy was defined precisely by this very antithesis of slavery and freedom.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* she argues that there is an irony to this trope, insofar as it emerged as:

... the economic practice of slavery ... was increasing quantitatively and intensifying qualitatively to the point that by the mid-eighteenth century it came to underwrite the entire economic system of the West, paradoxically facilitating the global spread of the very Enlightenment ideals that were in such fundamental contradiction to it.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," in *Autobiographies*, ed. Jr. Henry Louis Gates (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1994), 60, 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, *The Rebel: An essay on man in revolt*: 22.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, ed. John Beverley and Sara Castro-Klarén, *Illuminations: Cultural Formations of the Americas* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

In other words, as actual slavery proliferated, a proliferation which thereby aided the advance of Western imperialism, the ideals of freedom could be spread far and wide upon a foundation that was its very opposite. So, the very critical tools for exposing slavery advanced in lockstep with the very institution they criticized. Unfortunately, it is precisely this irony (reframed as hypocrisy, or worse) that has often led to a wholesale dismissal of the modern Western project.

It is not coincidental that Buck-Morss' focus lies with Hegel, for, if Camus had a clear forerunner in theorizing the importance of the moment of rebellion as a moment of radical emancipation, a moment in which freedom most clearly revealed itself, it was certainly Hegel, whose dialectic of master and slave foregrounds rebellion as the locomotive process of historical development. As such, "hypocrisy" in their work would be particularly striking, a charge that often attends postcolonial criticism of both—Hegel for the Atlantic slave trade, and Camus for Algeria. Interestingly, just as Camus sought to refocus attention on the revelatory *moment* of rebellion, Buck-Morss' project aims to demonstrate that Hegel must have drawn great inspiration from the simultaneously occurring Haitian revolution; all of which suggests that, perhaps, this was Hegel's own such moment, empathetically, at least.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, given Hegel's economic precarity, the repressive Prussian State, not to mention his cultural racism, he never made this explicitly clear,<sup>17</sup> choosing instead the abstract language of master and slave, language that hid its connection to specific individuals and their struggles. However, in this abstraction lay a real problem, one that forms the focal point of Camus' work, *The Rebel*.

In connecting us with the moment of rebellion, what Camus and Buck-Morss have in common is the recognition that this moment of freedom can be easily lost. In this way, Camus proves to be an existential complement to Buck-Morss' intellectual history, concerned, as he is,

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<sup>16</sup> For Camus, rebellion need not originate in our own experience of oppression, but can also arise "by the mere spectacle of oppression of which someone else is the victim." Camus, *The Rebel: An essay on man in revolt*: 16.

<sup>17</sup> Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*: 19-20.

with understanding the nature of the subjectivities in which such freedom is betrayed—a betrayal that often begins with our very first attempts to articulate it. In fact, we might expect Camus to argue that it was the moment Hegel spoke of the “master” and “slave” as abstract categories, without reference to the very real individuals he was *describing*, that he began transforming freedom into something that could be used to achieve the opposite. Rather than giving voice to the Haitian revolutionaries in a way that allows us to empathize with them, a way that might allow freedom to grow, the Haitians became secondary to their philosophical articulation.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Hegel’s fealty increasingly became attached to an idea (or the *Idea*), and not to a people. And, for Camus, it was precisely this dissembling process—a process in which the *felt* experience of human freedom was replaced with an objective ideal—that transformed an inspirational expression of freedom into an ideology. And once transformed, such ideologies could then be used instrumentally, including even, to enslave. As such, rather than suffering from hypocrisy himself, Camus was actively engaged in rescuing the moment of revolt from theorizations whereby it was betrayed.

In this is found one of Camus’ unique intellectual achievements, insofar as he attempted to theorize human freedom while simultaneously refusing to do so via any articulation that might then be used to subvert it. That is, he refused to render freedom objectively, as he recognized that such objects often became the very enemies of that which they expressed, focusing instead on cultivating its recognition (and appropriation) among his readers. This helps explain why Camus’ account of rebellion is so vividly proximate to that of Frederick Douglass, as Camus’ solution to the problem of ideology lay in description and narrative, rather than abstract theorizing.

However, owing to their historical location close on the heels of Hegel’s radical theorization of

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, regardless of who Hegel had in mind, be it the Haitian revolutionaries or the French, this remains equally true.

rebellion, a theorization coupled with other more conservative elements of Hegel's thought, Kierkegaard and Marx were engaged in exactly the same project as was Camus. That is, they both sought to rescue the moment of emancipation, a moment they both theorized, from a theorization whereby it was betrayed. Unfortunately, while Camus recognized part of his debt to Kierkegaard and Marx, he failed to recognize how deeply they were engaged in the selfsame project, instead seeing them as ultimately betraying rebellion; Kierkegaard by way of his Christianity and Marx by way of Communism.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, for both Kierkegaard and Marx, Christianity and Communism were expressions of human freedom, not its betrayal, and further, they were both actively engaged in the project of preventing just such a betrayal. Turning to this moment of emancipation, and the attendant hypocrisy, we will see how it forms the core of both Marx and Kierkegaard's thoughts on *becoming*.

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<sup>19</sup> Camus, *The Rebel: An essay on man in revolt*: 188-226; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1983). 37-41.

### Chapter 3: *Communication*

As we have seen, for both Kierkegaard and Marx, freedom has both an ontological and an existential dimension. Ontologically, freedom speaks to the fact that we are willful creatures, a will born of our innate capacity for self-reflection. Existentially, however, freedom speaks to our responsible appropriation of that same freedom. As we will later see, Marx imagines this appropriation as possible on a universal scale, but for Kierkegaard, his focus is always on the individual. However, for both, this appropriation depends on an ability to overcome socialization, for the internalization of a socially determined self depends on a passive role vis-à-vis society. That is, the social world presents itself to us as the norms, cultures, institutions, and religions, into which we are born, and which we thereafter internalize. While this internalization speaks to the active role we play in our own socialization, it also demonstrates a fundamentally subservient role we adopt towards the social world. That is, we must conform to it.

It is to this model of society that Kierkegaard sets himself as an opponent. For him, any society so conceived is necessarily irreconcilable with a robust notion of individuality. Such societies shape individuals in their own mold, a mold that might offer an infinite divisibility of particular identities within it, but that is antithetical to a notion of individuality that is not the result of socialization. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, becoming an individual—a process that entails a transition from being a socially determined creature to being a self-determining one—necessarily puts us outside the social universe. If we look at this from the point of view of the socially determined individual, however, we can see that freedom itself, as well as free individuals, are *necessarily* misunderstood. In other words, if I am a socially determined

individual, a free individual is the one thing for which I have no meaningful point of reference, as they exist wholly outside my own world.

In this vein, we can think of both Socrates and Jesus Christ, and how their lives ended, if we want to see examples of how an individual can find themselves beyond the social world. In fact, these two examples form a pillar of Kierkegaard's thought. For Kierkegaard, these two men represent the very best of what a human being can be, and yet, from the point of view of the communities that sentenced them to death, they appeared as the very worst. With this in mind, we can turn to Kierkegaard's most exhaustive treatment of this problem, the case of Abraham and his attempted sacrifice of Isaac. A horrific story, no doubt, Kierkegaard uses it to demonstrate a very specific point: from the point of view of the socially determined individuals who executed Socrates and Jesus Christ, these two men appeared just destructive as Abraham. Hardly murderers, from the point of view of what Kierkegaard sometimes calls "the crowd," they very well might have appeared so.

### **Recovering Abraham**

Of all Søren Kierkegaard's many works, *Fear and Trembling* is the most problematic, yet it is also essential for understanding Kierkegaard's thoughts on emancipation. As a meditation on the biblical Abraham, one that explicitly focuses on his attempted sacrifice of Isaac, Kierkegaard's apparent praise for this horrific act seems irreconcilable with any sense of human decency. In fact, the image of Abraham obeying God's command, hand poised atop Mt. Moriah, has become one and the same with that which many have of Kierkegaard himself. Abraham's story, after all, is the central concern of *Fear and Trembling*, and it is used by Kierkegaard to make the claim that God's demands are higher than those of reason, i.e. that faith, of which

Abraham is the father, is higher than reason.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation has been particularly acute in the Anglophone world where, for example, the American philosopher Brand Blanshard put forward an image of Kierkegaard as a kind of Abraham fetishist, famously arguing that Kierkegaard's position was one of moral nihilism, in a warning call that then served as the *sine qua non* for Kierkegaard demonization.<sup>2</sup> And as Kierkegaard scholar Edward Mooney has noted, even Walter Kaufmann, to whom Kierkegaard's popularity owes a profound debt, found it in himself to excuse many other "writers commonly dismissed as irrationalist," while remaining unable to extend a similar charity to Kierkegaard.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Kaufmann saw in Kierkegaard "one of the foremost ... spokesmen of authoritarian religion," with "[t]he ethical import of ... Kierkegaard's authoritarianism ... expounded in *Fear and Trembling*."<sup>4</sup> Despite a half centuries interlude, this image remains pervasive, as when Thomas Pangle writes that Abraham's faith consists in the "single moment of "faith"" atop Moriah, a moment that "totally dethrones human reason ... [in its] state of quasi insanity."<sup>5</sup> However, while a favorite foil for many, these claims bear little resemblance to Kierkegaard's actual thought; instead, they owe themselves to a profound misreading, one that testifies to poor translations, limited access to Kierkegaard's oeuvre, cursory readings, and also, perhaps, to a deep-seated fear that reason might lose its

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Brand Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," *The Personalist* 49, no. Winter (1968). Within Kierkegaard scholarship, Blanshard's article is often referred to as an important bulwark for this pernicious, yet durable, line of interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> Edward F. Mooney, "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion* 19, no. 1/2 (1986): 38, Fn. 1. For many in the Anglophone world, Walter Kaufmann's 1956 book, *Existentialism*, was their first experience of Kierkegaard. This book remains in print, with what seems like an endless print run, and so it is safe to assume that for many, it continues to be their first encounter with Kierkegaard. Yet, unfortunately, in Kaufmann's introduction, we find him saying that Kierkegaard "rashly renounced clear and distinct thinking altogether," and that his "diagnosis is mistaken and ... his prescription would prove fatal." Walter Kaufmann, ed. *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre: Basic Writings of Existentialism by Kaufmann, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kafka, Heidegger, and Others, Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1975), 18. In many ways, the last several decades of Kierkegaard research has been defined by the attempt to extricate Kierkegaard from such damning indictments.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Kaufmann, "Kierkegaard," *The Kenyon Review* 18, no. 2 (1956): 184-85.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). 178-80.

ascendancy to the “irrationality” of the age—a fear quite justified by the all-too-real example of Hitler’s Germany.

And yet, seemingly as a warning against such misinterpretation, from its very first words it is clear that *Fear and Trembling* is concerned with questions pertaining to the complexity of communication and interpretation. Specifically, it begins with an epigram borrowed from Johann Georg Hamann, an epigram which reads as follows: “What Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not.”<sup>6</sup> This epigram refers to a story in which Sextus, the son of the last King of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, having just taken the city of Gabii, sent a messenger to solicit orders from his father. His father Tarquinius, not trusting the messenger, gave him no message, instead taking the messenger to the garden where he lopped off the tops of all the poppies. In this way he sent word to his son to execute the city’s leading men, doing so *by way* of the messenger, but without informing the messenger as to the content of the message (or even that they were carrying one).<sup>7</sup> As C. Stephen Evans notes, it is precisely this story that is meant to orient us to Abraham’s story—and to all of *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>8</sup>

Granted, in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard’s praise for Abraham seems endless, while he offers little by way of an explanation of Abraham’s faith—a faith which does, in fact, appear horrific. However, this absence of a positive doctrine of faith is the second clue that the demonization of Kierkegaard might be unfair. Specifically, Kierkegaard wrote *Fear and Trembling* under the pseudonym *Johannes de Silentio*, and Johannes makes it clear that he

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<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the message given to Tarquinius’ messenger was *literally* non-violent, insofar as flower stems are arguably not an appropriate locus for violence, but *actually*, the message was extremely violent. It is, therefore, the exact opposite of the Abraham story—assuming Kierkegaard can reveal a non-violent core to Abraham’s literally violent story.

<sup>8</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 210-11.

knows not what faith is. “Abraham I cannot understand; in a certain sense I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed.”<sup>9</sup> And so, like that messenger, Johannes knows not the message he carries, as he does not have the faith of which he attempts to speak.<sup>10</sup> Johannes cannot even be sure he carries a message at all, making the readers interpretive work all the more difficult. Therefore, the meaning of the story cannot possibly be in any explicit content it contains, i.e. he cannot be praising Abraham for what Abraham does (i.e. his act of faith), because Johannes *does not know* what it is Abraham is *actually* doing. All he *knows* is how it *appears* to him, an individual lacking faith, and who therefore lacks access to the *essential* content of the story. And to him, it does, in fact, appear like murder.<sup>11</sup> The only mitigating factor is that Johannes is also “amazed”—a specific type of amazement that seems to testify to a vague recognition that Abraham *cannot* possibly be a murderer (and note, Johannes does not extend this charity to other filicide’s, as we will see, but only to Abraham); or perhaps, it just indicates a hope that Abraham is not one—but he does not quite know why.

And so, a tension exists between the apparent content of the story which beckons revulsion, and Johannes’ belief that the story must be otherwise; and all Johannes offers is his willingness to extend a benefit of the doubt. But this tension is obviously orchestrated intentionally by Kierkegaard, an intention that is twofold. In the first place, his use of this story is meant to have the exact opposite effect that his later critics would imagine. That is, in choosing such a horrific story, he is depending upon the very bourgeois norms he is attacking to act preventatively against a literal interpretation of the biblical story. In other words, while it seems easy to surmise that Kierkegaard meant to shock, the flipside of this intention is that he could

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<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 37.

<sup>10</sup> Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," 211.

<sup>11</sup> "... the reality of his act is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer." Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 74.

count on the very same sense of decency that was being “shocked” to prevent anyone foolish enough from mimicking Abraham.<sup>12</sup> Granted, he probably was not particularly worried about this, not to mention that it places much too much worth in the role that ideas play in regard to action, but it still serves a subtle role. Recalling Camus’ refusal to articulate freedom in any language that might thereby be used to attack freedom, in the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard had found his own insulation against such problems, by way of his use of a story that no one would mimic—at least insofar as his audience possessed a sense of bourgeois decency.

Kierkegaard’s second intention follows closely from the first; in order to make any sense of *Fear and Trembling*, that is, in order to recognize that an alternative meaning lay behind Abraham’s story, it is necessary to overcome one’s own horror at Johannes’ praise. That is, it requires a recognition of the interpretive role we play in ethical life, regardless of how obvious our interpretations might seem. Specifically, as a particular sense of ethics had pervaded his age—an ethics that Kierkegaard comes to call “the ethical” and whose very name hints at reification—and as all of human life had been subsumed within “the ethical,” those employing this ethics had long mistaken their interpretation for reality. And so, rather than acting as one particular interpretative framework, in its refusal to admit alternatives, this ethics had come to serve a role of obfuscation. The problem, then, lay in the “attitude” behind this conception of ethical life, an attitude that Camus would later call “seriousness,” in that it entailed an unflinching certitude in one’s own values that, for Camus, made “the history of the last two

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<sup>12</sup> While Anglophone philosophy took Kierkegaard literally and subsequently demonized him in the post-WWII era, in much the way Kierkegaard might have expected, the only time he was interpreted literally *and* praised was perhaps the interwar period in Germany, when thinkers such as Carl Schmitt saw in Kierkegaard a glorification of unbridled will. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). 15. However, it would be foolhardy to criticize Kierkegaard for failing to anticipate a society with such a radical breakdown of bourgeois ethical norms as that of Germany in the lead up to the Second World War, just as it would be irresponsible to blame him for playing any kind of role in that breakdown. Sociopolitical reality created that era, and their interpretation of philosophical texts reflects that fact, not vice versa. In other words, Nazi Germany did not need Kierkegaard’s help.

centuries so tedious and depressing.”<sup>13</sup> Ironically, Lukács saw in Kierkegaard this same seriousness, particularly in his idealization of women.<sup>14</sup> However, given Kierkegaard’s intention to destabilize such seriousness, and the gleefully mischievous pleasure he must have taken in shocking his all too “proper” bourgeois audience, it is likely Lukács was being unintentionally self-referential.<sup>15</sup> After all, Lukács had deeply internalized Kierkegaard’s thought, not to mention that his own seriousness has been well documented.<sup>16</sup> And while Kierkegaard’s point could have been demonstrated by way of a less horrific story, he seems to be saying that even in cases where the truth appears obvious (or perhaps, even more so in such cases), self-criticism is warranted because an act of interpretation is taking place. Absent the willingness to “suspend judgment,” which, in Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen meant suspending “the ethical,” we might, in fact, be missing the truth. In other words, sometimes our application of ethics might itself be unethical, albeit by a more complex sense of ethics, and this problem is only compounded by our stubborn adherence.

Case in point, contextualized in the ancient world in which it was written, a world, perhaps, of such intertribal warfare that unquestioning allegiance to a monotheistic god might actually mitigate against such murders, it is possible to imagine that this story was intended

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<sup>13</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An essay on man in revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1984). 125.

<sup>14</sup> Georg Lukács, "The Foundering of Form Against Life: Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen," in *Soul and Form*, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1980), 28.

<sup>15</sup> As a young boy, Kierkegaard’s mischievous glee has been well documented. A teased boy, who himself turned to teasing in self-defense, Kierkegaard could be, to put it bluntly, a bit of a pain. Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 17-22. It has widely been suggested that *Fear and Trembling* is, in part, one of Kierkegaard’s many attempts to explain his famous breakup with Regine Olsen. In a bizarre twist of fate, Lukács had a similar breakup with his own betrothed, Irma Seidler. However, Regine later married another, and by all accounts, lived a happy life. Irma, on the other hand, tragically commit suicide. While it is unwise to read too much into these examples, it is hard not to see them as examples of Lukács own inflexible seriousness and Kierkegaard’s naïve, but caring, foolishness. It seems that as in many things, Kierkegaard is a complementary opposite to Marx, in that this historical repetition occurred first as farce and then as tragedy.

<sup>16</sup> Agnes Heller, "Georg Lukács and Irma Seidler," in *Lukács Reappraised*, ed. Agnes Heller (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983). Agnes Heller calls this Lukács’ haughtiness.

precisely to avoid such family violence. This is not the truth after which Kierkegaard strives, but it is enough to recognize that ethical judgment can also sometimes obscure ethical life of a more complex kind. That being said, “intention” or “agency” is, in fact, an essential component of the type of ethical responsibility at which Kierkegaard is aiming, so it is actually more than an incidental example. And, if all of this is understood hermeneutically, Kierkegaard’s claim is that the meaning of a story is often conveyed in ways other than through its apparent content, or, that the use to which a story is put can help reveal a reality that is often more complex than its particular content might admit. And so, just as context helps reveal this complexity, it also helps indicate that Kierkegaard might be answering to a higher sense of ethics by which his *use* of a seemingly unethical story is, in fact, ethical. After all, stories themselves are fictional, but the uses to which they are put are real. And so far, if Kierkegaard has only managed to prompt the critical scrutiny of his readers’ ethics, this actually seems an easily defensible ethical position, regardless of the particular ethics used to judge.

In tandem with this, it is also possible to look at this hermeneutic point theologically, in that we can begin to see that in his attack on interpretive simplicity, one of Kierkegaard’s concerns was the problem of *idolatry*, albeit reframed in philosophical guise. After all, while the specific meaning of the Abraham story is not yet clear, Kierkegaard does not seem to dispute that it is somehow about faith. More specifically, a central tenet of Christianity, and many other religions, is that God does not adhere to any one specific appearance. It therefore follows that neither God nor faith can be captured within any single objective manifestation; that is, for those with faith, their attempts to objectify their faith can never lead to objectifications that fully capture its essence—at best, these objectifications will *refer* to their faith descriptively, that is, they will reveal themselves as manifestations of faith insofar as they are *acts* of faith, yet these

objects themselves will never fully encapsulate it. Recalling *Part One*'s discussion of objectification, this should not be difficult to imagine; after all, the whole point behind recognizing the nature of objectification involved overcoming the mistake that objects exist independently of the subjects that created them. In this context, then, Kierkegaard seems to be making the claim that no objectification can ever fully encapsulate a subjectivity *in faith*, and therefore, a flexible interpretative position is likewise a necessary feature of those who wish to perceive faith—a flexibility he is actually trying to provoke. And so, not only is Abraham's faith not found in the apparent content of the story, it cannot be.

### **Silence and Speaking**

If Nora Helmer's rebellion entailed a discovery of self-worth that impelled her to explore her own individuality, the above claims about the nature of objectification gain some context. After all, if Nora begins developing her own unique individuality, she then faces the problem of expressing herself by way of translating herself into a medium common to all. That is, she has to translate her individuality into a communicable form, which means, she has to speak. However, there are different ways this can happen. Recalling the conclusion of chapter 2, language, in its authentic iteration, can be used to express a subject's uniqueness through authentic self-objectification. That is, it can be used artistically, in much the way Marx helped demonstrate. However, language can also be alienating.

Kierkegaard has already highlighted the ontological dimensions of this alienation, in that the existence of language as a symbolic medium awakens consciousness, which is itself a necessary prerequisite for alienation, i.e. Kierkegaard's claim that language births sin.<sup>17</sup> Granted, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Adam proves to be a useful example insofar as he is ontologically

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<sup>17</sup> See, Chapter 1.

similar to us. However, in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard offers substantive content to fill in this ontological claim, because, in demonstrating our similarity with Adam, an important difference is glossed over.<sup>18</sup> Adam is not born into a *particular* social world, but we are. In other words, unlike Adam, we learn language from others, we do not create it ourselves.<sup>19</sup> More broadly construed, from the moment we are able to give ourselves meaning, meaning is imposed on us, as the very tools we use to understand and shape our subjectivities carry with them preexisting content. This brings Kierkegaard remarkably in line with Marx, who also realizes that “the material of my activity [is] given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active).”<sup>20</sup>

Recalling *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard puts forward the claim that “[j]ust as Adam lost innocence by guilt, so every man loses it in the same way,” making it appear as if alienation were a necessary step in growing up.<sup>21</sup> However, as the authentic form of language demonstrates (i.e. creative expression), alternatives to this alienation might be possible. The problem, then, is that unlike Adam, we do not invent language. Instead, we make use of the symbols and meanings available to us, meanings that come with the weight of social conformity

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<sup>18</sup> *Fear and Trembling* was actually written before *The Concept of Anxiety*, so it might be more apt to say that *The Concept of Anxiety* provides the structure for *Fear and Trembling*. However, thematically, the latter does fill in the former.

<sup>19</sup> “So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*, trans. New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Genesis 2:19.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 298.

<sup>21</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Reidar Thomte, trans. Albert B. Anderson and Reidar Thomte, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980). 35

behind them. So, from the very moment we become conscious, the pressure to despair is present, i.e. the pressure “to will to be rid of oneself.”<sup>22</sup>

And so, out of our desire to be understood, out of our desire to fit in, we translate ourselves into social categories in an ongoing process of social reproduction. And if this process occurs with our very development of consciousness in childhood, as Kierkegaard believes it does, these pressures begin with the most vulnerable members of our communities, i.e. with children. And so, instead of language serving as a means of authentically objectifying our subjectivity, objectified meanings become internalized, acting as the boundaries in which we are allowed to live. For example, this is Nora prior to her rebellion, having internalized the social mores of her age, shaping her subjectivity to fit the confines of what is allowed, acting as a doll for her masters. In her case, her subjectivity was forced into the specific contours of “daughter,” and then, “wife” and “mother,” as these roles were then understood. However, in this way she is also understood by her community, accepting, as she did, the role or roles assigned to her—complete with the excitement of the occasional transgression, a transgression which is itself circumscribed by those very same roles.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Frederick Douglass’ story also parallels this perfectly, in that his own narrative, up until his moment of revolt, is the story of how “a man was made a slave.”<sup>24</sup>

In this, we can see Hegel’s heavy hand, as we are not far from Adorno’s insightful analysis, when he wrote:

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<sup>22</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 20.

<sup>23</sup> In Nora’s case, her delight in eating macaroons, despite her husband’s prohibition, is certainly heightened by the secrecy surrounding it. In an interesting contrast, she also enjoys the transgression of flirting with a man who is not her husband (Dr. Rank), but once he professes his true love for her, and a socially acceptable transgression is replaced with the threat of a transgression that is actually transgressive, Nora quickly retreats.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," in *Autobiographies*, ed. Jr. Henry Louis Gates (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1994), 60.

Now, what Hegel calls the world spirit is the spirit that asserts itself despite people's wishes, over their heads, as it were. It is the primacy of the flow of events in which they are caught up, and it impinges on them no less than do the facts. Only it does so less painfully, and is therefore the more easily repressed. What is important here is that you should not regard this idea of spirit prevailing over people's heads as a kind of speculative prejudice and hence dismiss it all too readily. It is important, I say, that you should realize that this process in which what prevails always passes not merely over people's heads, but *through* them.<sup>25</sup>

This point is likewise articulated by Alastair Hannay, when he writes that Hegel's concern "*is* the self and its fulfilling activities and goals ... it is in forms of the self's *action* that 'consciousness' is afforded the satisfying experience of being at one with all reality."<sup>26</sup> And, for Kierkegaard, this *through* happens precisely because our subjectivities, and therefore the lives we live, have to be articulated by way of a world of meaning that preexists us, and that we inherit under pressure—a pressure Marx believes is more than simply social, as our very survival is at stake in our need to work in order to live.

Kierkegaard further clarifies this point by way of a comparison between Abraham and Agamemnon. Both are stories of filicide, yet Kierkegaard admiringly calls Abraham a "knight of faith," while Agamemnon only receives the "lower" moniker of "tragic hero."<sup>27</sup> For Kierkegaard, what makes Agamemnon a tragic hero as opposed to a knight of faith is that Agamemnon is comprehensible from within the confines of social language, as his was a social dilemma.<sup>28</sup> After all, Agamemnon's dilemma exists between his conflicting commitment to his daughter and to his nation, both of which could be understood by anyone within the universe of a socializing language, insofar as they both pertain to the social roles he found himself in.

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<sup>25</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009). 25

<sup>26</sup> Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, ed. Ted Honderich, *The Arguments of the Philosophers* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982). 54.

<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 74-81.

<sup>28</sup> It is also important to note that Kierkegaard does not consider Agamemnon's actions heroic, even though he calls him a "tragic hero." The term tragic hero is a category within Kierkegaard's thought, a category meant to denote an individual's relationship to the social universal, and does not refer to the specific ethics of the actions involved.

The authentic tragic hero sacrifices himself and everything that is his for the universal; his act and every emotion in him belong to the universal; he is open, and in this disclosure he is the beloved son of ethics. This does not fit Abraham; he does nothing for the universal and is hidden.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, Agamemnon's very act upholds society itself insofar as the "justification" for his crime is society, i.e. it is the universal—or, in modern parlance, what we might call the "national" interest. In other words, his crime against one social role is simultaneously an act of faith in the social world as a totality, i.e. the same world into which we are *all* born, yet, he expresses nothing higher—his is not *true* faith. There is nothing to Agamemnon that is beyond comprehensibility by anyone living within his community, making him both transparent, and, potentially, admired.<sup>30</sup> Abraham, however, expresses nothing of the social universe, or rather, he cannot be comprehended by way of it, as his faith transcends society; and so, he is hidden.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard makes it clear that this very comprehensibility offers Agamemnon "relief," for, in translating himself into the social world, in upholding the totality of meaning he inherited, he slips into the despair of social conformity and avoids personal responsibility. From Agamemnon's point of view, if not from ours, Agamemnon can claim that it was not he himself who sacrificed Iphigenia, for he had no choice, and any fellow citizen would have done the same. That is, faced with a dilemma between a father's duty to his family and a king's duty to the state, Agamemnon did the "responsible" thing and heeded the call of the "higher" duty. And while this example might seem horrific to the modern sensibility (not to mention, to many ancient ones too), especially given how immediate Agamemnon's role in the sacrifice was, given our current state of war, a parents willingness to sacrifice their children for *affairs of state* should not be too difficult to imagine. However, while employing the language of

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<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 113.

<sup>30</sup> Or he could be reviled, for that matter. The point is not that he is or should be admired, but that he *can* be admired. In other words, his actions are thoroughly comprehensible, and so he can be judged.

responsibility, Agamemnon is actually avoiding responsibility, as the responsibility falls not on his shoulders, but on the dilemma itself. In fact, opposed to Kierkegaard's belief in radical personal responsibility, Agamemnon's use of God (in his case, Artemis), was as an *excuse*. For Kierkegaard, this makes Agamemnon a character with whom his society can sympathize, insofar as he appears as victim and not perpetrator: "The tragic hero needs and demands tears, and where is the envious eye so arid that it could not weep with Agamemnon, but where is the soul so gone astray that it has the audacity to weep for Abraham?"<sup>31</sup> Yet, even if they withhold sympathy, as they might choose to do, the real point is that they can at least understand him.

And so, our use of symbols, be they those of language or otherwise, is very much a social practice, concerned as we are with communication, and it is a practice that occurs under great pressure. After all, even Adam, in his seeming solitude, gained the ability to relate to *selves* by way of language (even if it was only his own self).<sup>32</sup> As for Abraham, however:

Abraham remains silent—but he *cannot* speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking. This is the case with Abraham. He can say everything, but one thing he cannot say, and if he cannot say this—that is, say it in such a way that the other understands it—then he is not speaking. The relief provided by speaking is that it translates me into the universal.<sup>33</sup>

Statements like these further clarify that Kierkegaard is imagining the problems of communication along Hegelian lines, insofar as "the universal" refers to the universe of social life (or a *totality* of social meaning). In fact, this prompts Alastair Hannay to note that the language Kierkegaard really has in mind is one tied to a Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* ethics, i.e. an ethics that pertains to a social universe.<sup>34</sup> The problem, then, is not that Abraham is not able to

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<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 61.

<sup>32</sup> See, Chapter 1.

<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 113.

<sup>34</sup> Hannay, *Kierkegaard*: 86.

physically vocalize himself, nor even that he is necessarily beyond self-expression; rather, it is that he cannot make himself understood through such language. After all, he is not trying to express something of his internalization of social values, but rather, his transcendent faith in God.

With all of this in mind, it becomes possible to clarify the object of Kierkegaard's critique; his problem is not with language *per se*, but with the *determining* language that attends socialization. That is, all such language has in common that its purpose, i.e. the way it is *used*, is to determine subjectivity—even though this determination is something we do to ourselves, as in Agamemnon's willful retreat into the comfort of the social universal. Furthermore, in this way, it should also be clear why Abraham cannot speak. After all, Abraham can, in fact, say “everything,” that is, everything about him as a socialized individual (everything in the “universe”), but there is *one* thing “he cannot say.” And, while we have established that this one thing is Abraham's faith, which makes sense given that faith is by definition transcendental, if we contextualize this against the backdrop of a determining language, the substantive nature of this *one* thing stands clear; Abraham cannot communicate his freedom. After all, freedom, by definition, transcends socialization.

As Judith Butler aptly notes, Kierkegaard's very writing style was meant to demonstrate “the limits of language to comprehend that which constitutes the individual,”<sup>35</sup> a point that is perhaps most explicitly engaged in *Fear and Trembling*. And, as we can begin to see, for Kierkegaard, for all of our socialization, that which essentially constitutes the individual is freedom. Yet, this should not be much of a surprise given Marx and Kierkegaard's shared

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<sup>35</sup> Judith Butler, “Kierkegaard's Speculative Despair,” in *The Age of German Idealism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *Routledge History of Philosophy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

anthropology of the self, an anthropology in which the will, or freedom, is front and center.<sup>36</sup> Granted, freedom is not incommunicable by poetry, perhaps, especially given what Marx might have called a “humanized ear,” i.e. one attuned to the nuances of subjectivity, but it is certainly incommunicable by the type of discourse that is meant to demonstrate (and create) inclusion in a social totality.<sup>37</sup> After all, the concern of social language is to shape and form subjectivity; it exists externally, and imposes itself on individual subjectivities through the individuals very own complicity. That is, it is a language that aims to *determine* subjectivity and is therefore completely at odds with a language of a *determining* subject, insofar as the former is a tool of oppression, while the latter is an expressions of freedom. And yet, this is not a matter of language itself, insofar as a determined and a determining subjectivity have access to all of the same words and symbols; rather, it speaks to the *use* of language. In other words, the language of a determined and a determining subjectivity will appear exactly the same, yet, one will express servitude, and the other, freedom. So, as it turns out, it is, in fact, impossible to communicate freedom by way of language—directly at least.

Returning to Abraham’s story, as the bible recounts, there is no mention of Abraham telling his wife, Sarah, about God’s command to sacrifice Isaac.<sup>38</sup> It is this problem that preoccupies the latter portion of *Fear and Trembling*, as Kierkegaard wrestles with the nature of Abraham’s silence vis-à-vis Sarah, the reason for which should already be clear. As we have seen, “Abraham cannot be mediated; in other words, he cannot speak. As soon as I speak, I

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<sup>36</sup> See, Chapter 1.

<sup>37</sup> While it is easier to see Marx praising the expressive power of language, insofar as Kierkegaard’s focus is on its alienating potential, in *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard does say that faith can be communicated. Søren Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 103. His real problem is that some expressions of faith can make it harder for those without faith to find faith.

<sup>38</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*: Genesis 22:1-19.

express the universal, and if I do not do so, no one can understand me.”<sup>39</sup> Posed in the context of his marriage, as Kierkegaard does, the question of Abraham’s silence is easy to answer. After all, the bible clearly recounts Sarah’s *lack* of faith, well captured by her laughing at God’s promise of a child in her old age.<sup>40</sup> That is, lacking faith, Sarah is immersed in the very world from which Abraham’s faith is excluded, i.e. she exists in the social world, as a subjectivity that is determined by it. And so, within their very marriage there is a communicative gap, insofar as they each use language differently.

In fact, the bible records very little by way of any of Abraham’s words through this ordeal, as Kierkegaard notes.

Just one word from him has been preserved, his only reply to Isaac, ample evidence that he had not said anything before. Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb is for the burnt offering. “And Abraham said: God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”<sup>41</sup>

Rather than a universalizable utterance that might make similar situations understandable, i.e. an utterance that pertains to a social role, an utterance that would thereby reveal Abraham to be a socially determined individual (or his dilemma to be a social one), Abraham’s words are entirely personal (i.e. expressive)—*and* reassuring. Nor are they a lie, but rather, a demonstration of his faith—a faith that not only entails his freedom, but as we will later see, also rests in his recognition that he would *not* lose Isaac. In fact, Abraham’s story is not the story of Isaac’s near death at all, as the sacrifice is solely a metaphorical one, and a metaphorical sacrifice by which Isaac is in fact won (as we will also soon see). And so, while to the outside reader Abraham’s act appears horrific, in his reassuring words to Isaac, we can begin to see that their relationship is constituted by a deep trust. Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, it is through an “absurd” double

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<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 60.

<sup>40</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*: Genesis 18:10-15.

<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 115-16.

movement of sacrifice and recovery that Isaac is *received*, as the story is ultimately about how Abraham “gets Isaac back again by virtue of the absurd.”<sup>42</sup>

### **The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical**

Questions of interpretation and communication are central to *Fear and Trembling*, but the real question is an ethical one. Specifically, midway through *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard puts a sharp point on his analysis, and asks: “Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?”<sup>43</sup> This question has justifiably weighed on the minds of many, as our sense of public ethics seems to depend on an absolute adherence to it, and Kierkegaard’s suggestion appears an invitation to fanaticism. However, what Kierkegaard has in mind is very much an ethical critique of ethics; that is, he critiques the dominant conception of ethics from what he takes to be a higher ethical standard—a glimpse of which is already evident in his critique of Agamemnon. And yet, even given this, his attempt is not to destroy this dominant conception, so much as it is to attack the hubris it displays in considering itself the highest. As C. Stephen Evans notes of Kierkegaard, such ethics only requires transcendence (i.e. a “teleological suspension”) when making claims of absoluteness and finality, but purged of this claim, they constitute an essential part of “religious” life.<sup>44</sup> Or, as Edward Mooney notes, there is a truth to the type of civic morality that Kierkegaard attacks, but being true does not simultaneously entail absoluteness.<sup>45</sup> In other words, such a suspension only occurs when we render such ethics absolute, as part of a process that actually serves absolves ourselves of true ethical responsibility.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>44</sup> Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," 214.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Mooney, "Getting Isaac Back: Ordeals and Reconciliations in *Fear and Trembling*," in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, ed. George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1992), 78.

In recent years, debate has occurred as to the specific type of ethics Kierkegaard attacks, a debate that alternatively swung between Kant and Hegel. However, consensus has largely emerged that Kierkegaard is clearly targeting not Kant, but Hegel. Particularly, such notable scholars as Merold Westphal, Alastair Hannay, and C. Stephen Evans, have all argued that Hegel is the intended target, and more specifically, that “the ethical” in question bears unquestionable resemblance to Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* ethics.<sup>46</sup> On this point there seems little reason to disagree, as our discussion of the associated language already attests, but in excavating Kierkegaard’s critique, it also becomes possible to see how it applies much more widely—including even, to Kant, and beyond. This broader critique is possible because Kierkegaard critiques Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* ethics not for the ethical content they contain (or do not contain), but for their self-appointed status as absolute, a status shared by many ethical systems. This usurpation of a status previously assigned to a transcendent God involved Hegel in a *de facto* subordination of God to reason, a move, we will see, that simultaneously eliminated the radical emancipatory potential Kierkegaard sees in Christianity. In fact, a careful look at Hegel reveals that this is exactly what he has in mind, even if he does not imagine it in precisely these terms.

Contrary to superficial accounts that see the Western philosophical tradition as anti-faith and pro-reason, the actual relationship between these poles is much more nuanced. As Merold Westphal writes, Kierkegaard’s attack is quite specific, focusing on “the claim that Hegel’s philosophy contains the same content as the Christian religion, but in the superior form of philosophical concept, *Begriff*, rather than the religious form Hegel labels *Vorstellung*.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, Hegel is not trying to denounce religious experience in favor of rational truth, but

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<sup>46</sup> Hannay, *Kierkegaard*; Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*."; Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*: 62.

rather, he is involved in making the claim that religion and reason are coextensive. While this is typically read as a blanket denigration of religion in favor of reason, Hegel is in fact affirming the content of religion as truthful, if he also intends to subsume religion (and its mythological focus on *appearance*) to the conceptual clarity of philosophical understanding. In Kierkegaard's terms, Hegel's claim is only that Abraham *can* speak. In fact, excavating this nuance is at the heart of Jon Stewart's recent, and ongoing, work, in which he seeks to reestablish Hegel's Christian credentials, while calling into question those of Kierkegaard.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, Stewart notes that in contrast to the volumes of Christian dogmatics Hegel wrote, there is comparatively little in Kierkegaard of what might be called Christian dogma, aside from basic assertions such as that God can become man—an assertion applicable to many religions, not only Christianity.<sup>49</sup> To better see this complexity in Hegel, a complexity that helps make sense of Kierkegaard's critique, we need to turn to Hegel's systematic exegesis of religion, as found in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>50</sup>

For Hegel, religion and philosophy are equally concerned with the truth, as “[t]he object of religion, like that of philosophy, is the eternal truth, God and nothing but God and the explication of God.”<sup>51</sup> What Hegel has in mind is not simply a rational, metaphysical God, but the same sensately experienced God found within “religious” experience, an experience that, within the religious tradition, comes to constitute faith. For Hegel, “[e]verything that people

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<sup>48</sup> Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard and Hegel on Faith and Knowledge," in *George W. Utech Memorial Kierkegaard Seminar* (Hong Kierkegaard Library, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota 2011).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Vol. I: Introduction and The Concept of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, et al., (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Vol. II: Determinate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, et al., (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Vol. III: The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, et al., (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, One-volume edition: The lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). 78.

value and esteem, everything on which they think to base their pride and glory, all of this finds its ultimate focal point in religion, in the thought or consciousness of God and in the feeling of God.”<sup>52</sup> All human value, it seems, originates not only in the consciousness of God, but in this *feeling* of God. And so, Hegel clearly recognizes that there is a sensate experience correlating to what religion considers God to be, i.e. that the “religious experience” is *somehow* a real experience.

In this way we can begin drawing together some loose ends, insofar as our discussion of language has already begun to demonstrate that faith, for Kierkegaard, entails the transcendent experience of freedom. After all, if servitude is maintained by a willful complicity in the process of socialization, the experience of freedom is necessarily a transcendent one, which, in turn, helps reveal the truthfulness of religious narratives. Following from this, it is not incidental that Frederick Douglass describes his moment of emancipation as a “resurrection” into the “heaven of freedom,” nor that Ibsen has Nora Helmer discover a “sacred” duty to herself. In fact, this all closely parallels Camus’ belief that *eternal* human value originates in revolt, a formulation that is ostensibly agnostic but in actuality hardly so, insofar as revolt entails the experiential discovery of the *transcendent* human worth found in freedom—a point especially important in light of how heavily the experience of revolt weighs in Hegel’s thought too. Momentarily ignoring the diverse ways in which all of this is imagined, for that is where the disagreement begins, a deep experiential unity lies here. With this mind, the question really becomes, and the debate really involves, only the matter of how best to understand this “transcendent” experience. For both Kierkegaard *and* Hegel, this occurs by way of God; however, what they mean by this is quite different.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 76.

For Hegel, reliance upon this *feeling* of God, the immediate apprehension of God, is problematic—be it religiously expressed as in Kierkegaard, or agnostically expressed as in Camus. After all, in both Kierkegaard and Camus’ case we find the assertion that the discovery of transcendent value that occurs in this moment *cannot* be captured in the type of social language found within a Hegelian universal. And so, both explicitly avoid rendering this experience objectively, and instead come to speak descriptively. For Hegel, however, traditional religions (in which we could likewise include Camus) were lacking in critical scrutiny of the religious experience, as they suffered from the prejudice that “[a]ll conviction *that* God is, and regarding *what* God is, rests, so it is surmised, upon this immediate revealedness in the human being, upon this faith.”<sup>53</sup> That is, satisfied with living in proximity to God, satisfied with the experience of freedom, they never sought to *know* God in a more substantive manner. So, while Hegel never questions the “truth” of God’s existence, he does argue that this truth can be known in a more conscious way.

More precisely, the *immediacy* of this knowledge is supposed to reside above all in the fact that one knows *that* God is, *not what* God is. The expansion, the content, the fulfillment of the representation of God is thus negated. But what we call “cognition” involves knowing not only *that* an object is but *also what* it is; and knowing what it is, not just in a general way or having a certain acquaintance with it, some certitude about it, but knowing what its determination are, what its content is, so that our knowing is fulfilled and verified knowledge in which we are aware of the necessary connectedness of these determinations.<sup>54</sup>

The implication of this line of thought is that God can be objectified (or that God *is* an object), i.e. that a specific corollary to the experience of God can be found in the objective, conceptual world. In other words, if an immediate experience exists, Hegel believes this experience must necessarily correlate to an object that can be known; which is to say, faith can be understood by way of objective social language. However, this premise runs directly counter to Kierkegaard’s

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 88.

claim that faith can be objectified *only* by way of particular human actions, insofar as these actions *express* faith tangentially, rather than directly, because no objectification can ever fully encapsulate it. In other words, we can begin to see that, for Kierkegaard, God *is* subjective. This also helps explain the earlier claims about the nature of idolatry, insofar as a God conceived as objective is the definition of idolatry—an argument that perfectly parallels Marxist arguments about reification.

Following from this, for Hegel, the true objectification of God is found in his comprehensive image of the state as the end point of human development, and the *Sittlichkeit* ethics that exist within it, as its internal nature.

The third way is that this contradiction is resolved in the *ethical realm* [*Sittlichkeit/Sittliche*], or that the principle of freedom has penetrated into the worldly realm itself, and that the worldly, because it has been thus conformed to the concept, reason, and eternal truth, is freedom that has become concrete and will that is rational. The institutions of ethical life are divine institutions—not holy in the sense that celibacy is supposed to be holy by contrast with marriage or familial love, or that voluntary poverty is supposed to be holy by contrast with active self-enrichment, or what is lawful and proper. Similarly, blind obedience is regarded as holy, whereas the ethical is an obedience in freedom, a free and rational will, an obedience of the subject toward the ethical. Thus it is in the ethical realm that the reconciliation of religion with worldliness and actuality comes about and is accomplished.<sup>55</sup>

In statements like these, it has been argued that Kierkegaard sees an explicit attempt to deify the state.<sup>56</sup> Granted, as Jon Stewart notes, and as the preceding explication demonstrates, Hegel's actual project is more complex, less concerned with deification than it is with discovering the objective content of faith.<sup>57</sup> In this vein, we can see how Hegel imagines the ethical realm of the fully developed state as the objective manifestation of the freedom found in faith, i.e. that this realm is faith's objective corollary, thereby transforming the unphilosophical freedom of faith

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 483-84.

<sup>56</sup> Jon Stewart, *Idealism and Existentialism: Hegel and Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century European Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser, Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010). 137.

<sup>57</sup> Stewart, "Kierkegaard and Hegel on Faith and Knowledge," 5.

into “an obedience in freedom,” in a perfect match of the subjective freedom of “religion” and objective “worldliness.” However, ultimately, the complexity of Hegel’s project fails to change the essential point of Kierkegaard’s critique, which is: subject and object agreement.

If we follow Kierkegaard’s argument, it amounts to the claim that, rather than *objectifying* subjectivity, Hegel’s equivalency of subject and object seeks to make subjectivity *objective*. And in doing so, the seat of value changes. Whereas the truth of an objectification lies in the subject that created it, the truth of something “objective” exists in the object.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, by way of this move, human beings are implicitly devalued; and this devaluation, in turn, offsets responsibility from a subjects responsibility towards other subjects, to objective “ethics” and one’s conformity to them—much as in the case of Agamemnon. This presents a serious dilemma in the case of ethics, for, either we place our faith in the ability of individuals to act ethically, a position that itself requires tremendous trust, or, we place our faith in objective ethics, a move that requires significantly less trust, insofar as the existence of such ethics affords a measure of control over other people. The former we cannot see, as it depends on an individual’s free subjectivity; whereas the latter we can, in that it depends on a conceptual understanding of ethics, and ultimately, on how someone acts, i.e. on how they conform their actions to meet objective standards. After all, if we accept that individuals are free, as in Kierkegaard’s leap beyond, or teleological suspension of, such ethics, there are no ethical guarantees—much as we might want them. The issue, therefore, is really one of trust; or, religiously put, it truly is a question of faith.

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<sup>58</sup> In fact, Marx makes exactly the same claim in his *Contributions to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, where he writes that “... Hegel everywhere makes the idea the subject and turns the proper, the actual subject ... into a predicate.” Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” 11. Marx calls this process “mystification.” There will be a fuller analysis of this text in the next chapter.

Unfortunately, something of the same problem can be seen anytime public ethics trumps all other commitments, i.e. whenever we see the law as absolute. It is in this way that we can subsume even Kantian ethics into Kierkegaard's critique. Granted, Kant's injunction to treat "humanity and ... every rational nature ... as an end in itself," shares similar ethical substance as that of the position towards which Kierkegaard is working.<sup>59</sup> Yet, recalling Camus' pronouncement, "I rebel—therefore we exist," we find an assertion of shared human worth, i.e. the assertion that every individual is an end in themselves, but not its axiomatic legislation.<sup>60</sup> And herein lies the difference, in the case of Kantian ethics, because they are formulated axiomatically, they inevitably place less stress on the type of subjective disposition for which the existence of inalienable human worth is experienced as true, and instead stress external action. That is, in the Kantian formulation, the individual who truly recognizes others as "ends in themselves" becomes indistinguishable from the individual who does not, but acts as if they did. Granted, Kant himself might be free of this critique, insofar as he was attempting to give voice to something he likely experienced as true, but this criticism likely applies to some of the neo-Kantian who followed in his wake.<sup>61</sup>

And so, when Kierkegaard looked at contemporary ethics, he recognized that "the question" had become "What rule applies? [And s]ince a rule takes precedence over the desires or eccentricities of the individual, the universal is superior."<sup>62</sup> Kierkegaard's alternative "moral content," therefore:

differs from the moral content of the old ethics partly by taking those old ethical ideals with real seriousness and earnestness ... It is, however, morality in a new

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<sup>59</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, 3 ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993). 37.

<sup>60</sup> Camus, *The Rebel: An essay on man in revolt*: 22.

<sup>61</sup> In fact, for all of the revolutionary movements inspired by Hegel, and for the revolutions that inspired him, it is difficult to decipher to what extent this critique applies to him, rather than to those who followed.

<sup>62</sup> Mooney, "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," 34.

key, for its motivational propeller is not autonomous striving to realize one's own ideals, but grateful expression of a self that has been received as a gift.<sup>63</sup>

For Kierkegaard, then, the question is largely one of making such ethics real, rather than feigned; of recognizing them as the true expression of a free subjectivity, rather than the objects by which an unfree subjectivity is socialized. And, if *Fear and Trembling* has an overarching trope, it lies in articulating and rearticulating this “gap” between subject and object, and in explaining how a subjectivity that experiences the world as so divided can be transcended. In other words, it seeks to articulate how one type of “objective” ethics can be “suspended” and replaced by another authentic ethics.

If this is the highest that can be said of man and his existence, then the ethical is of the same nature as a person's eternal salvation, which is his *τέλος* forevermore and at all times, ... [and] it would be a contradiction for this to be capable of being surrendered (that is, teleologically suspended), because as soon as this is suspended it is relinquished, whereas that which is suspended is not relinquished but is preserved in the higher, which is its *τέλος*.<sup>64</sup>

In the context of contemporary society, objective ethics serve an essentially organizational role, insofar as they are supposed to be concerned with public behavior. However, once again, Kierkegaard's claim is not that such ethics are invalid, but only that they are not absolute. But even this reveals a complex distinction, as Kierkegaard is not challenging the idea that such things as murder are absolutely unethical, but only that a diligently law-abiding citizen is not necessarily an ethical human being, at least not in any ultimate sense, as such duty might only entail mimicry and not an authentically ethical subjectivity. For Kierkegaard, however, it is only in faith that an individual appropriates freedom and thereby discovers the inalienable human worth upon which true ethics is based—thereby preserving the “worldly” ethics of “the ethical”

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<sup>63</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the Telos of Morality: A Reading of Fear and Trembling," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 54.

in a higher end, i.e. in true human worth. Yet, if Hegel is right and society can incarnate our highest *telos*, not only is a teleological suspension of the ethical impossible insofar as our highest end would be embodied in the very society we claim requires a suspension, but such social ethics stand in as our ultimate end. The only question becomes one of “free obedience” to them. In turn, this means that there is nothing irreconcilable in the “human being” vis-à-vis society, that there is nothing in the individual that cannot fit within this conception of a rule-based society. Or, in Kierkegaard’s words, it means that “there is in a person no residual” in relation to the universal.<sup>65</sup> And in such a case, there is no difference between authenticity and mimesis. That is, freedom no longer matters.

Given this, the problem is actually much more pronounced than simply being a matter of the role such ethics play in individual irresponsibility. As we have seen, for Kierkegaard, the transcendent moment of faith entails an appropriation of freedom, but this appropriation necessarily requires a reversal in how we relate to the world of social meaning; whereas before we were determined by our societies, now we emerge as determining agents in our own right. What follows, then, is that if we are concerned with the project of emancipation, Hegel’s objective ethics actually makes this project more difficult. After all, insofar as emancipation requires us to overcome our subordinate role to the world of social meaning, by objectifying God, Hegel transforms the very transcendent act of faith (i.e. the act of emancipation) into yet another experience of socialization—which is to say, freedom itself becomes its opposite.

And so, the very promise of faith is lost, subverted to the world of social ethics, prompting C. Stephen Evans to note that this means that “[t]he ethical life sees itself in religious terms as providing salvation.”<sup>66</sup> That is, the ethical, as a realm of social behavior, comes to see

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>66</sup> Evans, “Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*,” 216.

itself as the highest, and the truly “religious” life, and the transcendence it has to offer, is lost. Following from this, the only task left becomes a philosophical one. As Hegel notes, the real task becomes the intellectual apprehension of a Christianity that is now quite *easily* possessed, insofar as we are born (i.e. socialized) into it, and this is precisely why Hegel believes philosophy is superior to religion.<sup>67</sup> In other words, for Hegel, as God is presupposed as present, the real question of God is less about appropriation and more about philosophical articulation. And while the religious vernacular has often thrown off some of Kierkegaard’s readers, insofar as faith entails freedom, the problem should be obvious: Hegel is asserting that we can be born, or socialized, into freedom.

For all of Kierkegaard’s reputation as an “irrationalist,” his critique of philosophy revolves solely around this point. As Kierkegaard writes, the philosophy with which he has a problem is that same one tied to the ethics of which he is critical.

For if the ethical—that is, social morality—is the highest . . . then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had or what can be deduced from them by consistent thought. Hegel should not have concealed this, for, after all, he had studied Greek philosophy.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, if life can be understood from within a universal, then the type of thinking to which it correlates will be adequate. However, for Kierkegaard, there is a latent inadequacy in this approach, one that dates back to the origins of Western thought, and one that makes it an improper medium for apprehending faith. Specifically, Kierkegaard has in mind the Socratic doctrine of *anamnesis* (i.e. recollection), as elucidated in the *Meno*.<sup>69</sup> As Socrates explains,

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<sup>67</sup> “Human beings are born into this doctrine . . . [and s]ince individuals are born into the church, they are destined straightaway, while they are still unconscious, to participate in this truth.” Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, One-volume edition: The lectures of 1827*: 476-77.

<sup>68</sup> Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 55.

<sup>69</sup> Plato, “Meno,” in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). Kierkegaard explicitly makes the connection to the *Meno* and its doctrine of anamnesis in his 1844 work, *Philosophical Fragments*. Kierkegaard, “Philosophical Fragments,” 9. In that work, Kierkegaard revisits many of the same themes as in *Fear and Trembling*, but rather than doing so from a position that itself lacks faith,

conceptual understanding occurs by way of a process of recollection; that is, when we come to understand a geometrical truth, for instance, such as the fact that dissecting a square by its diagonal severs the square precisely in half, we have *recollected* a truth that precedes us.<sup>70</sup> In other words, we did not create this truth; we only came to realize a truth that pre-exists us. For Plato, this doctrine proved essential, as it allowed for a theory of education in which truth was brought out *from* the student, not imparted in them; a point demonstrated in the *Meno* by the fact that an uneducated slave was made to recognize the truth of a square's diagonal, with nothing more than his own mind. Yet, for all the democratic leanings of this doctrine, it harbors a problematic conservative core

The doctrine of *anamnesis*, itself a doctrine of *innate* truth, transforms the discovery of truth into a rational, intellectual, process. Granted, this process might apply to that into which we are born, i.e. those features of the social world into which we are socialized, because insofar as we are socialized into them, they already exist to be discovered. And so, if Hegel is right and we are socialized into faith, which, in turn, means we are socialized into freedom, then this doctrine might prove apt. However, Kierkegaard's claim about faith is fundamentally different; not only does the faith experience of God contain a truth we did not have beforehand, but God also *gives us* a truth we did not have.<sup>71</sup> In faith, we are born *anew*.

This becomes clearer if we focus upon faith as an appropriation of freedom. Granted, ontologically speaking, for both Kierkegaard and Marx, freedom is an essential component of the self. As such, I might even arrive at an ontologically truthful understanding of my freedom by way of abstract thought, insofar as this type of freedom always does exist as an ontological fact.

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the pseudonym of that work understands faith in a much more substantive manner. This work will be further explored in Part Three.

<sup>70</sup> Plato, "Meno," 84d-85c.

<sup>71</sup> This is most explicitly discussed in *Philosophical Fragments*, one of the subjects of Part Three. See, Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments."

However, despair and alienation are not phenomenon pertaining to the elimination of this freedom, but to its misuse. That is, they both entail a use of our freedom in which we attempt to determine our subjectivity by way of objective social categories. In other words, we use our freedom to try and will it away, which further helps explain Kierkegaard's formula for despair, i.e. "to will to be rid of oneself."<sup>72</sup> And while Marx adds material pressures to this process, pressures essential for understanding our sociopolitical reality, it is clear that neither despair nor alienation could exist without our free complicity. So, both phenomena speak to how we *use* our freedom, or, in Kierkegaard's vernacular, to how we *relate* to ourselves.

And herein lies the doctrine of *anamnesis*'s conservatism: it necessarily confines truth to that which already exists. In other words, emancipation is imagined as entailing an elimination of the false self-relationships that characterize alienation and despair, but it stops there. That is, emancipation is imagined as the absence of untruth, not the presence of truth. However, Kierkegaard's point is that the truth of ourselves only comes into existence in that moment in which we *choose* ourselves, i.e. in the moment of self-appropriation. Ontologically we have not changed, but existentially, a *new* relationship with ourselves is born—and this new relationship is not simply the elimination of false relationships. For instance, thinking of Nora Helmer, Frederick Douglass, or the example offered by Camus, it seems hard to reconcile the nature of these experiences with a doctrine of innate truth. Specifically, such a doctrine presumes that the transcendent self-worth of a free subject always exists, but in a latent, unrecognized form, and that this form only later comes to consciousness. But it seems false to call a sense of self-worth that is not *felt*, self-worth at all. Such a self-worth is not self-worth—at best, it is a conscious idea imposed on a subject (even if done so by that selfsame subject), regardless of how they themselves receive it. In other words, if Nora did not feel her own self-worth, the presumption

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<sup>72</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. 20

that she still has self-worth is equivalent to telling her so; that is, it is to attempt to socialize her into self-worth, in a process that only reinforces the problem. So, if this idea finds no subjective corollary within her, that is, if it does not *mean* anything to her, in what way can it be said to be true? Now, this should not be construed to mean that we can treat human beings who do not feel their self-worth as if they are not worth anything, and it is perhaps here that an ethics that imposes and socializes value is useful, but it should be clear that when self-worth is felt (i.e. when freedom is appropriated), something comes into existence that did not exist before. Freedom, therefore, is not a matter of *being*, but of how we relate to that being.

In fact, we can see how the project of emancipation presents a basic contradiction, insofar as the project of aiding individuals to overcome their oppressive relationship with the universe of social meaning has to occur by way of the very same meanings they find oppressive. That is, helping someone find faith entails communicating with them, but from the determined subjectivities point of view, these messages are received as yet more objective meanings to which they should conform. And this is why a paradoxical expression of faith—such as found in the possibility that Abraham does not sacrifice Isaac but *receives* him—proves so useful, insofar as it provokes Kierkegaard's readers to change their very relationship with the world of meaning. However, the doctrine of anamnesis, a doctrine that presupposes truth and that thereby presupposes we only need to come to consciousness of that which exists, when applied to the human world (as Hegel does), demonstrates its detachment from this struggle. That is, it presumes that what is missing is simply the proper understanding of a freedom that already exists, transforming the project of emancipation into the intellectual task of discovering the proper conceptual object. However, in this way it fails to recognize that what is at stake is

overcoming how one relates to the universal, i.e. as a subject determined by it, not how one acts within it.

So, ultimately, the transition of emancipation speaks to the birth of something new, i.e. the birth of a new relationship with oneself. Or, in Kierkegaard's Christian vernacular, emancipation is a *rebirth*. "But the person who already *is* cannot be born, and yet he is born. Let us call this transition *rebirth*, by which he enters the world a second time just as at birth."<sup>73</sup> And where does this rebirth occur? "In the *moment*, [that is where] he becomes aware of the rebirth."<sup>74</sup> That is, in the moment in which Nora, Douglass, and Camus' rebel revolt, the moment in which they overcome their own internalizations of oppressive social roles, they also come to accept that rather than being a determined subject, they are, in fact, transcendently free. And this *acceptance* is radically new—it is an acceptance that is a *new*, positive, relationship with oneself, not simply the absence of prior negative ones. And so, in a leap beyond the confines of the world of social determination, in a leap of *faith*, they come to embrace their transcendent, free, self. In this way, Kierkegaard's pronouncement about the nature of faith is clearer, for, "[f]aith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal."<sup>75</sup> And this is precisely Kierkegaard's critique of philosophy—you cannot think yourself, nor socialize yourself, into such faith. "Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he entered into it or how it entered into him."<sup>76</sup> That is, faith is not a matter of understanding, but a leap beyond a conceptual relationship with oneself, as faith entails the birth of a new and accepting relationship with oneself.

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<sup>73</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 19.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 55.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

In this way, Abraham's importance becomes clearer. Kierkegaard pronounces that Abraham is irreconcilable with such universally conceived ethic, because:

[b]y his act he transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher τέλος outside it, in relation to which he suspended it. For I certainly would like to know how Abraham's act can be related to the universal, whether any point can be found other than that Abraham transgressed it.<sup>77</sup>

The nature of Abraham's transgression is precisely that, as a free subject, he stands beyond the world of social determination. Moreover, in that specific moment atop Mt. Moriah, his particular act is itself an act of freedom, and as such, it is incomprehensible from within a social universal. And yet, as Agamemnon's story makes clear, filicide is wholly comprehensible from within the social universe, and therefore, it is *not* what is taking place. Rather, we are presented with the paradox of emancipation—for those with faith, emancipation is self-acceptance, but for those without, for those for whom the social universe constitutes everything, emancipation appears as the sacrifice of the universe. Which is why, as we will later see, this story is not about Abraham losing Isaac, but about how he receives him again.<sup>78</sup>

Lastly, if Abraham is truly an individual, a free individual who, having overcome despair, comes to accept responsibility for his actions, then “the ethical” appears as something quite different from his point of view. For Abraham, “the ethical is the temptation.”<sup>79</sup> As Kierkegaard explains:

As a rule, what tempts a person is something that will hold him back from doing his duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would hold him back from doing God's will. But what is duty? Duty is simply the expression for God's will.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 60.

If what exists beyond the ethical is the true, not feigned, individuality of a free subject, then duty to God's will is not simply an empty phrase meant to connote a blind allegiance to something transcendent (or to the Hegelian sense of ethics). Substantively, God's will is intimately bound to the very process of becoming an individual itself, and, necessarily, to helping others do so too. It is therefore wholly different from the type of duty endemic to an axiomatic ethics, insofar as such a duty entails an abdication of responsibility, not its cultivation. As Edward Mooney notes, "[o]ne becomes a self by relating to an absolute Good," i.e., by experiencing the inalienable worth in those around you, and not by submitting to a rule.<sup>81</sup> And from this point of view, "the ethical," as the world of socialization, is precisely a temptation. In this light, we have finally hit upon the true substance of *Fear and Trembling*, and the hidden message behind the Abraham narrative: it is a story about becoming a *truly* ethical individual. And, as Abraham's faith predates the ascent of Mt. Moriah, we are not witnessing his rebirth, but Isaac's.

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<sup>81</sup> Mooney, "Getting Isaac Back: Ordeals and Reconciliations in Fear and Trembling," 76.

## Chapter 4: *Law*

Following from Kierkegaard's critique of society, a critique that focused on our subservient role to the social universe, and which required us to overcome social determination if we are to become self-determining, it is possible to see much the same critique latent within Marx. However, as is usual, Marx's interest tends towards the sociopolitical. He therefore foregoes Kierkegaard's individual-level analysis, yet assumes something quite similar, which he then situates within our own particular sociopolitical world. As such, Marx's interest is not to expose the universal ways in which such a society operates upon subjectivity, nor is it to expose the universal process through which an individual travels in order to become free. Instead, his concern lies in the specific social ideas into which we happen to be socialized at this moment in history, as this helps extend Kierkegaard's understanding of subjectivity and the commensurate critique of society, into a specific critique of *this* society.

To this end, Marx sets his sight on bourgeois notions of individual freedom, for, in exposing these as ideas into which we are socialized, he can come to demonstrate that our ideas of freedom have come to impede our appropriation of freedom. Furthermore, by integrating a Kierkegaardian critique into a larger sociopolitical project, we can come to see how the specific ideas into which we are socialized serve certain political interests. That is, the ideas into which we are socialized do not reflect an inalienable process of socialization that will forever occur, changing in content but never in form; instead, these ideas help us expose the specific powers at play who are advanced by our servitude. In other words, not only is emancipation itself political, and not solely individual, but the specific ideas we need to overcome inform us about the sociopolitical reality we will face once we are free. While emancipation might render us socially

unintelligible, as was the case for Socrates and Jesus Christ, and therefore a *general* danger to those still within the social universe, we also become a *specific* threat to those whose interests lie in maintaining this specific status quo. So, Socrates might upset the particular world-views of his specific interlocutors, but in analyzing the nature of those views, we might come to recognize who it is that benefits by the particular beliefs our society holds true. And, this analysis is not provided by Kierkegaard, but by Marx, as we will presently see.

### **Political Emancipation and the State**

Thus far, Kierkegaard's narrative offers a critique of reason that attempts to demonstrate how an overreliance on rationally based ethics lends itself to inauthentic mimicry. Following from this, he has already begun to establish that overcoming these ethics, or appropriating their content authentically, is for him, synonymous with faith. Turning to Marx, however, we find a way to situate these insights within the historically determined sociopolitical world. To see this, it is necessary to turn to Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, the work that most explicitly parallels Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, and that coincidentally dates to the exact same year of 1843. Interestingly, *On the Jewish Question* parallels *Fear and Trembling* in more ways than one: both are among the very earliest "seriously considered" works of Marx and Kierkegaard, demonstrating their respective intellectual development while also presenting themes that will pervade their work ever after. Furthermore, there is a simplicity to these works that allows their themes to emerge in starker relief than will be the case in later works—just as a forest can be lost for the trees—a point which makes them particularly useful. Lastly, both works critique existing ethics, but do so from an ethical stance presumed to be higher; however, for both, this "higher" stance is no more than hinted at, and never fully articulated. So, Kierkegaard critiques "the

ethical” from the ethics that proceeds from faith, while leaving the substantive question of faith largely unanswered, while Marx critiques “political emancipation” from what he calls “human emancipation,” while offering little more than a paragraph’s worth of its explication. In this way, however, they both demonstrate that the preoccupation of these works is not found in the articulation of either a beginning- or an end-state, but with a process of becoming.<sup>1</sup>

Marx’s ostensible reason behind writing *On the Jewish Question* was to critique two works by Bruno Bauer, *The Jewish Question* and *The Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians to Become Free*. In these works, Bauer lays out a position opposing German Jewry’s claims for equality, doing so along two lines. Firstly, he argues that the German state offers freedom to no one, so that Jewish oppression was only their particular form of a generally experienced oppression; while secondly, he argues that the specific nature of Judaism prevented Jews, as Jews, from being free.<sup>2</sup> Marx was quick to dismiss both arguments. To Bauer’s second claim, he responds that Bauer’s understanding is essentially “theological,” insofar as it relies on long-standing prejudices against the Jewish religion that see it as an outmoded precursor to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Bauer views Judaism as an inferior religion of revealed law, rather than one of revealed truth, and this implicitly puts Judaism at odds with the secular law of the state.<sup>4</sup> So, Marx essentially refuses to engage a point he thought an irrational and unfounded prejudice, choosing instead to examine Jews as an actually existing historical group, not as an essentialized fiction.<sup>5</sup> As for Bauer’s first claim, i.e. that both Germans and Jews require emancipation (a claim Bauer believed mitigated against any “preferential treatment” for Jews,

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<sup>1</sup> What this freedom looks like is the subject of Part Three.

<sup>2</sup> Yoav Peled, "From Theology to Sociology: Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the Question of Jewish Emancipation," *History of Political Thought* 13, no. 3 (1992): 466.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 467-69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 467-68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

even if such treatment “advances” Jews to the level of oppression of other Germans), Marx responds by calling into question the type of emancipation at which Bauer aims, an emancipation Marx calls *political* emancipation. Marx not only advances the argument that political emancipation does not require the elimination of any religion, let alone Judaism, thereby attacking Bauer’s theoretical application of his own desired political end; but more importantly, Marx levies a critique of political emancipation itself, a critique that calls into question Bauer’s whole project, and that helps reveal Marx’s real theoretical contribution. Through this contribution, Marx transcends the specific debate with Bauer, a debate that marked Marx’s ongoing attempt to distance himself from the Young Hegelians, while he also lays the foundation for his “mature” understanding of social and political emancipation.<sup>6</sup>

While Marx refuses direct engagement with Bauer’s “theological” prejudice, i.e. Bauer’s claim that the Jews, in particular, are incapable of emancipation within the German state, Marx does spend some time exposing Bauer’s folly in thinking so. But first, Marx details Bauer’s position. In response to Jewish demands for emancipation, Marx writes that Bauer responds by claiming that: “No one in Germany is politically emancipated. We ourselves are not free. How are we to free you?”<sup>7</sup> Marx continues narrating Bauer’s position:

Or do the Jews demand the same status as *Christian subjects of the state*? In that case, they recognize that the *Christian state* is justified and they recognize, too, the regime of general oppression. Why should they disapprove of their special yoke if they approve of the general yoke? Why should the German be interested in the liberation of the Jew, if the Jew is not interested in the liberation of the German? The *Christian* state knows only *privileges*. In this state, the Jew has the privilege of being a Jew. As a Jew, he has rights which the Christians do not have. Why should he want rights which he does not have, but which the Christians

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Löwy marks this work as the true beginning of Marx’s intellectual development, as do many others, while Shlomo Avineri recognizes that this work marks a conscious attempt to distance himself from the Young Hegelian critical tradition. Shlomo Avineri, “Marx and Jewish Emancipation,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 3 (1964): 445; Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, Historical Materialism Book Series (Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003). 51.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, “On The Jewish Question,” in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 146.

enjoy? In wanting to be emancipated from the Christian state, the Jew is demanding that the Christian state should give up its *religious* prejudice. Does he, the Jew, give up *his* religious prejudice? Has he, then, the right to demand that someone else should renounce his religion?<sup>8</sup>

Several features of Bauer's position emerge. Firstly, Bauer argues that in asking for equality with Christians, Jews are implicitly normalizing the oppression that Christians face—and this warrants Christian indifference to Jewish demands. That is, in wanting to share the oppression of Christians, rather than being satisfied with their “special” oppression, they are asserting Christian oppression as a good, rather than criticizing it as an evil. Secondly, in order to make this claim—a claim which avoids making a judgment as to which type of oppression is worse—Bauer is clearly essentializing both Christians and Jews. In arguing that Jews have the rights of *Jews*, while Christians have those appropriate to *Christians*, Bauer is arguing that political life is determined by religious affiliation. In turn, this means that Bauer defines members of a religious group solely according to their religion. Therefore, for Jews to have the rights afforded to Christians they would have to become Christians—short of that, they get what they deserve. Following this, the logical answer to the Jewish question occurs only “[b]y *abolishing religion*.”<sup>9</sup> And so, for Bauer, Jewish equality depends on the universal elimination of all religion.

The very first sentence of *On the Jewish Question* begins: “The German Jews desire emancipation. What kind of emancipation do they desire? *Civic, political* emancipation.”<sup>10</sup> Now, after recounting Bauer's position, Marx returns to the phraseology of “political emancipation,” indicating that his response to Bauer lay in the very terms he used from the start.

It was by no means sufficient to investigate: Who is to emancipate? Who is to be emancipated? Criticism had to investigate a third point. It had to inquire: *What kind of emancipation* is in question? What conditions follow from the very nature of the emancipation that is demanded? Only the criticism of *political*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 146.

*emancipation* itself would have been the conclusive criticism of the Jewish question and its real merging in the “*general question of time.*”<sup>11</sup>

For Marx, the type of emancipation of which Bauer speaks, is a particular, and limited, form of emancipation, a form that Marx calls *political* emancipation. While Bauer believes he is speaking to the general question of emancipation *writ large*, doing so from the point of view of the parties involved (i.e. from essentialized religious groups), Marx reframes Bauer’s project in a way that demonstrates Bauer’s limitations. In fact, Bauer’s intellectual project proceeds from a misunderstanding of the very end he seeks, i.e. political emancipation, for if he only understood this end clearly, he would not only understand the true significance of Jewish emancipation, he would also understand how problematic his own position is. Specifically:

If Bauer asks the Jews: Have you from your standpoint the right to want *political emancipation*? we ask the converse question: Does the standpoint of *political* emancipation give the right to demand from the Jew the abolition of Judaism and from man the abolition of religion?<sup>12</sup>

In other words, if Bauer only understood the very political emancipation he seeks, he would understand that it offers him no leverage by which to deny Jews equality. Shortly, we will explore how Marx articulates political emancipation, demonstrating its inherent limitations, and critiquing those like Bauer who hold it as an ultimate political end; but before turning to a full explication, it is useful to note a corollary of Marx’s assertion thus far. If Bauer’s political position does not offer him the right to begrudge Jews their emancipation, the question remains: why does he do so?

While Bauer argues that *both* Christians and Jews need to overcome their religions, his seeming *equation* of Judaism and Christianity is actually a problematic *equivocation*. In a Christian state in which Jews live, or even in a secular democratic state in which one religion is a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 149-50.

majority, Bauer argues that the majority group will always mistreat the minority group. As his understanding of such groups, particularly religious ones, is an essentialized understanding in which political life follows necessarily and directly from social identity, this should be easy to see. After all, the majority will always legislate in their own particular interests. This, in turn, leads to Bauer's call for the elimination of all religion, and the founding of a secular state with secular citizens. Furthermore, this also means that Bauer only considers the general form of oppression to be oppression, i.e. oppression under "religion," whereas the oppression by one religious group of another, is only the *manifestation* or *effect* of the general oppression. However, if we refuse to subscribe to Bauer's essentialisms, as Marx does, what we are witnessing is Bauer's *use* of a general concept of emancipation in order to legitimize a particular form of oppression.

Earlier, we watched as Kierkegaard made the claim that the use to which stories are put help reveal their truth, and here, Marx makes a similar claim *vis-à-vis concepts*—a point which also parallels their thoughts on the legitimacy of *ad hominem* argument, insofar as understanding the will of an individual is essential for interpreting the meaning of their words.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Marx specifically references the belief Bauer uses in order to justify his position, referring to it when he writes that Bauer believes that "their respective religions [Judaism and Christianity] are no more than *different stages in the development of the human mind*," with Judaism the obviously lower stage—a problem only remedied "[b]y *abolishing religion*."<sup>14</sup> Astutely, Yoav Peled dates this particular prejudice to Moses Mendelssohn's 1783 work *Jerusalem*, the very work that originates the previously mentioned belief that Judaism was an inferior religion of revealed law

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the value, and, in fact, the necessity of *ad hominem* argument, see, Chapter 2, footnote 24.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, "On The Jewish Question," 147-48.

rather than one of revealed faith—and therefore, for Bauer, the first of two skins to be shed.<sup>15</sup> So, Marx is clearly aware of Bauer’s reliance on essentialized understandings of religious groups, as he is aware of the specific content Bauer ascribes to them. However, with all this being said, Marx’s argument really amounts to an assertion of Bauer’s anti-Semitism, even if it is not a vitriolic anti-Semitism, but a more “acceptable” philosophical one. Refusing Bauer the intellectual legitimation provided by his ideas—even if Bauer himself might truly believe them—and instead foregrounding the end to which his ideas are used, Marx exposes Bauer’s “political” position; Bauer clearly thinks “the Jews” are getting what they deserve.

Returning to the larger question of political emancipation, Bauer did nonetheless advance some examples that seem to demonstrate the irreconcilability of religion with the state, examples that might lend credence to the claim that religion always leads to political intolerance. However, it is through a refutation of these examples, a refutation that is also a refutation of essentialism itself, that Marx begins advancing his own understanding of political emancipation. For instance, Bauer points to recent French legislation in which Sunday was designated the official state holiday.<sup>16</sup> In this, he sees an example of how religious prejudice not only imposes inequality on a religious state, but how religion will also co-opt a secular state in order to legislate in its own interest, thereby transforming an ostensibly secular state into a *de facto* religious one. However, contrasting the more perfect secular state of the United States with the less perfect one of France,

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<sup>15</sup> Peled, "From Theology to Sociology: Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the Question of Jewish Emancipation," 467-68. Peled points to passages from *Jerusalem*, such as the following: "I believe that Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine *legislation*—laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity." Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1983). 89-90. As Peled notes, Mendelssohn’s argument was meant to demonstrate how Judaism was entirely compatible with a modern secular state, yet, Bauer makes use of Mendelssohn to make the opposite argument. As Kierkegaard has begun to demonstrate, a demonstration Marx will continue, the fact that ideas are so easily used in such antithetical ways is a pronouncedly modern irony.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, "On The Jewish Question," 148-49.

Marx argues that the religious legislation upon which Bauer harps is the detritus of the same type of anachronistic essentializing prejudice Bauer himself demonstrates. Marx writes:

In France ... the *semblance* of a state religion is retained here, although in a meaningless and self-contradictory formula, that of a *religion of the majority*, [and so] the relation of the Jew to the state retains the *semblance* of a religious, theological opposition. ... [Yet] in the North American states ... the Jewish question lose[s] its *theological* significance and become[s] a really *secular* question ... [because] the political state exists in its completely developed form ... Nevertheless, North America is pre-eminently the country of religiosity ... [which] is proof that the existence of religion is not in contradiction to the perfection of the state.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly modern history affords numerous examples of secular states co-opted by religious agendas, but for Marx, such situations occur only because the process of political emancipation which leads to a secular state is incomplete—not because individuals are solely defined by their religion, and will co-opt even a secular state, as argued in Bauer’s essentialist framework. As Marx points out, in North America, itself the “pre-eminent” country of “religiosity,” which also happens to be the country with the most “completely developed” “political state,” religion “displays a fresh and vigorous vitality, that is proof that the existence of religion is not in contradiction to the perfection of the state.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, political equality and religion can not only coexist, religion seems to thrive in the soil of political equality. This is so because political emancipation entails the overcoming of religion *by the state*, not by its constituent members.

The *political* emancipation of the Jew, the Christian, and in general, the *religious* man is the *emancipation of the state* from Judaism, from Christianity, from *religion* in general. In its own form, in the manner characteristic of its nature, the state as a *state* emancipates itself from religion by emancipating itself from the state religion, that is to say, by the state as a state not professing any religion, but, on the contrary, asserting itself as a state.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 151-52.

The transformation to a purely secular state, a transformation by which political equality is afforded all its citizens regardless of religious affiliation, occurs not by way of the elimination of religion, but by way of the elimination of religion's effect on politics. Insofar as a supposedly secular state is co-opted by religious forces, such a secularization has occurred in form, but not in fact. It is only when religion's influence is truly eliminated from the political realm that political emancipation is complete, and the true political state is formed. However, as the North American example demonstrates, this hardly entails the wholesale elimination of religion; rather, if religion can remain, while its influence on politics is eliminated, political emancipation does not entail religion's elimination—it entails its privatization—and this might, in turn, lead to an expansion of religion. That is, the realm of religion is circumscribed out of public, political life, and into the private, social realm, where it can thrive. This privatization also mitigates against the usurpation of the secular state, as the state is sustained by a change in individual attitudes towards religion. Specifically, while individuals remain religious, they take a *secular* attitude towards religion—an attitude codified in the belief in *religious freedom*, i.e. in the state behaving “towards religion as a state – i.e., *politically*.”<sup>20</sup>

Essentially, religious freedom is a belief in the political equality of all religions. That is, it is the belief that no religion should politically legislate in its own best interest, but rather, that legislation should proceed in the general interest. Therefore, this belief is often framed positively, as the freedom or right to practice any religion; however, for Marx, such a right also needs to be understood negatively, as the privatization of religious choice, i.e. as the belief that religion is limited. And so, what Marx is beginning to demonstrate is that within a secular state, two conflicting attitudes exist: the old religious attitude, and the new secular one. When the old attitude usurps the new, you have a situation such as the French; but when the new one trumps

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 150.

the old, you have modern, secular (i.e. private) religiosity, such as that found in North America. This is what the secular state is proof of, after all, in that its own secularity reflects a real attitude that necessarily resides in its constituent members. So, as the secularity of the political state must have come from somewhere, this, in turn, means that modern religiosity is both religious *and* secular. Marx clearly explains this when he writes that:

... the attitude of the state, and of the *republic* in particular, to religion is after all only the attitude to religion of the *men* who compose the state. ... It follows ... that man, even if he proclaims himself an atheist through the medium of the state, that is, if he proclaims the state to be atheist, still remains in the grip of religion, precisely because he acknowledges himself only by a roundabout route, only through an intermediary.<sup>21</sup>

However, in defining Christians and Jews wholly as essentialized members of a religion, i.e. as thoroughly religious, rather than recognizing the nature of secularization implied by political emancipation, Bauer cannot explain the secular state—except as a *de facto* religious one.

The origin of Marx’s insight lies in his understanding of history, for the contradiction of modern secularity has a historical origin, even as it has come to pervade all aspects of modern life—not only religion.

The character of the old civil society was *directly political*, that is to say, the elements of civil life, for example, property, or the family, or the mode of labour, were raised to the level of elements of political life in the form of seigniorship, estates, and corporations.<sup>22</sup>

In a roundabout way, Marx is actually saying that Bauer’s essentialism might have been apt, if only he had been speaking of feudal society. That is, under feudalism, political life followed directly from civil life—just as Bauer believes political action follows from essentialized religious identities—because feudal political organization directly mimicked social organization. And so, political power was not exercised “nakedly,” as it now is (potentially, anyone can

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 165.

exercise power, in any way they see fit), but only insofar as it naturally followed from the social group wielding it, in a manner consistent with how that group was defined, just as Bauer believes Christians had the “rights” afforded Christians, and Jews, those of Jews. However:

The political revolution [against feudalism] thereby *abolished the political character of civil society*. It broke up civil society into its simple component parts; on the one hand, the *individuals*; on the other hand, the *material and spiritual elements* constituting the content of the life and social position of these individuals.<sup>23</sup>

For Marx, the end of feudalism and the beginning of modernity was marked precisely by this liberation of the individual from the social categories that had heretofore defined them. These categories were not eliminated, however, they were only divested of *direct* political power; which is to say, rather than being subject *to* them, subjects now *used* them.<sup>24</sup> And, it is precisely this divestment, itself a sort of wholesale privatization of social life that leads to a uniquely modern duplicity, that Marx calls political emancipation.

### **The Limits of Political Emancipation**

Problematically, however, as might be surmised, “[t]he limits of political emancipation are evident at once from the fact that the *state* can free itself from a restriction without man being *really* free from this restriction, that the state can be a *free state* without man being a *free man*.”<sup>25</sup>

In other words, political emancipation is only a partial process of emancipation. Granted, in breaking the chains that attend the politicization of social life, political life becomes a realm in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>24</sup> In terms of Bruno Bauer, it is interesting to note that Marx’s charge of anti-Semitism is of a uniquely modern form of anti-Semitism. Feudal life pervaded individuals with ubiquitous social mores reinforced by a staid social life, what Marx calls the “idiocy of rural life.” Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 06, Marx and Engels: 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 488. However, this is not the case for modern individuals, who not only have the freedom to believe what they want, but also, whose intellectual freedom is reinforced by the fracturing of society into its constituent parts. So, at some level we moderns recognize that our beliefs are choices—even if we do not want to do so. As for Bauer, Marx seems to be saying that, not only should he have known better, he did know better.

<sup>25</sup> Marx, “On The Jewish Question,” 152.

which individuals can freely act without reference to their social position. That is, politics becomes a space in which the general interest is meant to be served, enshrined as an ideal, as it goes. So, the first accomplishment of political emancipation is the creation of a higher, “political” realm, in which social distinctions carry no weight.

The *political* elevation of man above religion shares all the defects and all the advantages of political elevation in general. The state as a state annuls, for instance, *private property*, man declares by *political* means that private property is *abolished* as soon as the *property qualification* for the right to elect or be elected is abolished...<sup>26</sup>

Yet, for all this political elevation, the creation of a political state in which all are equal does not eliminate *private* inequalities. In fact, it expands them, by privatizing inequalities that previously had a public, political dimension. In the case of religion, for instance, religious institutions become free to recreate themselves in ever new and vital incarnations, as they themselves are liberated from the constrictions of feudal social organization. And, as Marx notes, this freedom allows them the opportunity to flourish, as the pandemic religiosity of the North American states attests.

In fact, the creation of a state based on political equality not only cultivates inequality, it presupposes it, insofar as the need for a specific realm of equality speaks to its lack elsewhere. That is, the modern, “secular” attitude is proof of our religiosity, as our belief in political equality testifies to our social inequality. And so, this very distinction between political equality and social inequality is what gives our political life its particular distinctiveness.

... the political annulment of private property not only fails to abolish private property but even presupposes it. The state abolishes, in its own way, distinctions of *birth, social rank, education, occupation*, when it declares that birth, social rank, education, occupation, are *non-political* distinctions, when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of the nation is an equal participant in national sovereignty, when it treats all elements of the real life of the nation from the standpoint of the state. Nevertheless, the state allows private

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 153.

property, education, occupation, to *act in their* way, i.e., as private property, as education, as occupation, and to exert the influence of their *special* nature. Far from abolishing these *real* distinctions, the state only exists on the presupposition of their existence; it feels itself to be a *political state* and asserts its *universality* only in opposition to these elements of its being.<sup>27</sup>

And so, secularization amounts to the claim that in our public, political lives, we are all equal, insofar as political emancipation has won the “masses” their equality there; however, in every other facet of our lives, inequality remains in a privatized form, as the very fact that we speak of “political” equality reciprocally testifies to the ubiquity of the inequality pervading every other facet of our lives. Furthermore, this contradiction coheres to Marx’s distinction between civil society and the state: the former is governed by egoism, and the inequality it creates, while the latter is governed by concern for others—ideally, at least.

Where the political state has attained to its true development man—not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality*, in *life*—leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community*, in which he considers himself a *communal being*, and life in *civil society*, in which he acts as a *private individual*, regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.<sup>28</sup>

And so, our duplicity extends not only to intellectual life by way of our conflicting attitudes, but to the lives we actually live. Most of the time we live the egoistic lives of civil society, but sometimes, when *duty* calls, we might find it in ourselves to rise above egoism and our instrumental use of others, and act in the interest of all.

However, a problem emerges almost immediately; while such things as religious freedom and property rights are typically understood as rights that protect all individuals equally, from Marx’s point of view, if you understand that such worlds as those of religion and economics are grossly unequal, with institutional religions and the owners of capital exerting near total control, these rights actually serve to protect these powerful groups as they exploit *religiously* and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 153-54.

*economically*. That is, “the state allows private property, education, occupation, to *act in their way* – *i.e.*, as private property, as education, as occupation, and to exert the influence of their *special nature*.”<sup>29</sup> And while religion provided a convenient topic upon which to enter the fray, insofar as it weighs heavily in the concerns of the Young Hegelians, Marx slowly refocuses the question to that of the economy. As Michael Löwy notes, one of the important features of *On the Jewish Question* is that it marks an important advance in Marx’s recognition that the inequality of private property was that which most oppresses modern individuals.<sup>30</sup> Recalling the inequality endemic to private property, *i.e.* that workers, as sellers of labor, are subject to the terms set by employers as a condition of receiving the money they need in order to live, the result of political emancipation is that these inequalities become normalized. Insofar as we each embody a “secular” attitude towards these privatized inequalities, an attitude that itself embodies a real (if limited) sense of equality, we imagine these social spheres *from* a political position in which we exist as equal individuals, and so, we relate to inequality *from* a position of equality. In other words, instead of seeing the private exercise of unequal power, we instead see equal individuals, because, in having come to see ourselves as equals, it becomes difficult to see all of the ways in which we are not.

In this way, Marx’s argument serves as foundational for many critiques of contemporary liberalism. Speaking of Marx’s *On the Jewish Question*, Wendy Brown astutely notes that modern rights discourses have a tendency to essentialize the “abstract individual,” which, in turn, blinds them to power dynamics.<sup>31</sup> She writes:

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>30</sup> Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*: 51.

<sup>31</sup> Wendy Brown, "Rights and Identity in Late Modernity: Revisiting the "Jewish Question"," in *Identities, Politics, and Rights*, ed. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns, *The Amherst Series in Law, Jurisprudence, and Social Thought* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 97.

In Marx's account, the ruse of power peculiar to liberal constitutionalism centers upon granting freedom, equality, and representation to *abstract* rather than concrete subjects. The substitution of abstract political subjects for actual ones not only forfeits the project of emancipation, but also *resubjugates* us precisely by emancipating substitutes for us—by emancipating our abstracted representatives in the state and naming this process “freedom.” The subject is thus *ideally emancipated* through anointment as an abstract person, a formally free and equal human being, and is *practically resubordinated* through this idealist disavowal of the material constituents of personhood, through disavowal of that which constrains our freedom. Thus, it is because we are in this way subjugated by the very discourse of our freedom that liberal freedom is structurally, not merely definitionally, ambiguous.<sup>32</sup>

Brown's point is that in *ideally* emancipating an abstract individual, and granting this idealization freedom and equality, we forfeit the project of emancipation through our belief in its success. So, we come to relate to our idealization, i.e. our political selves, rather than to ourselves as materially defined (i.e. actually existing) individuals, a process that effectively “resubjugates us ... by emancipating substitutes for us,” just as we remain constrained by the inequalities of civil life. In other words, we come to believe we are equal, as ideally that is how we appear, but this appearance comes to mask the actual inequalities that shape our lives. As such, servitude hides behind a veil of freedom. Or, in Marx's words:

... man frees himself through the *medium of the state* ... he frees himself *politically* from a limitation when, in contradiction with himself, he raises himself above the limitation in an *abstract, limited, and partial* way. It follows further that, by freeing himself *politically*, man frees himself in a *roundabout way*, through an *intermediary*, although an *essential intermediary*. ... The state is the intermediary between man and man's freedom.<sup>33</sup>

And so, our idealized selves find their home in the political life of the state, a home in which we can think of ourselves as equal, and the state then serves as the mechanism by which we mediate our entire self-understanding. As “the attitude of the state ... is after all only the attitude ... of the *men* who compose the state ... [man] acknowledges himself only by a roundabout route, only

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, "On The Jewish Question," 152.

through an intermediary;”<sup>34</sup> and so, we come to relate to ourselves by way of an idea that we have of equality, rather than an understanding of equality based on the type of felt experience of equality that itself might unite individuals in more than an abstract way. That is, our equality is an abstract projection, and not real. And so, rather than embodying a true sense of human worth, in the sense that Camus meant, one which would simultaneously reveal the equal worth of others, we are instead socialized into a belief in equality that serves to prevent such a sense of worth, by making us think we already have it. That is, instead of finding worth within, we impose it on ourselves from without. Granted, Marx does recognize that a type of freedom is achieved, in that we are freer politically than we were under feudalism, and so, political emancipation is not solely an obfuscation; but for all its advances, it is *also* an obfuscation. And this insight prompted David McLellan to note that, while Bauer condemned religious alienation, the very political emancipation he praised was itself a type of alienation akin to religious alienation.<sup>35</sup>

It should now be easy to see how Kierkegaard’s critique of the ethical fits into Marx’s critique of political emancipation. After all, for all the apparent confusion as to the specific target of Kierkegaard’s critique, it is entirely clear that he has in mind a type of Universalist ethics predicated on a belief in the equality of individuals. Granted, Kierkegaard has no mind for the type of systemic inequalities overshadowed by such ethics, inequalities that greatly concerned Marx, but he well understood the alienation and hypocrisy that emerged as a result of a socialized belief in equality, and the ethics to which it led. That is, in approaching the world as neo-Kantians, Young Hegelians, or liberal Constitutionalists, our theoretical presupposition of the equal freedom of all individuals serves to blind us to the reality of the individuals we actually

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> David McLellan, *Marx Before Marxism* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1970). 134.

meet, and the actions they actually commit. Presenting ourselves as faithful to an inalienable human worth (i.e. socialized into faith), we use this veneer to hide our actual crimes, as we regularly impinge on this worth, doing so in its very name. For Kierkegaard, these crimes are personal, and if they are social and political, they are not systematically so; while for Marx, they are systematic, making Kierkegaard's "ethical" inherently political. However, this difference amounts to the same—our belief in equality, and the freedom it is meant to express, has become an excuse for domination, be it interpersonally or systematically understood.

Finally, as we have seen, this is exactly why Kierkegaard calls "the ethical" a temptation.<sup>36</sup> In satisfying our need for justice all-too-easily, we avoid having to face the true nature of our actions. Or framed socially, instead of confronting the myriad of social inequalities and private exercises of power that pervade our world, inequalities in which we complicity participate, that is, instead of seeing all of the constitutive elements of our real *lived* lives, we instead assert our belief in our innate equality, and thereby refuse to acknowledge our own complicity—nor, the ethical imperative to act. Like Bauer's failure to overcome his own essentializing, a failure that blinds him to the power imbalance between Jews and Christians, our own essentializing of the *individual* and their *rights*, serves to blind us to the private inequalities under which we suffer. It is a blindness we willingly accept, for the cost of critiquing liberal equality, even in the name of authentic equality, is, like Abraham's example (or Camus's *rebel*, Ibsen's Nora, and even Frederick Douglass), exclusion from the social whole. So, in the name of defending true human dignity, we appear, like Abraham, to be attacking it. Not to mention, recalling *Part One*, the acceptance of responsibility entailed in overcoming our blindness puts us face to face with our own past crimes, that is, it puts us face to face with our accumulated guilt,

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<sup>36</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 115.

as this guilt has been acquired over a lifetime of irresponsibility. And if these crimes are systematic, such as the regular dehumanization's we necessarily inflict on others as the cost of participating in capitalism, our guilt weighs heavily.

### **The Promise of Political Emancipation and “The Ethical”**

Yet, despite their shared ire, both saw promise in “the ethical” and “political emancipation,” and they did for much the same reason. Specifically, they both recognized that such Universalist ethics helped individuals overcome egoism. For instance, the politicization of civil society under feudalism was a complex phenomenon, particularly insofar as it concerned individual subjectivity. If political activity followed directly from social position, i.e. if the political action of individuals followed directly from their social class, the individuals involved were necessarily defining themselves solely by their social position. That is, individual action reflected social position because individuals wholly identified with their position. However, this also meant that politics was thoroughly egoistic, in that political activity was always self-serving, even if individuals happened to understand themselves under the restrictive terms of their social position. So, even so-called other-oriented action—such as examples in which feudal aristocrats acted out of a duty they believed they owed their subjects—emerged not out of a felt duty, i.e. it was not caused by a sense of empathy for their subjects (even if such empathy might also have existed), but rather, it was caused by a sense of fealty to their class identity and the duties it imposed. And this is what the revolution of political emancipation changed. Granted, all of the egoistic forces of civil society remained, and were in fact protected by the state, but the creation of political equality meant that when it came to political life, we were encouraged to act unselfishly in the *general interest*. While hardly a perfect arrangement, the creation of the

*general interest* allowed every individual access to a mechanism or medium by which to think of *all*—even if this sense of communality often led to a reified concept of the individual, and even if we remained as egoistic as ever in our everyday social lives. After all, “[f]eudal society was resolved into its basic element—*man*, but man as he really formed its basis—*egoistic man*.”<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, it was an important step forward, as modern individuals, by way of their unique duplicity—a duplicity in which true communality could begin to grow—became more complex than their feudal counterparts.<sup>38</sup>

As for Kierkegaard, he does not speak Marx’s historical sociopolitical language, but much the same claim is evident with a brief glimpse at his theory of “stages.” Kierkegaard imagined life as falling within one of three basic categories: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The aesthetic was the life of the romantic aesthete, a life lived through emotion, a life best detailed in *Either/Or, Vol. I*; on the other hand, the ethical was the life of the dutiful citizen, a life that sought to follow the dictates of reason, and that was itself detailed in *Either/Or, Vol. II*.<sup>39</sup> While this chapter focuses on the transition from the ethical to the religious, as an analysis of the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical has only a minimal bearing on the question of true emancipation, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard’s primary critique of the aesthetic (by way of the ethical), was for its selfishness. Far from denigrating this life, as Kierkegaard certainly had

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, "On The Jewish Question," 166.

<sup>38</sup> It is a shame that Karl Löwith’s masterpiece, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, is not more widely read. Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The revolution in nineteenth-century thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964). In placing Nietzsche in conversation with Hegel, a conversation achieved by way of the intermediaries of Marx and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche’s situatedness within Western Thought becomes much clearer. For instance, both Kierkegaard and Marx are clearly foreshadowing Nietzsche’s claim in the *Genealogy of Morals* that it was through Christianity that “man first became *an interesting animal*.” Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1992), 469. That is, in offering individuals a mechanism by which to think of themselves and others, individuals began overcoming their own egoism, and thereby acquired subjective depth. Marx and Kierkegaard are making much the same claim, and one that is every bit as radical.

<sup>39</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 1*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 1, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987); Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part 2*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 2, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987).

bohemian tendencies himself (as did Marx), Kierkegaard nonetheless recognizes that there is an implicit narcissism to a life of “feeling,” insofar as feelings are always “my” feelings. That is, such a life is lived for how it makes *me* feel, in turn leading me to treat others as *means* towards my own gratification. For this reason, the aesthetic life is what Kierkegaard calls a life of “immediacy,” i.e., my will follows directly or “immediately” from my emotions, which are themselves a direct response to my environment—in much the way that Marx described feudalism’s role in directly (or immediately) determining political action—without being modified by critical self-reflection.<sup>40</sup> However, this is not a denigration of emotion *qua* emotion, as Kierkegaard’s lower stages are subsumed in the higher ones, i.e. “that which is suspended is not relinquished but is preserved in the higher, which is its τέλος.”<sup>41</sup> Instead, it was a critique of the narcissist for whom the emotions constituted the teleological end of life, and who therefore left no room for reason or for God, both of which aid in allowing a recognition of the subjectivity of others. In fact, empathy plays a central role in faith, but if the feeling I derive from empathy becomes my end, instead of those individuals with whom I empathize, even this altruistic emotion can become egoistic. And, rather than locating this stage historically, as did Marx, Kierkegaard sees both this and the ethical as coexisting within contemporary society (albeit similarly to how a secular and a religious attitude constitute modernity), as if they were inevitable stages of “growing up”—perhaps, even, stages he himself outgrew.<sup>42</sup> And ultimately,

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<sup>40</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 1, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). 433-34.

<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 54.

<sup>42</sup> Marx also recognized that such bohemian “types” existed in contemporary society, but they did so as anachronisms. In fact, this anachronism lies at the heart of Marx’s famous phrase in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that history repeats itself, “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 11, Marx and Engels: 1851-53* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 103. Louis Bonaparte’s political constituency was precisely composed of the remnants of the *Ancien Régime*’s peasantry, a class that having avoided the transformations of capitalist labor, also

in transitioning to the ethical, in exercising our reason to explore the world around us, each of us begins to *think* of the other, and not simply as a means of personal satisfaction, but as *an other*.

However, the problem for both Marx and Kierkegaard is that short of a complete transformation, i.e. short of truly overcoming our egoism, our partial transformation is a peculiar and problematic stage. Specifically, we come to relate to ethical life *egoistically*, that is, we selfishly co-opt ethics and the general interest for our own narrow concerns. However, Marx and Kierkegaard understand this in subtly different ways. For Marx, when it comes to giving substantive content to our communal, ethical life, that is, when it comes to understanding what an “individual” actually is, the way we imagine ourselves is as ego. That is, even when acting for others within the world of politics, the way we imagine those others is as they appear in civil society. And so, “the member of civil society [is] called “man,” simply man; ... [and this is why] his rights [are] called the *rights of man*,” rather than the “*droits du citoyen*,” i.e. the rights of the citizen.<sup>43</sup> What this means, therefore, is that we have instrumentalized our other-oriented action in the interest of our selfishness. Specifically:

... we see that the political emancipators go so far as to reduce citizenship, and the *political community*, to a mere *means* for maintaining these so-called rights of man, that therefore the *citoyen* is declared to be the servant of egoistic *homme*, that the sphere in which man acts as a communal being is degraded to a level below the sphere in which he acts as a partial being, and that, finally, it is not man as *citoyen*, but man as *bourgeois* who is considered to be the *essential* and *true* man.<sup>44</sup>

While political emancipation has achieved a communal political realm in its universal inclusion, and has thereby shattered feudal class structure, the self-image of those involved was that of bourgeois egoists. It is therefore easy to imagine that Marx had the French Revolution in mind,

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avoided the self-reflective space that political emancipation created. Marx sees the urban equivalent of this rural peasantry in the bohemian class, a class much like Kierkegaard's aesthetes. Ibid., 148-49.

<sup>43</sup> Marx, "On The Jewish Question," 162.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 164.

in that its emancipatory promise of universal inclusion only managed to go as far as universalizing bourgeois life. Framed more broadly, democracy, as a potential realm of true community predicated on equality, comes to serve capitalism, which is the economic system predicated on instrumental ego.

As for Kierkegaard, he spends little time dwelling on the substantive content of what constitutes the “individual” at the heart of the ethics he critiques, because such an individual, as a mimetic copy, is actually constituted by their adherence to universal, rational, ethical maxims. In a way, they are the constructed consequence of their enaction of ethical maxims, that is, they become what they do. However, as the ethical is only a mimetic copy of true ethics, a copy in which human worth is rendered into rational maxims, such an individual transcends egoism in appearance only. And so, objectively such an individual seems ethical, even if subjectively they have a ways to go. That is, beneath the ethical shell they have created, lurks their egoism. And yet, the implication does seem to be that the individual, as conceived by the ethical, is at least partially above egoism. After all, their ethics might hide an underlying egoism, and might even be a product of egoism insofar as they desire to *appear* ethical, but in obeying such rules they are learning the type of self-control that is a prerequisite for ethics.

And so, while Marx seems to imply that for those individuals who are involved in true, communal, political life, egoism might only reside in their conception of what constitutes an individual, Kierkegaard’s concern is different in that he sees egoism in many such seemingly altruistic individuals too. Yet, these differences only speak to features each chooses to accent, features in the same mutually reinforcing process. After all, for each of Marx’s political actors involved in true, communal, political life, a private life also exists, a life they wish to protect by that very political action. Whereas, for Kierkegaard, his focus on individual subjectivity does not

prevent Marx's political analysis, it simply lacks it. Instead, Kierkegaard highlights the egoistic attachment such individuals display in their very choice of such ethics. All told, we *use* "ethics," in much the same way that we *use* "democracy." In the former case, we do so for the sake of self-satisfaction, social inclusion, and to avoid the arduousness of true ethics; whereas in the latter case, we do so because our egoism seems truer than our communality, and therefore we make our communality serve our egoism. And so, our egoism leads us to ethics, which itself serves our egoism. And regardless of where each lays the stress in their analysis, it amounts to the same thing. For both Marx and Kierkegaard, our better nature has come to serve our worse.

### **Sacrifice**

And so, Kierkegaard and Marx criticize contemporary ethical and political life, not for its content, but for its egoism—an egoism that traffics in appearances to the contrary. We can thereby see why each focus on the *use* of concepts and stories as being essential for understanding their meaning, insofar as authentically appropriated ethics and their mimetic copies appear the same, but originate differently in subjectivity. Following from this, in the transition from mimetic copies to authentic appropriation, institutional democracy and axiomatic ethics would necessarily reveal themselves as defunct, in that we would no longer rely on them for their guarantees of a *truly* democratic and ethical life. In fact, dispensing with these appearances would seem to be a necessary step on the path to true equality, as an authentic appropriation of the human dignity they are meant to express is itself the guarantee of equality. For this reason, we see Marx pronouncing that "[c]ommunism [entails] ... the abolition of the state," whereas we have already seen Kierkegaard's corollary in the "teleological suspension of

the ethical.”<sup>45</sup> What follows, then, is that sacrifice is an essential element of emancipation insofar as the way we understand ourselves, and our very ego itself, is the mechanism by which our complicity in oppression is achieved. That is, we need to sacrifice our identities in order to overcome them. Which is to say, we need to learn to let go.

Immediately, however, a problem emerges: specifically, the idea of sacrifice easily lends itself to different iterations of conservative politics. The best example of this, so far, is that of Bauer himself. After all, his insistence on the elimination of Judaism (and Christianity)—that is, the elimination of the identities we derive from them—was not much more than a counter-revolutionary legitimization of Jewish subjugation. So, in his case, what we have is not an emancipatory idea, but a form of sadistic asceticism that is ideologically legitimized. And, for many, Kierkegaard’s use of the Abraham narrative was precisely a glorification of this type of sacrifice. Unfortunately, interpretations like these have hindered a greater incorporation of Kierkegaard into contemporary social, political, and critical thought. In fact, a similar problem lies at the heart of Theodor Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard, a critique he advanced in his *Habilitationsschrift* on Kierkegaard, later published as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*.<sup>46</sup>

The influence of Kierkegaard on Adorno was pronounced. In a 1923 letter written by Siegfried Kracauer to Leo Löwenthal, ten years before the publication of Adorno’s *Habilitationsschrift*, Kracauer reveals Adorno’s deep immersion in Kierkegaard:

If Teddie ever decided to make a declaration of love so as to escape from the sinful state of bachelorhood ..., he will be sure to phrase it so obscurely that the

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<sup>45</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 296; Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 54.

<sup>46</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

young lady concerned ... will be unable to understand what he is saying unless she has read the complete works of Kierkegaard.<sup>47</sup>

A playful joke at both Adorno and Kierkegaard's expense, quite apt given the complexity of their writing, it makes it difficult to imagine why Adorno's major work on Kierkegaard was itself a scathing critique. However, a large part of his critique was precisely that Kierkegaard's understanding of self-development relied upon sacrifice, an understanding that was essentially ascetic and thereby implicated in domination.<sup>48</sup> This also helps explain Adorno's increasing reliance on Marx, a reliance that coincided with Adorno's turn away from Kierkegaard, as he came to see in Kierkegaard an individualistic retreat into the "bourgeois interior."<sup>49</sup> And yet, in *On the Jewish Question*, among elsewhere, we can see that Marx could be likewise accused of relying on an idea of sacrifice, insofar as we have seen that "[c]ommunism [entailed] ... the abolition of the state," and "the attitude of the state ... is after all only the attitude ... of the *men* who compose the state."<sup>50</sup> Not to mention that Marx has had his fair share of ascetic interpreters, those who praise discipline or who welcome economic crisis, and yet, Adorno extends Marx an interpretive charity he begrudges Kierkegaard. What, then, explains the endurance of this pernicious misperception? The answer lies in Kierkegaard's first major intellectual reception, that of Weimar Germany.

Susan Buck-Morss writes that the German interwar reception of Kierkegaard "moved from theological circles (cf. Karl Barth) to philosophy, when Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in, Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005). 123.

<sup>48</sup> I am indebted to Professor Robert Hullot-Kentor for helping me understand Adorno's point.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Critique of the Organic: Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 84-85.

<sup>50</sup> Marx, "On The Jewish Question," 152; Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 296.

“emancipated” his existentialism from its religious context.”<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, given this turbulent but philosophically fruitful era, Kierkegaard was often conflated with those who were responsible for his popularity, as it was often the case that people arrived at Kierkegaard already immersed in the thought of contemporary “Kierkegaardians.” It is this conflation that helps explain Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard better than can anything Kierkegaard actually wrote—a conflation not quite accidental, given Adorno’s deep immersion in Kierkegaard’s thought, but actually, in some ways, intentional. That is, Adorno *used* Kierkegaard.

Turning first to his philosophical, rather than theological, reception, in the case of Heidegger, scholars are increasingly excavating the profound depths to which he appropriated Kierkegaard’s thought.<sup>52</sup> However, in this “creative” appropriation, Heidegger often interpreted Kierkegaard in ways Kierkegaard himself would abhor. Perhaps this is no more evident than in their respective concepts of anxiety, concepts that seem similar, but that have essential differences. Recalling the last chapter, Kierkegaard described anxiety as pertaining to our growing awareness of our freedom and the unbounded possibility it holds. Heidegger appropriates this theme as anxiety in the face of an expansive sense of being that threatens to set us adrift in the overwhelming meaninglessness that attends freedom’s lack of direction.<sup>53</sup> That is, for Heidegger, “... *Being-in-the-world itself is that in the face of which anxiety is anxious.*”<sup>54</sup> For both, anxiety therefore pertains to the sense of expanse that is a byproduct of human freedom.

At face value, these ideas seem much the same. Yet, for Kierkegaard, anxiety is not an ontological truth, rather, it is a characterization of how freedom looks to those who have not yet

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1979). 269, Note 25.

<sup>52</sup> The literature on this connection is extensive, however, for a good place to start, see, Vincent McCarthy, "Martin Heidegger: Kierkegaard's Influence Hidden and in Full View," in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, ed. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1962). 228-35.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

appropriated it. And so, it speaks to the fears associated with self-development, not to an eternal truth with which we forever have to live. After all, the appropriation of freedom Kierkegaard has in mind does not set us adrift in being, it gives us ethical direction insofar as it reveals the inalienable value of human beings, a value which also provides the foundation for community. Yet, in rendering Kierkegaard's existentially developmental philosophy ontologically, the radically progressive dimensions of Kierkegaard's thought are lost, making of anxiety not a stage to be overcome by way of freedom and community, but a reality with which we forever have to live. All told, while this is but a single example, it helps get at the essential difference, a difference well captured by Richard Wolin, who perfectly summarized it: "In Heideggerian Angst, one finds a de-theologized version of Kierkegaard's "fear and trembling"... [yet, for Kierkegaard] the prospect of salvation was, if never certain, always a possibility."<sup>55</sup> And this salvation, an existentially development goal towards which Kierkegaard works, is the central premise of his work. Unfortunately, within the philosophical reception of Kierkegaard's work, his association with Heidegger proved a major obstacle in seeing this radically progressive and redemptive dimension of his thought.

While Heidegger's popularity, and his appropriation of Kierkegaardian themes, is certainly the key feature for understanding Kierkegaard's philosophical reception in Weimar, Kierkegaard's parallel reception in theology also proves illuminating. As Heiko Schulz notes, the theological reception of Kierkegaard reached its peak with the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich, a movement that was

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). 80.

itself a response to the dominant liberal theology that preceded them.<sup>56</sup> In Karl Barth, for instance, we find a striking example of many Kierkegaardian themes, notably in his attempt to distinguish Christianity from other “worldly” sociopolitical movements, for fear of conflating them with divine truth, and thereby travelling the road of idolatry.<sup>57</sup> This same theme is repeated in the pronounced role that “krisis” plays in Barth’s theology, as krisis is precisely the gap between God and the material world, mimicking the gap (or leap) at the center of Kierkegaard’s teleological suspension of the ethical.<sup>58</sup>

Speaking of Paul, for instance, we can see that Barth writes in very Kierkegaardian terms, when he writes that:

[a]s an apostle ... [Paul] stands in no organic relation with human society as it exists in history: seen from the point of view of human society, he can be regarded inly as an exception, nay, rather, as an impossibility.<sup>59</sup>

Just as Abraham was an exception to the social world, so too with Paul. Within both Kierkegaard’s thought and Barth’s, such “krisis” is a way of regaining a connection with the world, not of overcoming one. However, it is easy to see how this inter-subjective reconnection might first come to be imagined in the more limited terms of interpersonal relationships, and not political ones, a problem with which Barth himself struggled. Specifically, while Paul Tillich praises Barth’s dissociation of religious truth from worldly affairs insofar as it helped save Protestantism from the onslaught of Nazism, doing by way of the Barmen Declaration, which refused the subservience of the church to the state, declaring the church’s complete autonomy, he likewise notes that this position made it difficult for Barth to challenge the Nazi’s for their

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<sup>56</sup> Heiko Schulz, "Germany and Austria: A Modest Head Start: The German Reception of Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard's International Reception: Tome I: Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 334.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1968). 536.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968). 140-48, 362-90, 502-26.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

treatment of Jews—a position at which he eventually arrived, but only several years after Tillich did himself.<sup>60</sup> Granted, it would not be hard to lodge a similar criticism of Kierkegaard, indicting him for the absence of systematic political engagement, it is nonetheless clear that, while overtly lacking, the underlying ethical imperative propels one into sociopolitical critique—even if this takes some time.

So, when Adorno composed his major work on Kierkegaard, he did so in the midst of this uniquely problematic revival of Kierkegaard's thought. But perhaps most egregiously, while Adorno's *Habilitationsschrift* was published in 1933, in the years 1930-1933, a 3-volume treatise on Kierkegaard was published by the reputed Kierkegaard scholar, and noted German theologian, Emanuel Hirsch.<sup>61</sup> As Heiko Schulz notes:

Hirsch mistakenly transforms Kierkegaard's insistence on the daring character of faith into the purported historical, in fact quasi-eschatological necessity of subscribing to the truth of Nazi-ideology in general, and Hitler's pursuit of war in particular, ... he was one of the first German theologians who successfully integrated ideas of the former [Kierkegaard] into the framework of Nazi-ideology—and vice versa the latter into the former.<sup>62</sup>

Specifically, Hirsch read Kierkegaard as a decisionist,<sup>63</sup> a reading that, like Heidegger's, removed the specific substantive content from Kierkegaard's work, so that the radical nature of National Socialism could come to appear as indistinguishable from the radical, yet deeply ethical, message that Kierkegaard saw in Christianity. Following from this, Marcia Morgan argues that "[t]he strong connection between the National Socialist Hirsch and the early scholarship of Kierkegaard in Germany ... gave very strong impetus to Adorno's rejection of

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<sup>60</sup> Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*: 536-39.

<sup>61</sup> Marcia Morgan, "Adorno's Reception of Kierkegaard: 1929-1933," *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter: A Publication of the Howard and Edna Hong Library* 2003, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Schulz, "Germany and Austria: A Modest Head Start: The German Reception of Kierkegaard," 346-47.

<sup>63</sup> Matthias Wilke, "Emanuel Hirsch: A German Dialogue with "Saint Søren", " in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology: Tome 1: German Protestant Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 170.

Kierkegaard.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, while Adorno had written his *Habilitationsschrift* for Paul Tillich, Tillich himself had a major public confrontation with Emanuel Hirsch in 1934-35. Furthermore, as Morgan also notes, Adorno’s rejection of Kierkegaard was further predicated on the fact that Adorno “most despised and most held responsible [Martin Heidegger] ... for the philosophical errors and evils of the times,” and that not only did Adorno attribute the “downfall” of “academic philosophy” to Heidegger, but also to “Heidegger’s use of Kierkegaardian philosophy.”<sup>65</sup>

In sum, Germany in the 1930s hardly lent itself to fair readings of Kierkegaard. Insofar as Germany’s spiritual and cultural crisis lent itself to ontological readings like Heidegger’s, as their crisis become conflated with the very specific existential crisis involved in overcoming socialization, and if noted Kierkegaardians like Hirsch and Heidegger so easily lent their support to Nazism (with the former explicitly using Kierkegaard to justify it), while those like Barth failed to offer the type of criticism of which one might hope, it becomes easy to see how Adorno might conclude that Kierkegaard’s philosophy was, at best, bourgeois, and at worst, in possession of “a fascistic core ... itself.”<sup>66</sup> And while there is a great divergence in these thinkers, a tendency towards ontological readings of Kierkegaard was commonplace. So, Kierkegaard had become fraught territory, and while Adorno also had the example of Tillich as a socialist, anti-Nazi Kierkegaardian, the historical scales increasingly made a redemptive reading of Kierkegaard something for which one needed struggle—and more important struggles were certainly at hand. Instead, Adorno’s *Kierkegaard* refused the complexity that Kierkegaard

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<sup>64</sup> Morgan, "Adorno's Reception of Kierkegaard: 1929-1933," 9. This article is a shorter version of themes she explored in her dissertation under Agnes Heller. See, Marcia Morgan, "The Aesthetic-Religious Nexus in Theodor W. Adorno's Interpretation of the Works of Søren Kierkegaard and its Influence on Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," (Ann Arbor, MI: New School for Social Research, 2002). To date, it is the most exhaustive study of Adorno’s relationship to Kierkegaard.

<sup>65</sup> Morgan, "Adorno's Reception of Kierkegaard: 1929-1933," 10.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

himself demonstrates, and instead used him as a proxy for attacking those, like Heidegger, who seemed most emblematic of the era.

Turning to Adorno's work itself, it is easy to demonstrate how poor a reading it is. Granted, taken in light of Adorno's true aim, and his interest in further developing his own thought, the book might have much merit, for which we might turn to Adorno scholars; but as a study of Kierkegaard, it is remarkable how little it actually resembles what Kierkegaard actually wrote. In fact, it strays so far from Kierkegaard himself that it is oftentimes difficult to see any Kierkegaard at all, despite Adorno's extensive use of quotations. In fact, this extensive use of quotations is itself symptomatic of the problem, for even a brief glimpse at Adorno's work indicates a haphazard use of them, a haphazardness that completely ignores Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms. As Kierkegaard himself writes, his use of pseudonyms was part of his strategy of "indirect communication,"<sup>67</sup> whereby truths were expressed tangentially, not directly. While we have not yet explored the nature of this writing style,<sup>68</sup> Merold Westphal makes the point succinctly, when he writes that Adorno's attribution of all of the pseudonym's opinions to Kierkegaard "is like confusing Fyodor Dostoevski with Raskolnikov or Arthur Miller with Willy Loman,"<sup>69</sup> a confusion that makes Adorno's *Construction of the Aesthetic* "a construction, to be sure, but not so much of the aesthetic as of a thoroughly fictitious Kierkegaard."<sup>70</sup>

Turning to Adorno himself, Adorno comes to see "sacrifice" as the very core of Kierkegaard's thought, a sacrifice not only ascetic, but also, one that makes individuals

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<sup>67</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," in *The Point of View*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 43.

<sup>68</sup> This discussion will be taken up in *Part IV*.

<sup>69</sup> Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996). 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

completely amenable to the forces of nature—such as the way fascism presented itself. And so, we find Adorno claiming that:

The category of sacrifice, by means of which the system transcends itself, at the same time and fully contrary to expectation, holds Kierkegaard's philosophy systematically together as its encompassing unity through the sacrificial abstraction of all encountered phenomenon.<sup>71</sup>

This reading is understandable, perhaps, for a quick reading of *Fear and Trembling* might leave one with that same impression; but it is less understandable from one who long studied Kierkegaard, and who once seemed to be enamored of him. Turning to one of Adorno's examples, we will see just how skewed his reading is.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard narrates, and discusses, an old Scandinavian folktale, Agnes and the Merman.<sup>72</sup> As Kierkegaard tells it, this story is one in which a bestial merman rises from the sea, only to find himself enraptured by the sight of the innocent Agnes. The merman sets off to seduce Agnes, moved by his own "demonic" nature, as he resorts to any means at all in his single-minded pursuit of Agnes. When Agnes responds to his deceitful advances, when she trustingly loves him, the merman is overcome with grief—he cannot go through with his seduction, overcome by two powerful forces, "Agnes and repentance."<sup>73</sup> For Kierkegaard, it is only in giving himself to his inhuman nature that the merman can act towards Agnes as he has, treating her as an object to be possessed, and not a subject to be loved. Yet, Agnes loves him, a love that sees the merman as a subject even if he himself wants to abdicate his own subjectivity and the ethical demands it makes towards her. And in this experience, in feeling a love that acknowledges his humanity even while he wants to obey only the animal, the merman finds a possibility to become something more than he is, to become human. And so,

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<sup>71</sup> Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*: 107.

<sup>72</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 94-99.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

“Agnes has won, and the merman has lost her. Only as booty can she be his; he cannot give himself faithfully to any girl, because he is indeed only a merman.”<sup>74</sup>

It is a subtly complex interplay, a drama in which the redemptive power of love is demonstrated, even if that love sometimes requires us to be hurt by those who do not yet love us. Certainly there is something of self-sacrifice to Agnes, a willingness to put herself on the line so that she can help the merman become human, but this “sacrificial” element does not devalue Kierkegaard’s point as a psychological-existential observation. For anyone who has hurt someone they love, or for someone who has been hurt, yet refused to lash out in revenge, Kierkegaard’s story should be clear. Yet, for Adorno, it is not Agnes’ sacrifice that is the problem, but the merman’s. For Adorno, the merman sacrifices nature, but does not find anything in its place, thereby demonstrating a claim he also levies at Kierkegaard: the merman is “objectless inwardness.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, both Kierkegaard and the merman renounce their animal natures, and claim to find something higher; but all they have is their renunciation.

Adorno’s claim is a far cry from what Kierkegaard attempts to express—that love requires us to overcome the attempt to objectify those we want to love. And, as the story of Agnes and the merman demonstrate, if we come to love someone who we once only tried to possess, we have cause to repent, for, we once treated them as an object even if now we recognize them as a subject. Moreover, Kierkegaard’s love is hardly an “objectless inwardness,” for he clearly states that the merman is not only overcome by repentance, which itself requires an object, but he is also overcome by Agnes herself. It is her, as a subject he now loves and as an incarnation of transcendent value against whom he has sinned, that is the cause of his salvation.<sup>76</sup> And now, through repentance, he is faced with a choice: he can run away and hide, or become

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>75</sup> Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*.

<sup>76</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 98.

disclosed, and admit what he has done.<sup>77</sup> And, if he is brave, if he discloses himself instead of hiding, he is reborn into the world, for now, he can have an *honest* and *human* worldly existence, now he can marry Agnes.<sup>78</sup>

If ascetic sacrifice is an accurate characterization of *Fear and Trembling's* sacrifice, Adorno's criticism might be apt. However, Kierkegaard clearly is not concerned with sacrifice itself, but instead with self-development, in much the way as was Marx. Nor is this self-development ascetic, as its ultimate concern is an authentic reconnection with others through faith. Furthermore, insofar as we previously misunderstood the nature of objectification by egoistically reifying it, through faith, "one does not [even] lose the finite but gains it whole and intact."<sup>79</sup> That is, through faith, the whole world becomes richer, insofar as we overcome our alienated relations with it, seeing in the objects around us their human origins. In fact, it would be wise to see in this an interesting corollary to Marx's "rich human being," for whom the senses have become attuned to the subjective origins of objects.<sup>80</sup> After all, for all of his own ascetic interpreters, the world in which Marx wanted to live was rich with the products of human creative labor—not devoid of them.

As such, when Kierkegaard speaks of sacrifice, his concern is not actually sacrifice, nor is it in Marx's case. Rather, the real concern is with the fear of loss. It is this fear which leads us to egoistically grasp onto our social identities, it is this fear that leads us to dominate ourselves and others through those identities, and it is this fear that impedes our self-development. Marx understood this as constitutive of capitalism, and saw it as hindering a transition to a more communal form of life; but Kierkegaard, with his focus on the individual, only cares for how it

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>80</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 304.

impedes our own self-growth. Yet, once again, we find Kierkegaard and Marx arguing in tandem, not at cross-purposes.

## **Chapter 5: Transcendence**

The idea of transcendence strikes many as diametrically opposed to that of philosophical materialism, insofar as transcendence is often imagined as an overcoming of the material constraints with which materialism is so concerned. In this sense, transcendence is little more than an ascetic renunciation of our embodied existence. However, as Marx and Kierkegaard have indicated, transcendence does not entail overcoming the material world as such, it only entails overcoming our internalization of the constraints it imposes on us. It therefore speaks to a process of overcoming our socially determined selves, in the name of an appropriation of subjective freedom. For Marx and Kierkegaard, transcendence is how we authentically connect with the world, not how we leave it behind.

This far, we have seen Kierkegaard describe the nature of this process at the subjective level, as he articulated the problems of speaking about transcendence within a language that is socially determined. We have also seen Marx politicize this process, by grounding Kierkegaard's individual process of emancipation within the concrete specifics of our own historical, sociopolitical, world. With all of these pieces in play, we can now introduce a note of dynamism, exploring how the transcendent process of overcoming a socially determined existence, and finding a new, authentic one, takes place in the context of our own particular sociopolitical reality. Or, using Kierkegaard's and Marx's language, we can now ask: what does faith look like in the context of capitalism?

### **Learning to Doubt**

With this groundwork laid, we can now understand Kierkegaard's repeated praise of Socrates, a praise quite pronounced in *Fear and Trembling*, for while Socrates never achieved what Kierkegaard considers faith, Socrates came as close as possible without actually finding it. And, for Kierkegaard, what makes Socrates so admirable is his doubt—a type of radical doubt he calls “infinite resignation”—and which forms the stage immediately prior to faith.<sup>1</sup> After all, given that what characterizes our lives prior to faith is our willful identification with the ephemeral socio-historical world, doubt is a necessary tool for exposing this fallacy, i.e. for demonstrating that we are not self-identical with any of the social roles we play. Yet, Socrates' doubt was not found in a rote repetition of a “method” of questioning, but in his earnest attempts to withhold assent to anything not proven as true. And this, rather than a merely intellectual activity, entailed a spiritual transformation whereby Socrates refused to allow his egoism to push him into a position not true.<sup>2</sup>

And so, Kierkegaard saw Socrates as a model for overcoming the type of egoistic attachment that allows us to instrumentalize others by way of objectifying them; however, obscuring this earnest doubt was a common type of doubt, a bourgeois doubt, that Kierkegaard believes had overtaken Europe.

Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf* [a real sale]. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid. Every speculative monitor who conscientiously signals the important trends in

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 42-44.

<sup>2</sup> In many Platonic dialogues, the relationship between self-interest and belief is strikingly clear. That is, while Socrates exposes the logical fallacies of his interlocutors' positions, what also emerges is the role these positions play in justifying their lives. Appropriately, in the dialogue on piety, Euthyphro's first attempt to define piety begins with an assertion that piety is to do as he himself does: "I say that the pious is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer, be it about murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious." Plato, "Euthyphro," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 5d. While Euthyphro's subsequent definitions dance around like one of "Daedalus' machines," something for which he blames Socrates, what becomes increasingly clear is that Euthyphro needs his beliefs in order to justify his life.

modern philosophy, every assistant professor, tutor, and student, every rural outsider and tenant incumbent in philosophy is unwilling to stop with doubting everything but goes further. Perhaps it would be premature and untimely to ask them where they really are going, but in all politeness and modesty it can probably be taken for granted that they have doubted everything, since otherwise it would be odd to speak of their having gone further.<sup>3</sup>

Momentarily skipping the very telling comparison with the world of business, what Kierkegaard is pointing out is the superficiality of modern intellectuals, intellectuals for whom ideas no longer *expressed* a lived reality, but rather formed an intellectual veneer *in which* they found home. That is, we are back again at Kierkegaard's critique of mimetic inauthenticity. In such a case, "doubt" becomes an "object" that individuals will, that is, it becomes an identity they adopt, rather than an expression of the fact that, like Socrates, they had yet to find the truth.

What those ancient Greeks, who after all did know a little about philosophy, assumed to be a task for a whole lifetime, because proficiency in doubting is not acquired on days and weeks, what the old veteran disputant attained, he who had maintained the equilibrium of doubt throughout all the specious arguments, who had intrepidly denied the certainty of the senses and the certainty of thought, who, uncompromising, had defied the anxiety of self-love and the insinuations of fellow feeling—with that everyone begins in our age.<sup>4</sup>

Socrates had overcome his egoistic attachment to the ephemera of his social existence, and it is only in this way, that is, by questioning *why* one believes what they do, that untruth is exposed as a consequence of our own will. And yet, Socrates was also the paramount example of the political consequences of a truly "doubting" attitude—execution. That is, permanent elimination from the social whole, a whole which depends on belief, and for whom doubt threatens its very existence. Furthermore, his attack on bourgeois intellectuals further clarifies his choice of stories, as the horror of the narrative of Mt. Moriah would make its appropriation by bourgeois academe difficult. That is, Abraham could not yet be another veneer the bourgeoisie pretended at being.

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<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

With Socratic doubt in mind, it is easy to see that Kierkegaard believes Descartes provided the avenue whereby doubt could be commodified by bourgeois intellectual life. Whereas Socrates was a distant example, Descartes provided a modern example for the Danish bourgeois intelligentsia to mimic. For instance, looking to justify themselves, such intellectuals ask: “‘But did not Descartes do it?’”, to which Kierkegaard responds: “Descartes, a venerable, humble, honest thinker, whose writings no one can read without being profoundly affected—he did what he said and said what he did. Alas! Alas! Alas! That is a great rarity in our day!”<sup>5</sup> As Kierkegaard explains of Descartes’ *Dissertation on Method*, Descartes only explained how he had conducted his own reason, that is, his work described his own subjective travails; he was not instructing, but recounting.<sup>6</sup> While Descartes, as with Socrates, might not have found the full authenticity of faith, i.e. the authenticity found in becoming self-identical with human freedom, in the fact that his writing bore a personal relationship to his subjectivity, he could be said to be more authentic than a purely socialized subjectivity, i.e. a subjectivity for whom appearance did not necessarily bear a relationship to reality. According to Kierkegaard, wary of the fact that his was a personal journey, Descartes:

... did not shout “Fire! Fire! And make it obligatory for everyone to doubt, for Descartes was a quiet and solitary thinker, not a shouting street watchman; he modestly let it be known that his method had significance only for him and was partly the result of his earlier warped knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

Like Socrates, Descartes also sought to question the truth of appearance—but to do so earnestly, and not solely as a role to be played.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Kierkegaard is referring to Descartes’ own description of his “method,” insofar as the latter wrote that: “... my intention is not to teach here the method which everyone must follow in order to direct his reason correctly, but only to show the manner in which I have tried to direct mine ... [And so] I am proposing only this work as, so to speak, a history—or, if you prefer, a fable—in which, among many examples you might find to imitate, you will perhaps find as many others which you will have reason not to follow ...”. René Descartes, “Discourse on the Method for Rightly Directing One’s Reason And Searching for Truth in the Sciences,” in *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 6.

Kierkegaard's earlier comparison between the world of ideas and that of business is also more than a little coincidental, as it is easy to surmise that, at least culturally, Kierkegaard saw the bourgeois spirit of commerce as having overtaken intellectual life, insofar as it had made ideas into objects that could be acquired with the ease of a "purchase." This commercial spirit makes everything into something easily acquired ("a real sale"), making it clear that at some level Kierkegaard correlates this intellectual problem with that of commodification. While it is unlikely that he saw this as systematically as did Marx, recalling that his critique of Hegel focused on the value of "objective" reality, it is clear that Kierkegaard correlates the commercial spirit in which value resides in things, i.e. in commodities, with an intellectual attitude that does the same. After all, as was true even in Kierkegaard's own case, it was the children of the wealthy bourgeoisie who attended college—a point that itself need not be true to recognize that Danish society as a whole, like the rest of Europe, was in the process of becoming less agrarian and more commercial. So, the bourgeois spirit would seem to have overtaken not only the world of economics, but as the example of the commercialization of doubt attests, it took over intellectual and spiritual life too. And ultimately, Kierkegaard's long lament for the commercialization of intellectual life demonstrates his belief in the promise that thinking holds, if it is only invested with the spiritual integrity demonstrated by Socrates. Granted, as discussed earlier, you cannot think your way to faith (insofar as faith attests to a *new* self-relationship), but you can think your way out of a great deal of self-deception, if done earnestly. And so, Kierkegaard hardly yearns for the intellectual life of the bourgeois classroom, but rather, he does wax nostalgic for that of the Athenian marketplace.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard was a well-known figure in Copenhagen life, and would often converse in the streets with other members of the Copenhagen intellectual elite. Later in life, as he became more socially and politically radical, his engagement in the "street" increasingly took on an even more democratic tone.

In fact, Kierkegaard clearly foreshadows Marx's *Paris Manuscripts*, which Marx would write the following year, a point that is particularly clear in lines such as the following: "[N]ot only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human sense*," have been replaced by "the sense of *having*."<sup>9</sup> In such a world, "[*m*]oney as the external, universal *medium* and *faculty* ... [turns] an *image into reality* and *reality into a mere image*."<sup>10</sup> In fact, we can see that Marx is here theorizing a similar critique of the mimetic as that of Kierkegaard, so that, in turn:

He who can buy bravery is brave, though he be a coward ... [a]s money is not exchanged for any one specific quality, for any one specific thing, or for any particular human essential power, but for the entire objective world of man and nature, from the standpoint of its possessor it therefore serves to exchange every quality for every other, even contradictory, quality and object: it is the fraternisation of impossibilities. It makes contradictions embrace.<sup>11</sup>

And this, as is the case with Kierkegaard, depends on a wholesale misidentification of objectivity with subjectivity. In fact, bourgeois power itself, i.e. the power to buy and sell, depends on a particular attitude towards the world, an attitude that sees nothing but commodities. And while Kierkegaard diagnoses this as an intellectual malady, for Marx, this attitude is that of private property. Granted, for Marx, private property is the consequence of alienated labor; however, given a social world in which alienated labor is the social form of work, this attitude is what reproduces such a society. "Only at the culmination of the development of private property does this, its secret, appear again, namely, that on the one hand it is the *product* of alienated labor, and that on the other it is the *means* by which labor alienates itself, the *realisation of this alienation*."<sup>12</sup> Uninterested in systemic social analysis as his focus remains on subjectivity,

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 300-01.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

Kierkegaard only sees this “realisation,” whereas Marx locates its origins historically; however, they are describing two sides of what Marx recognizes to be a reciprocal relationship.

In fact, Marx likewise turns his ire towards the world of intellectuals, just as Kierkegaard did. After all, *On the Jewish Question* was precisely such an attack on Bruno Bauer, if it also happened to be more. But given Marx’s focus on the sociopolitical world, his concern is not solely with subjective transformation, but with the political change that would follow. So, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, we find Marx famously saying that “[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, such utterances were hardly isolated, as in the early 1840s Marx turned his vitriol towards the superficiality of his fellow “radical” intellectuals, in what amounted to hundreds upon hundreds of pages of polemics, most notably in *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*.<sup>14</sup> In *The German Ideology*, Marx’s comparison of German and French socialism is particularly telling. Speaking of the German Young Hegelians, Marx’s critique is precisely that they mistake ideas for reality.

These “socialists” or “true socialists,” as they call themselves, regard foreign communist literature [i.e. French] not as the expression and the product of a real movement but as purely theoretical writings which have been evolved—in the same way as they imagine the German philosophical systems to have been evolved—by a process of “pure thought.” It never occurs to them that, even when these writings do preach a system, they spring from the practical needs, the conditions of life in their entirety of a particular class in a particular country.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas French socialist literature is the expression of an actually existing social movement struggling for emancipation, i.e. it is an authentic objectification of their lives, German socialists simply adopt ideas, treating them as objects rather than as objectifications. As such, they miss the truth.

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 5, Marx and Engels: 1845-47* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Holy Family," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 4, Marx and Engels: 1844-45* (New York: International Publishers, 1975); Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology."

<sup>15</sup> Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 455.

On the basis of this philosophical belief in the power of concepts to make or destroy the world, they can likewise imagine that some individual “abolished the cleavage of life” by “abolishing” concepts in some way or other. Like all German ideologists, the true socialists continually mix up literary history and real history as equipotential. This habit is, of course, very understandable among the Germans, who conceal the abject part they have played and continue to play in real history by equating the illusions in which they are so rich, with reality.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of the French, themselves actively engaged in a political struggle, socialist literature played an authentic role in self-understanding. That is, united in an emancipatory struggle, French socialist literature helped socialists understand themselves, their movement, their demands, and the obstacles they faced. So, ideas played an authentic role in their lives. However, in the case of the Young Hegelians, Marx clearly mocks them for their pretentious self-importance. The Young Hegelians adopt socialist ideas, integrate them into the main currents of German thought, and then convince themselves that their intellectual games are superior to the real struggles of the French. In this way, they come to mistake ideas for the reality that they express. Marx even hints at something akin to Kierkegaard’s assertion that we adopt ideas to avoid reality, in that Marx argues that German intellectual proclivities traditionally mistake ideas for reality so that German intellectuals do not have to accept how small a role they have played in that reality. The problem is not the ideas themselves, but rather, it is found in the attitude which intentionally overvalues appearances so as to avoid reality. Marx does not explicitly counsel doubt as a solution to this problem, as does Kierkegaard, but if we understand doubt Socratically, that is, as a hard fought struggle against the egoism that fuels such hypocrisy, we can begin to see how such doubt is a necessary prerequisite for emancipation.

### **Accepting Loss, Accepting Love**

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 467.

As Judith Butler notes of Kierkegaard, nonconformity (to which doubt leads) is an essential criterion for becoming an individual.<sup>17</sup> However, this, on its own, is insufficient; in fact, as nonconformity signals the loss of a social whole into which one once fit, i.e. its *sacrifice*, this loss can easily result in a pervasive sense of loneliness, or what C. Stephen Evans calls “anguish.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, if nonconformity were a necessary and also a sufficient cause of individuality, then Adorno might be right, as self-development comes to appear ascetic. Wary of such interpretations, Kierkegaard introduces the theme of loss early in *Fear and Trembling*, doing so by way of four introductory exordia. These exordia, perhaps better translated as *attunements*, insofar as they are, just like a musician tuning an instrument, off-tune pieces that get progressively closer to their proper key, find Kierkegaard pairing four attempts at retelling the story of Mt. Moriah with four parallel stories of a mother weaning her child.<sup>19</sup> In these attunements, attunements which are off-key and therefore failures, Kierkegaard sets the stage with the theme *against* which he is writing, i.e. the theme of loss.

In the first attunement, Abraham pretends to be crazed so as to spare Isaac’s relationship with God.<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard likens this to a mother weaning her child by way of blackening her breast, changing the child’s relationship with a part of their mother, so as to maintain the larger relationship intact. “So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother—she is still the same, her gaze is as tender and loving as ever.”<sup>21</sup> In both cases, the parent sacrifices a smaller source of meaning in order to preserve a higher one. In other words, to ward off the despair that

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, "Kierkegaard's Speculative Despair," in *The Age of German Idealism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *Routledge History of Philosophy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 381-82.

<sup>18</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 218.

<sup>19</sup> Edward F. Mooney, "Art, Deed, and System: The Prefaces to *Fear and Trembling*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 77.

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

might accompany loss, they ensure that the loss is only partial—they sacrifice a particular to maintain the whole. As for the second attunement, it sees Abraham himself struggling with God’s task, as he is now the one who despairs. “From that day henceforth, Abraham was old; he could not forget that God had ordered him to do this. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham’s eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more.”<sup>22</sup> In this case, Abraham’s source of meaning was lost, a loss experienced in God’s request of Isaac. This retelling is paralleled with a mother who “virginally conceals her breast;” however, in this sudden disappearance of the source of nourishment, it is as if “the child no longer has a mother.”<sup>23</sup> As Isaac was the result of a promise made by God and therefore constitutes the material example of Abraham’s spiritual life, and as it is the mother’s breast from which physical life itself is nourished, both stories recount how the loss of a particular can entail the loss of the whole.

The third iteration finds Abraham despairing over his willingness to sacrifice Isaac as he comes to believe it was a test he had failed, in that “the father had forgotten his duty to his son.”<sup>24</sup> The language of duty is striking, as Kierkegaard is explicitly alluding to the ethics that are the focus of his critique. It is to his duty that Abraham has failed, and not to Isaac; in other words, Abraham has failed “the ethical.” And so, Abraham has lost the very medium through which he believes they relate, i.e. the social/ethical as constituted in the relationship of bourgeois father and son. This attunement is paralleled with a story in which mother and child grieve together, both recognizing that they are to be ever more separated, “because the child who first lay under her heart and later rested upon her breast will never again be so close.”<sup>25</sup> In both cases, losing a particular type of relationship appears to preclude the possibility of an even stronger

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

bond growing in its place, and so, the process of growing up is transformed into an experience of prolonged loss. And finally, and perhaps most tellingly, the fourth iteration finds Abraham's hand trembling in the act, a tremor he believes he has hidden from Isaac, but which he has not. And in this perceived absence of faith, it is Isaac who suffers, for even as life seems to go back to normal for Abraham, Isaac has lost his faith.<sup>26</sup> To this failure of Abraham's, Kierkegaard replies simply: "When the child is to be weaned, the mother has stronger sustenance at hand so that the child does not perish."<sup>27</sup> Whereas Abraham had depended on Isaac's trust (or, put differently, on Isaac's faith in his father), in that faltering moment, Abraham proves that trust to be unwarranted. It seems that the parents' greatest responsibility, a responsibility not historically specific but eternal, is to provide their children with the strength they need to withstand loss. Without that "sustenance," little else matters. So, ultimately, the question of faith pertains just as much to Isaac's faith, if not more, than it does to Abraham's.

Last chapter we abandoned a discussion of Kierkegaard's higher forms of despair in favor of a discussion of his lowest form (i.e. conformity); however, brief mention is now warranted, as these higher forms result precisely from the same type of loss as detailed in these attunements. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard calls the first of these two higher forms of despair the despair of weakness, while the second is the despair of strength. Of the despair of weakness he writes that such despair entails "will[ing] to do away with oneself."<sup>28</sup> Bruce Kirmmse explains that this type of self has begun to become aware of itself as a self, that is, as something not simply the product of socialization, but it wishes not to be such a self, i.e. it

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). 14/15?

wishes to abdicate its humanity.<sup>29</sup> In other words, such a self has extricated itself from social mores, and in so doing, it necessarily has an intimation of itself as something more than the product of socialization, but it becomes almost crushed under the weight of the loneliness it now experiences. Tellingly, Kierkegaard calls the intense form of the despair of weakness *encapsulation*; such a self might continue to play the appropriate social roles, but it is not able to convince itself of them, it has become almost hermetically sealed in itself, outwardly playing a role but inwardly withdrawn.<sup>30</sup> While, ultimately, Nora Helmer goes off in search of her authenticity, if we imagine what might have occurred had her fear of loneliness overcome her, we have a perfect example of this type of despair. Obeying the forms of bourgeois life, even after they no longer held meaning for her, Nora would have withdrawn into herself—even as she outwardly appeared no different than before.

As for the despair of strength, Kierkegaard writes that such despair entails “will[ing] to be oneself.”<sup>31</sup> While this might actually seem like an appropriate formula for authenticity, what Kierkegaard has in mind is a specifically defiant attitude that characterizes a self that believes it can create, or will, itself. This leads Michael Theunissen to evocatively label this despair the “arrogance of self-construction.”<sup>32</sup> In this lies Kierkegaard’s most direct critique of the fascism that would soon overtake Europe, as fascism’s myths of self-creation were quite directly a politicization of this type of despair. Rather than withdrawing after a feeling of loss, as in the case of weakness, this self reacts to the same experience, but overcompensates by way of a demonstration of power. And so, not only does Nazism help demonstrate this form of despair,

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce H. Kirmmse, “Psychology and Society: The Social Falsification of the Self in *The Sickness unto Death*,” in *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, Harold A. Durfee, and Gloria H. Parloff, *Psychiatry and the Humanities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 170.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. 14/15?

<sup>32</sup> Michael Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, ed. Harry Frankfurt, trans. Barbara Harshav and Helmut Illbruck, *Princeton Monographs in Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 54.

but whenever violence is fetishized as a means of attaining authenticity, it would be wise to suspect the despair of strength.

Coupled together, what *Fear and Trembling*'s attunements present are examples of how an experience of loss can overwhelm a life; of how such loss, of individuals, of relationships, of trust, can lead to exactly the type of lonely despair found in *The Sickness Unto Death*. That is, beginning with the despair of conformity found in *Sickness, Fear and Trembling* diagrams the loss that leads back to *Sickness*'s higher forms of despair. However, what emerges out of the attunements' paralleled stories of weaning—parallels that suggest that Abraham and Isaac's experience of loss is much more universal than might seem—is the claim that certain types of loss are inevitable features of life. In fact, becoming an individual itself entails a transformation in how we experience loss. For instance, if we absolutely define ourselves by the roles we play, roles such as child or mother, we inevitably set ourselves up for crisis. Testifying to Ibsen's penetrating reading of Kierkegaard, we can here see a direct correlation between Kierkegaard's discussion of the parent-child relationship, and Nora Helmer's crisis. Nora's crisis was explicitly brought on when she was made to recognize that she had been thoroughly defining herself by way of historically specific social roles. That is, she wholly identified with the roles her society allowed her to have, i.e. a bourgeois *child* (Isaac) and then a bourgeois *mother* (Abraham)—so, for her, there was no “remainder,” i.e. there was no self that transcended these roles, there was no self in which she could have found strength. So, when those roles collapsed, they took the world with them, and she found herself alone. Yet, as she eventually learns, “before all else [i.e. before being a mother and a wife] I am a reasonable human being ... or, at all events ... I must try and become one.”<sup>33</sup> In finally recognizing that she had never looked upon herself clearly, nor acted out from herself, but always through the meanings her society proffered, that is, in failing to be

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<sup>33</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992). 68.

free, Nora could now attempt to be a human being in an eternally true, rather than a historically specific, sense. At least, that is, as a prerequisite for being an authentic mother, rather than a mimetic copy of a bourgeois ideal.

Furthermore, it is easy to imagine how the intimation of loss, and the despair that lurks behind that loss, serves to bolster social identities in the first place. After all, this is Nora's husbands' story, as his fear of losing his comfortable bourgeois life, and the self-image that went with it, was enough for him to cast out the wife he believed had upset this order. And this is precisely Kierkegaard's point: for those of us not yet freed of our desperate, self-interested hold on the world of social meaning (a grasp that Marx calls our "sense of having," and that he believes constitutes the bourgeois self-image), the freedom of our loved ones appears to us as loss. That is, by definition, if I have not yet accepted your freedom, *your* freedom is *my* loss. So, for those enslaved to social mores, mores which universally take the form of "objects" (which helps explain why we relate to them by "having" them), freedom appears precisely as the type of anxious void of which Heidegger wrote.

However, the similarity with Heidegger stops there, for, if we accept that Abraham had faith, and that this faith entails an appropriation of freedom, we can also see that faith speaks to how free subjectivities relate. If Socratic doubt helps us overcome our grasp on the world of social meaning, if it helps us learn to let go of the stability it provides, this, in turn, hardly means that the actually existing individuals with whom we had previously related through the world of social meaning are now gone. Instead, it only allows us to overcome our egoistic attachment to them, freeing us to relate to them more openly. However, if I have overcome misidentifying you by way of identity, which is to say, if I stop seeing you as an object, and instead accept you as a free subjectivity, just as I accept myself that way, then I am taking your subjectivity *on faith*.

After all, I only ever experience you by way of your objectifications (i.e. your words, your actions, etc.), and it is impossible to infer from these that you are free. That is, I never see your freedom, as your subjectivity is, by definition, hidden from me—I only see its manifestations. However, I can equally attribute these manifestations to causal explanations rather than to a free subjectivity, just as determinists are able to do, in what is a further demonstration of Kierkegaard's critique of philosophy. That is, existence itself is not something that is proven, essence is. And so, in order to relate to you as free, I have to *accept* your freedom, just as I have done for mine, because your freedom will never be *objectively* proven; that is, I have to take it on faith.

From Abraham's point of view, his supposed sacrifice of Isaac is nothing other than his faith in Isaac as a free, autonomous, human being. It is a faith that freed from the social identities in which we live, Isaac will remain. Granted, from the anxious readers' point of view, their story seems to narrate a profound loss (and forcing his readers to confront this is part of Kierkegaard's point); but from Abraham and Isaac's point of view, their story is about their spiritual connection *in* faith, that is, their reception of one another as free subjectivities. Which is to say that, while the word faith clarifies certain elements of the self-appropriative move, self-appropriation is really about love—and, the "salvation" it provides. For Kierkegaard, having faith in an others free subjectivity *is* to love them, for such a faith is loving insofar as it allows the other to experience themselves as something more than the product of socialization, as something more than a historically determined creature, and instead, as something both socio-historical, but also, as something eternal. That is, love is precisely the self-relationship into which we cannot think ourselves; rather, we need to be loved, and we need to be open to that love, in order to experience ourselves as worthy of it. For, in being loved, we come to realize that for all our

insecurities and guilt, for all the dehumanization's we have been made to suffer, and for those we have inflicted on others, we are still worthy of the kind of complete self-sacrifice that would destroy itself to save us. And, in this, we can begin to see the importance Kierkegaard sees in Jesus Christ, as the first (or most pronounced) example of such a love. For, it is only through the love we receive from others that we come to realize our worth, i.e. to see ourselves as worthy of such a love. And through this, we can not only learn to love others ourselves, but in the self-appropriative move of the leap of faith, we can come to love ourselves too. Having faith in those for whom freedom is not yet appropriated, loving them when they do not feel worthy of it, ultimately helps them experience themselves as free.

And so, faith is not simply a passive and distant disposition, for it *lovingly* urges the other to accept and appropriate that in which the faithful already has faith.<sup>34</sup> In this way, faith is indistinguishable from ethics, insofar as having faith necessarily implies a recognition of universal freedom and the activity of helping others appropriate it; for, in affording others truly *human* dignity, even when they themselves might have failed to appropriate the freedom upon which it is based, the faithful individual stands as a constant, and active, reminder of freedom. Such a faith is to see in Frederick Douglass, Ibsen's Nora, and Camus' rebel a dignity they only later appropriate for themselves, and which then constitutes their own faith. And while these examples have been used to focus upon the most dramatic moments of their rebellion, it is easy to imagine that within their old dehumanizing lives, the brief moments of kindness in which those around them afforded them the dignity deserving of human beings (or, for Kierkegaard, the simple understanding that such a person as Jesus Christ once existed), might have provided the very catalyst for their uprisings in the first place. And ultimately, for Kierkegaard, insofar as this

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<sup>34</sup> This point also speaks to the question of praxis, which, dealt with tangentially here, is also the subject of Part Four.

type of love does not pertain to our particular nature (or rather, not exclusively to it), but to our eternal, universal nature as free subjectivities, we are relating to one another transcendently; that is, we are relating through God.

Furthermore, this spiritual love also helps explain why Abraham's failure to hide his lack of faith is so egregious in the final attunement; it is through seeing himself in the eyes of faith that Isaac can find faith himself. In other words, in failing to "sacrifice" Isaac *existentially*, i.e. in failing to "let go" of his egoistic attachment to Isaac, which would thereby provide Isaac the space he needs for his own freedom, Abraham *actually* sacrifices Isaac's salvation. Rather than facing his fear of losing Isaac, rather than overcoming this fear in the interest of a healthier and more loving relationship, Abraham refuses to let go; and in so refusing, he continues to treat Isaac as an object, making Isaac's own appropriation of freedom that much harder. Granted, love ultimately strengthens us, however, learning to love can often be as terrifying as losing Isaac. For love requires openness, insofar as it is an expression of a free, rather than a determined, subjectivity, and this openness requires us to overcome the desire to dominate—both ourselves and others. And this, in turn, requires an acceptance of the very vulnerability that feeds the fears behind domination in the first place. We might have within us an eternally valid worth, but as material beings, we are all ephemeral too. So, paradoxically, just as the material world around us seems to crumble, in the eyes of the loving other, we find the strength to create the world *anew*. That is, we come to *feel* that we are worth a love that is eternal and uncompromising, thereby finding ourselves in a truly new, human community. And so, for all the attempts to equate faith and blindness—an equivalence that makes faith into precisely the kind of obedience to an authoritarian God that Walter Kaufmann saw in Kierkegaard—faith clearly is not an irrational absence of reason that sends us into a world of nothingness; rather, it is the presence of a real

bond between subjectivities that has no direct (or immediate) appearance, and therefore no rational, existence.

As Edward Mooney notes, Abraham trusts God—not blindly, but because he has prior substantive knowledge of God—and it is this knowledge that strengthens Abraham.<sup>35</sup> After all, Abraham lived his whole life according to God’s promises, with the greatest promise being that he would be given Isaac.<sup>36</sup> So, he *knows* that God is not a destroyer (albeit, this is not rational knowledge, but a more intimate experiential or existential knowledge); rather, Abraham knows God is a provider, as God was the very provider of Isaac, i.e. the very provider of the subjectivity he deeply loves, and furthermore, God is the provider whose promise of Isaac remains intact *even* atop Mt. Moriah.<sup>37</sup> That is, God’s promise to Abraham was that Isaac would live, that he would have children, and that his progeny would flourish.<sup>38</sup> It is only anthropomorphically that this story presents a problem, for it is only then, when God is imagined objectively, that we can imagine God as a fickle creature of fleeting whims—a creature capable of taking Isaac away just as easily as he was given. In fact, it is only then, when God is imagined as something external, that we can imagine God as authoritarian, making faith into blind obedience. However, if we imagine God differently, as the source of free subjectivities that have an otherwise inexplicable origin, i.e. as the source of a nature whose origins we cannot explain historically, and as the very medium through which such subjectivities emerge, can we begin to understand that calling God a provider and not a destroyer is not to affix random qualities onto an entity, but to describe qualities that are indistinguishable from it. In other words, God is, by definition, the source of all

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<sup>35</sup> Edward F. Mooney, "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion* 19, no. 1/2 (1986): 32.

<sup>36</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*, trans. New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Genesis 18:10.

<sup>37</sup> Mooney, "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," 32.

<sup>38</sup> *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*: Genesis 21:12.

that is good; God is the name Kierkegaard gives to the *miracle* of human worth. And it *is* a *miracle*; lacking any rational explanation, it has origins that remain a mystery—albeit a mystery that is experienced, not a mystery that is defined by absence.<sup>39</sup>

As Kierkegaard writes of Abraham, “[d]uring all this time [his trip to Mt. Moriah] he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded.”<sup>40</sup> Abraham’s faith in God was absolute, as his willingness demonstrates, and yet, substantively, Abraham knew that Isaac would never be required by God. It is a strange sort of paradox that Kierkegaard presents, i.e. to be absolutely faithful to something (and therefore willing to do anything for it), while knowing that the “object” of that faith would never demand certain things of you. But it is less strange if the object of that faith is actually something with a specific nature, as already articulated. Kierkegaard himself further explains Abraham’s faith:

Yet Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life. In fact, if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world to which he did not belong. But Abraham’s faith was not of this sort, if there is such a faith at all, ... But Abraham had faith specifically for this life—faith that he would grow old in this country, be honored among the people, blessed by posterity, and unforgettable in Isaac, the most

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<sup>39</sup> This idea of a *present* God who is also inexplicable presents a real problem for any style of thinking that wants proof. Kierkegaard’s point, however, is that such a God is real, but that questions of existence and non-existence are not resolved by proof. “Therefore, whether I am moving in the world of sensate palpability or in the world of thought, I never reason in conclusion to existence, but I reason in conclusion from existence. For example, I do not demonstrate that a stone exists but that something which exists is a stone.” Søren Kierkegaard, “Philosophical Fragments,” in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard’s Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 40. Kierkegaard, a great fan of Shakespeare, put it more poetically when he wrote that “... the Hamlet dialectic, to be or not to be, applies to factual being.” *Ibid.*, 41, note. However, the doctrine of *anamnesis*, which thinks that the question of God is one of essence and not existence, insofar as it presupposes the existence of God, misunderstands that the important question of God is precisely that of existence, i.e. does God exist for the subject or not? Interestingly, Camus, an insightful if sometimes uncharitable interpreter of Kierkegaard, sees in Kierkegaard’s God a betrayal of the inexplicable origins of freedom, which thereby devalues the process of becoming free, i.e. it transforms it into something always existing. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1983). 37-38. However, despite Camus’ similarity with Kierkegaard, he failed to see that Kierkegaard’s God was an affirmation of this mystery, rather than its denial.

<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” 35.

precious thing in his life, whom he embraced with a love that is inadequately described by saying he faithfully fulfilled the fathers duty to love the son ...<sup>41</sup>

And here is the decisive point: the duty of a father to a son insufficiently explains Abraham's love for Isaac—Abraham's love is greater. Kierkegaard is no doubt referencing what the ethical might proscribe, but the ethical can never account for how Abraham truly feels for Isaac.

Abraham loves Isaac fully, i.e. spiritually, yet love, as something purely subjective, has no direct objective correlate. In other words, there is no specific action we might say that always follows from love, no specific social identity to which it always conforms, nor an action we might say always indicates the presence of love—for any action and any identity can be mimicked. And likewise, Abraham does not love the appearances through which Isaac relates to him, Abraham loves Isaac himself, as a free subjectivity. Therefore, it is conceivable that no matter what ethical mores we invent, Abraham might eventually find his love at odds with a society so conceived. Furthermore, if Isaac is to become a free subject, Abraham *must* lose him (i.e. as an object)—but only to get him back again, by way of faith (i.e. as a free subject). And now it should be clear what Kierkegaard means when he says that Abraham does not lose Isaac by faith, but that he gains him that way.<sup>42</sup> Isaac's sacrifice is not at all about loss, it would seem, but rather, about a type of love that recognizes the other's freedom.

And herein lies Kierkegaard's most biting critique of his greatest appropriator, Martin Heidegger, insofar as freedom is *only* anxious for those without it—for those with it, freedom and the strength provided by a loving community, are one and the same. While the full explication of the nature of this freedom, and the love that is its expression, will be left for the following chapter, the fact that faith is a faith in the others autonomy already attests to the fact that this idea of freedom is deeply substantive. That is, it is not a freedom of unbridled will,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 49.

which is to say, it is not the despair of strength; rather, it is a conception of freedom that expresses itself through love. So, freedom is not about overcoming obstacles, as freedom is not a result of the will; rather, it is about appropriating our subjectivity, an appropriation that requires us to overcome our attempts to will who we might want to be, for every moment that we spend willing ourselves, is a moment not spent lovingly accepting ourselves. And ultimately, all forms of despair have this in common; rather than *accepting* what we are, we try to will something else. This is why Nora cannot return to her previous life, why Douglass attacks his slave master, and why Camus' rebel *rebels*; they have discovered within themselves something real that is irreconcilable with the indignity of servitude. In a way, while they have found their freedom, remaining a slave is the one possibility not possible for them (for it is, in fact, an abdication of the very possibility they only now found). As Douglass recounts, "... I might [for a while] remain a slave in form, [but] the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."<sup>43</sup> It would seem that in the "religious experience," itself a sort of radical religious conversion whereby a community of freedom is discovered, we have simultaneously discovered an unassailable position from which to lodge social and political critique. In fact, insofar as they *cannot* remain slaves, in that their dignity will necessarily abrade against a society based on socialization, this position is necessarily a revolutionary one.

## **God and Poverty**

Kierkegaard began *Fear and Trembling* with an epigram meant to cast interpretive doubt upon his whole work, and then immediately introduced the theme of doubt more explicitly by way of Socrates and Descartes. Bookending his work with this same theme, he ends it with a

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<sup>43</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," in *Autobiographies*, ed. Jr. Henry Louis Gates (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1994), 65.

joke about Heraclitus. After praising Heraclitus and recalling his famous pronouncement that you cannot step in the same river twice, he speaks of one of Heraclitus' disciples, a disciple who went "further," and pronounced that "[o]ne cannot do it even once."<sup>44</sup> In so arguing, this disciple amended Heraclitus' thesis into one that "denies" motion rather than affirming it, whereas all he had wanted to do was to go "further."<sup>45</sup> Reminiscent of Kierkegaard's critique of the bourgeois intellectual for whom everything had become easy, in building upon Heraclitus without understanding him, his disciple unwittingly transformed Heraclitus into his opposite. As for Heraclitus himself, in affirming the motion of being, specifically, in affirming temporal change, he offered a correlative to Socratic doubt by way of affirming the ephemerality of the apparent world. That is, in a world of ceaseless temporal flux, Socratic detachment helps remedy our anxious desire to dominate.

However, in this dual-sided claim, a metaphysical and a spiritual claim that seems anchored in ancient thought, Kierkegaard is actually demonstrating how much he himself is a modern—while also offering another point of contact between himself and Marx. Certainly Heraclitus captured something enduringly revelatory in his pronouncement; yet, its deep resonance with Kierkegaard speaks to something well captured by Marx. Particularly evident in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx famously describes the chaos of the modern world given the fantastically creative and destructive powers of capitalism. Capitalism created a world in which "steam and machinery revolutionised industrial production," in which the "market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land;" it is a world in which the "bourgeoisie ... has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations... [and] has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," where it

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<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 123.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

has also “stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe,” converting “the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers;” and it does so because the “bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society;” and all of this leads to a world in which “[a]ll fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify,” so that “[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.”<sup>46</sup>

While evocatively described in the *Communist Manifesto*, this sense of instability and dislocation is also evident in *On the Jewish Question*. After all, while it is partially a story of how political emancipation reifies the idea of the bourgeois individual, this reified sense of stability is the mechanism by which the forces of civil society are unleashed. That is, by believing in equality, the inequalities endemic to capitalism are liberated, a liberation that forms the underlying narrative of Marx’s analysis. So, while Heraclitus and Socrates might help capture this flux as an eternal metaphysical truth, the former doing so by way of a pronouncement about the nature of the world and the latter by affirming an attitude by which to experience that world, what Marx helps reveal is that as a result of capitalism (and its protection under the modern, democratic, state), the material world has come to embody this flux in an ever-more immediate way. The Socratic detachment of an authentically lived doubt, and the Heraclitean affirmation of a world that warrants it, might demonstrate an eternal truth; however, given the contemporary sociopolitical world, it was an eternal truth that had become particularly pronounced.

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<sup>46</sup> Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 06, Marx and Engels: 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 487.

For this reason, Marshall Berman speaks of Marx as a paragon of modernity, as he sees in Marx a deep awareness of the nature of modern experience. In an oft-quoted passage, Berman matches Marx's poetry by writing:

There is a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity." To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air."<sup>47</sup>

Given this reality, it is easy to imagine the difficult fate of an isolated individual. For all the promise of capitalism, such as the endlessly changing world of experiences it provides, and the possibility this holds, the cost of this world is that we are each reduced to instrumental laborers in a vast, unforgiving and ever-churning, machine. It is a world in which towers that dwarf Babel are erected in mere months, in which cities are conjured out of the ground seemingly overnight, and in which the greatest dreams of science-fiction are tomorrow's realities; however, it is simultaneously a world in which "eminent domain" ensures that no one's home is free from the threat of destruction, a world in which once thriving communities lie in ruins when their "sustaining" industry "dies," and a world in which "downsizing," "outsourcing," "layoffs," and "structural reorganization" are just a few of the synonyms for the human refuse who have stubbornly outlived their use. And so, the experience that unites humanity is one that potentially destroys us too.

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<sup>47</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The experience of modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988). 13.

The challenge, therefore, is to find a sense of strength by which to “survive” this maelstrom, let alone to thrive within it. And, given this evocation, it should be easy to imagine why a sense of personal integrity that draws upon an identification with the ephemeral objects of modern life sets the stage for overwhelming loss and loneliness—while simultaneously being bolstered by them. It also helps explain why the “individuality” of “political emancipation” and “the ethical” is one of the few identities capable of surviving for any extended period of time given the creative-destruction of capitalism. In its substantive vacuity and absence of any real communal solidarity, a belief in the abstract individual is particularly malleable to the sorcerer’s forces of capital, which itself depends on the willingness of individuals to be instrumentally exploited. In a bitter irony, the affirmation of this vacuous equality—an affirmation which sometimes soothes but which affords little position from which to critique—is tantamount to an affirmation of the equality of our own instrumental worthlessness, so that while seemingly affirming our worth, we are actually affirming that which allows us to be treated as expendable, so long as we are all *equally* so. And, while private property originates as a historical phenomenon, we have seen that it is reproduced by way of this very *attitude*, an attitude that itself is nothing but the appearance of control enshrined in the word *rights*—a word which once stood for the advance of political equality, and which is now often used to legitimize inequality. So, we find ourselves in a maelstrom in which we anxiously grasp onto the little that we can, failing to realize that this domination is the very way in which capitalism is perpetuated, as our egoistically driven domination is a response to our helplessness and vulnerability, while our helplessness and vulnerability leads to our desire to dominate. All of which happily serves those few who stand to make a profit. That is, it is from poverty which we all flee, running into the

waiting arms of private property, and its *true* masters.<sup>48</sup> And so, as Socrates counseled, we need to learn to let go.

And yet, the modern world also opens many doors. If the wisdom of Heraclitus affirmed temporal flux, and Socrates' urged detachment, we can either understand this to mean a world of endless cessation, or else, as *the very precondition for the new*. If feudal social relationships held so fast it was impossible to see past them, that is, if feudalism made true interpersonal disclosure a near impossibility, then capitalism's maelstrom has made true community a greater possibility. For all our attempts at holding onto our delusions, as the instability that leads to our domination has only grown, even our most durable misconceptions sometimes fall prey to the dehumanization we are regularly made to suffer. In other words, while Kierkegaard never understood despair as a sociological category, it is easy to see how it could be. Granted, it remains a phenomenon that pertains to the individual and their subjectivity, but insofar as his higher forms of despair speak to an inability to *will* conformity, we might expect capitalism to multiply their occurrence. Yet, despair is hardly a good answer to vulnerability, even if its higher forms are more honest in their inability to conform to an oppressive world. What is needed, however, for both Marx and Kierkegaard, is a sense of personal integrity that is not subject to the vicissitudes of the ephemeral world of capitalism, a sense of integrity upon which true communities can be built, and a sense of integrity that offers an enduring position from which to critique the systematic dehumanization upon which capitalism depends. What is needed, therefore, is faith.

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<sup>48</sup> Poverty can certainly be understood in a myriad of ways, many of which were best described by Georg Simmel in his essay on poverty. Georg Simmel, "The Poor," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1971). However, rather than using the term to denote its various social and cultural iterations, I am instead using it in a way I think is consistent with Marx. Following from the last chapter in which it was argued that economic exploitation pertains to a power relationship, poverty comes to denote the absence of economic power. That is, in a world governed by money, poverty and vulnerability are one and the same.

Marx does not speak the language of faith, but he is less far from this formula than might appear. If Kierkegaard's faith entails an appropriation and disclosure of the self as free and loving, Marx achieves much the same through his idea of human emancipation. For Marx, the bourgeois sense of freedom "makes every man see in other men not the realization of his own freedom, but the *barrier* to it."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, "[t]he right of man to liberty is based not on the association of man with man, but on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the *restricted* individual, withdrawn into himself."<sup>50</sup> That is, in conceiving of myself as ego, in conceiving of freedom as the satiation of my desires, and in transforming this self-image into a reified object, other people come to appear as obstacles to my freedom rather than an expression of it. Or, at best, they become means to my ends. Which is to say, I only see objects to be possessed, objects which now include even my own freedom, insofar as I see it as an abstract right I possess, rather than an immediate reality that I live. And so, rather than finding myself in a world populated by unique and valuable subjectivities with whom I share a community based in freedom, I see obstacles in my way. And so, human emancipation entails an appropriation of myself as species being, i.e. an appropriation of my eternal nature as a free, creative subject, so that rather than seeing others as mutually exclusive with my freedom, I see them as further examples of it.

And so, Marx writes of human emancipation as the process of following through on the promises of political emancipation, a process of making those promises real.

All emancipation is a *reduction* of the human world and relationships to *man himself*.

Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, to an *egoistic, independent* individual, and, on the other hand, to a *citizen*, a juridical person.

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<sup>49</sup> Marx, "On The Jewish Question," 163.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-63.

Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognised and organised his “*forces propres*” as *social* forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished.<sup>51</sup>

The revolutionary values of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, having been enshrined in the *droits du citoyen*, were themselves a legitimate expression of a freedom that was an advance on the oppression of feudal life; however, having been abstracted into the political realm, they need to be reclaimed by human beings in our real, social existence. That is, rather than living our duplicitous lives, caught between a world that affords us a vacuous equality and one that offers indignity, this vacuous equality needs to be made real by re-absorption into our actual lives. Which is to say, freedom needs to be lived, not only thought, and in overcoming our abstract projection of ourselves, and the irresponsibility it entails, we set the stage for a self-appropriation in which the *human world* is rightly recognized as a product of our free subjectivity. Rather than being vulnerably subject *to* the world, we become subjects upon which *it* depends. That is, the creativity released by capitalism only appears a foreign force intent on our ruin so long as we have not yet appropriated those forces as our own. And ultimately, it is on this basis that true communality can arise, as accepting responsibility for my freedom—which, understanding freedom as substantive and not vacuous, is to say nothing more than that I have *appropriated* my freedom—is to recognize that this freedom is shared by all. So, in overcoming our desire to dominate, and in appropriating a real, substantive freedom, “every man [might come to] see in other men ... the realization of his own freedom ... [not] the *barrier* to it.”<sup>52</sup> After all, my compromise of this freedom becomes your experience of oppression, and your compromise, my oppression, insofar as we reciprocally impose on one another the restrictions we impose on

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 163.

ourselves. Which is to say that, truly, “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>53</sup> Or, in Kierkegaard’s language, “by faith Abraham received Isaac.”<sup>54</sup>

Marx spent little time detailing the complex narrative of an individual subjectivity on the road to freedom. However, as many commentators have noted, the years following 1843 saw Marx increasingly imagine the proletariat as the class of revolutionary change.<sup>55</sup> And in this, we find Marx helping along Kierkegaard, just as Kierkegaard’s faith lends Marx a hand. The proletariat, as the class that, by definition, is the instrumental class, it also happens to be the class of vulnerability, the class in which truly “[a]ll that is solid melts into air.”<sup>56</sup> Yet freed of their illusions, they do not find themselves alone, but together. In their disabused eyes, and in the love from their fellow workers, they can come to feel worth, perhaps, for the first time. And because the forces of domination have matured to their peak, a peak in which society has “simplified class antagonisms ... [into] Bourgeoisie and Proletariat,” i.e. into *pure domination* and *pure instrumentality*, and therefore has “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest,” for Marx, the eternal struggle for human dignity needs to become the historical struggle to overcome private property.<sup>57</sup> And so, their particular battle was also a universal battle; living in a society of pure dehumanization, a society in which they embody the indignity of being an instrumental object rather than a free subject, their battle can potentially become one of pure humanization. Unlike other cases of oppression that masked oppression behind an anachronistic cloak of essentialism, such as occurred under feudalism, the modern

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<sup>53</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 506.

<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 49.

<sup>55</sup> For example, see, David McLellan, *Marx Before Marxism* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1970). 141; Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, Historical Materialism Book Series (Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003). 51.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 487.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 485-87.

guise of this struggle was starkly naked.<sup>58</sup> And while the starkness of the class opposition seems, at least to some, to have receded, the prevailing logic used to understand our social and political reality *is* economic. After all, increasingly, the very *existence* of anything within sociopolitical life requires economic rationale, in a point that critics of neo-liberalism are quick to note. And so, for Marx, an eternal struggle had finally come to historical fruition.

Had Marx sought to answer the question of where this human dignity originated (i.e. the origins of the free creativity of our species being) he might have been led to Kierkegaard's God; however, so far as we know, he never asked. And yet, understood in the way Kierkegaard understood it, the mystery of this question provides an unassailable critical perspective upon the world, and an eternal foundation for a loving community. This was a point clearly captured by Camus' rebel, a rebel who distills the struggle for dignity to its eternal essence. Furthermore, for those living in a capitalist world in which the proletarian class has seemed to become less distinct, in which few identify with the instrumental class despite being situated in its midst, Kierkegaard's radicalism helps reveal the foundational essence of what makes the proletariat revolutionary. That is, understanding communities of free subjectivities in apolitical and eternal terms is essential in a world of less starkly drawn class distinctions. Not only are the proletariat revolutionary for the social position they hold, for if this was sufficient, we would find ourselves

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<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, essentialism has proven quite enduring, as the examples used in this chapter illustrate (i.e. Frederick Douglass and Ibsen's Nora). That is, sexism and racism remain, and they invariably heap added misery on the individuals subject to them. For instance, Douglass's slavery made working class conditions pale in comparison, so much so that he yearned for the *regular* exploitation of a paid laborer; while Nora's dilemma essentially amounted to choosing between the complete social, legal, and political domination of 19<sup>th</sup> century marriage, or, a life of near total destitution. In fact, as it turns out, the woman upon whom Ibsen based his play spent two years committed to an asylum following her husband's wishes, after which point she returned to him. However, rather than reading these as anachronisms, we can instead see that modern *uses* of race and sex are distinct, just as Marx argued with regard to Bauer's anti-Semitism. That is, oppression is not necessarily veiled behind a rigid social structure, as it used to be, but individuals and groups have to play a more active role in hiding the oppression of which they partake, thereby employing racism and sexism in a more instrumental way. Perhaps this helps point a way forward, so that we avoid dismissing such institutions as "premodern," and therefore "banned from the [official] story and relegated to the past." Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, ed. John Beverley and Sara Castro-Klarén, *Illuminations: Cultural Formations of the Americas* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). 57.

with a deterministic Marx inconsistent with his belief in freedom. Rather, the language of Kierkegaard provides a critical corrective within radical movements—a way to keep them honest—for the dignity upon which such politics needs to be built is inconsistent with any instrumental goal that devalues the individual—just as Kierkegaard’s God is a provider, and not a destroyer. Otherwise put, capitalism may be about economic production, but its problem, and the reason it requires critique, is the worthlessness it imposes on its members. And this, rather than a particular, historically apparent, feature, is what constitutes the problem. For the proletariat, so disabused of their self-deceptions, and yet, potentially disclosed to one another in their vulnerability, the possibility for a new type of community could emerge out of the “upbuilding” love they felt for one another.<sup>59</sup> The value enshrined in such communities entailed an innate and inalienable critique of the old, and it is this critique that Marx’s analysis helps articulate in its fullest terms, as these terms are necessary for effective political action.

And so, it would seem that the radical conversion of the proletariat entailed a twofold conversion: the first, a recognition of the dignity found in freedom, the second, an understanding of the systematic forces of dehumanization. So, just as those “religiously” converted start making sense of a world inconsistent with their faith, a world in which their freedom abrades against their servitude, they can potentially come to understand that the forces working against them are not eternal nor are they accidental; that is, the problem is not socialization as an eternal problem. Rather, these forces are deliberate and systematic, extorting a profit on workers’ instrumentalization. For every Nora, there is a Torvald, for every Douglass, a slave owner, and for every worker, there is an owner of capital. And so, following from “religious” conversion, some such individuals might come to have what Jim Marsh calls, with poetic clarity, a “radical

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<sup>59</sup> Upbuilding is the Kierkegaardian adjective for this love, but more on this later.

political conversion.”<sup>60</sup> Told by society that they had no worth, yet told by one another that this was not so, the faith of those around them could prove to be the start of something truly, and inexplicably, *new*.

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<sup>60</sup> James L. Marsh, *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence*, ed. Lenore Langsdorf, SUNY Series in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999). 210-29.

## Part Three: *Freedom*

Kierkegaard and Marx: these living-dead men condition our anchorage and institute themselves, now vanished, as our future, as the tasks that await us.  
(Jean-Paul Sartre, *Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal*)

But deep down this eternity of man through the stars is melancholy, and sadder still this sequestration of brother-worlds through the barrier of space. So many identical populations that pass each other without suspecting their mutual existence! But yes! It has finally been discovered at the end of the 19th Century. But who will believe it?  
(Louis Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity Through the Stars*)

Justice is what love looks like in public.  
(Occupy Wall Street Poster, quoted from Cornel West)

### Introduction

In Paul Tillich's article *Existential Philosophy*, he dates the origins of existential thought to Schelling's 1841 lectures, a movement that lasted a scant decade, only to be replaced by neo-Kantian idealism and naturalistic empiricism.<sup>1</sup> This brief window, one that would later be revived and prove an essential ingredient in many strands of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought, was brief for both Marx and Kierkegaard too, the two thinkers who are themselves most responsible for it. In Kierkegaard's case, by the decades end, his work would become more explicitly Christian, leading to his untimely death in 1855, at age 42. In Marx's case, while he would live until 1883, dying at the riper age of 64, by the 1850s his existential thinking increasingly proved the implicit, rather than the explicit, foundation for his sociopolitical analysis. It is striking that such a powerfully important development in thought should have had such a short birth. A decades

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, "Existential Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5, no. 1 (1944): 45-46.

worth of thought, and yet, in many ways, it set the tone for several major strands of thought that endure into the present day.

In an interesting side note, Marx, best known for theorizing new forms of collective life, died a stateless person in London, with a scant handful of attendees at his funeral. Hardly the end we might expect for the man who would inspire countless millions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in a manifold variety of ways. On the other hand, Kierkegaard, best known as a theorist of radical individualism, and who himself lived his life alone, found himself met with a church and cemetery overflowing with people upon his own death.<sup>2</sup> Like Marx, it would not be until the twentieth century that his work would be given the seriousness it deserved, but this image of Copenhagen's people, many of them "commoners," descending upon Kierkegaard's funeral and gravesite, is hardly the image we might expect from one whose work seems to admit so little other than Kierkegaard's own interiority. And while we should not read too much into this juxtaposition, both stories help testify to the nourishment each gave to multitudes of people—even if it took decades to occur—nourishment that they continue to provide.

This nourishment should be unsurprising. While the overall narrative of the present work is to chart how they imagined unfreedom, emancipation, and now, in *Part III*, freedom, both Marx and Kierkegaard imagine the type of unfreedom into which each of us is born as simultaneously entailing loneliness. Despair, for Kierkegaard, and alienation, for Marx, is a malady that relates to our nature as free beings, if we are considered ontologically; however, the way we *experience* these problems is overwhelmingly as a feeling of loneliness. As Tillich notes:

In all the Existential philosophers it is this loss of community that has provoked the flight from the objective world. Only in that world—in what Herakleitos called "the common world in which we live our waking lives"—is genuine

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, even Hans Christian Anderson attended the funeral, mentioning the impropriety of the packed crowd. Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 797-98.

community between man and man possible. If this common world has disappeared or grown intolerable, the individual turns to his lonely inner experience, where he is forced to spin out dreams which isolate him still further from this world, even though his objective knowledge of it may be very extensive. Here is suggested much of the social background of the philosophy of Human Existence.<sup>3</sup>

Responding to this pervasive modern loneliness, a loneliness that is symptomatic of the absence of truly nourishing communities, Kierkegaard and Marx argue that it arises from a failure to appropriate our true natures as free beings—an appropriation Marx understood as being hindered materially too. Barring such an appropriation, the possibility of openly relating to others was also lost, as, being untrue ourselves, the formation of a true community was also prevented. After all, how might we form a real community when we ourselves are unreal? So, Kierkegaard and Marx's extensive ruminations on interiority, ruminations we find most clearly in Marx's thoughts on alienation and Kierkegaard's on despair, were hardly a teleological end. Neither wanted us to remain inside ourselves, despite how Kierkegaard, in particular, has been portrayed; instead, the challenge was to determine how to connect our interiority with the world, the challenge was community. Freedom and community are inseparable.

In this light, the evocativeness of Marx and Kierkegaard's choice of words for unfreedom make more sense. In Part One, despair and alienation were largely explored in terms of a philosophical anthropology, but now we can see just how appropriate those terms actually are. Both despair (*Fortvivlelse*) and alienation (*Entfremdung/Entäusserungare*) are words we might better expect in literary or poetic works, then in those of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Conceptually, they might mean unfreedom, but experientially, both words evoke precisely the kind of loneliness against which they both wrote. And while their philosophical and sociopolitical projects might have

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<sup>3</sup> Tillich, "Existential Philosophy," 65.

<sup>4</sup> Granted, particularly in Marx's case, these words have a long philosophical lineage (Hegel, Feuerbach), but this should not stop us from noticing just how poetically evocative they nonetheless are.

gone without proper notice for far too long, not truly inspiring major movements of thought until their revival in 1920s Germany (although Marx's earlier inspiration of the Russian Revolution is hardly something to gloss over), the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would be rife with just such existential explorations of loneliness of a more literary, rather than philosophical, variety.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Fyodor Dostoevsky stands out, just as Franz Kafka does in the 20<sup>th</sup>; but interestingly, it was in a place largely devoid of this philosophical lineage that the intertwining discourses of loneliness and freedom would find one of its most evocative homes. Perhaps owing to its wide open expanse, its lineage in Protestant thought, its self-definition as the land of the free, and its understanding of freedom as individualist—or, capitalistic—that home came to be the United States. When the existential thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, managed to capture a generation of Americans in the 1950s and 60s, this wave of existentialism did not speak to the beginning of a tradition in the United States; instead, it only testified to the enduring appeal and relevance of existential thought when it came to describing certain truths about the American experience. This 20<sup>th</sup> century chapter proved to be but one more in a much longer story.<sup>5</sup>

At roughly the same time as Marx and Kierkegaard were writing, an ocean away, Herman Melville captured many of these themes in his vast oeuvre. Perhaps unparalleled in its description of despair, Bartleby's refrain of "I would prefer not to" rings out as the perfect expression of the individual in despair. Lacking the self-determination to "prefer something," and therefore, explicitly "about" freedom and its failed appropriation, Herman Melville not only evokes Bartleby's despair, but also hints at its cause: years spent toiling in the Post Office's

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed history of existentialism in America, see George Cotkin's aptly titled *Existential America*. George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

Office of Dead Letters, itself a repository of failed communication, of failed community.<sup>6</sup> As Bartleby's boss notes, "I might give alms to his body but his body did not pain him, it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach."<sup>7</sup> Precisely, it was Bartleby's soul that was out of reach, a despairing detachment that manifests itself in an inability to act, and an inability to connect with others. Interestingly, this can be juxtaposed with *Moby Dick's* Captain Ahab, a more forceful example of despair, but an example nonetheless. "If Bartleby is a character of resolute passivity, then Captain Ahab explodes as dauntless obsession," notes George Cotkin.<sup>8</sup> No less alone, manifesting his despair in *willfulness* rather than a *lack of will*, we find freedom and loneliness paired yet again. In fact, it would be easy to read these as perfect examples of Kierkegaard's two major forms of despair: that of weakness and that of strength. And, in Ahab's case, we find another important element: the sea.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American frontier weighed heavily in the minds of many, both for its promise, but also, for its hidden terrors. This makes it easy to imagine that Melville's sea was a stand-in for the American West, which, more broadly understood, was itself a stand-in for nature. The relative absence of habitation in the Americas meant that American stories were often set against the backdrop of nature, rather than that of existing communities. Whereas Joseph Conrad's Charles Marlow needed to travel to Africa to find this setting,<sup>9</sup> as the colonies often served as the "natural" setting for many European novels, American novelists needed to have their characters travel far less, potentially finding "nature" at the city limits. In fact, the wide expanse of ocean is certainly an unspoken character in many of Melville's works, providing the context in which human life occurs, as life is bounded within communities that are

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<sup>6</sup> Herman Melville, "Bartleby, The Scrivener," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction* (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 1997), 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Cotkin, *Existential America*: 18.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 1993).

surrounded by a vast, unforgiveable, expanse. So, in *Moby Dick*, the human world is contained within the small outposts of fishing villages, villages surrounded by an endless void in which human action struggles against futility; whereas *Bartleby*, whose story unfolds in New York City, shows that even amidst multitudes, one can feel as if they were lost at sea.

These same themes would not often be so disguised, as the uniquely American cultural phenomenon of the *Western* dispensed with the sea as a metaphor, and instead used the actual American frontier as its setting. While not all Westerns matched Melville's talent and insight, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cormac McCarthy emerged as an enviable talent in his own right, one who is a perfect match for Melville in his use of the expanse of nature as the backdrop for American life. In McCarthy's work, however, he explicitly makes use of the American West rather than a stand-in by way of the sea. It is therefore no coincidence that we find the same themes of despair as in Melville. In both Melville and McCarthy, human relationships, oftentimes real and meaningful, struggle to survive against a backdrop intent on human demise. So, McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*, itself set on the frontier between Mexico and Texas, told stories of individuals struggling to retain their humanity in the face of unforgiving nature, *The Road* tells of a father and son's attempt to remain human in post-apocalyptic America, whereas *Blood Meridian* sets its story directly within 19<sup>th</sup> America, and its violent expansion westward. For all of these works, the message is clear: human creations are fleeting, but the expansive *space* of nature abides. While metaphoric, the relationship between space (or spatiality) and despair is not incidental; as we will soon see, we experience despair *in* space, but we experience freedom (and community) *in* time. But more on that shortly.

There is yet another American novelist, perhaps less celebrated, but important nonetheless, for whom loneliness and despair were central themes: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. In his first

of several autobiographical works, *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut includes a commencement address he delivered to the graduating class of 1974 at Hobart and William Smith College, in which he had this to say:

What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.<sup>10</sup>

Typical of Vonnegut's thought, in reading his vast works—as has become almost a rite of passage for American youth—it becomes clear that perhaps, bar none, Vonnegut believes the “disease of loneliness” to be the greatest affliction from which humankind suffers. This helps explain his enduring appeal, for, if he is right, and loneliness is the scourge he makes it out to be, his great empathy, repeatedly demonstrated in his writing, proves a potent salve—and one he dedicated his life to perfecting. This is why he continues to prove a rite of passage for American youth, providing some much need community for those who empathize a little bit too much with characters like J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, a character who pronounces that the world is filled with nothing but “phonies.”<sup>11</sup>

However, if our despair is symptomatic of our unfreedom, making the end of loneliness and the appropriation of freedom one and the same, what might such a “free” community look like? More problematically, how does one go about constructing a free community, a community which is itself a construct, without having that community, in turn, restrict the freedom it is meant to express. After all, for both Kierkegaard and Marx, freedom is open-ended, implying a constant creation and recreation of the self, even if this does happen within an unchanging anthropology of freedom; for, it is a human anthropology that allows an infinite world of

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<sup>10</sup> Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 2011). 180.

<sup>11</sup> J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2001). 19. In *Six Degrees of Separation*, John Guare has his main character, Paul, expound at length upon the theme of phonies in *The Catcher in the Rye*. See, John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation* (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1992). 24-26.

possibility. This is hardly a tangential question, for within the wide swath of modern thought, it proves to be one of modernity's central concerns (not to mention an explicit concern of *Part II*). We find it, for instance, in Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*, in which the Underground Man surmises that, perhaps, we only enjoy building things, but not living in them.

How do you know, maybe he likes the edifice only from far off, and by no means up close; maybe he only likes creating it, and not living in it, leaving it afterward *aux animaux domestiques*, such as ants, sheep, and so forth.<sup>12</sup>

This discourse about construction relates not only to the world of material buildings, but also, to the intellectual structures we create for ourselves—structures which share important characteristics with their material counterparts—structures such as the various sociopolitical institutions we create in which to live.

Along these lines, the Underground Man attacks the pervasive rationalism he diagnoses in his age. In a critique reminiscent of Kierkegaard's in *Fear and Trembling*, the very idea that human beings might be objectively known with the type of certainty endemic to rational knowledge, is pure anathema to him.

Two times two is four—why, in my opinion, it's sheer impudence, sirs. Two times two is four has a cocky look; it stands across your path, arms akimbo, and spits. I agree that two times two is four is an excellent thing; but if we're going to start praising everything, then two times two is five is sometimes also a most charming little thing.<sup>13</sup>

Impudence, he calls it, as he attacks the very hubris we have seen falls prey to Kierkegaard's attack. All of this is summed up in the Underground Man's attack on the Crystal Palace, that 19<sup>th</sup> century testament to the idea that human beings can be transparent, and therefore, just like a mathematical formula, predictable.

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<sup>12</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, Inc., 1994). 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

You believe in a crystal edifice, forever indestructible; that is, in an edifice at which one can neither put out one's tongue on the sly nor make a fig in the pocket. Well, and perhaps I'm afraid of this edifice precisely because it is crystal and forever indestructible, and it will be impossible to put out one's tongue at it even on the sly.<sup>14</sup>

As Marshall Berman writes of this, “[t]he crucial distinction here is between building a building and living in it: between a building as a medium for the self’s development and as a container for its confinement.”<sup>15</sup>

One of the things that Berman focuses on is the very construction of the material locations in which we live, seeing engineering as a prototypical example of the productive forces modernity has unleashed, and the cities in which we live as its product. We love to build, and as Marx notes in his *Manifesto*, the world of capital has unleashed our productive forces.<sup>16</sup> In this spirit, Berman writes that “[t]he activity of engineering, so long as it remains an activity, can bring man’s creativity to its highest pitch; but as soon as the builder stops building, and entrenches himself in the things he has made, the creative energies are frozen, and the palace becomes a tomb.”<sup>17</sup> Categorized as two fundamentally different types of modernization, “modernization as *adventure* and modernization as *routine*,”<sup>18</sup> Berman writes that “...if the adventure were ever transformed into a routine, then the Crystal Palace would become (as the Underground Man fears) a chicken coop, and then modernization would turn into a death sentence for the spirit.”<sup>19</sup> As the Underground Man’s equivalence of engineering (the Crystal Palace) and mathematics (two plus two equals four) makes clear, this proves equally true of the conceptual structures in which we live, such as our sociopolitical institutions. So, if our nature is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The experience of modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 242-43.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 06, Marx and Engels: 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 487.

<sup>17</sup> Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The experience of modernity*: 243.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

freedom, but structures (even conceptual ones) are, by definition, static, how we do build communities that allow for, rather than repress, our freedom?

We are therefore faced with *the* fundamentally modern sociopolitical question: how to construct sociopolitical edifice's for our communal habitation that do not later become prisons—prisons that, insofar as we betray our natural freedom through them, also become prisons of solitude. Despite the difficulty of demolishing a physical building in order to build a new one better suited to our ever-changing needs, or even, the difficulty of demolishing an entire city to start anew, this problem is infinitely more difficult in the realm of politics. After all, sociopolitical ideas hold fast in a way that our attachment to material buildings do not approximate, insofar as such institutions shape the very bricks by which they are built, i.e. they shape human beings. Granted, the buildings in which we live, and the cities we call home, do influence us in often profound ways; but so too do the sociopolitical institutions in which we live, institutions whose very existence is maintained through our collective belief in them. This is why revolution entails overcoming the way in which we think of ourselves, as *Part II* has argued. So, while that question was reserved for the prior part, in this one we instead ask, what might a real home truly look like?

And here we discover why the question of space is so important. The things we build are things that take up *space*, but the process of building them, as a process, takes up *time*. Looked at differently, freedom occurs in time, but its products take up space. Herein we find the clearest expression of the philosophical problem at play: how do we make freedom's products, that which it creates, a serviceable habitat in which to live. How do we make space *into* time, or, how do we make space amenable to beings who live *through* time? What all of the problematic constructs we have so far surveyed help demonstrate—stories of unfreedom and despair, from

Melville to McCarthy, to the Underground Man's railings against mathematical formulas and the Crystal palace—is that they all have in common that they take space as our context. Their time is lived in space—be it the sea or the American West. By reversing this relationship, we begin to arrive at the solution. The context for our lives needs to return to time, so that we contextualize the spaces in which we live in terms of time, rather than contextualizing the time we each have allotted to us according to the space in which we happen to live.

Lastly, for a more explicit hint at what such recontextualization might look like, we can once again turn to Kurt Vonnegut Jr., and his book—what is perhaps his best—*Cat's Cradle*. In it, Vonnegut invents a fictitious religion, *Bokononism*, one that helps cure that awful “disease of loneliness.” Vonnegut further prefaces his work with this epigraph: “Nothing in this book is true,”<sup>20</sup> a phrase that also aptly describes the religion he creates. In fact, speaking of this religion, but doing so by way of the fictitious narrator of the book (a very *Kierkegaardian* thing to do), he writes that: “I do not intend that this book be a tract on behalf of Bokononism. I should like to offer a Bokononist warning about it, however. The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this: “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.”<sup>21</sup> The true things we create must simultaneously be understood as lies. That is, as times change so too will our truths; we create truths in order to live, but when these truths lose their context as created things, created out of our changing needs, when they appear spatial rather than temporal, we must recognize that they have become lies. Freedom might endure as an eternal truth, but how we live that freedom will necessarily change, in turn necessitating new truths. In the language of continental thought, we must enter an understanding of sociopolitical life that goes beyond Hegel's understanding of

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<sup>20</sup> Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Cat's Cradle* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 2010). vii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the state as the end goal of human history, but that does not devolve into post-modern relativism.

We must learn to be free, together.

## Chapter 6: *Subjectivity*

With this broad context set, a context that understands freedom as communal, and that grounds this freedom temporally rather than spatially, it is time to turn to the first part of this equation: the question of freedom. For this, we turn to Kierkegaard, as Kierkegaard offers us a complex and nuanced understanding of the nature of freedom, if considered subjectively. Working through the problems of space and time, of past and future, we will come to see why despair (and oppression) are spatial, whereas freedom is temporal. Kierkegaard therefore helps us understand what the freedom we have appropriated in *Part II* looks like once we have it, a freedom that is one and the same with a proper understanding of time. In the chapters that follow this one, with Kierkegaard's understanding of subjective freedom in tow, we can then turn to Marx, to see what this freedom looks like objectively, if we imagine the kind of community that follows from it. The question for *Part III* is therefore twofold: what does a free individual look like, and, what of a community of them?

### **Necessity and the Spatialization of Time**

Kierkegaard's 1844 work, *Philosophical Fragments*, is widely considered to be among his most important philosophical works. While the 1846 companion piece, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, has received more study, perhaps owing to its voluminous six hundred pages to its predecessors scant one hundred, Kierkegaard's earlier, shorter, work is itself quite densely packed, and quite worth the effort required to unpack it. In broad strokes, *Philosophical Fragments* finds itself rearticulating the gap between subjectivity and objectivity, just as we have seen in *Fear and Trembling*, albeit with a distinctly temporal

twist. Specifically, *Fragments*' concern is with the question of Christianity as a historical doctrine, and as such, with how much can be learned from just such an "objective" doctrine. If emancipation entails overcoming a relationship whereby we are determined by objective ideas, Christianity itself also falls prey to this problem.

However, even more important than this problem, *Fragments* is concerned with demonstrating that the essential "advance" Christianity makes over its Hellenic predecessors is in understanding God *as* historical. While Christianity might entail transcendence, as we have seen in the third chapter on emancipation, it also happens to be a type of transcendence that is never but embodied. In fact, it is through the transcendent emancipatory act that material existence gains its truth and value. This also helps demonstrate how the former problem folds into the latter, insofar as Christianity itself, as an objective doctrine, but one that is concerned with subjective emancipation, has to describe a subjective experience by way of a language that, as a medium for communicating between individuals, *is* objective. We can also see how Marx's materialism might map onto Kierkegaard's Christianity, insofar as God, for Kierkegaard, is most importantly a conception of God *becoming* an actually existing human being. In other words, both are concerned with understanding the subjectivity that lies, often hidden, behind (or within) the objective world.

While it shares its overall conceptual schema with *Fear and Trembling*, unlike that work, a work which focuses almost exclusively on demonstrating the limits of our understanding vis-à-vis faith, the pseudonym of *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus, speaks with an authority unknown to *Fear and Trembling*'s Johannes de Silentio. While Climacus claims not to possess faith (a claim that Kierkegaard elsewhere hints is a merely rhetorical device),<sup>1</sup> it is clear

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," in *The Point of View*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8, n2.

that Climacus speaks of faith substantively, in a way that Johannes de Silentio does not. So, whereas Johannes de Silentio took a negative approach in which he sought to demonstrate the limits of philosophy, Climacus, wary of those limits, recognizes that there are, in fact, some things that you can say. So long as we do not mistake a conceptual understanding of faith for its subjective appropriation, a mistake that would lead us to believe that thinking about faith is the same as possessing it (a mistake which *Fear and Trembling* has already attempted to prevent), we can complement faith with a conceptual understanding of what it is that we have (or do not have). Demonstrating he is much more a philosopher than he lets on, through Climacus, Kierkegaard further clarifies that his critique of Hegel does not lie in a renunciation of philosophical thought, but rather, it lies in establishing an intellectual humility that distinguishes between conceptual understanding and an appropriation of faith. In his attempt to limit reason while simultaneously arguing that individual human beings are ends-in-themselves, we might say that Kierkegaard represents a post-Hegelian Kantianism.

The distinctly temporal nature of this work's philosophical approach also helps reveal an essential dimension of faith; specifically, *Fragments* contains what is Kierkegaard's most direct explication of the nature of freedom. As we have seen, to have faith is precisely to have faith *in* freedom, i.e. to have faith in the existence of freedom, and in *Fragments*, Kierkegaard further elaborates this relationship.<sup>2</sup> Contained in a brief section in the middle of *Fragments*, a section entitled "Interlude: Is the Past More Necessary than the Future?", it is deceptively easy to overlook the gravity of this section for how it temporarily breaks from the main narrative—not to mention its own rather obtuse complexity.<sup>3</sup> In it we find Climacus directly expounding on the nature of several temporal concepts, notably possibility, actuality, and necessity, in what can

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<sup>2</sup> For an explanation on the connection of faith and freedom, see, Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 72-88.

easily come off as an arcane philosophical discussion (a retort to Hegel's *The Encyclopaedia Logic*), but which hides a profound understanding of radical freedom. Asking after the nature of what it means for something to have "come into existence," i.e. what it means when we say that something now exists which did not exist before, through Climacus, Kierkegaard offers a conceptual understanding of the radical freedom that we have seen is appropriated in the act of faith.

Climacus begins by clarifying what he means by "coming into existence," the concept that lies at the heart of this interlude.

If, in coming into existence, a plan is intrinsically changed, then it is not this plan that comes into existence; but if it comes into existence unchanged, what, then, is the change of coming into existence? This change, then, is not in essence [*Væsen*] but in being [*Væren*] and is from not existing to existing.<sup>4</sup>

Simpler than it seems, Climacus is trying to disassociate two ways in which we make sense of temporal change: either we understand each new moment as a process of cessation, or else, as a process of birth. As Climacus argues, the former explanation occurs by way of essence, and the latter, by way of existence. However, before proceeding to what Climacus believes to be the proper explanation of temporality, an explanation that reveals his understanding of freedom, it is important to first understand the problematic one.

In speaking of temporal change as a matter of essence, the "newness" of the new speaks only to what the world *means*—not to what it actually *is*. For instance, Climacus captures this when he refers to "a plan [that] is intrinsically changed," insofar as from one moment to the next the *plan*, or, the *idea*, is what has changed. Climacus is pointing out that such explanations of time see each moment in time as *essentially* different than the prior ones (the "plan," or idea, has changed)—in other words, this moment *means* something different than the last ones—so that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 73.

what we imagine we are experiencing, when we experience time, is a change to what the world *means*, or, its “essence.” Rather than understanding temporal change as the birth of truly new, existing, things—things that did not exist a moment before—we come to see the new in a very circumscribed, and, in fact, contradictory way. This conception of temporal change sees change as a change to *form* and not to *content*, to essence and not to existence. Therefore, in this conceptualization, the so-called newness that we experience as we move from moment to moment, does not speak to a birth of new moments, a birth whereby something that did not previously exist “comes into existence;” rather, this conception of the new is but a new form for old content. What therefore distinguishes this moment from moments past is not that something new exists which did not exist a moment ago, but rather, what existed a moment before has simply taken on a new form. In turn, this betrays a position that takes existing matter for granted, as what exists simply adopts new forms as time goes by. From ashes to ashes, and dust to dust, as it were.<sup>5</sup> We can also see something of this in scientific inquiry, for example, as the changes with which it is concerned are changes to that which it can already observe. Scientific experiment does not study the birth of anything *ex nihilo*, but rather, it studies changes to that which already exists.

Looked at abstractly, the presumption that content preexists form seems to grant eternal status to *being*, insofar as all that exists appears to have always existed. The totality of being is therefore taken for granted, and what we experience as temporal change is but the changing form of this *total* content. This does make intuitive sense insofar as the birth of anything *ex nihilo* seems beyond comprehension, as everything that now exists seems to have some sort of antecedent state. Positing the eternal nature of being can therefore be seen as an attempt to avoid

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<sup>5</sup> Or, as the book of *Genesis* puts it, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version*, trans. New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Genesis 3:19.

the problem of infinite regress, by making temporal change a matter of form, or essence, and not of content, or existence. What follows is that the study of temporality becomes the study of the changing form of what currently exists. Given that this presupposition accords well with our experience of the world, insofar as we can recognize that everything that currently exists, existed in a different form at an earlier point in time, this premise seems a difficult one to dispute. However, for Climacus, regardless of this internal consistency, a consistency that makes this conceptualization appear irrefutable, rather than explaining time, this perspective actually serves to betray it.

The empiricism of the scientific method is the best example of this problem, while it simultaneously demonstrates that such a conceptualization of time is actually quite appropriate, depending on the subject matter in question, i.e. when studying “nature,” or, at least, certain parts of it. Scientific study does not entertain the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*; rather, it presupposes its object of study—the natural world—and only seeks to understand how it operates, ultimately floundering on the question of from where it all came.<sup>6</sup> In a very rough schematization, the scientific method proceeds by way of hypotheses and experiment: a hypothesis is made and then an experiment is constructed in order to test its truth. Ultimately, if successful, it becomes possible to infer the veracity of the hypothesis. Furthermore, the nature of such successful inferences allows us to understand the unique causality that underlies the observed phenomenon in question—that is, we infer a *why* about a *what*. As Hegel puts it, “[t]he problem of science, and especially of philosophy, undoubtedly consists in eliciting the necessity

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<sup>6</sup> Even the “big bang theory,” which attempts to explain the origins of the universe, does not explain the origin of matter itself, but only posits that all matter once existed in a hyper-condensed form, before exploding across the universe.

concealed under the semblance of contingency.”<sup>7</sup> In finding the *why*, we have not only demonstrated the reason underneath events that had previously seemed contingent, but also, what we have actually discovered is *necessity*. That is, scientific inquiry aims to discover the necessary ways in which the natural phenomenon we observe *must* act, activity that follows directly from their natures, for they have no choice but to act as they do. This is why repeatability is such an essential criterion of scientific experiment. After all, the fact that an experiment can be repeated with the same result lends credibility to the veracity of our inference, an inference that should always, i.e. *necessarily*, be true.<sup>8</sup>

Problematically, with this knowledge of necessity arises a difficulty, for it now seems possible to predict the future. If we presuppose that content exists, i.e. that, as matter, everything that ever will exist already does exist, understanding the necessity that underlies the changing of its forms also allows us to understand how that world will necessarily unfold in the future. In times long past, for example, people might have experienced fright in the event of a solar eclipse, but for us, who understand *why* it occurs, and with such accuracy that we can predict it years in advance, the *future*, or this *type* of future, is something that we *know*. So, rather than being frightened, such events serve to prove to us the truth of our foreknowledge. And even when it turns out that we predicted wrong, it need not be because the natural world proved unpredictable, but, as Kant argued, it might only indicate that our theories have proven *insufficient*—for, “[i]n such cases it was not the fault of theory if it was of little use in practice, but rather of there having been *not enough* theory.”<sup>9</sup> It is not that theory cannot explain reality and its future

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<sup>7</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975). 228.

<sup>8</sup> Hardly a new methodology, this is what Aristotle calls a “demonstration.” Aristotle, “Posterior Analytics,” in *Selections*, ed. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, “On the Common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice,” in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Allen Wood (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 279.

trajectory, but that it has not fully done so yet. When successful, when the totality of the natural world finds its intelligible complement in the world of theory, then we have what Kant calls “a system.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, in the companion piece to *Philosophical Fragments*, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we find Kierkegaard saying of such knowledge—a knowledge that attempts to create a theoretical complement that truthfully renders an underlying reality—that its “truth is an approximating.”<sup>11</sup> Hardly a denigrating appraisal, Kierkegaard’s terminology seems to capture the nature of this type of truth, albeit while including its epistemological status in its very name.

We can see all of this as a corollary to *Fear and Trembling*’s critique of *anamnesis* (recollection).<sup>12</sup> While that doctrine presupposes that we can think ourselves into faith, it presumes so on the basis of the belief that reason and existence are coterminous, a presumption that necessarily rests on the belief that all that exists is all that ever will. This very presumption is necessary if we are to know the future, as otherwise, the future might hold things that do not *now* exist, in any form whatsoever. This is why at the end of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard is frustrated with the so-called advance of Heraclitus’ disciple. Whereas Kierkegaard argues that Heraclitus sought to affirm the unpredictability of the future in his pronouncement about the inability of stepping into the same river twice (i.e. tomorrow’s river is not today’s), his disciple transforms this pronouncement into one that affirms universal being by arguing that you cannot do it even once (i.e. the river itself is but a transitory form, whereas universal being is the real, ever-present, reality), and unwittingly takes a step “backwards” instead of “forwards.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 1, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). 190.

<sup>12</sup> See, Chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 123.

Complementing *Fear and Trembling's* critique of reason, in *Fragments*, Kierkegaard offers a corollary that focuses on what such an overreliance on thought presupposes about existence; or, reciprocally, what a presupposition about the nature of existence means for how we conduct our thinking. A belief in a totality of existence leads to a belief in a totality of forms (i.e. essence), even if we do not happen to know them all yet, because we do not yet have “*enough* theory.”<sup>14</sup> Insofar as both presuppose the universe as bounded, i.e. as a totality, such a belief allows the possibility of prediction to arise. If all that exists is a given, all its possible forms are necessarily circumscribed by that given matter itself. Therefore, if we can only come to know the nature of the necessity underlying said existence, a necessity that explains the transformation of its forms, we can know how these forms will necessarily change in the future, freed from the possibility that something fundamentally new might arise.

Following from this, Climacus has this to say: “Nature as spatial determination exists only immediately.”<sup>15</sup> What he means is that the necessity we infer as operative in nature operates in a simple, unreflective, manner, because, when we discover the necessity underlying a particular phenomenon, or a particular *form* nature has taken, we have discovered how that thing *must* act. While human self-reflection allows us to exercise freedom, nature, as proven through our ability to predict it, lacks this capacity (or, if it is self-reflective, it is a self-reflectiveness that lacks the capacity to alter its activity). The activity of the things of nature are one and the same with what those things are: an animal acts as that animal should act, so too with plants, with the best example provided by the precise dynamics of celestial behavior, a realm in which prediction has no match. We can see a precise parallel in Marx too, such as when he writes that: “The

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<sup>14</sup> Kant, "On the Common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice," 279.

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 79.

animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life activity.”<sup>16</sup> Or, when he writes that:

Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. ... It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need...<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, the fact that we can predict these things reciprocally testifies to the fact that this type of simple necessity—a necessity that directly or immediately determines activity—is, in fact, operative within them. We know that if we incorrectly predict natural phenomenon it is not because they do not act in a necessary way that is determined by their nature, but rather, it is only because we have not yet discovered what that necessity is.

Returning to Climacus’ assertion that nature is a spatial determination, his claim is actually a claim about the nature of representation. Specifically, Climacus is noting that all symbolic representation, the very building blocks of thought, building blocks that include the very scientific theories we use to explain nature, necessarily fall short when they try and explain time. Specifically, a symbol is always static, for it exists, in its entirety, in a single moment of time. As a prototypical example of symbolic representation, a map can be quite accurate at portraying space. Yet, time is absolutely different, for we experience time as an endless flux, just as evoked by Heraclitus; in other words, what characterizes time is change, but symbols are fixed—they are creations created in time. However, the moment we create a map of time, we have transformed time *into* space; or, at least, we have tried to. As David Harvey notes, “[a]ny system of representation, in fact, is a spatialization of sorts which automatically freezes the flow

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 276.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

of experience and in so doing distorts what it strives to represent.”<sup>18</sup> He also notes that one of the best examples are the very hands of a clock, which directly chart time through spatial movement, a paradox that infuriated the great theorist of time, Henri Bergson.<sup>19</sup> Following from this, it is also easy to explain modernist literature’s fascination with this problem, a problem that is directly evident in such seminal works as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, both of which attempt to capture the complexity found in but a single day. While we certainly learn about the complexities of time through reading these works, it nonetheless remains impossible to represent time without, in this way, betraying it. In fact, for all their efforts to capture the complexity of time, pointing this peculiarity out was most certainly part of both Joyce’s and Woolf’s plan. For all his seeming simplicity, perhaps Vonnegut captured this best. His creation of a fictitious religion is a way of giving shape to time, insofar as religion is supposed to offer people a way to shape their lives, as they live them *through* time. Yet, he does so with a full acknowledgement of the fact that the “true” symbols he offers us, as we navigate our own lives, are simultaneously all “lies.”

For all his many works, Kierkegaard shows little interest in questions of epistemology that pertain to the natural world, as his almost exclusive focus is on the activity of living, seemingly taking Kantian epistemology for granted in the realm of nature. However, the epistemological gap at the heart of Kant’s philosophy is one that is also witnessed in the realm of living, if such thought is misapplied to the study of humankind. There, it becomes the gap between subjectivity (what we are inside, or, our noumenal existence) and objectivity (how we appear to others, or, our phenomenal existence). This is precisely where the problem lies. If we proceed to study human beings by inferring into their subjectivity based on observations about

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<sup>18</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990). 206.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

their objective actions, just as the social sciences are increasingly wont to do, our aim is to find the theoretical necessity underlying human action. Just as if human beings were natural phenomena to be hypothesized, experimented upon, and inferred into, the social sciences often seek to understand the necessity that underlies the diverse forms of human behavior—a point that easily explains their endless attempts at prediction. However, unlike the natural world, for which this approach seems apt, human beings possess something subjectively that proves entirely incommensurate with such an intellectual approach—as we have seen, human beings are free. And, furthermore, it is time, the very thing that proves incommensurate with representational thought, that serves as the medium in which we act. That is, it is through the future, a future we believe we can shape, that we exercise our freedom.

So, Climacus' project is increasingly bound up with an explication of the nature of the future, insofar as a real, unpredictable, future is a necessary prerequisite for freedom. Otherwise, we devolve into determinism. Unlike nature, or parts of nature, for whom activity takes the form of necessity and therefore creates a predictable future, human freedom *necessarily* implies an unpredictable future—nature's *nature* makes it predictable, whereas human *nature* makes us unpredictable. We have heard Climacus say that: "Nature as spatial determination exists only immediately."<sup>20</sup> However, he continues this thought, and now, speaking of human beings, he says that: "Something that is dialectical with respect to time has an intrinsic duplexity [*Dobbelthed*]."<sup>21</sup> As nature exists only *immediately*, it simply acts according to its nature; however, in the case of human beings, because we are "dialectical with respect to time" we have an "intrinsic duplexity" that makes us *mediated* creatures. Because we can think about ourselves *in* time, and, particularly, because we can think about the future, we have a duplexity or

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<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 79.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

reflective capacity (*Doppelthed* is perhaps best translated simply as *doubleness*) that allows us to act according to different possible futures. In other words, we have the dialectical capacity for freedom *in* time, insofar as our natural self-reflective capacity allows us to perceive different possibilities of action, rather than the necessary action that the natural world seems compelled to take. All of which helps explain, perhaps, why many of the great works of alienation and despair, such as those of Melville and McCarthy, have space as their context (the sea/the desert), and not time (i.e. history). Insofar as nature is “spatial,” that is, insofar as it has no real future because it acts only according to necessity, a spatial context for life provides no tools for exercising freedom. But if freedom is our true nature and constitutes the foundation for community, and if freedom requires time, then, losing time to space as the context for our action seems to preclude, or, be symptomatic of, the loss of community.

Finally, before exploring the metaphysics of freedom, it is important to note one last consequence of this problematic conceptualization of time: not only do we lose the future, perhaps more troubling is that temporal change takes on the character of cessation. As existence is presupposed, the different possible forms of its existence are also presupposed; just as with existence, its forms have always existed, albeit in an incipient form. However, when we know the future, our relationship to it changes. Rather than the unknown opening up in front of us, an unknown that allows us to shape the present, we instead confront the known future, so that temporality appears to us as the known moving backwards to meet us, in a perpetual cycle of change, rather than us moving towards it, shaping it as we go. As a result, the extent to which we exhibit any attachment to the fleeting forms that matter happens to take, be they the people or the things that populate our lives, is the extent to which we experience time as a perpetual process of loss. Rather than experiencing time as a continual birth of the new, i.e. the location into which

our freedom is projected, we come to experience it as the death of the old; rather than acting out into the future, the future comes to pass over us. As Climacus puts it, such a conception of change “presupposes the existence of that in which change is taking place, even though the change is that of ceasing to exist [*at være til*].”<sup>22</sup> It is no wonder, then, that Kierkegaard believes a detached philosophical attitude and the experience of loss are so intertwined—a belief in universal being is, paradoxically, both a cause and an effect of our unfreedom. It is the necessary conclusion when we experience time as loss, as we must so experience it, if we are not yet free. And it is also the appropriate bulwark to ward off this loss, as, while forms may change, we can retreat to a realm where *being* seems to always exist. Or, more succinctly put: if we think too much, time turns to death; but dialectically, if we are lost in death, thinking proves to be a much needed refuge.

Recalling *Part One*, where we explored Kierkegaard’s notion of despair, that notion did not necessarily evoke the psychological emotion usually brought forth by the word despair (i.e. the feeling of hopelessness). However, we are now in a better position to see how his previous definition of despair does in fact explain those feelings. We have seen Kierkegaard define despair thusly: “To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself – this is the formula for all despair.”<sup>23</sup> And, as we have seen, what he has in mind is a conception of despair as the willful act of willing to be other than what one truly is. However, if what one truly is *is* freedom, despair is the willful abdication of freedom—itsself an impossibility—but, barring this, it instead entails the abdication of responsibility for one’s freedom, i.e. the feigned attempt to act *as if* one were not free. We can now see how despair is not simply a technical term used to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>23</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). 20

denote our unwillingness to accept our nature, but that it also captures those feelings of hopelessness with which it is usually associated. If an appropriation of freedom and a real future are one and the same, then the abdication of freedom necessarily entails a loss of an open future, it entails precisely the experience of time as loss against which Climacus now writes. Unless we accept our freedom we do not truly have a future, and without a future, or, with a future that seems determined by the forces of necessity, time is not the medium in which we freely act, but a series of endless deaths in which that which exists perpetually washes over us. In other words, until we *act*, or, until we truly appropriate our action by taking responsibility for it, time *is* a perpetual experience of loss.<sup>24</sup> And so, we despair.

### **The Metaphysics of Freedom**

With his attack on this conceptualization of temporality in place, a conceptualization that sees temporal change as a matter of essence, Climacus therefore lays stress on existence, on what he calls the transition from “not existing to existing.” Interestingly, in switching his focus from essence to existence, what Climacus is actually doing is switching his focus from cessation (from existing to not existing) to birth (from not existing to existing). Entirely parallel modes of conceptualizing temporal change, insofar as one focuses on the beginning of what exists and the other on the end of it, by switching his focus in this way, Climacus can begin to demonstrate how human freedom introduces a fundamentally new quality into temporality. As the natural world seems to unfold necessarily, and therefore coheres more closely to the way in which spatiality operates than to temporality, it might even be argued that it is human beings themselves who

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<sup>24</sup> This also helps explain why accepting loss is essential for accepting love and the freedom upon which it rests. It entails a willingness to face the self-defensive terms one has set for one’s own existence, albeit in the ultimate interest of overcoming them. See, Chapter 5.

give birth to time. Or, more precisely, that the existence of the future depends on the existence of human beings.

Climacus is therefore tasked with having to explain how coming into existence is not simply an experience of cessation, an experience whereby we might easily become passive witnesses to a history independent of our own actions, so that we can instead come to see in the future something not only new, but dependent on us. He begins by explaining the nature of *coming* into existence, rather than going out of it, by arguing that what exists is not simply a new form of what has always existed. In his words:

... this non-being that is abandoned by that which comes into existence must also exist, for otherwise “that which comes into existence would not remain unchanged in the coming into existence” unless it had not been at all, whereby once again and for another reason the change of coming into existence would be absolutely different from any other change, because it would be no change at all, for every change has always presupposed something.<sup>25</sup>

By positing that non-being exists, and that what we take to be actuality is the transition from non-being to being, Climacus overcomes the model of time as cessation. The way he does so is by arguing that what exists, rather than being another permutation of what *has* existed, is, in fact, the result of the non-existent giving up its non-being for being; in other words, it is *born into existence*. The antecedent state of that which exists is not that which existed a moment ago; rather, it is something else, a non-being, which gives up its non-being in exchange for being. For Climacus, we can begin to see that time is not endless death; instead, it is constant birth.

While Climacus’s narrative seems to be getting evermore obtuse, as discussions of being and non-being can be, he quickly clarifies his position, in terms with which it is easier to relate.

But such a being that nevertheless is a non-being is possibility, and a being that is being is indeed actual being or actuality, and the change of coming into existence is the transition from possibility to actuality.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 73-74.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

Here, we have the point: coming into existence, a transition from non-being to being, is the transition of possibility into actuality; or, better yet, of imagination into reality. When we imagine something that does not yet exist, when we imagine what is *possible*, Climacus first argues that these things do have a kind of existence. The things that we imagine *are* real, but *as* imagined things; they exist *as* imagination, or, in Climacus's vernacular, they have a "being that nevertheless is a non-being." Following from this, when something comes into existence, when it exists *materially*, its status as non-being is given up, it is no longer a thing of the imagination, as it gains real being, becoming *actual*. Granted, we continue to use our imagination to apprehend real things too, however, in such cases, we are imagining real things that have *being*, rather than imagining imagined things that have *non-being*.

In this simple formulation, a formulation in which a relationship is born between what exists ("being") and what we imagine might exist ("a being that nevertheless is a non-being"), we have Climacus' understanding of freedom, an understanding that is inextricably bound to his understanding of temporality. When we exercise our imagination beyond the limits of imagining what exists, and we enter the realm of imagining what might exist, we have begun to think of the future. Specifically, all imagined things that are not *actual*, are imagined things that are *possible*—even if they seem, or in fact are, absurd. Yet, regardless of the likelihood of their becoming actual, the *location* of our imagination, as the realm of possibility, *is* the future. Reciprocally, such a future is necessary if we are to be free, for our ability to imagine different possible futures is exactly what allows us to exert control over how we act. That is, I can choose how to act only because I can imagine different ways in which I might; the very doubleness (*Dobbelthed*) of which Climacus has already spoken.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 79.

This logic needs to be extended even further: the future *never* exists *except* as something imagined, and so, it does not actually exist *in the future*, but has the actuality of non-being *in the present*. In other words, the future always exists in the present. Following this, actuality encompasses everything that actually exists, both that which has being and that which has non-being, so that all of actuality—the sum-total of existence—exists only in the present. Yet, in the interaction of possibility and actuality, in the interaction of the future and the present, an interaction that itself takes place in the present, we find freedom. As Climacus puts it: “The change of coming into existence is actuality; the transition takes place in freedom.”<sup>28</sup> Actuality is therefore nothing but our actualization, or making material, of those things which we only once imagined—it is the process of making the future, or, what we imagine, real. The emancipatory process of becoming free is thereby transformed into the self-appropriative task of accepting responsibility for a process of actualization in which we are always engaged. That is, we are always making the present, even if we do not want to accept this fact, and so, freedom not only entails this actual process of actuality, but also, it entails accepting responsibility (and therefore control) over it. In fact, we are also back at *Part One*, where we found a conception of human nature as free activity. Just as Marx argued, but as is consistent with Kierkegaard too, “free, conscious activity is man’s species-character.”<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, this freedom is demonstrated in our interaction with the world, in our making actual of what we first imagine as only possible.

Herein we can also see that temporal change does imply the birth of something new; while the natural world might operate according to a necessity that we perceive as a process of endless cessation, the moment we act, the moment we make a choice and modify the “natural” flow of nature, we make our mark on the world. That is, we truly do bring something into the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 276.

world that would not have existed without us, we make a possibility *actual*. Whereas before the existence of human action, it could be argued that the operative principle behind the world was nature's necessity, once we act, we interrupt this flow, altering the world in a way that is not directly, or immediately, determined by our own necessity. Granted, we might *necessarily* be free, and over this part of our nature we have no control (i.e. we cannot *not* be free, no matter how hard we might try), but our nature is unique insofar as it is the one type of nature that is not truly a nature, at least insofar as we understand a thing's nature as determinative of the specific ways in which it acts. Our nature, instead, allows us choice over these specificities through our dialectical relationship with time, limiting our action only at the point at which our imagination ends; a limit that, for both Kierkegaard and Marx, does not exist, and a limit that instead reflects back upon restrictions imposed *on* our freedom, be they self-imposed or externally originated. That is, we come to believe certain things are not possible because we have not yet appropriated our freedom. Rather than determining our specific actions, human nature *is* self-determination.

What follows, then, is that we have found our explanation for the flux of temporal change—time is constant change only because we are free, as without freedom, necessity reigns. In such a case, the doctrine of cessation would be true, for its retreat into a belief in eternal being is a way of positing that because necessity strictly determines how events unfold, events *are not* actually unfolding. What we perceive as change would only be our inability to perceive the entirety of “time” at once, so that we only ever see a snapshot. Just as a film exists in its entirety, even if we only ever watch it in sequence, this sequence only creates the illusion of change, whereas the truth is that if we were omniscient, we could see the whole film at once. Without recognizing that each frame we watch is a human creation created in freedom, a misrecognition that demonstrates an unwillingness to accept one's own freedom (i.e. despair), we only ever

experience such a reality as cessation. If we cannot see how things are born, our only other way of explaining temporal change is by seeing it as death. And if this is the case, retreating into a belief in eternal being is an understandable self-defense mechanism. It is no wonder that such a world is one of despair, for, lacking freedom, it is completely devoid of human presence.

Returning to the text, soon hereafter, Climacus clarifies and develops this position, explicitly juxtaposing the human realm, a realm in which freedom is the operative principle, with the natural world, a world in which necessity reigns. He asks:

Can the necessary come into existence? Coming into existence is a change, but since the necessary is always related to itself and is related to itself in the same way, it cannot be changed at all. All coming into existence is a *suffering* [*Liden*], and the necessary cannot suffer, cannot suffer the suffering of actuality—namely, that the possible (not merely the possible that is excluded but even the possibility that is accepted) turns out to be nothing the moment it becomes actual, for possibility is *annihilated* by actuality. Precisely by coming into existence, everything that comes into existence demonstrates that it is not necessary, for the only thing that cannot come into existence is the necessary, because the necessary is.<sup>30</sup>

We can see here that Climacus clearly demarcates two realms: that of freedom and that of necessity. Playing off the distinction between that which always exists, i.e. the natural world, or, more basically, substance itself, what Hegel might call *being-as-such*, Climacus argues that at this level these things do not come into existence. The necessity we see operative in parts of the world, such as the natural world, is not that part of the world which has “come into existence.”

However, without denying that the realm of necessity exists, Climacus only claims that this realm has simply always existed, that it did not come into existence. In other words, the natural world, the world of existing substance, has simply always been there. But, even more specifically, he is saying that the necessary “cannot be changed.” He certainly does not mean that the things of nature cannot be altered themselves, insofar as our every interaction with the world

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<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 74.

changes it, but rather, he is simply arguing that the necessity that underlies the world is not something that has been freely created. We did not create, or bring into existence, the necessary natures of the things in the world, we discover them to have natures independent of our wishes. However, while their natures might be unalterable, we can make dramatic changes insofar as we learn how to manipulate those natures. So, we look at nature, and we witness that it operates according to inalienable physical laws, and we further recognize that these laws are not the products of human hands. However, while ice might always and *necessarily* melt when heat is added, the fact that this piece of ice melted because *I* added heat to it is something that I have *freely* done. So, we might have to accept certain necessary laws of the universe, but what we choose to do with them is up to us. And, with this more nuanced reading of freedom and necessity established, Climacus goes on to make a peculiar claim about coming into existence: he calls it *a suffering*, and not just any suffering, but a suffering in which possibility is *annihilated* by actuality. Complex to unpack, it is with this pronouncement that Climacus puts the final nail in the coffin on his attack on the false conceptualizations of temporality, offering a profound insight into the nature of the *experience* of freedom.

Climacus explicitly states that it is not only the one actualized possibility that is annihilated, but instead, all possibility that is. He is clearly not referring to the idea that actualization transforms a single imagined thing into its real, or actual, equivalent. Instead, as possibility is the imaginative realm of *non-being*, what Climacus is speaking to is our tendency to hide in imaginative possibility, that is, within imagined futures—be they literary, conceptual, or of any other form. So, once we bring something into existence, or better yet, once we become responsible for what we bring into existence (i.e. once we become aware of, and responsible for, the fact that we are perpetually bringing things into existence), we likewise become aware that

our imagination is not real in the way that actuality is. For all the seeming reality of our imagined lives, life is lived in actuality, and not in possibility, as possibility itself is but a part of actuality (its being is non-being). As such, our appropriation of freedom is simultaneously a recognition that possibility is somehow unreal, it is non-being, so that a life lived in possibility is a life that, while it has being, only has the less real being that is actually a non-being. It is a fantasy life. This annihilation of possibility by actuality, this wrenching away of our lives from imagination into reality, is, in fact, a suffering. The comfort we found in retreating to our imaginations “turns out to be nothing the moment it becomes actual,” for, it turns out to have been but the non-being of possibility, not the real comfort we might find in actuality, in actually existing people.

With all this said, it is important to remember that Climacus is not here advocating a position against imagination—be it of either an aesthetic or philosophical kind—rather, he only means to argue that our imaginations are unreal in the way that actuality is real. Yet, our imagination does have a reality in actuality, for it is our *actual* imagination, here and now, and in this sense, it has real being. It is only when we misunderstand the nature of the content of our imagination, when we come to mistake possibility as being more real than actuality, that there lies a problem. After all, without possibility, freedom becomes impossible; and yet, too much possibility and freedom is lost too. While the former problem is easy to see, and the latter one more difficult to discern, this second problem also happens to constitute Climacus’ final attack on the doctrine of time as cessation, insofar as the false conceptualization of time is a retreat into the imaginative realm of possibility.

In coming to see temporal change as a change of form, or meaning, i.e. in seeing change as a matter of “essence,” such a conception of time betrays itself as residing solely in the imaginative world of meaning. We have already seen how such a conception presupposes a

totality of meaning, a *system*, so that what actually happens to exist at this moment, and what seems to have ceased in the next moment, are but momentary glimpses into this presupposed totality. With this presupposition—a presupposition that comes to see change as necessary insofar as change itself becomes a matter of our limited perspective and not actual change—we likewise lose freedom. What will be is already written, even if we do not know it yet. So, unless our imaginations are organized in service of our actual lives and our exercise of freedom, we become prisoners to possibility, and willingly so, for the relief it provides from a world without freedom. In other words, freedom is our ground, it is that towards which possibility must be oriented; otherwise, freedom retreats into the non-being of imagination. That is, we allow a deterministic conception of time to take over our responsible exercise of freedom.

Freedom therefore entails a proper relating of the world of imagination with that of actuality. Interestingly, if we tip the scale too far in either direction, we lose freedom. Recalling our first chapter, where we discussed *The Sickness Unto Death*, we can see Kierkegaard foreshadowing that work, insofar as it pronounces that “[a] human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.”<sup>31</sup> Too much actuality, too much of the finite, and possibility seems a hopeless dream; too much possibility, too much of the infinite, and actuality seems the dream. However, with the proper balance, a balance predicated on a proper understanding of actuality as what is real, and possibility, as our ability to imagine how actuality might be different, we can properly exercise our nature as free. When we do, we come to realize that the world, rather than being necessary, actually depends on us. It is what we make it; it is what we have made it, as freedom is our making of the world. We become not just “a negative unity” that is, the ontological fact that our nature inalienably exists in such a relationship, but this relation becomes “the positive third” in

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<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*: 13.

the relationship, as we complement our ontological freedom with a responsible appropriation of our nature.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps this is what prompted Paul Tillich to write that “existentialism is not only a revolt; it is also a style.”<sup>33</sup> After all, no specific action follows from freedom, instead, it is the location from which all actions, in their infinite diversity, emerge. And so, we find Climacus offering a radical understanding of freedom, whereby, because our imagination is unlimited, so too is our freedom—with the appropriation of our freedom occurring when imagination serves freedom rather than restricting it. Lastly, if the implied target of his understanding of freedom has not yet been made explicitly clear, Climacus’ very choice of terms offers clarification: the target is, once again, Hegel. Specifically, the terms possibility, actuality, and necessity with which Climacus plays, the terms he uses to offer his own doctrine of freedom and temporality, point directly back to Hegel’s *Logic*—albeit in a less than direct way.

### **Living Freedom, Thinking Freedom**

In his *Logic*, Hegel defines necessity as the reciprocal interplay between an existing thing and the essence by which it becomes intelligible.<sup>34</sup> In fact, in the *Logic*, Hegel uses the term “possibility” to refer to essence, and the term “actuality” to refer to an essence become material, so that he can say: “Necessity has been defined, and rightly so, as the union of possibility and actuality.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, necessity is the very intelligibility of the world, i.e. that part of the world that conforms to its essence, rather than those “irrational” times, times when “man, with

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1968). 539.

<sup>34</sup> Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*: 217-20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 202, 08.

his own private opinion and will, follows the call of caprice and arbitrary humour.”<sup>36</sup> In contradistinction to Climacus, for whom these terms are used in a much more human way (i.e. possibility generally refers to the future and actuality to the present), Hegel uses these terms in a technical way, to help articulate his belief that there is a rationality within different sociopolitical arrangements. For all their complexity, there are ways in which different societies “make sense.”

Following from this, Hegel argues that what we often take as causality arises out of a view of the world that too narrowly focuses on one moment, rather than seeing the rich interplay of possibility and actuality.<sup>37</sup> Turning to a political example, Hegel offers a concrete illustration of what he means.

Thus in historical research the question may be raised in a first form, whether the character and manners of a nation are the cause of its constitution and its laws, or if they are not rather the effect. Then, as the second step, the character and manners on one side and the constitution and laws on the other are conceived on the principle of reciprocity: and in that case the cause in the same connection as it is a cause will at the same time be an effect, and vice versa.<sup>38</sup>

In opposition to linear conceptions of historical causality, such as the one Kierkegaard critiques when he critiques necessity (demonstrating that both Hegel and Kierkegaard criticize that simple, linear, understanding of historical necessity), Hegel introduces the reciprocal relationship of necessity to explain the complexity of human society. Specifically, what Hegel wants us to understand is that, as opposed to a simple understanding of socialization whereby a society determines its constituents’ subjectivity, such societies also depend on their constituents, in a self-reinforcing loop. We can see that this dialectical conception of subjectivity is wholly borrowed by Climacus, embedded in his understanding of our innate *doubleness*, insofar as both Climacus and Hegel recognize that we have a dialectical relationship to time. As such, for Hegel,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 215-18.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 219.

a political Constitution is our externalized essence, just as our essence is the Constitution internalized. To the extent that we adhere to the Constitution of our era, we become intelligible, and to the degree to which we follow our own selfish “caprice and arbitrary humour,” we fall from grace, obeying our particularity rather than our universality, thereby losing our historical intelligibility. The task of philosophy thereby becomes one of separating the wheat from the chaff, or, as Hegel puts it, “[t]he problem of science, and especially of philosophy, undoubtedly consists in eliciting the necessity concealed under the semblance of contingency.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the elegance of Hegel’s theory, this becomes problematic when we reintroduce historical progress. As human essence is freedom, and yet political Constitutions are not always free, Hegel’s argument is that we are increasingly becoming freer over time. That is, *as* possibility (in Hegel’s technical sense, i.e. as essence), freedom always exists, but *as* necessity (also in Hegel’s technical sense, i.e. the unity of essence and existence), we evermore embody that possibility with the advance of history. This advance is measured in the amount of freedom reciprocally embodied in human beings and the political constitutions in which they live—a freedom embodied in the relationship that Hegel calls necessity. However, this brings us back to the problem of the third chapter, which is that Hegel subsumes the subjective discovery of freedom to a higher objectivity. As the introduction to this chapter attempts to demonstrate, human beings like building “edifices” but we do not like living in them. While Hegel argues that the “truth of necessity, therefore, is **Freedom**,”<sup>40</sup> which, in his technical use of the terms locates freedom, as with Climacus, in our dialectical relationship to time, he also believes that necessity can be absolutely realized by way of a “truly free” Constitution. That is, human beings are not truly free in their moment of rebellion, a moment in which they realize that their imagination,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 220.

and therefore also, their freedom, is unbounded, just as we have seen in the last chapter; rather, we are free when we reconstitute a new political constitution that reflects said freedom, so that we can reciprocally, or dialectically, reproduce it until days end.

With this brief survey of Hegel in place, we can return to Climacus. In fact, we can now see to whom Climacus is speaking when he asks:

Is not necessity, then, a unity of possibility and actuality?—What would this mean? Possibility and actuality are not different in essence but in being. How could there be formed from this heterogeneity a unity that would be necessity, which is not a qualification of being but of essence, since the essence of the necessary is to be.<sup>41</sup>

Recalling that Climacus clearly disassociated possibility from actuality in the interest of disassociating the world of the imagination from the material world, we here find the same distinction maintained, and this time, directly aimed at Hegel. After all, it was Hegel who argued that “Necessity has been defined, and rightly so, as the union of possibility and actuality.”<sup>42</sup>

While this might also seem to attack Marx’s understanding of the human world as invested with human essence by way of our laboring to create it, it has already been made clear that Climacus does recognize that which is the product of human freedom (i.e. that which came into existence), can only be understood as being a product of human freedom, a point that demonstrates he continues to remain in sync with Marx, while somehow disagreeing with Hegel.

It therefore becomes important to clarify the precise nature of Climacus’ critique. Given the similarity in terms, it would be easy to see this as a technical, philosophical, disagreement with Hegel, whereby Climacus is simply disagreeing with the way in which Hegel understands how these ideas interact. However, as has also been demonstrated, Climacus and Hegel use these terms quite differently. While Hegel uses the term necessity in a positive light, it has already

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<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 74.

<sup>42</sup> Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*: 202, 08.

been demonstrated that the object of Climacus' attack when he attacks necessity is also something that Hegel attacks, albeit they do so with different terms, in that Hegel's dialectical conception of causality is an attempt to overcome the linear, or undialectical, conceptions of history that also bother Climacus. The fact that Climacus attacks Hegel's conception of necessity, while arguing for a dialectical conception of history, makes it seem as if he totally misunderstands Hegel.

It has often been suggested that Kierkegaard's understanding of Hegel is lacking, so that Kierkegaard's *Hegel* and Hegel himself need to be disassociated. Certainly this is true to a degree, insofar as Kierkegaard often makes Hegel into a convenient foil against which to argue, a foil which simultaneously allows him to attack his fellow Danish intellectuals, insofar as Hegelianism was the reigning philosophical fashion. It was a fashion used to justify the Danish state church, for instance, a church which was often his real opponent. For Kierkegaard, the church had transformed the radical message of Christianity into nothing more than easily accepted cultural mores. In fact, in the case of Hegel's *Logic*, Jon Stewart recounts an early story of Kierkegaard from his student days, whereby the foremost Danish Hegelian of the era, Frederick Christian Sibbern, was surprised at Kierkegaard's ignorance about the role that actuality played in Hegel's thought.<sup>43</sup> To this, Stewart adds a story of Kierkegaard's enthusiasm when he heard that Schelling's 1841 lectures, lectures famously attended by Friedrich Engels too, would deal with the subject of actuality.<sup>44</sup> However, this enthusiasm quickly turned to disappointment when Schelling used the term in its technical philosophical sense, much as did Hegel, rather than to refer to a philosophy that dealt with the task of *living*—a disappointment

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<sup>43</sup> Jon Stewart, *Idealism and Existentialism: Hegel and Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century European Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser, Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy (New York, NY: Continuum, 2010). 80.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

that further marks Kierkegaard's seeming unfamiliarity with the technicality of the philosophical discourse of German idealism.<sup>45</sup>

From this, Stewart rightly notes that Kierkegaard uses the term actuality in an essentially different way, in what he calls a "common-sense manner," owing its origins to a style of thought more indebted to the Ancient Greeks, and Socrates in particular, than to Hegel or Schelling.<sup>46</sup>

Kierkegaard is essentially redefining these terms, rather than engaging in a philosophical debate with his predecessors, doing so in a way that parallels the Hellenic concern with the activity of living, rather than the more abstract debates of his contemporaries. Stewart therefore argues that this precludes him from serious philosophic dialogue with those like Schelling and Hegel, who speak from within a common tradition, as Kierkegaard's concerns are other than theirs.<sup>47</sup>

However, while Stewart aptly notes the different ways in which Hegel and Kierkegaard define their terms, Stewart's last claim overreaches the point; Kierkegaard might be speaking a different language, but not only is his different *style* of philosophy a rebuke to Hegel, his redefinition of terms is also a rebuke of a more philosophically sophisticated kind.

While both Hegel and Climacus see freedom in our dialectical nature, each lays the stress differently, with important consequences. For Climacus (and for Kierkegaard, more broadly), our dialectical nature ensures a future that is profoundly open. As our imagination is unbounded, making the possibilities of our free action likewise unlimited, the process of emancipation entails an appropriation of our free nature, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Therefore, true human freedom, a freedom that is not simply ontological but that takes into account our self-reflective nature, is synonymous with responsibility. Ontologically we are always free, but becoming free—appropriating freedom—means that we have become responsible agents of that

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

freedom. For Kierkegaard, becoming free does not mean we dialectically bring forth the specific possibility of freedom, i.e. it does not mean that we will freedom, it means that we appropriate ourselves as free, dialectical, creatures. While Kierkegaard does speak of the appropriation of freedom as the human telos, it is clear that it is a peculiar type of telos. In appropriating freedom, it is no longer our end but our beginning—it is no longer our telos but our foundation.

Hegel, however, organizes things a little bit differently, and unfortunately, more problematically. For him, freedom is found not solely in our dialectical nature, but when we dialectically will a free constitution. Freedom is not only something subjective (i.e. our dialectical nature), but also, something objective (i.e. a free constitution), so that in their reciprocal (or, in Hegel's use of the term, necessary) interaction, we find what Hegel believes freedom to be. Whereas Kierkegaard argues that freedom is the human telos, whereby once it is achieved it becomes our ground, for Hegel, because freedom is objectively manifested in a specific free constitution, once we achieve this telos, which, as a constitution, is necessarily sociopolitical, being free comes to entail the perpetual maintenance of this constitution. Freedom does not become our foundation for acting out into the world, but remains an end that we forever maintain. Hegel, therefore, sees freedom as something that can determine human beings, and that determines them within a free state; Kierkegaard, however, sees freedom as something that is purely determinative, as the ground of all action, and not its end.

In other words, whereas Hegel locates freedom in reciprocity, as does Kierkegaard, the consequences they draw from it are different. For Hegel, the freedom in our nature can be matched with a free constitution, whereas for Kierkegaard, the possibility of such a constitution is forever prevented by the open-ended nature of our freedom. If this dialectical interaction is ever truly appropriated, that is, if we ever become free, then, that becomes the exact moment in

which we defy the possibility of a final state. The moment we become free is the moment in which our future becomes truly unpredictable—even if this unpredictability rests upon a foundation of a dialectical subjectivity that itself can be conceptualized. That is, *knowing* freedom is to perceive the way freedom works, but not the destination towards which it strives. Unfortunately, this knowledge, if not understood as a conceptualization of the dialectical *form* of freedom, can be mistaken for its content. We come to think that we can create freedom, whereas freedom is not something that is created, it is something that creates. Our understanding can complement our free activity, helping us understand ourselves better, but ultimately, if ever we find a concept that we think determines our freedom, we should instead come to realize that this is the exact moment in which our freedom has been lost. The concept takes responsibility, instead of our *selves*.

What follows is that the only way we might ever create a constitution that is truly free is if we manage to create a constitution that is not a constitution, at least as constitutions are typically understood. It would have to be a constitution of infinite malleability, for just as our freedom means that our future is implicitly unpredictable, and that the actions we will take, and the people we will become, cannot be foretold, we must also find a constitution that does not limit this freedom. However, insofar as a constitution is an actual thing, insofar as it is a formalized way of living, it cannot simultaneously be open to infinite malleability. In other words, laws must have content, they must have definite norms that guide them, but freedom must retain the possibility that today's laws are tomorrow's prisons. If freedom has no specific content but a constitution must have one, a truly free constitution is a paradox. Granted, most contemporary constitutions, such as the American Constitution, have codified rules governing their own transformation, such as by Constitutional Convention or by Amendment, but this is

more a recognition of humility on the part of the drafters, than it is a recognition that no law can ever encapsulate human freedom. Human beings can be free, constitutions can only be expressions of that freedom, created out of it, but never fully embodying it. The reciprocal interaction of necessity of which Hegel writes, a necessity in which individuals are dialectically shaped by the very things they create, can be true about everything, except freedom. Freedom is our foundation, it is not, and can never be, the end.<sup>48</sup> Or, recalling the Underground Man's polemic, there is no house in which freedom can be at home, for freedom is always found in the construction, not the habitation.

Returning to Kierkegaard's notion of coming into existence, we can see that he devolves the relationship Hegel calls "reciprocity" onto the shoulders of individuals. Granted, there is a relationship between our creation of ideas, such as political constitutions, and how they, in turn, shape our subjectivity. However, insofar as freedom is subjective and not objective, a political constitution will always be a product of our freedom, but never a total embodiment of it. A political constitution is but one imagined, and then actualized, arrangement for our sociopolitical lives. As such, we will, in fact, shape our subjectivity according to shared "objective" ideas. However, this is not the constitution working on us, it is us acting on us—and in a way that often inhibits our ability to recognize that we have created but one of an infinite number of possible constitutions. So, we *freely* shape our subjectivity according to objective ideas, and then, we reciprocally *freely* objectify those ideas in turn. All of which seems to return, if we are inclined to a charitable reading, to Hegel's assertion that the "truth of necessity [i.e. reciprocity]... is **Freedom.**"<sup>49</sup> Yet, reciprocity speaks to a cyclical pattern, whereas what Kierkegaard has in mind is a reciprocal relationship that is fundamentally open. Simply because the things we create in

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<sup>48</sup> It is, of course, our teleological end, insofar as it is our task to become free. However, freedom can never be the direct end of a free act. That is, we cannot create something that is free, we can only act out of our own freedom.

<sup>49</sup> Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*: 220.

turn create us, we should not be led to believe that those created things have any reality other than that which we have given them, nor that they will ever embody the freedom that is within us. They are expressions of freedom, not embodiments of it.

Ultimately, all of this devolves back to the question of the status of ideas. For Kierkegaard, they have a being that is a non-being, whereas, for Hegel, they have a truth that is as real, if not more, than the material reality they explain. Kierkegaard does not argue with the possibility that an idea may be true, but ideas are always an “approximating,” whereby they never embody truth, they only help reveal it. An idea is always secondary to the reality it reveals, its conceptual truth is always less true than the truth that is lived. Freedom is our nature, and while understanding this helps reveal it, the truth itself lies in us, not in the idea. To believe otherwise is to value the imaginative realm too highly, it is to escape into our fantasy life, perhaps, as Climacus suggests, because the eternal status of our ideas provides comfort from a reality in which life is transitory. And here lies Climacus’ critique of Hegel; by way of his very definition of the intellectual realm as a realm of non-being, by saying that ideas are not as real as the reality they help illuminate, Climacus is attacking Hegel’s belief that the idea of freedom, embodied in a political constitution, is just as real as the freedom each of us lives. For Climacus, this is simply not true. Insofar as an overreliance on the intellectual realm actually serves to eclipse freedom, as the doctrine of cessation helps demonstrate, there is an inherent conservatism within such philosophical systems. Rather than using Hegel as a foil by which to attack the bourgeois Danish Hegelians, Climacus attacks both Hegel *and* these Hegelians, insofar as their overreliance on thought comes at the expense of freedom.

Kierkegaard’s argument is that, rather than seeing the world in which we live as spatial, in which case we easily slide into a view of time as cessation, i.e. we come to recognize that this

material world in which we live is bound to end, we instead come to see the world as temporal. Our world, while it takes up space, was created in time. This is true for every moment in which we live; these new moments are not new moments created by the end of the old, rather, each moment we live is a moment that has been created through the collective expression of our freedom. If only we could realize this, not only could we re-appropriate our freedom as outlined in *Part II*, but we could begin to act responsibly, in full awareness that our future is truly open, and that possibilities we fail to imagine depend on our own inability to imagine them—an inability certainly cultivated by political forces—but an inability that nonetheless depends on us *not* imagining alternatives.

## **Chapter 7: *History***

Kierkegaard's radical conception of freedom has led some to conclude that it is an ahistorical, and therefore apolitical, understanding of the human being. If human beings are radically free, if this freedom is simply there for the taking, this seems to devalue the historical sociopolitical world as a location that limits, or allows, certain expressions of freedom. So, in some circles, Kierkegaard has earned himself a reputation as a libertarian of sorts, as he seems to downplay the effect that history and politics have on us, by way of his argument that we are each radically free. However, this is not his point at all, for subjective freedom, and its objective expression, are hardly one and the same. We might have appropriated our own subjective freedom, finding a measure of autonomy, authenticity, and responsibility in this act of self-appropriation, but we still find ourselves bounded by an objective world beyond our control. In *Part II*, it was suggested that this conflict is the conflict that gives birth to progressive politics, as freedom abrades against a world that is not free. Now, equipped with a fuller understanding of freedom, we can return to this problem, to see just how freedom acts in the context of a world that is not.

### **Kierkegaard and History**

It should be easy to imagine where Marx might complement Kierkegaard's vision of freedom, for his critique of Hegel's state runs parallel. In it, we will find Marx theorizing a type of sociopolitical arrangement that defies the codification Hegel believes is necessary, a codification that can shape its subjects just as they reciprocally maintain its existence. However, before turning to Marx, one last Kierkegaardian theme needs to be explored—that of history. Not

only is history the best place in which to see freedom in action, thereby offering a fuller picture of Kierkegaard's understanding of freedom, but also, it provides an avenue by which to demonstrate how complementary Marx and Kierkegaard are on the question of freedom.

Returning to *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard writes:

All coming into existence occurs in freedom, not by way of necessity. Nothing coming into existence comes into existence by way of a ground, but everything by way of a cause. Every cause ends in a freely acting cause. The intervening causes are misleading in that the coming into existence appears to be necessary; the truth about them is that they, as having themselves come into existence, *definitively* point back to a freely acting cause. As soon as coming into existence is definitively reflected upon, even an inference from natural law is not evidence of the necessity of any coming into existence. So also with manifestations of freedom, as soon as one refuses to be deceived by its manifestations but reflects on its coming into existence.<sup>1</sup>

If we are free, and this freedom is understood as a coming into existence, whereby we give actuality to a possibility that was once only imagined, then history itself, as a record of humanity, is the story of freedom. However, oftentimes, as in the case of a teleological understanding of history, history takes on the cast of necessity, making it seem as if our actions were predetermined, in what amounts to little more than the positivism that lies at the heart of the temporal doctrine of cessation. As Climacus reminds us, history is not the story of a type of cause and effect that unfolds across time, in what becomes a deterministic understanding of human action, one that ultimately ends in an infinite regress; rather, the causality of history is different. The moment prior is not the cause of this moment, we are. Just as we cause this moment, so too did we cause the last one, and so too will we cause the next one, because “[e]very cause ends in a freely acting cause.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

We therefore find Climacus' defining history as the story of freedom, so that reciprocally the story of freedom becomes the *creation* of history:

Everything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical, for even if no further historical predicate can be applied to it, the crucial predicate of the historical can still be predicated—namely, that it has come into existence.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the assertion that history is the product of freedom, for added clarity, we can also tie this together with something from Climacus' earlier remark, when he argued that the illusion of historical necessity is overcome “as soon as one refuses to be deceived by its manifestations but reflects on its coming into existence.”<sup>4</sup> As we have explored in the prior chapter, and in this one, freedom has no direct objective corollary; that is, freedom is a subjective quality of human beings, and not a quality that resides in any of the objective things that we create—be they words, deeds, or anything else. Rather, freedom speaks to where these have originated, i.e. in our free activity, and so, it does not refer to a property that they themselves possess. Such things are only “manifestations of freedom,” they are “objectifications” in Marx's language, they are not freedom itself, but only things that freedom has created, offering yet another example of why a constitution that perfectly embodies freedom is an impossibility. Moreover, if we fail to realize that the reason the manifestations of freedom exist is because of freedom, that is, if we look out at the human world and fail to see its origins in free activity, we become “deceived.” In such a case, failing to realize that the human world is created, that it “comes into existence,” we might surmise that its origins lie in the past, rather than the present. In such a case, we find ourselves back again at the doctrine of temporality as cessation, a doctrine that focuses on things themselves, and that sees their antecedent state not in our freedom, but in a prior moment.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

What follows from this is that, for Climacus, the past could have happened other than it did, while the possibilities for the future remain ever open. What this also means is that there is a way in which both the past and the future are unknowable, at least insofar as historical causality is considered to be knowledge.

The future has not occurred as yet, but it is not, *because of that*, less necessary than the past, inasmuch as the past did not become necessary by having occurred, but, on the contrary, by having occurred, it demonstrated that it was not necessary. If the past had become necessary, the opposite conclusion could not be drawn with respect to the future, but on the contrary it would follow that the future would also be necessary. If necessity could supervene at one single point, then we could no longer speak of the past and the future. To want to predict the future (prophesy) and to want to understand the necessity of the past are altogether identical, and only the prevailing fashion makes the one seem more plausible than the other to a particular generation.<sup>5</sup>

As should be easy to guess, neither the past nor the future is necessary, but both are caused by freedom. Insofar as both are caused by freedom, the future becomes inherently unpredictable, so that our attempts at prediction, which are themselves paralleled with a desire to see the necessity of the past, stand revealed as a project implicitly at odds with a recognition that both are the products of freedom. In other words, our very attempts to understand the past as something that happened for a reason other than free choice, coupled with our attempts to predict the future, are, for Climacus, little more than indications that we have failed to appropriate freedom.

This also means that the past and the future come to have the same type of non-being that Climacus previously ascribed to possibility, because, that is where they happen to reside. All that actually exists, exists right now, so that the past and the future find their home nowhere but in our imagination. This is easy to see in the case of the future, for our experience easily demonstrates that we never quite get to the future, but are always bound by the present. Instead, the future exists as an imaginative realm by which we can imagine different possible presents,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 77.

thereafter using our freedom to make them actual. Granted, in the case of the past, the past seems more real, as it actually has come into existence, yet, insofar as it continues to exist in actuality, it comprises *this* present, i.e. it still is *actuality*; however, insofar as only its meaning endures, but its existence has come to pass, the past persists, but only in our memory. It therefore exists in the imaginative realm that Kierkegaard calls *possibility*. This offers further insight into why our imagination is called possibility, as our imagination is how we shape how we act; it the faculty by which we imagine different futures, and then freely try to make them actual in the present. Memory is therefore also possibility, for it likewise exists as something imagined that shapes how we act; and this activity likewise occurs *into the future*, but bounded by the present. For Kierkegaard, therefore, our past and our future truly do depend on us. We might not have any control over the actuality we inherited, an actuality created in the past and that lingers on in the present, but the past itself resides only in us, side by side with the future.

In more human terms, what this means is that an appropriation of freedom entails an acceptance of responsibility for our past and our future. Instead of granting them status independent of ourselves, an independence that makes us subservient to them, we need to accept them as tools in service of our freedom. In the case of the future, we can easily see how a determinist conception of future historical development can become a tool whereby we abdicate responsibility for our actions, allowing the future to justify present misdeeds. In the case of the past, this become more complicated, insofar as the effect of the past on us is not solely in the intellectual realm, i.e. the meaning of the past does not simply linger on as a dispassionate idea, but becomes bound up with our lives in a deeply psychological way. The things I have done and those I have had done to me do not only exist as an imagined past, but have a sort of actuality, insofar as my psychological attachment to my past keeps it alive. We can see how those I have

loved and lost, or hurt and lost, might continue to have a deeply profound impact on the way I currently act. However, the point is not that I need to overcome the past, I only need to accept responsibility for it, because it continues to shape how I live. This effect might be good or it might be bad, but responsibility for it rests with me, not with the past. In other words, the question is not whether or not I can control my past, but whether I allow my past to control my present, i.e. my freedom. Until I come to grips with the way the past becomes the future, with the way I excuse my current actions for past events, I cannot exercise my freedom responsibly; I cannot be free. Or, as Yeats notes, “[i]n dreams begins responsibility.”<sup>6</sup>

With this established, it becomes clear that Climacus imagines freedom as essentially temporal. When the past and the future are seen as imaginative, when what exists is seen as actual, and where the truest significance of the past is found in that part of it that continues to endure in actuality, we find ourselves free. This is not to say that actuality does not constrain us in any number of ways, but such constraints are real, and, potentially, changeable. While some of Kierkegaard’s detractors attempt to paint him as ignoring material reality in favor of pure subjectivity, Kierkegaard is instead demonstrating that the route to material reality is *through* subjectivity. Kierkegaard’s concern is not explicitly with that reality, as is Marx’s, as he is more concerned with the way in which the *meaning* of the past endures, even after it has materially faded away, and how this oftentimes impinges on our ability to act freely. The past, even once it is gone, shapes how we think and how we act, it shapes how we think of ourselves, and it shapes what we imagine as possible. In other words, our memories linger long after that which caused them, leaving behind lessons we inflict on the future. Of course, this is likewise true of the future, but more directly, as the future is the very medium by which our freedom is

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<sup>6</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Responsibilities, and other poems* (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1916). Epigraph.

compromised, so that ideas we entertain about the future prove more directly inhibiting than do memories of the past. Yet, the effect is the same.

This is why, for Climacus, the real battle for freedom, the battle over the past and the future, takes place inside of us, in the hold they exert on our ability to imagine a real future and the actual present. As just such a subjective battle, history takes on new meanings, for its significance is revealed as primarily psychological (or psychological-religious), insofar as it stands as cause (and symptom) of our inability to appropriate our freedom. This helps make sense of Climacus' pronouncement that "the change of repentance ... wants to nullify an actuality."<sup>7</sup> While Kierkegaard has a problem with the idea of repentance, insofar as it seemingly places the absolution of our sins in our own hands rather than in God's (e.g. I can forgive myself, I do not need to be forgiven), it is easy to imagine repentance in terms of a temporal understanding of freedom. When we repent, we are attempting to "nullify" something we have done (or that we have failed to do), because, from our current vantage point, a point, perhaps, from which we have appropriated our freedom (and are therefore acting responsibly, or are, at least, trying to), we now realize that our prior act was wrong. As a practical matter, however, repentance seems foolish, for if our action (or inaction) endures, we should simply change our material reality, but if it does not endure, it would not seem to matter. However, recalling the *Part I* and its focus on the question of guilt, and how our inability to accept our guilt perpetuates despair, we can now see the conceptual mechanics of this relationship. Guilt is the psychological-religious term we use to describe a situation in which the past continues to haunt the present. Having failed to exercise our freedom responsibly in the past, through repentance, we try and make up for it after the fact.

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<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 77.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus also speaks of the process of emancipation, albeit less so than we have seen in *Fear and Trembling*. In *Fragments*, however, he draws attention to the moment of emancipation as a moment, that is, as something temporal, for it is in this moment that life is changed.

But this transition from “not to be” to “to be” is indeed the transition of birth. But the person who already is cannot be born, and yet he is born. Let us call this transition *rebirth*, by which he enters the world a second time just as at birth ...<sup>8</sup>

It should be easy to see how the self-appropriation we explored in *Part II* can be spoken of as a rebirth, but it is interesting to note that Climacus uses the terminology of being and not-being, terminology we have already explored, because it helps demonstrate how the condition of not-being is akin to being trapped in one’s imaginative life, whereas being, is about being present in the moment. Climacus repeats this theme in many similar guises:

Now if the moment is to acquire decisive significance, then the seeker up until that moment must not have possessed the truth ... Consequently, he has to be defined as being outside the truth (not coming toward it like a proselyte, but going away from it) or as untruth. He is, then, untruth.<sup>9</sup>

Possessed of false ideas, we fail to properly appropriate our freedom, absconding with it by giving the past and/or the future a necessity that alleviates the burden of the responsible exercise of our freedom. This truth we find, is the truth of our freedom; we might possess freedom ontologically, but to appropriate it existentially we need to know, somehow, that we are free. To do so, we need to recognize that our actions, both those of the past, present, and the future, depend on nothing but us.

The truth, therefore, is that we are the cause, and while we have always been the cause, not until we appropriate our agency can we exercise that agency in truth, without the self-

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 13.

deceptions provided by false conceptions of the past, present, and future. All of which brings us to Climacus' most important temporal concept, *the fullness of time*.

And, now, the moment. A moment such as this is unique. To be sure, it is short and temporal, as the moment is; it is passing, as the moment is, past, as the moment is in the next moment, and yet it is decisive, and yet it is filled with the eternal. A moment such as this must have a special name. Let us call it: the fullness of time.<sup>10</sup>

The moment of emancipation might be our first appropriation of the moment, but it is the first of many such moments. And what makes this moment distinct is that we realize, at last, that all that we have is right now: a moment in its very fullness. Freedom becomes one and the same with a particular insight into temporality—the recognition that all that actually exists, including even our imagination as non-being, exists nowhere but right now. If we understand this, and not simply as a conceptual truth we hide away in *possibility*, but as a *lived* truth, we can then make history, *consciously*.

With all this said, however, the question of history is twofold: not only is it the question of becoming freedom, it is also the question of understanding freedom after we become it. Yet, recalling *Part II* (and parts of this one), the freedom of others can never be proven to us. All we ever have access to are those things that others create freely, but to see others as free requires an inference; we need to recognize that what exists, exists because it has been created, and not because what used to exist has degenerated. In this way, we earlier gained insight into what Kierkegaard considers faith to be, i.e. it is a type of relationship between free subjects, a relationship based on a freedom that is never proven, but perceived through faith.

It is clear, then, that the organ for the historical ... must have within itself the corresponding something by which in its certitude it continually annuls the incertitude that corresponds to the uncertainty of coming into existence ... This is precisely the nature of belief [*Tro*], for continually present as the nullified in the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 18.

certitude of belief is the incertitude that in every way corresponds to the uncertainty of coming into existence.<sup>11</sup>

If doubt helps free us from imprisonment, ironically, it is belief that emerges as its complement. But, this is not a naïve belief, but a specific belief; it is a belief in freedom as the cause of history. Without this belief, a belief that testifies to the recognition that history has been made by free subjects, however confined that freedom may be, our understanding of history invariably wavers towards necessity.

Complementing this belief, we find something that demonstrates that our doubt is not, in fact, annihilated by belief, but coexists with it. This complement is *wonder*.

The historian once again stands beside the past, stirred by the passion that is the passionate sense for coming into existence, that is, wonder [*Beundring*]. If the philosopher wonders over nothing whatsoever (and how, except by a new kind of contradiction, could it occur to anyone to wonder over a necessary construction), then he *eo ipso* has nothing to do with the historical, for wherever coming into existence is involved (which is indeed involved in the past), there the uncertainty (which is the uncertainty of coming into existence) of the most certain coming into existence can express itself only in this passion worthy of and necessary to the philosopher (Plato—Aristotle).<sup>12</sup>

When freedom is understood to be the operative cause behind history, when history is revealed as a manifestation of freedom, we lose immediate access to history's cause. Instead, we must wonder about the subjectivity or subjectivities that created this moment, as we will only ever know them by their manifestations/objectifications—that is, by what they do. Doubt, therefore, necessarily coexists with belief, as, barring omniscient access into the subjects around us, we can never be certain that we are properly inferring meaning into their actions. We take their freedom on faith, a faith that bears with it its own type of self-confidence, but this faith does not extend to specifics. We must remain open, in wonder, if we are ever to truly know those with whom we live. As Climacus writes: “Belief is a sense for coming into existence, and doubt is a protest

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 80.

against any conclusion that wants to go beyond immediate sensation and immediate knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> We want to say we know others, but we might not; but in faith, we keep trying.

Herein we find Climacus’ understanding of Christianity. Recognizing that history is the realm where freedom is made manifest, but that this freedom is of a transcendental nature (i.e. it creates history, and lives within it, but it is not created by it), Christianity is the doctrine that properly understands the relationship between time (or history) and freedom. Freedom does not remove us from the world, it implants us within it.

Christianity is the only historical phenomenon that despite the historical—indeed, precisely by means of the historical—has wanted to be the single individual’s point of departure for his eternal consciousness, has wanted to interest him otherwise than merely historically, has wanted to base his happiness on his relation to something historical.<sup>14</sup>

According to Climacus, the uniqueness of Christianity is precisely that it treats the eternal as something that happens *in* time, not beyond it, a point demonstrated in the very fact that Jesus Christ is not an ethereal ahistorical deity, but an actually existing man. It is this man, for Kierkegaard, who stands as the gateway to the eternal. Therefore, Christianity’s content is precisely that it is within history that we find the eternal. Transcendence is not the process of overcoming the material world, but of fully apprehending it, just as Abraham does not lose Isaac by faith, but gains him that way.<sup>15</sup>

Here, we find the real question of *Philosophical Fragments*: the status of Christianity as a historical phenomenon. In other words, what is its status as a body of knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation, for as such a historical object, it does not possess a truth it

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>15</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 49; Edward Mooney, "Getting Isaac Back: Ordeals and Reconciliations in Fear and Trembling," in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, ed. George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1992), 85.

can give its followers, but rather, it helps point to a truth they can appropriate for themselves. It is a historical object, a created thing, and yet, it tries to point beyond history's manifestations towards something that lies underneath. For all of his criticism of Socrates in the last chapter, we can see just how similar Kierkegaard is to Socrates, for neither left behind doctrines which could be emulated (Socrates more explicitly, but Kierkegaard's pseudonyms make it difficult to say what Kierkegaard himself thought); instead, much of their wisdom lay in helping others find truth for themselves. What, then, is the content of Christianity? For Climacus, not much.

Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, "We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died"—this is more than enough. The contemporary generation would have done what is needful, for this little announcement, this world-historical *nota bene*, is enough to become an occasion for someone who comes later, and the most prolix report can never in all eternity become more for the person who comes later.<sup>16</sup>

The content of Christianity is reduced to a simple, *historical*, fact: God *lived*, and *loved*.

## **Freedom and History**

With Kierkegaard's radical formulation of a freedom the big problem that arises is political. The prior analysis suggests that the solution to sociopolitical oppression and exploitation is to convince its victims into not believing in them anymore. To a certain extent, this is true. After all, what Kierkegaard's claim amounts to is the recognition that for all the existence of actual, material, power—things such as weapons, soldiers, resources, etc.—the true way to combat these forces is by convincing people of their illegitimacy. What truly maintains political regimes is the belief, on behalf of those who live within them, that those regimes are legitimately exercising that power. If this were to occur, and power was laid bare, just as if it were Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, then the problem would be

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<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 104.

solved. Certainly, in one sense, this is true. If no one believes, regimes necessarily devolve into a state of war, in the classical sense, insofar as the only thing that maintains them is violence.

However, this is also where Marx proves an important complement. From a political rather than an individual point of view, the specific ways in which power is organized, and the specific beliefs used to justify it, are certainly important politically—that is, if your project happens to be one of sociopolitical emancipation rather than individual emancipation. In turning to the realm of history, itself the location to explore if we are interested in questions of such political specificities, Kierkegaard provides a framework, but little substance. His understanding of freedom offers an understanding of how freedom operates within each one of us, i.e. it is a universal within every single individual (which also helps explain why Sartre’s article on Kierkegaard is entitled “The Singular Universal”), but Kierkegaard is less concerned with exploring the *different* ways in which sociopolitical regimes have constrained this freedom. Whereas Marx also imagines a future in which such freedom is democratically achieved, what we might call a *universal* appropriation of our *universal* nature, he makes it his project to understand the sociopolitical realities in which it is not. Despite his chosen focus, Marx always presupposes the very freedom of which Kierkegaard has written, and never devolves his analysis into base determinism; instead, he only seeks to understand the ways in which free subjects make their way in sociopolitical realities that are less than free.

In order to see this juxtaposition, we need to turn to one of Marx’s criticisms of Hegel. Whereas Marx does criticize Hegel in a fashion quite similar to that of Kierkegaard (i.e. he argues that freedom is inherently open, and therefore it cannot be constrained within a specific sociopolitical constitution), Marx is not as quick to jettison the use of Hegel’s reciprocal (or dialectical) formulation of sociopolitical life. Marx might agree with Kierkegaard that Hegel

does not do justice when it comes to describing freedom, but, Marx recognizes that Hegel does do justice when it comes to describing servitude.

In 1843, Karl Marx wrote an extensive critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, one that focused on paragraphs 261-313. Unsurprisingly, given *Part II*'s argument, this section of Hegel's *Philosophy* is about ethics. More important than Marx's critique, however, is that in this work, titled the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (not to be confused with Marx's much shorter *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*), Marx lays out his thoughts on what he calls "true democracy."<sup>17</sup> For Marx, a true democracy is the type of free community that we might imagine occurs if the radical emancipation of *Part II* happens on a broad social scale, i.e. the universal appropriation of universal freedom. Wary of the problem of reification, Marx rarely offers anything by way of a positive vision of freedom, focusing, as did Kierkegaard, on criticism. So, this short section on democracy in the *Contribution* is all the more striking, for it reveals a dimension of Marx that would endure throughout his lifetime, but that would often form a subtext, rather than an explicit subject. While Marx is easily labeled a "Communist," often by those who believe this vilifies him insofar as Stalinism and Communism are all-too-easily equated, for Marx, what Communism means is incomprehensible without understanding it as synonymous with democracy—a point noted by Shlomo Avineri, among others.<sup>18</sup> So, embarking on a study of Marx's "true democracy" is perhaps as close as we can get to a specific vision of his ideal community.

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 29-32. The latest translation in the Marx/Engels Collected Works translates this work as the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, but it remains more widely known as the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

<sup>18</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1971). 34.

In *Part II*, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* was paired with Marx's *On the Jewish Question* for a number of reasons, including the fact that Marx's text allows us to read Kierkegaard's in a more overtly historical and sociopolitical way. However, while the two texts complement one another in many ways, there is one way in which they do not: Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegelian philosophy has no comparable equivalent in *On the Jewish Question*. However, in Marx's *Critique*, in addition to his thoughts on democracy, we find just such a parallel. So, before embarking on a discussion of Marx's understanding of true democracy, a discussion we will delay until the next chapter, it is useful to take a brief look at Marx's critique of Hegel. In fact, Marx's understanding of democracy emerges as a direct response to his critique of Hegelian thought, making this detour a necessary one. Furthermore, by demonstrating the similarities between Marx and Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel, and by showing how Marx's understanding of democracy emerges as a result of this criticism, we also see how much Marx's understanding of democracy is a natural endpoint for Kierkegaard's thought too. That is, Marx imagines Kierkegaard's universal *universally*.

Whereas Kierkegaard spends time developing a subtle criticism of Hegelian thought, using the story of Abraham and Isaac to provoke his readers into recognizing those parts of their own subjectivity that are incommensurate with it, Marx's approach is quite different. As is often the case, Marx is more direct, succinctly stating and restating the problem, all while offering example after example. This style makes it much easier to follow, as the complex theoretical work is left off the page (but we can find it in Kierkegaard's criticism), leaving us instead with concise and direct formulations of the problem. So, in a prototypical example, we find Marx stating that "... Hegel everywhere makes the idea the subject and turns the proper, the actual

subject . . . into a predicate.”<sup>19</sup> In the sophistication of this conclusion we can see much of the complexity that was more apparent in Kierkegaard’s methodical explication, but Marx’s point is much the same, and certainly more direct: human beings, i.e. *actual* subjects, are turned into predicates (or effects) of the “idea.” Hegel foregrounds ideas at the expense of actually existing human beings, thereby transforming actual human beings into consequences of the historical development of the idea, rather than seeing ideas as the consequence of those selfsame subjects. For Marx, in tandem with Kierkegaard, this problem occurs precisely because of a “perversion of the subjective into the objective and of the objective into the subjective,” which, Marx argues, “is a consequence of Hegel’s wanting to write the biography of abstract substance, of the idea, man’s activity, etc.,”<sup>20</sup> rather than the biography, or history, of actually existing human beings.

In turn, this inversion leads to a kind of positivism, insofar as what actually exists is taken as a manifestation of a preexisting objective truth, paralleling Kierkegaard’s assertions about the Socratic doctrine of *anamnesis* (recollection), and its foreclosure on the possibility of *the new*.<sup>21</sup>

In Marx’s words:

The inevitable outcome of this is that an *empirical existent* is *uncritically* accepted as the actual truth of the idea; for it is not a question of bringing empirical existence to its truth; but of bringing truth to an empirical existent, and so what lies to hand is expounded as a real element of the idea.<sup>22</sup>

When Marx speaks of “bringing truth to an empirical existent,” he is certainly speaking to the problem of *anamnesis*, even if he speaks his own language. There is an inherent conservatism in the idea that truth preexists us, as we need only find which part of the truth applies “to an empirical existent,” itself a solely intellectual task (i.e. the claim that we can think our way to faith), whereas a radical understanding of the truth recognizes the task of “bringing empirical

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<sup>19</sup> Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> *See*, Chapter 3.

<sup>22</sup> Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 39.

existence to its truth,” i.e. of transforming what exists *into* something true. Thinking of individual emancipation, as we did in *Part II*, we can imagine this as the question of the appropriation of freedom, insofar as we have seen how this process of emancipation requires the *addition* of something new, i.e. of adopting a truthful relationship with oneself. In other words, we cannot think ourselves into truth; rather, if we lack truth, we must change. Both truth and untruth, freedom and unfreedom, are existential conditions—they speak to how we live, *not* to what we think.

In various other parts of the *Contribution*, we find Marx repeating this same criticism time and again. However, whereas Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegel revolves around the locus of the individual, Marx’s revolves around society. For example, Marx writes that, “[w]hen the idea is made the subject, however, the real subjects, namely, civil society, family, “circumstances, caprice, etc.”, become *unreal* objective elements of the idea with a changed significance.”<sup>23</sup> So, while Kierkegaard’s concern is with Hegel’s foregrounding of the idea, which, in turn, devalues individuals, Marx is thinking through the same problem for how it affects social groups. The net effect is the same, however, in that individuals, conceived either as individuals or as part of a community, become “unreal” in comparison with their abstract, objective, truth. Marx, like Kierkegaard, not only argues that Hegel’s equivalency of subjectivity and objectivity eliminates the possibility of radical emancipation, but also, this equivalency changes the seat of value, so that truth no longer resides *within* individuals (or, for Marx, communities of them), but rather, it lies in the objective world. In this way, we return to the original problem of *Part II*, in which subjects and objects are reversed, so that “[t]he mystical substance, therefore, becomes the actual subject, and the real subject appears as something else, as an element of the mystical

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 8.

substance.”<sup>24</sup> As a result, actual individuals and their social lives come to be seen merely “... as “finiteness”, as the “actual idea’s” own *finiteness*.”<sup>25</sup> They are repeatable instances of a value that exists independent of themselves.

Recalling *Part II*, as Kierkegaard and Hegel agree that freedom is an attribute of God, and as Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegel amounts to the claim that an objective concept of God is a contradiction, insofar as such a concept determines a subjects freedom rather than being an expression of that freedom, then Marx, with his political focus, makes exactly the same claim, albeit on his own *political* terms. In *On the Jewish Question* we have seen one such instance of this claim, in that the idea of equality that pervades modern societies fails to reflect a real, lived, equality, but in the *Contribution*, Marx’s broader criticism of Hegel likewise allows him to broaden his attack so as to include all forms of government. If an objective concept of God falsifies individual freedom by misappropriating it away from individual subjects, an objective concept of *sovereignty* does exactly the same thing, if only our focus is on a group of individuals. After all, sovereignty denotes *legitimate* self-determination (i.e. it denotes *freedom*), if only in the case of groups, rather than individuals.

So in this case sovereignty, the essential feature of the state, is treated to begin with as an independent entity, is objectified. Then, of course, this objective entity has to become a subject again. This subject then appears, however, as a self-incarnation of sovereignty; whereas sovereignty is nothing but the objectified mind of the subjects of the state.<sup>26</sup>

In this we can see a fairly direct extension of Marx’s argument about political equality from *On the Jewish Question*, a work written only a few months prior to the *Critique*. Specifically, Marx is speaking to the process of objectification and internalization that defines how individuals are socialized into a belief in freedom and equality (in the case of institutional democracy), but here,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 24.

Marx enlarges this critique so that it includes any of the other beliefs that happen to ground the idea of sovereignty underlying other forms of government too. As a result of this broadly conceived process of socialization, individuals come to appear in the image or incarnation of the principle that underlies the sovereignty of their particular state, instead of recognizing that the self-determination denoted by sovereignty is but an expression (and a limited one) of the subjects themselves. That is, the freedom exercised by the state is none other than that of its constituent members, whereas the legitimacy of the state lies solely in the “mind of the subjects of the state.” However, by way of a process of “mystification.” A process whereby an idea takes on a life of its own, the state’s subjects paradoxically seem to depend on the state rather than the reverse. The legitimacy of the state only endures as a result of its particular claim to sovereignty being inscribed in the subjectivity of its members.

Insofar as sovereignty speaks to the “legitimate” seat of collective self-determination, i.e. it speaks to the nature of political rule, sovereignty *is* the question of freedom, if considered communally. The different nature of political constitutions, each with their own commensurate concept of sovereignty—concepts that are nothing other than “the ideality of the state”—can each be judged according to the expression they give, or repression they cause, in the free self-determination of their constituent members.<sup>27</sup> Marx’s broad criticism of Hegel, however, is that apart from the specific ideas of sovereignty and their commensurate states, each of which affords its members differing degrees of freedom, the entire Hegelian conceptual apparatus falls prey to the idea that sovereignty is “an independent entity.”<sup>28</sup> For Marx, Hegel devolves into “*state formalism*,” insofar as his project is bound up in finding the perfect form of the objective state,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 24.

while failing to realize that a state so conceived, regardless of its content, is itself the problem.<sup>29</sup> This prejudice brings us back full circle to where we began—Marx’s claim that Hegel’s thought is a “perversion of the subjective into the objective and of the objective into the subjective,” which, in turn, “is a consequence of Hegel’s wanting to write the biography of abstract substance, of the idea.”<sup>30</sup> Just as Hegel’s idea of God, for Kierkegaard, usurps individual freedom rather than being an expression of it—a usurpation that means we are socialized into faith rather than having to make a radical emancipatory leap *into* it—sovereignty serves much the same role for Marx, if our subject is *the people* rather than *the individual*. As such, we come to see freedom in the state instead of in the individuals who live within it. This is nothing other than the now familiar claim that the state becomes deified as the community’s God. Yet, as Marx repeatedly states, “[t]he state is an abstraction. The people alone is what is concrete.”<sup>31</sup>

In this way, the path towards *true* democracy is also made clear, insofar as Marx is clearly imagining the collective appropriation of freedom in much the same way that Kierkegaard imagined the individual process. When the people take a self-reflexive attitude with themselves in which they appropriate their freedom, rather than a relationship whereby they become alienated from it (by way of the state), we find truly free communal life, that is, we find true democracy, we find rule by the people. So, true democracy is predicated on an appropriation of freedom and the mutual interpersonal respect that emerges as a consequence of this appropriation, rather than being found in any particular objective manifestation of that freedom. It lies in the people, precisely the kind of people imagined by Kierkegaard, although it is never imagined by him as a universally inclusive community.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 28.

However, before turning to the question of true democracy, Marx's criticism reveals another important distinction between his own work and that of Kierkegaard—or, better yet, another dimension of Marx's work that is absent in Kierkegaard. Specifically, Kierkegaard's focus is overwhelmingly on the process of individual emancipation and the individual subjectivity through which it occurs. Following this, the majority of his work then aims to aid individuals in their recognition, and transcendence of, the socialization in which they necessarily play an active role. Even when describing those not yet free, Kierkegaard insists on seeing them as free, in recognition of the fact that their despair is freely willed. That is, their despair lies in a failure to appropriate their own freedom, a failure they themselves maintain, so that Kierkegaard's project is inextricably involved in cultivating an awareness of this freedom in his readers. This oftentimes entails a deliberate attempt to undermine the excuses and rationalizations that we use to avoid our own freedom, and the responsibility that necessarily ensues, just as we saw with the narrative of Abraham and Isaac. We therefore find Kierkegaard's radical formulation of freedom, in which "[e]very cause ends in a freely acting cause," a formulation that is both truthful in content, as we have seen, but that also serves Kierkegaard's pedagogical goal of cultivating radical freedom and responsibility in his readers, insofar as this formulation of the individual *as* radical freedom reinforces the idea that individuals are responsible for their actions, regardless of the rationalizations they may try to employ.<sup>32</sup>

Marx, however, while sharing Kierkegaard's understanding of individual freedom, also theorizes this freedom at the collective level, and this collective theorization allows Marx to think through sociopolitical life in a way that is absent in Kierkegaard. As a result of this collective theorization, Marx demonstrates that his concern is less with the individual process of emancipation—a process he clearly assumes—than it lies in imagining a form of communal life

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<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 75.

for which this freedom forms the basis. Rather than concerning himself with the individual and their appropriation of freedom, Marx instead spends his time imagining a form of life in which such individuals can actually live it. Whereas Kierkegaard's focus is on the ways in which societies determine subjectivities, Marx's focus is on changing those societies so that they no longer do so. What follows, therefore, is that Marx necessarily makes political judgments that are historically specific, in a way that is much more systematic than is anything Kierkegaard has to offer.<sup>33</sup> After all, different societies oppress differently, even if, for Kierkegaard, they all share a similar form—and it is this form that needs to be overcome—even if Marx shares this judgment. Recalling *Part II*, whereas Kierkegaard and Marx are able to levy criticisms of the societies in which Frederick Douglass and Nora Ibsen live, it is only Marx who is concerned with imagining a world in which their newfound freedom no longer abrades against their sociopolitical existence. This, in turn, requires an understanding of the specific ways in which they do.

For example, in *Part II* we saw how Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel relied upon a criticism of socialization, regardless of the society in question, after which point Marx allowed us to theorize Kierkegaard in his specific application to modern societies. Following this, in the *Contribution*, Marx's extension of this criticism to the concept of sovereignty itself, offers a way to criticize different forms of political organization (or *constitutions*) that is specific to them. For Marx (and for Hegel), "[t]he political constitution is the organization of the state, or the organism of the state is the political constitution."<sup>34</sup> While Kierkegaard's focus on socialization helps us understand the difficulties involved in individual emancipation, Marx recognizes that the

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<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard famously criticized contemporary society in what has become one of his most-referenced works, *Two Ages*. Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age, A literary Review*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978). In this work, as elsewhere, Kierkegaard often demonstrates a penetrating eye when it comes to contemporary sociopolitical life. However, unlike Marx, Kierkegaard's criticism often lacks a systematic sociopolitical basis. That is, for all his insight when it comes to diagnosing symptoms, one still wonders after the true cause.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 11.

particular beliefs into which we are socialized, themselves reflect the specific way in which our sociopolitical lives are organized. Abstractly they all share the same form, as Kierkegaard well understands, but their content reflects back upon a material reality that is different. Simply put, while belief maintains oppressive societies, individuals within such societies come to believe things that are oftentimes quite different. In turn, these beliefs then speak to the lived reality of such societies, insofar as our beliefs in our particular form of sovereignty, are cultivated so as to legitimate the actual practices upon which our societies are built. What emerges from the *Contribution*, then, is twofold: on one hand, we have true democracy, which, we will shortly see, if united with Kierkegaard, entails overcoming social determination and becoming a freely determining individual or community; on the other hand, whereas Kierkegaard's position of criticism is always the socialized individual who is always *de facto* subject to society, because Marx theorizes this freedom collectively rather than individually, he can criticize such societies *from above*, that is, *as a totality*. In other words, from a position in which he imagines what a truly free society would look like, he can criticize existing societies *politically*. Not only do such societies fail because they determine their subjects, but also, the ways in which they fail are unique to them—and, politically relevant.

This position of criticism not only offers Marx leverage by which to analyze particular societies, but also, it allows him an avenue by which to appropriate Hegel's historical analysis. For Kierkegaard, wary of Hegelian history and cognizant of the fact that freedom resides within the individual, history itself appears as an attempt to wrestle away subjective freedom into an objective causal narrative, the response to which we have already seen in Kierkegaard's eloquent assertion that "[e]very cause ends in a freely acting cause."<sup>35</sup> If we are free, then the story of history should be nothing other than the story of what we, as free subjects, have done. Such

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<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 75.

history is no more than a personal narrative that reflects back upon the unique uses of freedom of its subject, but that offers no more internal consistency than that which the subject gives it by way of living a free life. However, this in itself is *not* quite a history *per se*, at least not as conceived by Hegel, for it lacks an internal consistency or causality of its own. However, for Kierkegaard, any such historical continuity becomes an objective phenomenon that comes at the expense of seeing human action as a product of our freedom. After all, if history is the history of anything but radically free subjects, this objective causality comes at the expense of human beings as “freely acting causes.” This, in turn, threatens Kierkegaard’s pedagogical project of convincing us that we are free.

Marx is not so quick to jettison Hegel’s history of freedom, because he thinks it can be reconciled with radical freedom. Marx does not fall prey to Kierkegaard’s dilemma, i.e. how to think history *and* radical freedom. For Marx, while objective history might not pertain to freedom, for the reasons Kierkegaard articulates, it quite appropriately pertains to the realm of servitude. After all, the sociopolitical reality into which we are born *is* objective, and insofar as we are a product of this reality (i.e. insofar as we are *not* free), our action is *predictably* circumscribed. Not only does this material reality itself limit the possibilities of our lives, but also, this material reality inscribes itself in our very subjectivity by way of its attendant set of legitimating beliefs. While this might sound deterministic, none of this precludes the possibility of self-appropriating freedom, it only sets out to demonstrate that within a particular sociopolitical reality, individuals are *similarly* oppressed. Yet, regardless, it hardly seems scandalous to assert that our sociopolitical realities might allow certain possibilities while also foreclosing on others, and that the content of our subjective lives then bears a resemblance to the world in which we live.

What emerges is that history takes on a more distinct form than simply being a story of “freely acting causes” ending in more “freely acting causes.” Instead, history comes to exist in the relationship between actually existing free subjects, the constraints they experience upon their freedom, and the attendant legitimizing beliefs into which they are socialized. Moreover, insofar as freedom is our nature and our *telos*, history can adopt this teleology without subverting it. Rather, it becomes possible to recognize that history is moving towards a communal embrace of freedom (or, sometimes, away from it), but once it does, Marx’s understanding of history as the struggle to be free gives way to Kierkegaard’s understanding of history as the story of freedom. So, whereas Hegel’s later work mystifies politics and history by placing the origin of actions in the realm of ideas rather than located within actually existing individuals, so that “[m]ind thus becomes the predicate of its predicate,”<sup>36</sup> Marx reverses this relationship, making the free subject the engine behind historical sociopolitical reality, while still recognizing that the world in which we actually live does have a necessity of its own. Continuity in history is not a result of our freedom, but rather, history is seen in the evolution of the sociopolitical institutions by which our freedom is curtailed. Freedom might have no history, but servitude certainly has one.

Interestingly, this idea of history is something with which Kierkegaard could easily agree. After all, the causality in Marx’s understanding of history reflects two things: firstly, it speaks to the fact that different sociopolitical constitutions organize life differently, and secondly, it speaks to the fact that in order to maintain their legitimacy, these constitutions impart their specific ideas of sovereignty on their subjects. Any apparent causality we witness in history does not come at the expense of an understanding of individuals as radically free. Rather, it only recognizes that for those who are not yet free, socialization is not a random occurrence, but instead reflects back

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<sup>36</sup> Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 17.

upon the specific societies in which we live. These ideas are essentially ethical ideas, insofar as they seek to circumscribe the types of ideas and actions that are acceptable within these societies. They seek to circumscribe freedom in very particular ways, replacing Kierkegaard's causality of "freely acting causes," with a sense of causality that is much more limited. 'These are the types of things an individual, or community, can do,' say our societies, and while we often retain the right to do them or not to do them (although, societies do often compel certain actions), what is taking place is that we are being educated into causality—what we can, and cannot do—by way of what Kierkegaard calls possibility. In other words, we are told what is possible, because possibility is the mechanism by which our freedom is exercised. It should be no surprise, then, that servitude is predictable. Granted, insofar as we always remain free, surprises do occur, but *en masse*, events sometimes simply *make sense*. And, they make sense exactly in the way that Hegel thought societies were intelligible, i.e. because of the reciprocal interaction of subjectivities with their objective constitutions.

While the overt philosophical analysis of early works like the *Critique* became increasingly replaced with works that more explicitly focused on sociopolitical and economic issues, this early philosophical emphasis provides the structure for Marx's later thought. Perhaps this is no more evident than in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, a work dated to 1852, for there we actually find an explicit mention of these same ideas, prior to an analysis of actual historical events.<sup>37</sup> In one of Marx's most famous passages, he states that:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary

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<sup>37</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 11, Marx and Engels: 1851-53* (New York: International Publishers, 1979).

crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of the world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.<sup>38</sup>

In this passage, we can see Marx relying on those very same insights we have seen in the *Critique*. Specifically, we can see that history plays a twofold role when it comes to the free self-determination of individuals. Firstly, Marx clearly identifies that history is comprised of the circumstances we inherit from the past. Our freedom always exists in a context, it always exists in an inherited *actuality*, and while our future might be unbounded, our point of origin can restrict us. Free individuals have no choice but to exercise their freedom in a world that might make certain possibilities more difficult, or that might punish individuals for certain exercises of their freedom. It would be hard to find a better example of Kierkegaard's understanding of actuality, for Marx's focus on inherited circumstances, an actuality that continues to endure *as* actuality, is precisely the same as Kierkegaard's.

Recalling our examples from *Part II*, i.e. that of Frederick Douglass and Nora from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, while their stories speak to a process of subjective emancipation, once liberated, each still has to exercise that newfound freedom in a sociopolitical world that is incommensurate with that freedom. While certain sociopolitical arrangements might offer citizens greater amounts of freedom, a point that allows Marx and Kierkegaard to praise liberal democracy even while being critical of it, we have yet to find a sociopolitical arrangement that truly allows the type of freedom discovered in what Kierkegaard calls *faith*. Nora Helmer and Frederick Douglass may no longer define themselves via the identities proffered by their societies, in this case, identities that are sexist and racist, they might have found a transcendent self-worth within themselves that defies these identities, yet, materially, they are still subject to a

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 103-04.

society and its ability to exercise power—a society that continues to see them in ways that they themselves have overcome.

Marx's second point relates to the first, but offers a slightly more nuanced understanding of the role that history plays, for its effect is measured not in the objective world, but the subjective one. In fact, this second point perfectly parallels Kierkegaard's attempt to free us from the role that the past, as meaning, plays in our ability to imagine the future. We not only contend with the past insofar as it has materially created the present, i.e. insofar as it remains actuality, but we also contend with it insofar as our understanding of the past weighs on how we think of the future. Therefore, history reveals itself not only in the circumstances into which we are born, but also, in the fact that "tradition ... weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." Marx is not here speaking of the general role that socialization plays, but rather, he is also contextualizing this in terms of what Kierkegaard understands as the movement, or leap, of faith.

More specifically, Marx is addressing the role that this leap plays in historical development. Just as a group of individuals liberates themselves from the constrictions of socializations, i.e. "when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things," just when they seem ready to give birth to something truly *new*, i.e. when they seem to be "creating something that has never yet existed," just as they *anxiously* stand on the precipice of a leap of faith, it is:

precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of the world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.<sup>39</sup>

Too anxious to take the leap into freedom, a leap that would have them acknowledging that ideas and institutions are their own free products rather than appearances to which they are subject,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

they manage to shed their past illusions in a moment of partial revolution, but then, rather than making a leap, they willfully conjure up new ones. The anxiety of freedom is too much, an anxiety Kierkegaard describes as the anxiety that the not yet free have when faced with freedom, as described in *Part I*, so that, rather than making a leap by which they might discover anxiety to be a thing of the past, they shroud themselves in new deceptions, retreating from the anxious precipice, back into unfreedom.

This story of a partial revolution that falls short of a true leap sets the stage for *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. In it, Marx famously pronounces that history repeats itself, but “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce,” speaking precisely to the problem of a revolution unfulfilled, or, a leap not taken.<sup>40</sup> With both the French and English revolutions in mind, revolutions that helped enshrine something of the political constitutions that continue to define the Western world, Marx writes of the modern bourgeoisie as cloaking itself in the guise of the traditions of Ancient Rome.<sup>41</sup> While this class had managed to liberate itself from the deceptions that defined the prior age, they failed to make a true leap, and so, they needed new deceptions by which to deceive themselves—deceptions which disguise the fact that theirs was but a partial revolution, not a full one.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to this, the true revolution of the future will overcome current social restrictions *and* the temptation to hide within past illusions, and will thereby truly give birth to the *new*.

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped of all superstition about the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 103-04.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 103-07.

their dead. There the words went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the words.<sup>43</sup>

If repressive history is defined by forms which define content, i.e. by socialization, a history whereby even its progressive revolutions grab hold of past forms under which they can hide, then, a truly free future will be one in which content defines form. In other words, its form will follow from freedom, not define it.

### **The Singular Universal**

After 1945, French post-war existentialism dealt extensively with this nexus of history and freedom, in one of the best examples of Kierkegaard meeting Marx, as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre each made these problems central to their respective canons. For Camus, the problem of the revolutionary spirit failing to take the leap proved central to his work *The Rebel*, as the historical narrative he offers charts this spirit in its attempt to live free from illusions. While *Part II* explored Camus' *The Rebel* for how well it describes the moment of subjective emancipation, we also noted that Camus' real concern is with freedom's betrayal. This betrayal is characterized precisely by rebels and revolutionaries who find themselves on the precipice of freedom, but who then articulate freedom by way of *forms* that curtail its *content*. Focusing upon artistic, intellectual, and sociopolitical movements, Camus' work is a detailed survey of the ways in which rebels have failed to take the leap into true freedom—or, who take the leap only to betray it. This makes Camus' *The Rebel*, perhaps the best thematic exploration of the problem of emancipation, as understood by Marx and Kierkegaard, and as articulated in *Part II*.

In the case of Jean-Paul Sartre, however, his interest not only lay in the problem of freedom's betrayal, a problem that focuses on how *possibility* curtails freedom, or, in Marx's

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 106.

language, how past traditions weigh on us; but also, Sartre is concerned with the materialist question of how our actual circumstances curtail freedom, i.e. how *actuality*, rather than possibility, impinges on our lives. His concern is less with the process of emancipation, as it was with Camus, and more with freedom itself. So, the existential understanding of freedom that Sartre develops in his early works increasingly became wedded to a Marxist analysis of history, as he engaged in the project of synthesizing freedom and history. Sartre explicitly understands this as the problem of Kierkegaard *and* Marx, on one of the few occasions in which Sartre spoke of Kierkegaard directly, his 1964 lecture, *Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal*. There we find Sartre recognizing Kierkegaard's profound intellectual contribution in recognizing the "irreducible singularity" of each and every individual, even if he "failed to find History."<sup>44</sup> Yet, this was not his project, but Marx's, as, given Kierkegaard's concern with subjective emancipation, history necessarily appeared as something to be overcome (and then, to be created), thereby leaving to Marx the problem of reintroducing objective history. Sartre recognizes this, as the challenge which we all face is to conceive of both "History and the transhistorical."<sup>45</sup> Sartre writes: "Kierkegaard and Marx: these living-dead men condition our anchorage and institute themselves, now vanished, as our future, as the tasks that await us."<sup>46</sup>

However, this relatively brief work aside, the question of freedom and history would dominate Sartre's later life. As Mark Poster writes of Sartre, Marx's pronouncement about history at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire, i.e. that "[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please,"<sup>47</sup> rightly acknowledges that any understanding of history has to

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<sup>44</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 98.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 103-04.

account for the “uncertainty and contingency of human freedom.”<sup>48</sup> So, in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, his project is very much one of reconciling existential ideas of freedom and subjectivity with a Marxist idea of history.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, complementing this late work is Sartre’s *magnum opus* on Gustave Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*, in which he demonstrates this reconciliation, by way of a detailed analysis of Flaubert’s life and work.<sup>50</sup> Without delving into the exhaustive two volumes of the *Critique*, or the five of *The Family Idiot* (itself unfinished), it is interesting to note that in *The Family Idiot*, Sartre begins by stating that it is a “sequel” to an earlier work, a work entitled *Search for a Method*.<sup>51</sup> In fact, *Search for a Method* was written together with the *Critique*, distilling the philosophical grounding of the larger work into an intellectual method that demonstrates how to think both history and freedom.<sup>52</sup> That is, both the philosophical analysis of the *Critique*, and the practical demonstration of method in *The Family Idiot*, exist in *Search for a Method*, making it the perfect place to turn. In this way, we gain access to both dimensions of Sartre’s work, i.e. the philosophical elucidation and the practical demonstration, in a pithy work that succinctly demonstrates his synthesis of Marxism and Existentialism.

Sartre’s interest in this synthesis was historically driven, the response to a schism in Marxism itself.<sup>53</sup> As Sartre sees it, the rapid industrialization of the U.S.S.R. necessitated a new type of ideology, one that was practically oriented, as practical efficacy, i.e. getting things done,

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Poster, *Sartre's Marxism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1982). 20.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume One*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York: Verso, 2004); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume Two*, trans. Quintin Hoare, 2 vols., vol. 2 (New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*, trans. Carol Cosman, vol. 1-5 (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* vol. 1, ix

<sup>52</sup> Hazel E. Barnes, "Introduction," in *Search for a Method* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968), ix.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search For A Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968). 22-23.

had become valued more highly than abstract notions, such as the *truth*.<sup>54</sup> As Soviet ideology developed in tandem with the needs of industrialization, it increasingly became the type of repressive dogma of which Marx was so critical, and from which Kierkegaard sought to escape. That is, individuals increasingly needed to make themselves subservient to the needs of industrialization, with soviet ideology cementing this rule. As Poster notes, “[d]ialectical necessity became little more than the mechanical necessity of an iron law of nature,”<sup>55</sup> precisely the kind of necessity that Kierkegaard attacks. With this in mind, Sartre saw existentialism as a way of reinserting a concern for the individual into Marxism, for, it should never have been removed.

Interestingly, a few year prior to Sartre’s 1957 *Search for a Method*, Lukács, in his polemical 1949 essay, *Existentialism*, argues that existentialism is little more than a bourgeois attempt to save idealism, directly attacking Sartre, among others.<sup>56</sup> While, as a cultural form, many existential thinkers were bourgeois in political outlook, Lukács’ attack bears more than a passing resemblance to Adorno’s attack on Kierkegaard, as Kierkegaard (or existentialism) became conflated with some of those who claimed him as an influence.<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard’s own radicalism, a radicalism manifest in both his life and his works, was overlooked, in favor of a picture of Kierkegaard as offering an apologetic for bourgeois complacency rather than an attack upon it. To Sartre’s credit, however, he is able to see beyond this, no doubt aided by his own immersion in existential thought. For Sartre, therefore, “historical materialism furnished the only

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Poster, *Sartre's Marxism*: 28.

<sup>56</sup> Sartre refers to Lukács essay by the title *Existentialism and Marxism*, but it was published in English with the simpler title, *Existentialism*. See, Georg Lukács, "Existentialism," in *Marxism and Human Liberations: Essays on history, culture, and revolution*, ed. Jr. E. San Juan (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., 1973).

<sup>57</sup> For more on Adorno and Kierkegaard, see, Chapter 4.

valid interpretation of history and ... existentialism remained the only concrete approach to reality.”<sup>58</sup>

Not always a charitable reader of Kierkegaard, despite evidence of Kierkegaard’s thought throughout his work, in *Search for a Method* Sartre makes frequent mention of Kierkegaard’s importance: “Kierkegaard was perhaps the first to point out, against Hegel and thanks to him, the incommensurability of the real and knowledge.”<sup>59</sup> Recognizing Kierkegaard’s importance in reminding us that living life is not the same as thinking about it, Sartre recognizes Kierkegaard’s attempt to help his readers take their lives with the seriousness he thinks they deserve. So, Kierkegaard is responsible for reminding us such things as that “[k]nowing the cause of a passion is not enough to overcome it; one must live it, one must oppose other passions to it, one must combat it tenaciously, in short one must “work oneself over.””<sup>60</sup> In an obvious reference to Kierkegaard’s understanding of despair, Sartre knows well that overcoming despair requires actual changes to how we live, changes that are often difficult, and that simply “knowing” oneself is not enough to make a change; one must be willing, or, better yet, one must *will* it.

As for Marx, Sartre is quick to note his essential similarity to Kierkegaard, a similarity which originates in a shared rebellion against Hegel.

It is striking that Marxism addresses the same reproach to Hegel though from quite another point of view. For Marx, indeed, Hegel has confused objectification, the simple externalization of man in the universe, with the alienation which turns his externalization back against man. Taken by itself—Marx emphasizes this again and again—objectification would be an opening out; it would allow man, who produces and reproduces his life without ceasing and who transforms himself by changing nature, to “contemplate himself in a world which he has created.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Sartre, *Search For A Method*: 20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Recognizing that their critique of Hegel runs parallel, Sartre likewise notes that, for Marx, objectification is our salvation, insofar as our ability to freely create the world is the mechanism by which we make ourselves at home in it—and the mechanism by which self-discovery occurs. Rather than Hegel’s image of alienation as a reconciliation of ideas and reality, a reconciliation achieved through our free activity, Sartre recognizes that Marx’s vision of free activity is not one that reconciles us with a foregone idea (a point Kierkegaard spends much time elaborating by way of his critique of *anamnesis*), but that opens us up to an infinite future of self-creation and the concomitant self-discovery. In other words, there is no static home that human beings seek to create, but rather, we feel at home when freely *creating*.

As noted in *Part I*, the main difference between Marx and Kierkegaard on the question of despair and alienation, is the cause: Marx sees it as originating materially, whereas Kierkegaard sees it as stemming from our very nature as reflective beings. Sartre clearly sides with Marx in this debate, writing, contra Hegel, that “in the present phase of our history, productive forces have entered into conflict with relations of production. . . . Since alienation comes about as the result of this conflict, it is a historical reality and completely irreducible to an idea.”<sup>62</sup> While Sartre is here demonstrating his agreement with Marx contra Hegel, arguing that it is because our very freedom is at odds with economic reality, and while this seemingly places Sartre at odds with Kierkegaard, as it turns out, Sartre’s approach is more subtle—even if he fails to give a nod to Kierkegaard, as he should—a point we will presently see.

In *Search for a Method*, Sartre spends much time exploring questions of childhood, in what proves an extremely insightful point, and one that demonstrates his integration of Kierkegaard and Marx. He writes:

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 14.

Today's Marxists are concerned only with adults; reading them, one would believe that we are born at the age when we earn our first wages. They have forgotten their own childhoods. As we read them, everything seems to happen as if men experienced their alienation and their reification *first in their own work*, whereas in actuality each one lives it *first*, as a child, *in his parents' work*. ... Existentialism, on the contrary, believes that it can integrate the psychoanalytic method which discovers the point of insertion for man and his class—that is, the particular family—as a mediation between the universal class and the individual. The family in fact is constituted by and in the general movement of History, but is experienced, on the other hand, as an absolute in the depth and opaqueness of childhood.<sup>63</sup>

What Sartre means here is that the process of alienation and despair does not begin with our first experiences of alienated labor, but well before that, in the childhood homes in which we are raised. By the time we hit a point in which we can labor in an alienated way, we have already been raised in our parents homes, with their values and ideas, and it is here that our formative development takes place. Therefore, alienation is first transmitted to us prior to actual alienation, through the meanings proffered on us in childhood—meanings which partially reflect our own parents', and thereby, their communities', norms. Recalling that Kierkegaard's narrative of despair was a narrative of childhood, a narrative whereby despair originates in the child's growing self-awareness and their concomitant exercise of will, we see here just how much Sartre betrays a Marxist *situating* of Kierkegaard.<sup>64</sup> Sartre also shows how amenable Kierkegaard is to this synthesis, insofar as Kierkegaard argues that language births despair, a point that leaves open the question as to the specific, historical, form of language in question. In other words, Kierkegaard is only sketching out the *form* of despair, not the *content*, a content that will always be historically specific, a point that Sartre clearly recognizes.

Sartre is therefore free to develop the subjective impediments to freedom, while situating them historically, and acknowledging that these impediments serve forms of material, or actual,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>64</sup> For an exploration of Kierkegaard's argument, see, Chapter 2.

exploitation. And so, we find Sartre reminding us that “we must remember that we live our childhood as our *future*.”<sup>65</sup> The roles we learn, the meanings we learn to live by, the values we embody, in short, everything that Kierkegaard signifies when he argue that language causes despair, the sum total of our childhood which then comes to constitute our *possibility*, all of this lives on. It lives on precisely because we keep it alive, transforming a past that has ceased to exist, into a possibility we continue to bring into existence. So, “*at the same time* that these givens are a past-surpassed, they appear in every operation as a past-surpassing—that is, as a future. *Our roles are always future*.”<sup>66</sup> And this is because of our nature *as* free, a freedom that exists in relation to our future, because:

Man defines himself by his project. This material being perpetually goes beyond the condition which is made for him; he reveals and determines his situation by transcending it in order to objectify himself—by work, action, or gesture.<sup>67</sup>

Freedom is transcendence indeed.

Sartre is no stranger to materialist analysis; after all, he even attributes the crisis in Marxism to the Soviet need for an industrial ideology. What conceptually underlies this analysis, however, is not foreign to either Marx or Kierkegaard, both of whom understand that our intellectual life is often an *ex post facto* justification for action we would have taken anyway. While Marx is an astute analyst of material history, and while this material analysis provides Sartre, and us, a way to give content to Kierkegaard’s *form* of despair, Sartre’s use of existentialism hits upon precisely the right point: the challenge is not only to change material reality, but firstly, to simply acknowledge it. If history is thus far constituted by the dialectical formation of subjectivities under repressive ideology, a formation that is necessitated by the need to maintain material exploitation, then, only when self-appropriation occurs on a truly universal

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<sup>65</sup> Sartre, *Search For A Method*: 105.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

scale can this process be overcome. Otherwise, even an emancipatory ideology transforms itself into a repressive dogma, just as Sartre argues occurred with Soviet ideology. While we might agree with Marx that our alienation is materially based, and while, in an absolute sense, alienation might end when the material conditions of society are changed in a way that does away with exploitation, such a society can only be created by those already free, subjectively speaking. Which, for James Marsh, is precisely why Kierkegaard is pessimistic on the question of revolution.<sup>68</sup> Yet, if this is the case, an understanding of freedom as a subjective appropriation is an essential ingredient for understanding any progressive developments we find in history, just as history proves an essential ingredient for understanding freedom.

We can see further evidence of Sartre's synthesis when he speaks of the specific ways in which history shapes our freedom, and how, in turn, our struggles for freedom are deeply subjective, as we each struggle against the inherited baggage our families heap upon us as children. As Sartre notes, "[e]verything changes if one considers that society is presented to each man as a perspective of the future and that this future penetrates to the heart of each one as a real motivation for his behavior."<sup>69</sup> This insight stems from an understanding of individuals, and how they exercise freedom.

Man is, for himself and for others, a signifying being, since one can never understand the slightest of his gestures without going beyond the pure present and explaining it by the future. Furthermore, he is creator of signs to the degree that—always ahead of himself—he employs certain objects to designate other absent or future objects. But both operations are reduced to a pure and simple surpassing. To surpass present conditions toward their later change and to surpass the present object toward an absence are one and the same thing. Man constructs signs because in his very reality he is signifying; and he is signifying because he is a dialectical surpassing of all that is simply given. What we call freedom is the irreducibility of the cultural order to the natural order.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> James L. Marsh, "Marx and Kierkegaard on Alienation," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 164.

<sup>69</sup> Sartre, *Search For A Method*: 96.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

It should not be lost that Sartre is actually defining human beings as freedom, while recognizing that freedom necessarily requires the creation of meaning if it is to be exercised. Certainly we need a material basis if we are to act freely, for, if we are forever having to “work in order to live,” as Marx puts it, our lives fall prey to the necessity of survival. However, as Kierkegaard and Sartre note, our freedom also requires an ability to imagine the future, a point that is as true for wage laborers as it is for the affluent bourgeoisie. In fact, as Sartre is also sharp to note, action itself is incomprehensible without comprehending that towards which we are acting. Our action is future oriented, and as such, understanding it requires an understanding of how we conceive of the future. Insofar as history is a story of freedom’s activity, shared structures for conceiving of the future will necessarily give it cohesion. That is, the story of history, thus far, is that of freedom acting unfreely. In this way, Mark Poster’s claim about Sartre’s intention is clear: “Sartre sought to save the Marxist vision of man’s future by rewriting the past in existentialist hues, by recapturing freedom in history.”<sup>71</sup>

Finally, we can see how, with the existential dimensions of freedom explicated, Sartre comes to imagine collective freedom.

Thus man makes History; this means that he objectifies himself in it and is alienated in it. In this sense History, which is the proper work of *all* activity and of *all* men, appears to men as foreign force exactly insofar as they do not recognize the meaning of their enterprise (even when locally successful) in the total, objective result.<sup>72</sup>

For Sartre, like Marx and Hegel before him, history becomes the story of freedom. Furthermore, the degree to which we fail to recognize history as such testifies to the distance between our freedom and its appropriation; that is, it is a demonstration of the fact that we continue to exercise our freedom in an alienated, or despairing, way, acting through ourselves as socialized

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<sup>71</sup> Poster, *Sartre's Marxism*: 30.

<sup>72</sup> Sartre, *Search For A Method*: 89.

products, rather than as free subjects. Only when the appropriation of freedom occurs on a collective level, then, will humankind come to recognize that it, and nothing else, is responsible for history; only then will we be at home.

For a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a universal singular. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as a singularity. Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects, he requires simultaneous examination at both ends.<sup>73</sup>

For Sartre, we are freedom *and* history. Unfree, our freedom is determined by history; free, our freedom determines history. In the former case, we appear similar in our socialization, yet live alone insofar as our community is artificial. In the latter case, we appear different in our singularity, yet live together in a real community of free subjects.

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<sup>73</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*, trans. Carol Cosman, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981). ix.

## Chapter 8: *Democracy*

In *Part III*, we have been exploring the question of freedom. In Chapter 6, we spent our time exploring Kierkegaard's thoughts on freedom, as conceived at the level of the individual. In Chapter 7, we complicated this picture, by reinserting a free individual into a sociopolitical world that is not free, so we could understand the objective constraints that impress themselves on subjective freedom. Following Chapter 7's detour that complicated individual freedom, we now pick up where Chapter 6 left off, returning to the question of freedom itself. However, instead of theorizing freedom at the individual level, now our concern is to theorize it at the collective level. If an individual's freedom is as Kierkegaard described it, turning to Marx, we will see how this same freedom looks, if we imagine it communally. As we will see, it looks like democracy.

### Marx and Democracy

In *Part II*, we explored the process of emancipation, concluding that emancipation entails overcoming the relationship to the social world whereby subjectivity was determined by it, and instead coming to act as determining subjects in our own right. And, so far, in last chapter's analysis of Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, we can see Marx using this same language of socialization in as explicit terms as did Kierkegaard. So then, it should be no surprise that when Marx imagines what a true community would look like, what he calls a "true democracy," Marx defines it precisely as an overcoming of this repressive and oppressive relationship to the world, an overcoming that returns self-determination to the people. Rather than being an object of the state, the people appropriate the state's agency themselves.

In all states other than democratic ones the *state*, the *law*, the *constitution* is what rules, without really ruling—i. e., without materially permeating the content of the

remaining, non-political spheres. In democracy the constitution, the law, the state itself, insofar as it is a political constitution, is only the self-determination of the people, and a particular content of the people.<sup>1</sup>

For Marx, the transition from other forms of political arrangement to democracy precisely mimics the transition Kierkegaard describes as the movement to faith, a movement whereby an individual subject transitions from being socially determined to self-determining; or, from experiencing politics as something foreign to which they are subject, to experiencing politics as emanating from their own freedom. The constitution is no longer something to which people are subject, but instead, only an objectification of the people. In fact, it is not quite a constitution at all, at least as typically understood, for it becomes no more than the “self-determination” of the people, a “particular” expression of their freedom, and, as such, it might change. Tying a truly democratic constitution to self-determination also ensures that, even if changed, the constitution remains democratic, for its essential content is not found in the constitution itself, but in its relation to its origins in the people.

Playing off the conceptual distinction between form and content, as we will see, Marx also comes to define the people as content and the state as form. As the state and other social and political institutions are arrangements we use to organize life, arrangements we often mistake for life itself, they are forms we impose on ourselves. This distinction sets the stage for understanding Marx’s most powerful passages on democracy, passages in which he demonstrates how democracy, considered as the people, is content. However, insofar as people are dialectical, they not only need to be considered as content, i.e. ontologically, but they also need to be understood in terms of how they have chosen to live, i.e. existentially. What follows is that democracy, truly considered, is not only content, but also form; not only freedom as fact, but

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 30-31.

freedom as practice. Other forms of state might retain democracy as content, but they betray it in form. Therefore, for Marx:

Democracy is the truth of monarchy; monarchy is not the truth of democracy. Monarchy is necessarily democracy inconsistent with itself; the monarchical element is not an inconsistency in democracy. Monarchy cannot be understood in its own terms; democracy can. In democracy none of the elements attains a significance other than what is proper to it. Each is in actual fact only an element of the whole *demos* [people]. In monarchy one part determines the character of the whole. The entire constitution has to adapt itself to this fixed point. Democracy is the genus Constitution. Monarchy is one species, and a poor one at that. Democracy is content and form. Monarchy is *supposed* to be only a form, but it falsifies the content.<sup>2</sup>

Directly mimicking, or really, foreshadowing, the distinction at the heart of Marx's understanding of alienation, i.e. freedom acting unfreely, Marx critiques all prior forms of state for betraying this collective freedom. Working within the distinction between our inalienable ontological freedom and our existential appropriation of that freedom, Marx argues that sociopolitical freedom originates in the *demos*, i.e. the people. This *demos* is considered not solely as a "whole," but as comprised of "elements," i.e. actual, individual, people. And this, *these people*, constitute democracy as content.

Therefore, democracy first exists as ontological fact, i.e. as content. We can then make sense of Marx's criticism of other forms of government, in this case monarchy, for their exclusionary appropriation of self-determination in the hands of the king. So, "[m]onarchy is *supposed* to be only a form, but it falsifies the content."<sup>3</sup> In giving the political freedom of self-determination to the singular individual of the king, the freedom of the other constituent members of the community is lost, as the exercise of their freedom is usurped by one "element" of the "whole." Insofar as Marx speaks of democracy's *content* as being falsified, he is certainly speaking to the material fact that the king has power, and the people do not. While monarchy is a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

*form* of political organization, as it cedes self-determination to the king, it simultaneously betrays the self-determination of the rest of the *demos*. However, the language of “falsification” speaks not only to the material usurpation of self-determination, but also, to the fact that as a form of government, monarchy necessarily maintains itself through a legitimating ideology. That is, in order to maintain itself, monarchy needs to convince individuals that self-determination is not theirs to have. This ideology, insofar as it seeks to normalize monarchy, *falsifies* that which it is supposed to represent. Monarchy is not only a practice, but an idea.

Just as an individual who is alienated from their own freedom lives by way of a false sense of self, so too with the community, seeing their own freedom in the king's actions, rather than their own lived lives. Framed to include all non-democratic constitutions (in Marx's sense of the word democracy, by which liberal democracy would also be considered non-democratic), Marx further writes:

All other state forms are definite, distinct, particular forms of state. In democracy the formal principle is at the same time the material principle. Only democracy, therefore, is the true unity of the general and the particular.<sup>4</sup>

In democracy, the formal principle or political *form* comes to match the material principle or *content*, ending the conflict between the people and exclusionary forms of state. Given this, we can see why “[d]emocracy is the truth of monarchy,” as the people's freedom, insofar as it always exists as content, is always *the truth*—regardless of their appropriation of this freedom. This thereby reaffirms that the question of political history is the question of finding the appropriate form to match our ontological content—a form which is not a form, at least as typically imagined, insofar our appropriation of freedom is an appropriation of the very ability to create forms.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 30.

What follows from this analysis is that the form of democracy is nothing more than a self-reflexive *political* relationship (as opposed to Kierkegaard's self-reflexive *personal*—or *interpersonal*—relationship) in which the full freedom of the *demos* is appropriated, i.e. an appropriation of the freedom of each individual member that constitutes “the people.” In such a case, specific individuals, groups, institutions, etc. no longer play a role greater than their share when it comes to the self-determination of the people, but rather, as free individuals themselves they participate in self-determination equally with all. Unlike monarchy, where “one part determines the character of the whole,” the situation is different: “In democracy none of the elements attains a significance other than what is proper to it. Each is in actual fact only an element of the whole demos [people].”<sup>5</sup> In other words, in democracy, we each exercise our own freedom, even when acting collectively.

This is one place where Kierkegaard proves quite useful, helping flesh out the nature of the form of democracy, for it no longer adheres to the standard way in which we think of state forms. The typical way a state is conceived is as a political arrangement that we each internalize, just as we have seen Marx argue in *On The Jewish Question*. There, democracy was conceived as a legitimating ideology that we each internalize, one that spoke of equality, but that also serves to mask underlying inequalities. However, a true democracy is not created by an ideology of freedom imposed on its members, rather, it is the consequence of its members actually being free. Democracy does not reside in an external relationship among its member, i.e. in some *form* that its members adopt vis-à-vis one another, but rather, it resides in the nature of the intersubjective relationship among its members—it resides in the nature of how free subjects relate. And here, Kierkegaard has much to say, and Marx less so, because this type of democratic relationship among free equals is precisely the type of relationship after which Kierkegaard

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29.

years. The absence of explicit sociopolitical engagement in his work does not speak to any supposed aristocratic or necessarily apolitical dimensions of thought; instead, it only speaks to a conscious unwillingness or inability to imagine the possibility of an entire community transformed by the type of subjective appropriation of freedom that he truly believes is within every person's reach, i.e. it speaks to his pessimism. As it goes, part of Kierkegaard's attack on Christian dogma, as we saw in his reductive account of Christianity, entails making Christianity *more* accessible, not less so—in what can be construed as a political decision of his own.

Granted, he did want to make Christianity “more difficult” by disabusing “cultural” Christians of the belief that they followed in God's footsteps, but this is little different than Marx's attack on the ideology of equality, for its role in obscuring inequality.

All this being said, however, Kierkegaard's understanding of the intersubjective nature of faith helps illuminate the intricacies of Marx's democracy. If democracy is the self-determination of the people, a self-determination that requires a collective appropriation of freedom, this appropriation needs to be understood not as an appropriation of collective freedom, by which standard monarchy could be understood as democratic, insofar as the king appropriates everyone's freedom. Instead, it needs to be understood as a collective appropriation of individual freedom. In other words, if the self-reflexive relationship of democracy has any one of us appropriating the freedom of any other, or worse, any one of us appropriating the collective freedom of the whole, then, we find ourselves back at monarchy, or aristocracy, etc. Instead, what Marx is speaking to is a society in which each individual has appropriated their own freedom; that is, he is speaking of a society comprised of Kierkegaardian individuals, one that is no more and no less. Or, as Bertell Ollman writes, (keeping in mind that Marx's understanding of true democracy is essentially synonymous with what he otherwise refers to as communism or

socialism, as many commentators have noted)<sup>6</sup>: “Communism is the time of full, personal appropriation.”<sup>7</sup> In the last chapter, we saw how faith entails an acceptance of the self-determination of others—it entails a loving, supportive, respect for others—for we become free through the love of others. What constitutes the intersubjective relationship among such truly free individuals is precisely this loving acceptance of the other as a free, self-determining, creature. What follows, then, is that the *form* of democracy is nothing other than a *faith* we have in one another.

What constitutes such a sociopolitical world is not the particular set of institutions it may or may not devise, but only, the freedom of its members, a freedom that is one and the same with a love of others. In *Part II*, it was also demonstrated that what constitutes faith, or the appropriation of faith, is an overcoming of the fears and anxieties that lead us to grasp onto objects, including, even, the objectified form we anxiously give to others. What followed was that faith was seen to entail a type of submission, that is, a relinquishing of our own anxiety-driven desire to dominate, so that instead of controlling others, we learn to trust in them. This was the leap; we leap beyond a world comprised of the intellectual objects we use to try and control it—the world that money can buy, as Marx, and even Kierkegaard, understands it—and instead, we allow others, and the world they have freely created, to be revealed. Therefore, it is in faith—in trust—that community is born. And here we find the constitution of democracy: comprised of truly free individuals, what comes to define democracy is trust—a trust placed in people who, through their own responsible appropriation of freedom, have likewise come to deserve that trust. Rather than a constitution that sits atop people, looking down, determining our

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, see, Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1971). 34; Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, Historical Materialism Book Series (Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003). 41.

<sup>7</sup> Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society. Second Edition.* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1976). 93.

subjectivities, providing control over others, democracy is nothing other than an expression of the trust experienced between free subjects, as we collectively act out of our own respective individual appropriations of freedom, doing so with one another in mind. Rather than finding comfort in the endless accumulation of money, an accumulation we try and use to protect ourselves through money's ability to control the world around us, we instead learn to trust in those around us. We trust that when we have needs, our community will be there.

This has sometimes been taken to mean that Marx is an anarchist, at least in the sense that he decries all static political organization. However, this is not quite true. What Marx does decry is any form of political organization that comes at the expense of freedom, a problem that is solved not by the elimination of all forms of political organization, but by changing the nature of the relationship between the people and politics.

In democracy the political state, which stands alongside this content and distinguishes itself from it, is itself merely a *particular* content and particular *form of existence* of the people. In monarchy, for example, this particular, the political constitution, has the significance of the *general* that dominates and determines everything particular. In democracy the state as particular is *merely* particular; as general, it is the truly general, i.e., not something determinate in distinction from the other content. The French have recently interpreted this as meaning that in true democracy the *political state is annihilated*. This is correct insofar as the political state *qua* political state, as constitution, no longer passes for the whole.<sup>8</sup>

The state is annihilated, insofar as it is considered to be the true, and full, expression of the people. However, this does not entail eliminating the kind of self-determination that we find within such states, it entails expanding it. Rather than having a state in which a particular class exerts its control over others, in which a part comes to govern the whole, democracy emerges as truly inclusive political self-rule. So, we no longer recognize the state as something *against* which we live, a particular form into which we must conform, as this relationship betrays the fact

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<sup>8</sup> Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 30.

that we are alienated from political self-determination. Instead, when self-determination is appropriated on a collective level, this alienated type of state is eliminated, but only to have its function as a political mechanism appropriated by each and every one of its citizens—the state is no longer *distinct* from the content, i.e. the people, that it governs, but is recognized as an expression of them. The state returns to the status of the particular that it is, a particular that will continue to exist while it is needed, but will change, just as needs do.

Democracy is really little more than a synonym for “the people,” if the people are considered as free, in the Kierkegaardian sense. If we want to know what Marx means by democracy, we need to do little more than understand what Kierkegaard meant by freedom, and then imagine a society of such individuals. One might then ask what actually constitutes such a democracy, in that the word democracy speaks to a society, whereas Kierkegaard’s individual is an individual. Yet, Kierkegaard’s understanding of becoming an individual is inherently communal, even if he imagines the love of Jesus Christ, who he sees as the historically incarnate God, as he through whom we can all have a community. That is, it is because God loves us, that we can become free. However, what is truly important in this formulation is not only a transcendent love that is willing to sacrifice itself for us, a love that gives us the strength to appropriate freedom, but more so, the fact that this love is materially real, embodied in actual historical figures, with Jesus Christ serving as Kierkegaard’s *sine qua non*.

When an oak nut is planted in a clay pot, the pot breaks; when new wine is poured into old leather bottles, they burst. What happens, then, when the god plants himself in the frailty of a human being if he does not become a new person and a new vessel!<sup>9</sup>

And this is why the essential message of Christianity is only that God was historically incarnated, because through that message, we learn that we can become lovingly free too.

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<sup>9</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 34.

If we are to be truly free, we must have the freedom to organize, and reorganize, ourselves on a whim. That is, we do not have any fixed form, we do not have any fixed constitution, but instead, we are constantly creating our form anew, in what Miguel Abensour calls “the principle of ongoing self-foundation.”<sup>10</sup> So, even when a particular institution remains the same over successive “moments,” through every one of them we continue to create it, we continue to bring it “into existence,” for the moment we forget that the state depends on *us* is the moment we become subject to *it*. And this last point, that the state depends on the people, rather than the people on the state, a point that halts Hegel’s political dialectic mid-turn, is, for Marx, the truth of history.

In monarchy the whole, the people, is subsumed under one of its particular modes of being, the political constitution. In democracy the *constitution itself* appears only as *one* determination, that is, the self-determination of the people. In monarchy we have the people of the constitution; in democracy the constitution of the people. Democracy is the solved *riddle* of all constitutions. Here, not merely *implicitly* and in essence but *existing* in reality, the constitution is constantly brought back to its actual basis, the *actual human being*, the *actual people*, and established as the people’s *own* work. The constitution appears as what it is, a free product of man. It could be said that in a certain respect this applies also to constitutional monarchy; but the specific distinguishing feature of democracy is that here the *constitution* as such forms only *one* element in the life of the people—that it is not the *political constitution* by itself which forms the state.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than an alienated existence over above us, *the riddle is solved*, and the constitution reappears as what it is—nothing more than the way we have chosen, at this point in time, to organize ourselves. In fact, each moment we live we bring this constitution back *into existence*, as it is brought back to its “basis,” i.e. “the people,” emerging as a product of their “own work,” that is, a product of their freedom.

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<sup>10</sup> Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, trans. Max Blechman and Martin Breugh (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011). 62.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 29.

The sections of Marx's *Critique* that explore democracy are often mentioned in studies of Marx. So, we find commentators like Shlomo Avineri writing that Marx's true democracy is fundamentally the same as what Marx calls communism, whereas Michael Löwy recognizes that Marx uses the term to argue that the type of political equality within a democratic state needs to be extended to the rest of life too.<sup>12</sup> However, perhaps the only comprehensive study of Marx's *Critique* is Miguel Abensour's *Democracy Against The State*, the very title of which captures the fundamental nature of democracy as opposed to other, fixed forms, of government. In fact, Abensour is an often astute commentator on Marx's *Critique*, particularly insofar as he teases out the temporality of Marx's true democracy in a way that unwittingly places it in Kierkegaard's world. So, rehashing the prior point that democracy continually creates its political form anew, Abensour writes this:

The resolution of the constitution (socialized man) eliminates the danger of petrification since it brings about a reduction of the constitution, a determination of its limits as a moment – since it assigns the constitution *the status of being a moment*.<sup>13</sup>

Democracy signifies that we realize that the forms we create, those that we bring into existence, exist only so long as we continue to do so. They exist in *the moment*; a moment, in “the fullness of time,” that we have now appropriated. Furthermore, “[i]n democracy,” as opposed to Kierkegaard's scale of the single individual, “each moment is really only a moment of the whole demos.”<sup>14</sup>

We can see all of this more concretely when Marx speaks in terms of the familiar distinction between the state and civil society. Whereas civil society is where our lives are actually lived, the state is the abstract realm we have created to govern over us. Yet, when we

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<sup>12</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 34; Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*: 41.

<sup>13</sup> Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*: 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

overcome the alienation which leads to this divided arrangement, and each of us reclaims our freedom in a real, material, way, freedom returns to us as a quality of our lived lives.

Or, conversely: Civil society is *actual* political society. In this case, it is nonsense to raise a demand which has arisen only from the notion of the political state as a phenomenon separated from civil society, which has arisen only from the *theological* notion of the political state. In this situation the significance of the *legislative* power as a *representative* power completely disappears. The legislative power is representation here in the sense in which *every* function is representative—in the sense in which, e.g., the shoemaker, insofar as he satisfies a social need, is my representative, in which every particular social activity is a species-activity merely represents the species, i.e., an attribute of my own nature, and in which every person is the representative of every other. He is here representative not because of something else which he represents but because of what he *is* and *does*.<sup>15</sup>

What does this mean in the most practical terms possible? It means nothing other than that we begin to live in reality, or, what Kierkegaard calls *actuality*. Reclaiming our imaginative lives and giving it the status it deserves, no more and no less, we can finally look upon our collective lives clearly.

Mimicking Kierkegaard's attack on religion, an attack in which he reduces Christianity to the simple fact of God's existence, Marx does the same with the state, reducing our belief in democratic laws as the repository of collective freedom, to a recognition that human beings themselves are such a repository. Even though we do not need Marx to explicitly parallel his work with that of Kierkegaard, he does so:

Hegel starts from the state and makes man the subjectified state; democracy starts from man and makes the state the objectified man. Just as it is not religion which creates man but man who creates religion, so it is not the constitution which creates the people but the people which creates the constitution. In a certain respect the relation of democracy to all other forms of state is like the relation of Christianity to all other religions. Christianity is the religion *κατ' ἐξοχήν* [par excellence], the *essence of religion*—deified man as a *particular* religion. Similarly, democracy is the *essence of all state constitutions*—socialised man as a *particular* state constitution. Democracy stands to the other constitutions as the genus stands to its species; except that here the genus itself appears as an existent,

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 119.

and therefore as one *particular* species over against the others whose existence does not correspond to their essence. To democracy all other forms of state stand as its Old Testament. Man does not exist for the law but the law for man—it is a *human manifestation*; whereas in the other forms of state man is a *legal manifestation*. That is the fundamental distinction of democracy.<sup>16</sup>

If Christianity is the religion *par excellence*, and is so because it is nothing other than “deified man as a *particular* religion,” the democratic *state* is the equivalent, insofar as it deifies “socialised man” as a particular constitution. The former deifies us in our individual form, whereas the democratic state deifies us in our communal form. And yet, there is an essential truth captured in both, albeit in an alienated form, as each enshrines the worth of human beings in a codified, legal, form, a point Marx makes when he writes that “[t]o democracy all other forms of state stand as its Old Testament.”<sup>17</sup> True democracy, not institutional democracy, makes this worth “human,” or real, instead of “legal,” or alienated. So, just as Kierkegaard seeks to divorce “true” Christianity from everything we might think of as Christianity, i.e. the entirety of its doctrine, for, as Marx notes, “man creates religion,” Marx seeks to divorce democracy from everything we might think of as democracy, for it is “the people which creates the constitution.” As such, the message of Christianity will become real, as we learn to love one another, just as the message of democracy becomes real, as we likewise learn to love one another. Kierkegaard attacks Christianity as a doctrine, reducing it to its basic premise, a premise that needs to be appropriated by each individual; while Marx attacks bourgeois democracy, reducing it to its basic premise, a premise that itself need to be appropriated by a community of individuals. And at base, both are essentially the same. We are free, loving, creatures.

## **Democracies of Love**

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

On September 17, 2011, New York City experienced something that was a long time in the making. Following the economic crisis of late 2007 and early 2008, a crisis that would reach global proportions not seen since the Great Depression, and which served to expose, and was precipitated by, the rampant criminality within the financial services sector, a small group of activists descended on lower Manhattan, setting up an encampment just a few blocks from Wall Street, in Zuccotti Park. Known as *Occupy Wall Street*, within a few weeks this encampment would grow into hundreds of “permanent” occupiers who slept in the park, and many more thousands who volunteered, or who otherwise participated. Inspired by Occupy Wall Street (just as Occupy itself was inspired by the middle eastern revolutions known as the Arab Spring, as well as by preceding Spanish protests), dozens if not hundreds of other Occupy encampments set themselves up in cities across the United States, and the world. Back in New York, a broad swath of the city participated, creating, for its brief life of two months, a space in which people felt safe to share their own stories of vulnerability, as the recent crisis had left a scant few untouched.

For many, the supportive environment at Zuccotti Park was the first time, perhaps ever, that they could unburden themselves of the economic anxieties that had been mounting for decades. The prior decades had seen real wages plummet, and so too with the standard of living, all while inequality ran rampant. While people had long suffered, they nonetheless imagined their problems as individual ones, so that the crisis, and the attendant exposure of its origins in the predatory practices of the financial industry, helped many see that the precipitous decline through which they had been living, was hardly accidental, and not an individual but a political problem. And so, the atmosphere at Zuccotti was one of support, as people both talked and listened; it was one of self-expression, as people made posters, t-shirts, and buttons—often mass-producing them only to give them away for free; it was one of festivity, as people unburdened

themselves of worries and found the joy of community; and it was one of critique, as people experienced what a community could be, only to realize that outside of the Park, the reality was hardly the same.

Even practically, the community thrived, as there was no shortage of people who sought to support Zuccotti: be it by cooking food or by cleaning, by helping organize and dispense supplies, by providing medical care, by volunteering at the ever growing “people’s library,” or through the numerous donations that flooded Lower Manhattan in the form of money, food, and supplies. Whereas in the “real world” outside of Zuccotti Park, the diminishing quality of life meant that work seemed to matter less and less, within the park, volunteers were no doubt energized by the recognition that this community only existed through them, that, the community consisted of nothing but them and their work. For those involved, the satisfaction in seeing themselves in their work, in knowing that they freely acted out of a genuine sense of community, provided a sense of satisfaction that, for many, was new. For this reason, one of the many slogans popular at Zuccotti Park makes perfect sense, for it truly was “democracy at work.”

In the short period of time since, much has been written, much of which is quite illuminating. However, among this growing literature, what helped capture the world’s imagination, and helped the movement spread, were the numerous biographical stories about those who had made their way to Occupy. Rather than works that sought to explain the internal mechanics and history of the movement,<sup>18</sup> or those that sought to explain the economic crisis that preceded the movement,<sup>19</sup> the personal narratives of those involved most helped connect the

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Writers for the 99%, *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: and the Crises of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011); Charles Ferguson, "Inside Job," (Sony Pictures Classics, 2010).

movement with people who otherwise might not have become politically engaged.<sup>20</sup> It was through these stories, stories that helped people imagine that they too were connected with many others who were suffering, that a sense of solidarity was forged. This solidarity was demonstrated not only in the crowds who descended on Zuccotti Park, or in the numerous encampments that popped up across the country and the world, but was poetically demonstrated as tour bus upon tour bus passed the Park, only to find passengers from all corners of the world invariably clapping and cheering, adding their voices to the many on the ground. And, as we will see, for Marx, the democracy of Zuccotti Park was foreshadowed by a democracy of his own, that of the 1871 Paris Commune.

Before turning to the Commune, however, we will first turn to an earlier event, one that preceded the Commune by 20 years. In one of Marx's most celebrated works, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Marx offers a penetrating analysis of Louis Napoleon's 1848-52 rise to power, a rise that culminated in his reign over the Second French Empire as Emperor Napoleon III.<sup>21</sup> In a story that foreshadows the populist fascism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marx sees Louis Napoleon's sole governing principle as that of arbitrary power, as "[t]he coup d'état was ever the fixed idea of Bonaparte."<sup>22</sup> Coincident with this rise, Marx also explains that this work tells the story of the defeat of the proletarian party.<sup>23</sup> Historically, this paints an accurate portrayal, insofar as the events of 1848-1852 paved the way for the return of Empire, while

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<sup>20</sup> There were countless examples of such stories being shared. For instance, Verso Publishers compiled a collection of such stories. See, Astra Taylor and Keith Cessen, eds., *Occupy! Scenes From Occupied America* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2011). However, most of these stories are those of professional journalists, writers, and intellectuals. The most compelling stories were not like these, but rather, they were the stories of "ordinary" Americans who managed to find hope and support in the movement. For a couple of particularly striking examples, see, George Packer, "All The Angry People: A Man out of Work Finds Community at Occupy Wall Street," *The New Yorker*, December 5, 2011 2001; and this anonymously published, autobiographical account, Ina P., "Capitalism Makes Me Sick," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 11, Marx and Engels: 1851-53* (New York: International Publishers, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-11.

simultaneously dealing a heavy blow to the workers movements. However, more than a historical coincidence, there is an interesting conceptual opposition at play between Napoleon III's arbitrary power and the true democracy or socialism whose temporary end he signaled.

As Marx recounts, with Louis Napoleon, France found a leader largely free from ideology, whose sole principle, or "idée fixe," was that of the arbitrary power of "[t]he coup d'état."<sup>24</sup> However, part of what is so striking about Marx's narrative is his insight into the democratic support Louis received, support that was largely rural in origin, for Louis Napoleon began as the elected President of France before becoming Emperor by way of his coup. Marx turns to the small-holding peasants, for the counter-revolution of Napoleon III was popularly supported by this class of people. Marx makes note of the fact that rather than originating as a counter-revolutionary class, however, the small-holding peasants had earlier been a revolutionary one, as the social institution of small-holding was consolidated by Napoleon I, who gave land to the peasants as an attack against the aristocracy.<sup>25</sup> However, this attack on the aristocracy, an attack that simultaneously empowered the peasantry by giving them greater control over their own lives, had, for Marx, "outlived its day."<sup>26</sup> We can see here something of Marx's argument from *On The Jewish Question*, insofar as he clearly continues to see emancipation as a developmental process, whereby something that today is a step forward, tomorrow becomes a step back.<sup>27</sup>

What was once an advance in the ability of the peasantry to determine their own lives, soon became a position in which counter-revolution brewed. This conservatism emerged from the nature of this class, but not in a determined way, but only insofar as the conditions of life of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 189-90.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>27</sup> For more on this, see, Chapter 4.

the peasantry were an impediment to greater emancipation. Marx describes this class, noting that the peasantry largely shared the same conditions, while simultaneously being isolated from one another, as their mode of production depended on isolation.<sup>28</sup> Each peasant family was essentially self-sufficient, thereby lacking any of the external stimulation that might “develop” them, as occurred in industrial cities in which the division of labor, variety of talent, and the application of science, all led to a world in which constant change was the norm, in which people mixed together, and which therefore helped mitigate against the ossification of ideas.<sup>29</sup> As opposed to the dynamic world of capital, small-holding required the maintenance of the status quo, a status quo that also presupposed a great degree of isolation. Everyone kept to themselves, and needed to, in order to survive. This was hardly the base for radical, emancipatory, change.

It is no surprise that Marx argues that capitalism is exploitative, but, as we have also seen, he likewise argues that its very dynamism serves a developmental function in freeing us from our past. It might afford its workers little freedom, insofar as they need to work in order to live, but it also puts these workers into contact with one another, in a setting that leads them to question their sociopolitical world. Here, in the small-holding peasantry, we find further reinforcement of the complexity of Marx’s point, as this class has all the weakness of an individual worker under capitalism, but none of the dynamism. The political understanding of the peasantry was also essentially unchanged, if degraded, from the ideas they had in the revolutionary era. What was once a political self-understanding that proved revolutionary, had ossified into an empty shell, yet it was a shell that continued to provide the appearance of revolution without the content. Their ideas were no longer living, but dead, no longer revealing reality, but only occluding it.

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<sup>28</sup> Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 187-88.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

One sees all “idées napoléoniennes” are ideas of the undeveloped smallholding in the freshness of its youth; for the smallholding that has outlived its day they are an absurdity. They are only the hallucinations of its death struggle, words that are transformed into phrases, spirits transformed into ghosts. But the parody of the empire was necessary to free the mass of all the French nation from the weight of tradition and to work out in pure form the opposition between the state power and society.<sup>30</sup>

Yet another way in which the “[t]he tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” or, how the past continues to condition *possibility*.

What emerged as a result, was that politically, due to the lack of interaction, there was little opportunity for the peasantry to develop any kind of collective self-awareness of themselves, a self-awareness they could then try and assert politically. Yet, a feeling of disempowerment could pervade this class, insofar as this feeling related to this classes condition of existence, even if those same conditions prevented a class identity from developing. That is, they could all feel weak, and yet, lacking interaction with one another, lacking provocation, discussion, and argument, they could not understand the real reasons for that weakness—nor could they unite to overcome them. This made them a perfect match for Napoleon III, a leader who lacked any political ideas himself, save for the desire to lead. Formless content met contentless form. Speaking of the peasantry, Marx writes:

They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 187-88.

Vulnerability met power, as “[t]he fixed idea of the Nephew [Napoleon III] was realised, because it coincided with the fixed idea of the most numerous class of the French people.”<sup>32</sup> In fact, these were hardly ideas at all. Instead, the pure, arbitrary, power of Napoleon met the uncritical subjection of the peasantry. Lacking the ability to imagine themselves, lacking *possibility*, and thereby lacking the ability to be free, Napoleon became that for the peasantry.

Marx writes that in 1852, power, or, self-determination, became completely divorced from its origins in the people, exercised instead, through a government that was purely an executive and not a legislative force, a government in which the arbitrary whim of a single man ruled over all, lacking even the ideological justification of a monarchy, or the material incentive of capitalist production. For this reason, Shlomo Avineri notes that class antagonism does not provide a framework for understanding Napoleon III’s reign, as it was a reign of pure domination, a reign of bureaucratic administration.<sup>33</sup> However, just as capitalism’s dynamism provides ample opportunity to question the sociopolitical world, the farce of the Second Empire could prove to be a wakeup call for the French working class.

... if the overthrow of the parliamentary republic contains within itself the germ of the triumph of the proletarian revolution, its immediate and palpable result was the victory of Bonaparte over parliament, of the executive power over the legislative power, of force without words over the force of words. In parliament the nation made its general will the law, that is, it made the law of the ruling class its general will. Before the executive power it renounces all will of its own and submits to the superior command of an alien will, to authority. The executive power, in contrast to the legislative power, expressed the heteronomy of a nation, in contrast to its autonomy. France, therefore, seems to have escaped the despotism of a class only to fall back beneath the despotism of an individual, and, what is more, beneath the authority of an individual without authority. The struggle seems to be settled in such a way that all classes, equally impotent and equally mute, fall on their knees before the rifle butt.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>33</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 49.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 184-85.

In a passage that could have been taken from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Marx writes of the French public as having lost everything only to gain everything; it needed to lose what it thought it had in order to gain what it truly had, it needed to be freed from the illusions that maintained it in servitude in order to rise to the truth of self-determination. Whereas class interests often have a logic of their own, lending to their ideology the sense of legitimacy that arrives by way of internal consistency, Bonaparte's complete and utter *arbitrariness* taught that we should not be taken in by ideas, but rather, by how we use them. While different class interests use ideology to cloak themselves under a veil of legitimacy, Bonaparte's arbitrariness made it easier to see how this occurs. Rather than examining political ideas for the persuasiveness of their argumentation, Marx's point is that we should instead learn to recognize if political ideas are serving freedom, or subjugating it.

While Marx's analysis can easily lead to a problematic politics of forced loss, i.e. the type of embrace of a maelstrom that Arendt would see as the heart of totalitarianism,<sup>35</sup> we have also seen how a willingness to accept loss is necessary for a leap to freedom.<sup>36</sup> What differentiates between the counter-revolutionary and the revolutionary, however, is that for the revolutionary, the seeds of the new have already gestated in the old. Just as we need to learn to let go in order to accept the love that is already there, just as the mother must have greater sustenance at hand to nourish her newborn, and just as Abraham's love stands revealed even as he *appears* a monster, so too with politics. For Marx, the loss of illusions only serves to reveal something else that was already in its place, an *actuality* hidden behind *possibility*, an incipient workers democracy hidden first behind republicanism, and later, empire—a true community hidden behind a poor

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<sup>35</sup> This connection is made in Part Three of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where the role of terror is explored, specifically in regards to how it creates a perpetually unstable existence in which individuals lose themselves to the "mass." Marx's work insightfully reveals a similar proto-fascist logic in Napoleon III's reign. See, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1976).

<sup>36</sup> See, Chapter 5.

semblance of one. And, for Marx, something like this did happen, *actually*, if ever so briefly, in the final moments of Napoleon's reign; it happened in the Paris Commune, for "[t]hey have no ideals to realize, but to set free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant."<sup>37</sup>

Like Occupy Wall Street, the Paris Commune existed for a scant two months. In fact, both were precipitated by the arbitrary rule of elites. In the case of Occupy, the economic crisis of 2007-08 occurred as a result of finance capital's decades long campaign of deregulation, a campaign that resulted in the financial sectors massive agglomeration of power, coupled with an ability to act entirely arbitrarily, unchecked, as they were, by any form of governmental authority. In fact, the financial sector of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries greatly resembles the arbitrary will of an authoritarian ruler like Napoleon III, perhaps more than it resembles the industrial capitalists more frequently decried by Marx. In *Capital, Volume 3*, Marx even recognizes that the arbitrariness of finance capital is a natural development in capitalism itself, as stock companies transform the owners of capital from those interested in exploitative production into little more than gamblers.<sup>38</sup> "Since property here exists in the form of stock, its movement and transfer become purely a result of gambling on the stock exchange, where the little fish are swallowed by the sharks and the lambs by the stock-exchange wolves."<sup>39</sup> Napoleon III's reign is prescient, therefore, and not solely insofar as it foreshadows 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism, but also as it speaks to developments within capital too. As for the Paris Commune, it too began after a crisis brought on by arbitrariness, as Napoleon III's foolish initiation of the Franco-Prussian War led to

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<sup>37</sup> Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 22, Marx and Engels: 1870-71* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 335.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Capital, Volume 3*, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 37, Vol. 03, *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1998). 437.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

a major defeat, and the Prussian conquest of France. For a few brief months, the Commune managed to maintain rule, instituting democratic government coupled with a wide swath of social reforms, in what Marx would glorify as an example of what true democracy might look like.

If *The Eighteenth Brumaire* told of the workers defeat and the ascendancy of authoritarian rule, *The Civil War in France* was Marx's attempt to do justice to the Paris Commune and to a more legitimate form of self-rule.<sup>40</sup> Written as the Commune was ongoing, it greatly resembles the stories that emerged from Occupy Wall Street, insofar as, coupled with Marx's sharp analysis, he seems equally interested in ensuring that the basic story becomes known. In fact, Marx had serious problems with the Commune itself, as he believed it had little chance to survive, and that its working class *bona fides* were questionable, but he recognized the significance of what it tried to do both socially and politically.<sup>41</sup> As David McLellan notes, this work often speaks more to Marx's ideas of what a future communist society might look like, than to the Commune itself.<sup>42</sup> In fact, for all his praise of the Commune in *The Civil War in France*, in an 1881 letter Marx goes so far as to denounce the Commune as not being socialist, further suggesting that its dreams outmatched reality.<sup>43</sup> As a historical record, therefore, we need to take *The Civil War in France* with a grain of salt; however, as a pronouncement about Marx's vision of the future, as an example that Marx uses to illustrate how things could be, it has much to offer.

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<sup>40</sup> Marx, "The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association."

<sup>41</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 239-40.

<sup>42</sup> David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). 370.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Marx, "Marx to Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 46, Marx and Engels: Correspondence 1880-1883* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 65.

Marx spends a great deal of time elaborating upon the events and general character of the Commune, drawing attention to those he finds most significant, such as its relative non-violence. Taking a jab at the French Revolution, the revolution that solidified bourgeois rule, Marx writes that the Commune was "... free from the acts of violence in which the revolutions, and still more the counter-revolutions, of the "better classes" abound."<sup>44</sup> Marx notes only two instances of violence, both of which occurred as soldiers revolted against their commanding officers, with one such rebellion occurring as a result of commanding officer ordering their soldiers to fire on an unarmed crowd.<sup>45</sup> Marx goes so far as to explain these two instances as examples of the remnants of bourgeois socialization, as, within a true socialist army (if this itself is not an oxymoron), even such cases would not occur.<sup>46</sup> In this analysis we can clearly see Marx's intention to use the Commune as a way of speaking about his imagined future.

As Marx further writes, the Commune could only exist because the standing army, themselves in the paid employ of the government, had been replaced by the National Guard, who were themselves largely members of the working class.<sup>47</sup> The National Guard was not opposed to society, dictating to it as does the state; but rather, they were part of society, acting out their own unique role within it. When the government summoned the Guard, from 300,000 only 300 responded, demonstrating, for Marx, that they knew that of which they were a part.<sup>48</sup> If we can imagine the sense of solidarity that Marx is attempting to highlight, a solidarity based in free self-determination, it justly is difficult to imagine the type of violence of Marx's two anomalous cases, cases that demonstrate a type of visceral rebellion and frustration that is contradictory to

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<sup>44</sup> Marx, "The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association," 323.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 323-24.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 322.

the spirit of support, inclusion, and self-determination that characterizes a true democracy. In other words, for Marx, freedom and violence are opposed. As Erich Fromm would write almost a century later, “[d]estructiveness is the outcome of un-lived life.”<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to the non-violence of the Commune, a non-violence, Marx also notes, that came with a marked decrease in crime,<sup>50</sup> stood the new French government led by Adolphe Thiers.

“The men of order,” the reactionists of Paris, trembled at the victory of the 18<sup>th</sup> of March. To them it was the signal of popular retribution at last arriving. The ghosts of the victims assassinated at their hands from the days of June, 1848, down to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, 1871, arose before their faces. Their panic was their only punishment. Even the sergents-de-ville, instead of being disarmed and locked up, as ought to have been done, had the gates of Paris flung wide open for their safe retreat to Versailles.<sup>51</sup>

Marx chastises the Commune for not being politically astute enough to recognize that their enemies needed to be stopped, because they themselves would never stop, a claim that Marx would often repeat.<sup>52</sup> This no doubt reflects Marx’s ambivalent attitude towards the actual Commune, an attitude that in large part stems from his belief that the Commune was destined to fail.<sup>53</sup> That said, Marx clearly juxtaposes the innocence of the Communards (an innocence that, given his critique of them, he believes can coexist with a lucid praxis), to the anxious blindness of their enemies. Failing to recognize the Commune as both peaceful and forgiving, or, perhaps, recognizing and refusing it, “the men of order” trembled at the thought of their former servants rising up.

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<sup>49</sup> Erich H. Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1994). 182.

<sup>50</sup> Marx, "The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association," 341.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 325-26.

<sup>53</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 248-49.

Granted, the material loss of the workers upon whom wealth and power had been built provided the actual reason to subdue the Commune, but the way Marx describes their terror is as deeply subjective—it is Kierkegaard complementing Marx. Their anxieties were their own, reflecting their own subjective state and not any objective reality within the Commune (i.e. the Commune *was* peaceful), in an extremely practical example of the way in which Kierkegaard believes that guilt is what maintains despair—our inability to accept our own past crimes solidifies our continued perpetration of them. In deeply psychological hues, Marx writes that the “ghosts” of their “victims . . . arose before their faces,” that is, it is the memory of their past crimes that haunts them, distorting their perspective, leading them to see a threat in the Commune. However, aside from the actual threat of losing their ability to dominate and exploit Paris, a type of threat it is hard to imagine as evoking “panic” but that might evoke the calculative desire to re-subjugate ones subjects, the real threat was the exposure of the delusions they used in order to avoid that very same guilt; a guilt that presented these “men of order” with one of two options: face their anxieties and hope for forgiveness, or, deny their guilt and defiantly continue living as they had. It was the latter route they took.

What resulted was the brutal repression of the Commune, one in which Thiers perpetrated heinous acts, torturing prisoners, and submitting them to other “revolting atrocities,” such as using petroleum to burn down a house to which members of the National Guard had fled.<sup>54</sup> And yet, while the violent atrocities were one-sided, the picture that emerged was the reverse, as Thiers used the threats issued by the Commune—threats never carried through—to paint them as barbarous, while he presented himself and the government as virtuous.<sup>55</sup> Marx cleverly writes that this is the way capitalism typically works, cloaking itself in innocence and demonizing its

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<sup>54</sup> Marx, "The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association," 327.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

enemies as wishing to “abolish property,” which they argue is “the basis of civilisation.”<sup>56</sup>

However, as he corrects, all the working class wants to do is to make property *real*, it wants to expropriate the appropriators, so that freedom could be made real.

It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour.<sup>57</sup>

Here we find Marx offering yet another definition of Communism: the replacement of capitalism—a system in which the many labor for a few—with co-operative labor.<sup>58</sup> It is a community of free workers, having appropriated for themselves their capacity as free, creative, workers. Opposed to this truth, stood Thiers and the government, portraying freedom as oppression, and oppression as salvation.

Marx further develops this distinction, seeing the workers as people who have appropriated their freedom, and who have thereby become real and truthful, whereas the bourgeoisie maintain a comfortable distance and detachment from the events of the Commune, a detachment that makes the bourgeoisie false and unreal. Marx writes that this results in two Paris's: the Paris of Thiers and the bourgeoisie is the false Paris, and the real Paris is that of the workers. The false Paris is the Paris of Boulevards, which Marx also notes, were built by Haussmann under Napoleon III's reign, to open them for troops and artillery,<sup>59</sup> the same Haussmann who razed “historic Paris to make place for the Paris of the sightseer!”<sup>60</sup> it is the Paris of the capitalist, the gilded, the idle, it is a Paris of distant detachment.<sup>61</sup> It is a Paris of those lost within *possibility*, lacking any sense of the actual. For these Parisians,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 305, fn. 203.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 342-43.

“... the civil war [is] but an agreeable diversion eyeing the battle going on through telescopes, counting the rounds of cannon, and swearing by their own honour and that of their prostitutes that the performance was far better got up than it used to be at the Porte St. Martin. The men who fell were really dead; the cries of the wounded were cries in good earnest; and, besides, the whole thing was so intensely historical.”<sup>62</sup>

For the Paris of Thiers, like Kierkegaard’s bourgeois philosophers, life itself is but a spectacle.

In contrast to this Paris, however, stands the Paris of the workers, a Paris in which life is lived, and not simply observed. The real Paris is a Paris of workers working and living together, workers who demonstrate “self-sacrificing heroism” in defense of one another.<sup>63</sup> It is a Paris of freedom rather than exploitation, of community rather than alienation, it is a Paris whose existence is not proven by theoretical theorem or philosophical argument, but a Paris whose truth and goodness is obvious to those who would see it, to those who can see beyond the lies constructed to overshadow the truth.<sup>64</sup> And so, opposed to the distant reflectiveness of the bourgeoisie, a reflectiveness that shields itself from reality, and a reflectiveness that uses ideas in order to control, the truth of the workers is a lived truth, it is an experienced truth, it is a truth revealed to those with eyes to see.

This Paris of the workers is also one of respect and equality, and not simply economic equality, but sexual equality too. Marx writes that the real women of Paris emerged during the Commune, women, who, like those of antiquity, were “heroic, noble, and devoted,” just as were the men.<sup>65</sup> It was an equality demonstrated by universal suffrage, and not by way of a distant, reflective, representative institution like a Parliament, but rather, it was manifest in the government as a “working body,” a body that administrated what needed to be administrated, a

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 341.

body justified by the real needs of the community.<sup>66</sup> The Commune legislated in the interests of the workers, a truly universal interest insofar as we are all free, creative, workers, harming no one but the Capitalists who out of a desire to exploit refuse to join.<sup>67</sup> Remaining government functions were carried out not by government functionaries indebted to the state, but by “responsible agents of society,” themselves a part of, and in service to, the community.<sup>68</sup> Nor did the Commune pretend to be infallible, for, like those who comprised it, it was only human, subject to error as with the rest of us, but also willing to correct itself, like the best of us. And so, “it publishes its doings and sayings, and initiated the public into all its shortcomings.”<sup>69</sup> It thereby demonstrates its true appropriation of freedom, for, rather than hiding behind lies to cloak its potential mistakes and to shield it from the pangs of guilt, it stands revealed, accepting responsibility for its action, and capable of asking for forgiveness of its sins. Opposed to this honest and open expression of freedom, as freedom must be, stood Thiers and his government, who from the very outset, sought to paint the Commune as a barbarous abomination, for, only in sufficiently obscuring a truth that was *revealed*, could he hope to win (or construct) the obfuscating legitimacy upon which his rule relied.

The theme of freedom is ever-present in Marx’s work, evoked in terms with which we are already familiar. “Working, thinking, fighting, bleeding Paris—almost forgetful, in its incubation of a new society, of the cannibals at its gates—radiant in the enthusiasm of its historic initiative!”<sup>70</sup> The very existence of the Commune, in all its lived complexity, *was* history. For once, history had been wrestled into the hands of the free, allowing for a true history of freedom rather than that the history of oppression. Marx is clear: the workers symbolize the new, they

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 332-33.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 341.

incubate and birth new life, freedom is their ground; whereas Versailles, the home of the government, births nothing new, yet is “eager to feed upon the carcass of the nation,” as the old world feeds upon the new like “ghouls.”<sup>71</sup> The workers, as self-appropriated, bring things *into existence*, whereas the government feeds upon life, but itself, is only death—it sees life as that which dies, as for it, time truly is *cessation*. And so: “Paris all truth, Versailles all lie.”<sup>72</sup> And truth, in its fleeting two months of existence, by way of contrast, also revealed falsity.

The civilisation and justice of bourgeois order comes out in its lurid light whenever the slaves and drudges of that order rise against their masters. Then this civilisation and justice stands forth as undisguised savagery and lawless revenge.<sup>73</sup>

When freedom reveals itself, when it beckons us to acknowledge the truth, we have but one choice: to accept it or retreat into lies. The former is the path to community, the latter, despairing alienation.

Ultimately, the political failure of the Commune lay in its inability to usher in universal freedom—a failure, Marx believes, that was in this case inevitable.<sup>74</sup> Its partial victory left its enemies intact, able to muster their forces for a counterattack. Had the Commune been able to establish itself across France (a feat Marx could imagine, even if practically, this possibility really was little more than imagination):

The Communal Constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society. By this one act it would have initiated the regeneration of France.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>74</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*: 239-40.

<sup>75</sup> Marx, "The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association," 333.

Failing this, failing a universal appropriation of freedom, its gains were necessarily temporary, as the forces of unfreedom remained, forces for which freedom is an existential threat. However, something occurred at the Commune, perhaps, for the first time ever, and just as Kierkegaard thinks it essential to remember the example of Christ, Marx thinks it essential to remember the example of Paris. If Christ, to Kierkegaard, is an absolute example of an individual of loving freedom, for Marx, the Commune is an example of a community of free, loving, people. It is an example of the communal *faith* in one another's freedom, and this example is what remains important for Marx. The Commune might have failed, but while it lasted, something new was born. So long as the memory of that thing remains, so long as people draw courage and faith from the fact that communities of loving, free people are *possible*, the Commune lives on. For Marx and Kierkegaard, the message of freedom is clear: *ecce homo*. It is here that community is born.

## Part Four: *Praxis*

The form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. ... It isn't surprising that the ones who get to this point are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs and that their souls are always pressing upwards, eager to spend their time above.  
(Plato, *Republic*)

When you take a step to address wrongdoing, you are taking a step away from God, but in His service. Dealing with such matters is hard and thankless work.  
(Sister Aloysius, in John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*)

I am not a Christian.  
(Søren Kierkegaard)

I am not a Marxist  
(Karl Marx)

### Introduction

In the *Euthyphro*, Plato recounts a meeting between Socrates and the Athenian religious expert of the eponymous title.<sup>1</sup> On his way to have his own father prosecuted for murder, and addressing Socrates' surprise at the ease with which he seems to be handling the matter, Euthyphro responds:

It is ridiculous, Socrates, for you to think that it makes any difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative. One should only watch whether the killer acted justly or not; if he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, if, that is to say, the killer shares your hearth and table. The pollution is the same if you knowingly keep company with such a man and do not cleanse yourself and him by bringing him to justice.<sup>2</sup>

Offering an account of duty that accords well with the universalism of contemporary liberalism, insofar as his claim is that ethics should be free from personal bias, this account is something for

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, "Euthyphro," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4b-c.

which we might find contemporary thinkers willing to defend. Socrates, however, does not buy it. Whether because he knows something of Euthyphro not revealed in the dialogue, because the Greeks were all too familiar with patricidal stories, or because Socrates always doubted his interlocutors, it is clear he is suspicious from the start.

The events in the *Euthyphro* are meant to have taken place as Socrates was on his way to court himself, for what would be the trial that resulted in his execution. Given that one of the charges was that of atheism, and that Euthyphro was an expert on religion, it was an appropriate dialogue for Plato to stage. Asked about the nature of piety, Euthyphro offers several definitions, with both his first and last definition—those that are most substantial—amounting to the same thing:<sup>3</sup> “what is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, piety amounts to doing what the gods like. Problematically, this does not amount to a definition of piety, for it fails to locate any essential qualities *within* piety, and therefore does not offer us any understanding of what piety is, in-and-of-itself. Instead, Euthyphro’s definition amounts to little more than a call to obeisance, in this case, obeisance to the whims of the gods. For Euthyphro, what makes piety *pious* has nothing to do with an essential quality within a pious lifestyle, but only to the externality of whether or not the gods happen to like what you do. As we never find out what *types* of things they might like, or why, we are left with a definition that is hollow.

Remarkably, while little is directly achieved in this dialogue, as Socrates leaves without his desired definition of piety, we do come to understand something of the nature of piety—and why the Athenian charge that Socrates was impious might be truer than it seems. Euthyphro’s definition—a definition which draws its authority from “others” (in this case, the gods)—is entirely antithetical to the type of knowledge after which Socrates strives. For Socrates, a true

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7a, 14b-15c.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7a.

definition necessarily contains its content within itself, making a demonstration of its truth possible, while thereby also serving as a “form” he can use “as a model” to judge actions.<sup>5</sup>

However, Euthyphro’s definition is nothing but a formula by which he constantly has to consult an “other” authority, demonstrating that he does not know what piety is, despite his confidence.

We could easily apply Euthyphro’s logic to the many other interlocutors that Socrates had faced over his lifetime. Insofar as their self-confidence was always revealed to hide an underlying ignorance, it was a self-confidence that often drew its strength from an external authority, and not from an understanding the individual themselves possessed. Regardless of the question to which the hubristic answer happened to respond, be it a question of courage, justice, piety, or any other virtue, the inability to demonstrate the truth of an answer signaled that an individual was not drawing the authority for their belief from its innate truth. Instead, the legitimacy of their beliefs necessarily drew strength from an authority external to it, be it organized religion (i.e. Euthyphro’s *gods*), culture, or politics. Their confidence therefore testifies to their position *within* the realm of Athenian customs and beliefs, and not to the inherent truth of the beliefs themselves, as it is this world that legitimates their beliefs, not the beliefs themselves. Yet Socrates, in arguing that we should not assent to a belief until its truth is demonstrated, undermines all beliefs that derive their knowledge other than from themselves—he undermines all “social beliefs.” If Athenian society could not justify itself on its own terms, if its authority lay in the simple fact that it existed and people believed in it, Socrates’ quest for knowledge necessarily threatened to undermine everything in which the Athenians believed. And this means that he was, in fact, impious.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6e.

In the dialogue that continues this narrative arc, the *Apology*, we find Socrates in Court, addressing the charges levied against him. There, however, we find him making a peculiar claim.

Rhetorically invoking a hypothetical interlocutor, Socrates explains:

Someone might say: “Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?” However, I should be right to reply to him: “You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man.”<sup>6</sup>

Socrates continues this point:

This is the truth of the matter, men of Athens: wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace.<sup>7</sup>

Not quite framed in the same terms as was Euthyphro’s earlier explanation of his own actions, an explanation that asserted Euthyphro should not give preferential treatment to his father, in contrast, it seems like both claims actually amount to the same thing: ethics requires universal adherence, and we should not make exceptions, be it for the love of our father, as in Euthyphro’s case, or for self-protection, in the case of Socrates. Socrates might be suspicious of Euthyphro, but he has little problem articulating his ethics in much the same terms.

It is tempting to chalk up this difference to the respective ethics they each represent, insofar as fidelity to a true ethics seems easily defensible, whereas fidelity to a false one is not. In this light, we might say that Socrates’ claim to have overcome bias is noble, for his adherence is to ethical truth, whereas Euthyphro’s claim is little more than an excuse he uses to rationalize the prosecution of his father. In one sense, this is certainly true: as readers, we can intuitively recognize that Socrates embodies something that seems ethical, whereas Euthyphro’s evasions

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, "Apology," 28b-c.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 28d-e.

under Socratic questioning demonstrate that he really has not given much thought to ethical life at all. Yet, as Socrates himself recounts, he never found the type of ethical truth that he sought, one that was universally true, a “form” he could use “as a model” to judge actions.<sup>8</sup> Instead, over the course of his life, as he interrogated expert after expert, Socrates came to this conclusion:

... it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.<sup>9</sup>

However, if this is all Socrates had found, a discovery that affirms an absence of knowledge without being able to affirm any positive content, it becomes difficult to understand the ways in which we might say that Socrates was ethical. This is not to say that he was not, but it instead suggests that the very universal truths Socrates sought are not essential to living an ethical life.

At this point, it is useful to contrast Socrates with his disciple Plato, for Plato has an answer where Socrates did not. More importantly, as we will soon see, the contrast between Socrates and Plato helps demonstrate the very problem Marx and Kierkegaard are trying to overcome. In the *Republic*, Plato has little problem articulating a universal notion of justice. For Plato, justice is a “harmony of the soul,”<sup>10</sup> whereby each part of the soul—the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive—each does the work for which it is suited, obeying the boundaries of the other parts.<sup>11</sup> Articulating a conceptual framework of individual subjectivity, one that also corresponds to political life, Plato offers what Socrates never could, demonstrating how justice *universally* resides in a proper internal organization of the soul. While contemporary thought has travelled far from that simple tripartite model, most notably, with Hegel’s dialectical model of subjectivity, a model adopted by Marx and Kierkegaard but that also continues to pervade much

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, "Euthyphro," 6e.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, "Apology," 21d.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, "Republic," 443c.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 433a-45c.

of contemporary thought, there is a way in which Plato's articulation of this conceptual framework began the Western Philosophical project. Granted, it could not have begun without the "impiety" of Socratic doubt, but the positive philosophical project properly began with Plato.

Alfred North Whitehead writes: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."<sup>12</sup> While Whitehead only intends to point to the wealth of insight available to us in Plato, he also repeats the claim at the heart of Socrates' impiety, that "the final court of appeal" for philosophy is its "intrinsic reasonableness."<sup>13</sup> It is in this latter sense that Plato can also be said to be the founder of Western Thought, although this is likely less true as a matter of intellectual history, than as a rhetorical claim about how Western thought tends to see itself. Nonetheless, as argued, it seems clear that Plato's work most fully embodies a new standard of truth, one that would come to dominate Western Philosophy, as Plato took the first step forward after Socrates had cleared the way.

As we have seen in *Part II* and *Part III*, both Marx and Kierkegaard are, in part, rebelling against a tradition of thought that overvalues ideas to the detriment of living human beings; Kierkegaard attacks Hegel's conception of religion, and Marx, Hegel's conception of politics. While this is not a necessary consequence of philosophy, it is easy to see how philosophy itself could become an authority of the type to which Euthyphro appealed. We might come to take its "truths" for granted, *believing* them rather than *understanding* them, and thereby taking a subservient role to them. In such a case, we might imagine Socrates taking philosophers to task just as he did with priests,<sup>14</sup> politicians, artisans, and craftsmen.<sup>15</sup> However, Plato was wary of this problem, as he understood that truth spoke just as much to a subjective disposition as it did

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<sup>12</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1985). 39.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, "Euthyphro."

<sup>15</sup> Plato, "Apology," 21c-22d.

to a conceptual understanding. That is, possessing a conceptual truth without truly understanding it was little more than a belief, even if it was a “true belief,”<sup>16</sup> whereas a subjective ability to recognize the truth without yet possessing it, was but a contingent, and remediable, absence. We might fit Socrates into this latter category, so that, had he lived longer, he just might have found what he was looking for—and more importantly, he was in a position to recognize it when he did.

Plato himself was all too aware of the complex relationship between truth and its apprehension. While we find him offering a conceptual rendering of justice in the *Republic*, it is essentially a minor part of a much larger work. In fact, the *Republic* begins with the larger problem of the difference between truth and understanding. On the first page we find Socrates returning home with Glaucon, only to be met by Polemarchus, who, despite Socrates’ protests, wants them to join him for the evening. As Polemarchus has several people with him, he seems to joke that Socrates could be made to join him for the evening, to which Socrates suggests he might instead convince him to let them go. Polemarchus’s response is simple: “could you persuade us if we won’t listen?”<sup>17</sup> And with this response, a response that echoes Athens’ intransigent unwillingness to listen to reason at Socrates’ trial, the problem of the *Republic* is set: *education*. Articulating the truth is one thing, but bringing others to it is something else. Complementing Plato’s theory of justice, therefore, we find the *Allegory of the Cave*,<sup>18</sup> an allegory that reminds us that discovering the truth by which we should live is not a dispassionate process, but a struggle that we at first resist. In this light, Plato’s theory of justice is equally a theory of injustice, a theory of the irrational intransigence that led to Socrates’ death, in the

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<sup>16</sup> Plato, "Republic," 413a.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992). 327c.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, "Republic," 514a-18c.

ultimate interest of overcoming it. While Plato offers a clear conceptual understanding of justice, he realizes that demonstrating a concept is insufficient for helping others understand it.

This has been a long prelude to the point, but, as I would like to suggest, there is something to this problem that helps explain both Marx and Kierkegaard's approach to *praxis*. While Socrates continued to believe in the possibility of universal truth until the moment of his death, for Marx and Kierkegaard, having lived in an age with no shortage of truths claiming universal pretensions, they were all too aware of the problems of philosophy. We have seen these critiques already, whereby both Kierkegaard and Marx worked against subjective dispositions that ceded ethical authority and self-understanding to the world of ideas, at the expense of the arduous road of self-development. What resulted from their critiques of philosophy, as we will presently see, was that their projects became concerned with changing the project of thought itself.

In Kierkegaard's case, He writes that his "whole authorship pertains to Christianity, to the issue of "becoming a Christian."<sup>19</sup> For Kierkegaard, Christianity's concern is with "*the single individual*,"<sup>20</sup> a phrase that connotes the cultivation of subjective freedom, a freedom implicitly ethical, as it is synonymous with a "love for "the neighbor."<sup>21</sup> The narrative from *Part II* owes itself to an account of this task. Just as Plato recognizes that cultivating the subjective disposition towards truth is a necessary prerequisite for understanding truth, in Kierkegaard's work, we find this very same project constituting its majority. In Kierkegaard, we find little meditation on the nature of God, for instance, but much on the nature of the acquisition of faith. More importantly,

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<sup>19</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," in *The Point of View*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>20</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," in *The Point of View*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

just as Plato recognizes a need to speak allegorically in order to speak the truth to those who did not want to hear it, Kierkegaard himself became a master of allegory, hiding the truth behind a myriad of veils, each of which was meant to help us grasp what we might otherwise refuse—or that we might grasp improperly, i.e. without the necessary subjective transformation. And this is the key to understanding Kierkegaard on the question of praxis—Kierkegaard’s very work is the allegory of the cave itself, written for those within it (as perhaps was Plato’s allegory too).

As for Marx, in the eleventh *Theses on Feuerbach*, he famously writes: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it,”<sup>22</sup> which, for him, was the challenge of establishing “objective freedom as the realization, the practical manifestation of subjective freedom.”<sup>23</sup> Just as Plato recognizes that a subjective apprehension of truth should manifest itself objectively too, a manifestation that meant an engagement with politics, Marx’s work is an engagement in this political project. However, whereas Plato offers the critical tools for analyzing political life by way of a substantive image of a just *polis*, an image that can also be used to judge other cities, Marx offers no positive equivalent to this (as we have seen in *Part III*), and instead focuses on developing a critical method for apprehending objective political life.

And so, just as Kierkegaard is interested in creating individuals who can apprehend truth, and is uninterested in (and suspicious of) attempts to render truth conceptually, Marx offers the critical tools that such an individual can use to change their objective reality, while also refusing a positive articulation of such an objective reality. Both Marx and Kierkegaard adopt Plato’s pedagogical praxis aimed at creating those like Socrates, with Kierkegaard seeking to create such

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 5, Marx and Engels: 1845-47* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 62.

critical individuals, and Marx helping them think about their world, but both stop short of engaging in Plato's project of positive philosophy. Socrates, not Plato, is their ideal.

Until now, this work has drawn a narrative that plays off both Kierkegaard and Marx. The argument has been an attempt to demonstrate that a similar narrative of unfreedom, emancipation, and freedom, threads itself through Kierkegaard's and Marx's work, and that, in reading them together, not only does this narrative become clear, but that they each complement the other in a necessary way. Where Marx does not spend enough time working through the complex subjective dimensions of this narrative, we find Kierkegaard teasing it out; where Kierkegaard does not pay enough attention to the ways in which the objective sociopolitical world affects this process of subjective emancipation, Marx helps him out. Nonetheless, these differences have been differences of degree, of the relative levels of stress they place on different parts of this narrative, and not fundamental disagreements. However, now, as we look back towards the beginning of this road from its end—as freedom contemplates unfreedom in the interest of emancipation—just as the question of praxis emerges, we find a greater divergence than we have thus far. This requires a brief explanation.

In the first part of this work, we noticed how a similar ontological and existential understanding structures Marx and Kierkegaard's thoughts on unfreedom. Despair, for Kierkegaard, and alienation, for Marx, approximate one another in how they affected subjectivity. Where they disagreed, however, was in their cause. While this was not particularly relevant for understanding the nature of these problems, this difference is central to their thoughts on praxis. If praxis, for both Kierkegaard and Marx, entails a project of emancipation, then addressing the cause of unfreedom becomes central to any question of praxis. And, as their bodies of work are largely devoted to praxis, their work is necessarily quite different. But this

difference of causality, a difference that led each of them to write about much different topics, overshadows the fact that they are writing *from* a place that is much the same, if they also happen to be looking in different directions. And yet, for us, who do not have to choose between these different loci of causality, but can instead see how they are mutually reinforcing, we find two *apparently* different, but *actually* complementary bodies of thought. And, with this, it is time to turn to the final question of this work: *praxis*.

## Chapter 9: *Education*

Saving Marx's objective sociopolitical project for last, we first turn to Kierkegaard's subjective project of emancipation. In Kierkegaard's work, we will see a near constant effort to write works that themselves contribute to the emancipation of his readers. However, they do not do so by presenting a conceptual understanding of unfreedom, emancipation, and freedom, but by engaging the reader in a style that is intended to provoke them into the type of self-reflection that will aid in their own emancipation. What Kierkegaard writes is less driven by an attempt to express the truth he believes he has found, and more driven by an awareness of the needs of his reader, as he wants his readers to see, and appropriate, the truth for themselves, not be given it by him. So, Kierkegaard writes what we need to hear, not what he might want to say. In this, we can see Kierkegaard mimicking Plato's use of allegory in the *Republic*, as Plato's allegories and myths make the truth more accessible for those not yet ready to accept it. However, Plato complements these myths, myths he meant us to overcome in favor of a more explicit grasp of the truth, by just such an explicit study of the truth. Kierkegaard, however, abdicates this conceptual project, and writes almost wholly in Plato's "allegorical" vein, offering us little conceptual understanding of the truth *directly*, as he instead focuses on the cultivation of his readers ability to accept it. Whereas Marx's project is very much a political one, Kierkegaard's is best described as an educational one—Kierkegaard wants to educate us, *spiritually*—albeit it is a pedagogical project with profound political consequences.

### **The Single Individual**

As Kierkegaard matured, he sometimes reflected on the nature of his authorship and on his overall project, in a way that helps summarize it. In the section that follows this one, we will explore his thoughts on the nature of his writing, for through that, we can extract the nature of his praxis. But before we proceed to the question of his praxis, it is worthwhile summarizing how he imagined (or reimagined) the destination towards which he was working. We have seen his narrative of freedom, and we have seen how freedom is twofold, entailing both our ontological freedom and our responsible, existential, appropriation of that freedom, and we have also seen how being free is simultaneously imagined as involving love, as love is the intersubjective expression of a free subjectivity. However, everything towards which Kierkegaard was working can be summarized more simply: Kierkegaard's interest was in *the single individual*.

Posthumously published in 1859, but written in 1848, Kierkegaard's *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* is his most exhaustive authorial memoir.<sup>1</sup> In it, Kierkegaard does not reflect on his life *per se*, but rather, on his life *as* an author. For Kierkegaard, his point had always been to cultivate a sense of radical individuality, an individuality based on an individual's religious relationship to God, an individuality that was embodied in his category of *the single individual*.<sup>2</sup> If Kierkegaard's praxis can be spoken of in terms of its goal, a goal he cultivated by way of his writing, such an individual is certainly it. Kierkegaard explicitly acknowledges this, as when he comments on the great critical success he received following the publication of his first major philosophical work, *Either/Or*. Of the turn his writing then took, he has this to say:

This very situation—for many perhaps tempting, but to my thinking advantageous only for being able to get a good showing for what I had to do—I used in the

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," in *The Point of View*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard discusses the single individual throughout his authorship, however, appended to *The Point of View*, were further reflections on *the single individual*, in a short eponymous piece. Søren Kierkegaard, "The Single Individual": Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author," in *The Point of View*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998).

service of truth to introduce my category *that single individual*. It was at that very moment that I made a break with the public, not out of pride or arrogance etc. (and certainly not because the public was unfavorable toward me at the time, since, the very opposite, it was altogether favorable toward me), but because I had made up my mind that I was a religious author whose concern is with *the single individual*, an idea (*the single individual* versus *the public*) in which a whole life- and worldview is concentrated.<sup>3</sup>

We can see here that Kierkegaard juxtaposes the category of the single individual with a notion of the public (sometimes referred to as *the crowd*), which he thinks of as its opposite. As we have already seen in our analysis of *Fear and Trembling*, itself the first work that followed *Either/Or* and for which his above pronouncement first applies, Kierkegaard introduces the category of the single individual, insofar as “[f]aith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal.”<sup>4</sup> Replacing *Fear and Trembling*’s conception of a universal conceived along the lines of Hegelian sociopolitical thought, in *The Point of View*, we see Kierkegaard reframing this juxtaposition as that between the single individual and “the public.”

In the present work, we have spent more than enough time exploring Kierkegaard’s philosophical understanding of these categories, but at this point in time, it is useful to advance some examples. For Kierkegaard, there are really only two: Socrates and Jesus Christ. What they have in common is an absolute fidelity to ethical life, a fidelity that excludes them from certain forms of social life, for this fidelity relies upon an absolute acceptance of individual responsibility.

And that category *the single individual*, which was regarded as eccentric and the invention of eccentricity, which it indeed was, for was not the person who in one sense was its inventor, Socrates, at the time called ὁ ἄριστος (the most eccentric of men)—I would not trade having brought it forth decisively at the time, I would not trade it for a kingdom. If the crowd is the evil, if it is chaos that threatens,

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<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," 37.

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 55.

there is rescue in one thing only, in becoming the single individual, in the rescuing thought: that single individual.<sup>5</sup>

To Kierkegaard's imagination, it was Socrates who first posited the single individual, but not as a conceptual category, as a way of life. Juxtaposed against Socrates, however, is the crowd that killed him.

Shunning the beliefs of his many interlocutors, Socrates broke away from the Athenian *crowd*, refusing to give his assent to their beliefs. If joining them meant abdicating responsibility to a set of beliefs he simply accepted without knowing their truth, Socrates preferred to stand alone—a stance that ultimately led to his death. While there may have been some truth to Athens' beliefs, the picture we are left with after reading Plato's dialogue is that the Athenians themselves were indifferent to it, as what was important to them was that they believed in them. These beliefs united them in a community and provided meaning for their lives. However, Socrates threatened this, as, an *individual* who expects that others should have to justify their lives, is a person who is an enemy of a community based on unquestioned belief. Yet, Socrates was also just about as Athenian as you can get, committed to the city and to its citizens, refusing to leave even when faced with death. This fact was no doubt attractive to Kierkegaard, a thinker who was himself thoroughly of Copenhagen,<sup>6</sup> and who himself often felt persecuted, and rightly so.<sup>7</sup> While Kierkegaard is often painted as praising individuality at the expense of community,

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<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," 68-69.

<sup>6</sup> There is perhaps no more thoroughly Danish thinker than Kierkegaard. He lived his whole life in Copenhagen, with the exception of a few brief trips to Berlin and the Danish countryside, he spent his life in its coffee shops and clubs, he regularly conversed in the streets with anyone he happened to encounter, and he was the first Dane to write his dissertation in Danish, after receiving a special dispensation from the King. While his contemporaries were struggling to be more European, be it by way of French culture or German philosophy, Kierkegaard strove to be entirely of Copenhagen. This makes it all the more odd that Kierkegaard is little known in Denmark, especially when compared to the fame of Hans Christian Andersen—an irony in which Kierkegaard might delight (or which he might scorn).

<sup>7</sup> The best example of this is the "Corsair Affair." In 1845, Kierkegaard engaged in a public confrontation with the satirical paper *The Corsair*, who had published a critical review of his work *Stages on Life's Way*. Their response was to attack Kierkegaard over the course of several months, in an often quite personal matter, so that Kierkegaard came to feel persecuted on the streets of Copenhagen, the very streets in which he had once felt at home. For more

Socrates' example reveals an alternative interpretation, and one that is more consistent with the complexity of Kierkegaard's thought: Socrates did not shun community, his community shunned him.

Socrates' individuality was not essentially opposed to community, it was only opposed to the type of community founded on an unquestioning assent to its mores. It was his critical faculties, his insistence on questioning, that separated him, it was what Kierkegaard might call Socrates' fidelity to a personal truth that caused this conflict. However, it was not because questioning is opposed to community in any absolute sense, but because his type of community was opposed to it. Socrates loved Athens, just as Kierkegaard loved Copenhagen, even if Athens did not love him back. Yet, certain parts of Athens did love him, none more so than Plato himself, but as Kierkegaard wants to suggest, "Athens" is incapable of love, even if Athenians themselves are capable of it. Athens is an idea to which we conform, it is an idea to which we abdicate our responsibility, an abdication that allows us to become part of the same Athenians *public* or *crowd* that could bring itself to execute Socrates. Recognizing this, Socrates himself labored to extricate his fellow Athenians from beliefs they unquestioningly accepted, encouraging them to be *individuals* responsible for their own ethical conduct, rather than a crowd that finds its excuse in the ideas it shares.

For Kierkegaard, this message of individuation was furthered by Christianity, which complements Socratic questioning with a positive doctrine of faith, a doctrine that explicitly asserts the transcendent value of human beings. It is love that allows us to become human, it is

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on this, see, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Corsair Affair, and articles related to the writings*, ed. Edna H. Hong Howard V. Hong, trans. Edna H. Hong Howard V. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982). Moreover, as he aged, Kierkegaard increasingly came to feel that the truth was something for which you had to suffer, a pessimistic conclusion that no doubt testifies to his sensitivity to "the crowd's" barbs, in contradistinction to someone like Socrates, who forever seemed immune. For more on the relationship between suffering and truth, see, Søren Kierkegaard, "Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing," in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. Edna H. Hong Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

love that allows us to become individuals, for questioning alone is insufficient.<sup>8</sup> For Kierkegaard, Jesus Christ is the example *par excellence* of this transcendent humanity *exposed*, so that through Christ we can come to experience our own truth, our own transcendent worth. For this reason Kierkegaard states that “the essentially religious is the true humanity [*Menneskelighed*].”<sup>9</sup>

Take the supreme example, think of Christ—and the whole human race, all the people who were born and ever will be born. But the situation is one of particularity—as an individual alone with him in a solitary place, as an individual to go up to him and to spit on him—the human being never was born and never will be who would have the courage or brazenness to do it; that is the truth. But then they became a crowd; then they had the courage for it—frightful untruth!<sup>10</sup>

We can see here that Kierkegaard places great faith in individuals, if he has little in the crowd. It is in losing ourselves in the crowd that we can abdicate responsibility, but in standing as individuals, he believes we accept (or can accept) responsibility for our actions. Had more individuals sat on the Athenian jury, Socrates might have gone free; had more individuals lived in Jerusalem, Christ might have lived. In the name of an “idea” of humanity, we still might spit upon Christ or execute Socrates, for ideas can serve diverse ends. But love them, and this becomes impossible.

Thinking in these terms, Kierkegaard understands his project as the extrication of individuals from the midst of the conformist and irresponsible crowd. His project is to cultivate true individuality, an individuality based in responsibility, amidst a world that talks a language of individuality, but that uses this language to justify irresponsibility.

It was and is a joy to me, for I certainly do have faith in the rightness of my thought despite the whole world, but next to that the last thing I would surrender is my faith in individual human beings. And this is my faith, that however much confusion and evil and contemptibleness there can be in human beings as soon as they become the irresponsible and unrepentant “public,” “crowd,” etc.—there is just as much truth and goodness and loveliness in them when one can get them

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<sup>8</sup> We have seen all of this worked out in great detail in *Part II*.

<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, “The Single Individual”: Two “Notes” Concerning My Work as an Author,” 104.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

as single individuals. Oh, to what degree human beings would become—human and lovable beings—if they would become single individuals before God!<sup>11</sup>

Even within the most irresponsible of human beings lies the possibility of responsibility, even within the greatest evil lies a chance for good, even within hate lies the possibility of love, and this transformation occurs by way of relating oneself to the transcendent value within each individual. Socrates never arrives at a point where he could say he had a positive doctrine to offer, even if *we* might use him as an example to emulate, but for Kierkegaard, that positive doctrine is found in Jesus Christ. It is in love, a love he believes is best exemplified by Christ, that we find the courage to accept our own personal truth.

So far, much of this has been repetition, as Kierkegaard is reformulating ideas with which we are already familiar. However, at this point, he contextualizes this process in a problematic way, by explicating what he sees as the difference between the transcendental realm and the worldly one.

I have tried to express that the world, if it is not evil, is mediocre, that “the demand of the times” is always foolishness and fatuousness, that in the eyes of the world the truth is a ludicrous exaggeration or an eccentric superfluity, that the good must suffer. I have tried to express that to apply the category “human race” to what it means to be a human being, especially as a term for the highest, is a misunderstanding and paganism, because the human race, humankind, is different from an “animalkind” not only by the advantage of race but by this *humanness*, that every individual in the human race (not just an outstanding individual, but every individual) is more than the race. This has its basis in the God-relationship (and this is Christianity, whose category *the single individual* is so strangely laughed to scorn by an esteemed Christian age), because to relate oneself to God is far superior to relating oneself to the race or through the race to God.<sup>12</sup>

It would be easy to infer a problem in Kierkegaard’s opposition of Christianity and the world, for it seems to mimic a standard ascetic attitude towards the world. But this is not Kierkegaard’s point, and making this inaccurate criticism of him obscures a real criticism, one that emerges

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<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," 88, note.

when Kierkegaard takes this logic one step further. However, before turning to the real problem, we need to understand Kierkegaard point, which is simply that if we are not connecting human worth to a transcendental origin, our self-worth is an illusion.

If the origin of our self-worth lies in the historical world, that worth becomes relative, so that what we value today will not be what we value tomorrow. This is why religion, rather than history, has to furnish an understanding of human beings, as its concern with the eternal—its concern with what endures in-and-through history—is the only place we can find a self-worth that is real. Otherwise, we find ourselves with is a historically specific illusion. The world is not evil, as some ascetic's might say, it is simply "mediocre"—it is incapable of furnishing a spiritually nourishing value. Nor is this an ahistorical reading of humanness, it is an eternal reading of it, an eternity that endures *in* time.. Warning us away from some of the problems we have seen in *Part III*, such as when we make sense of freedom in terms that diminish it, Kierkegaard wants to ensure that we realize that the self-worth we experience when we are loved does not pertain to our historical sociopolitical identity, but to our transcendent nature. In other words, love is not a hallmark of a particular political group, social identity, or organized religion; love is the hallmark of God. In recognizing that loves transcends all, we avoid comprising it by way of ascribing it to a historically specific phenomenon. This also explains the paradox Kierkegaard sees in Jesus Christ; Christ is both historically specific *and* transcendental. In relating to him, Kierkegaard believes, we are relating to God. "Thus *the single individual* must personally relate himself to the unconditional. ... and I do believe, that this is Christianity and love for "the neighbor."”<sup>13</sup>

This opposition between the world and the religious is not itself a problem, as it only affirms that the world gains its richness because of the transcendental—the world *is* meaningful,

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<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," 20.

but it is meaningful because of God.<sup>14</sup> This is not far from Marx at all, who sees the world's meaning as the result of free labor, i.e. as a result of our spirit transforming the world. However, because Kierkegaard comes to equate politics with the world, and religion with the transcendental, he becomes pessimistic about politics, as he is only able to imagine a very limited form of them.

But although “impractical,” yet the religious is eternity’s transfigured rendition of the most beautiful dream of politics. No politics has been able, no politics is able, no worldliness has been able, no worldliness is able to think through or to actualized to the ultimate consequences this idea: human-equality, human-likeness [*Menneske-Lighed*]. To achieve perfect equality in the medium of *world-likeness* [*Verds-Lighed*], that is, in the medium that by nature is dissimilarity, and to achieve it in a *world-like* [*verds-ligt*], that is, differentiating way, is eternally impossible, as one can see by the categories. If perfect equality, likeness should be achieved, then *worldliness* would have to be completely eradicated, and when perfect equality, likeness, is achieved, *worldliness* [*Verdslighed*] ceases to be.<sup>15</sup>

Kierkegaard sees religion as fulfilling the “dream of politics,” the dream of “human-equality,” while politics is incapable of doing so, because he understands the domain of religion as the transcendent, while the domain of politics is the worldly. Politics is fighting a losing battle, therefore, for its dream of equality is impossible in the worldly realm, a realm whose very nature is difference.

Kierkegaard is making an extremely uncharitable reading of progressive politics, as he argues that all such politics believe that equality is a matter of eliminating worldly difference. It is an argument that is little different than the standard criticism of socialism and communism that see them as little more than redistributive mechanisms ensuring that everyone has the very same worldly goods, and in which all the joy in life’s endless diversity is removed. As Kierkegaard

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<sup>14</sup> This is yet another instance in which a religious interpretation of Marx is possible. For Marx, the world is meaningful because of the productive efforts of human labor, it is meaningful because of our freedom. If freedom is transcendental, originating not in the world but in God, as Kierkegaard asserts, then the world we create is meaningful because we invest a meaningless world with our “divine” labor.

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, “The Single Individual”: Two “Notes” Concerning My Work as an Author,” 103-04.

notes, however, the very nature of the world is diversity, so that a political agenda that seeks to end this diversity is bound to fail. However, given Kierkegaard's "sophisticated" philosophical understanding of this problem, it is easy to wonder how he could so easily ascribe this foolish project to so many people. He is writing in 1848, after all.

In the year 1848 the threads of sagacity broke; the shriek that announces chaos was heard! "It was the year 1848; it was a step forward." Well, yes, if "government" is achieved for which not a single new official is needed or the dismissal of any older official, but perhaps an internal transformation in the direction of becoming steadfast by fearing God.<sup>16</sup>

Continuing to assert that true development is religious self-development, Kierkegaard ascribes to the revolutions of 1848 the purely worldly goal of equality, failing to see that the revolutionary demand for worldly equality might be the result of an already acquired "religious" equality. Demands for social, economic, and political equality might emerge as a result of faithful earnestness, they need not be a replacement for it. In fact, we could even read Kierkegaard in this vein; after all, for all his denigration of revolutionary politics, he increasingly became engaged in issues of poverty.<sup>17</sup> For all his attacks, however, his underlying argument is actually true, so that his reported "conservatism" lies only in his inability to ascribe to "political" actors "religious" motivation. And yet, while Kierkegaard is certainly denigrating politics, or what Kierkegaard believes to be politics, we can equally read this as an acknowledgement, if tacit, that his understanding of religion is fiercely political. Politics cannot deliver on equality, but religion can.

What results from this is that Kierkegaard comes to understand the movement away from the public towards becoming a single individual as the domain of religion. Religion, for him, *is* praxis.

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<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," 19.

<sup>17</sup> Eliseo Perez-Alvarez, *A Vexing Gadfly: The Late Kierkegaard on Economic Matters*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009). 125-76.

Here again the movement is: to *arrive* at the simple; the movement is: *from* the public to “the single individual.” In other words, there is in a *religious sense* no public but only individuals, because the religious is earnestness, and earnestness is: the single individual; yet every human being, unconditionally every human being, which one indeed is, can be, yes, should be—the single individual.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly revealing his debt to the Protestant Lutheran tradition, and its stress on a private relationship to God, Kierkegaard understands religion as the domain of ethical individuation. It is only by relating to the transcendent value of God, and then coming to understand that this value is embodied in each and every individual, that we ourselves can become *the single individual*, an individual who treats others as irreplaceable and valuable individuals. In this way, by relating to one another in terms of a transcendent value we each embody, true human equality is achieved.

Ultimately only the essentially religious can with the help of eternity effect human equality [*Menneske-Lighed*], the godly, the essential, the not-worldly, the true, the only possible human equality; and this is also why—be it said to its glorification—the essentially religious is the true humanity [*Menneskelighed*].<sup>19</sup>

Here we find a clear explication of Kierkegaard’s faith in human equality, an equality found in the fact that everyone, regardless of who they are, is capable of a relationship with God.

However, it is an equality towards which we have to work, it is an equality that is achieved, as it results from faith.

As we can see, Kierkegaard locates the “true humanity” that is the basis for “human equality” within the realm of religion, a move that allows Kierkegaard to assert that the truly human is something that defies the ephemerality of the worldly realm. While the world might be subject to perpetual change, while everything that is born will one day die, there is something within us, despite even the pronouncement of our own mortality, that is eternally valuable. If we based human worth on something worldly and therefore ephemeral, our worth would likewise be ephemeral; but placing this value in the realm of religion allows Kierkegaard to assert that his

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<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," 10.

<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard, "The Single Individual": Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author," 104.

own existence, and that of every single other individual, is worthwhile, regardless of our own inevitable mortal end. Or, as Sartre writes, Kierkegaard's aim is to affirm "the irreducible singularity of every man."<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard's real failure, therefore, is not that he failed to theorize radical individuality, equality, freedom, or community, but that he failed to see that these could be, and need to be, translated into politics. Yet, his work is political, so it might be more accurate to say that he only failed to see his own religious vision in the political actors of his day—if not actually, then at least potentially. That aside, with an understanding of the goal towards which his work aimed, it is time to turn to the way in which he tried to achieve this goal: through writing.

### **Indirect Communication**

Reading Plato's Socratic dialogues, we are treated to something of Socrates' dynamism, as he adapts to his interlocutors changing positions, undermining them as he goes. Euthyphro, for one, notices this and gets frustrated, pointing out that Socrates seems to make Euthyphro's words dance away as if they were inventions of Daedalus.<sup>21</sup> As Socrates notes in the *Theaetetus*, he saw himself as a midwife to the truth, helping his interlocutors give birth to the truth themselves.<sup>22</sup> As no two opponents were the same, even if truth always was, the path to this truth was necessarily different—a fact reflected in Socrates' dynamic interaction with his interlocutor. However, the dynamism involved in attending to your interlocutor's state of mind is something that is lost in the written form, as an author has one chance to get it right, and cannot attend to his readers in

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 98.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, "Euthyphro," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 11c.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, "Theaetetus," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 149a.

the way that a speaker can. Nonetheless, Plato is a good example of the flexibility of the written form, as he offers contradictions, myths, and allegories that his readers need to think through, while also retaining the indirect medium of dialogue, which itself keeps something of this dynamism alive in the arguments we witness, even if Plato is not directly arguing with us. Situated at the precipice between oral traditions and written ones, the contrast between Socrates and Plato helps demonstrate something of what is lost when we write.

For Plato, however, his project lent itself to the written form, despite these obstacles. In the *Republic*, for instance, he speaks of justice of the soul as a harmony of its parts.<sup>23</sup> Articulating the soul as comprised of three parts—the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational—justice is found when the rational part rules the appetitive, with the aid of the spirited.<sup>24</sup> If Plato cannot directly attend to the state of the soul of his readers, in the way that a living interlocutor like Socrates can, Plato’s understanding can at least be represented in words. He could create a model of that which he was representing, i.e. the soul, and diagram how it should be properly organized. Plato could tell us what he thought we were, and then tell us how he thought we should live. Kierkegaard, however, cannot.

Plato’s project of justice depends on our capacity for self-reflection. He asks us to look at ourselves, to see how his image of our soul applies, so that we can then conclude that living in the way he proscribes is truly the best for us. However, recalling *Part I* of this work, self-reflection itself exists atop the self that Kierkegaard believes we are. According to *The Sickness Unto Death*, “[t]he self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to

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<sup>23</sup> Plato, "Republic," 443c-44a.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 441e-42b.

itself in this relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself."<sup>25</sup>

"The relation" is Kierkegaard's way of speaking of self-reflection, insofar as it is the relation between the image we have of ourselves and that to which this image applies. In Plato's case, the relation would be that between our actual soul, as something that exists, and our image of our soul as tripartite. However, Kierkegaard's point is that the self is not synonymous with what Plato considers our soul to be, nor is it the image we might have of our soul, but rather, our self is found in the active element within us whereby we effect this *relating*. Our self is freedom, it is the very freedom that allows us to live according to Plato's model, if we so choose, or by any other model that we might otherwise devise.

The process of emancipation detailed in *Part II* entails an appropriation of this self. However, from the point of view of praxis, aiding this appropriation becomes problematic. If Kierkegaard relies too heavily on a representation of the self, such as his rendering of the self in *The Sickness Unto Death*, this representation might become part of our self-reflective self-relation, rather than aiding us in exposing, and becoming, the underlying agent. Here we also find another iteration of Kierkegaard's critique of reason, as we have seen in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard does not have a problem with reason *per se*, but insofar as it provides universal images, it strengthens the self-reflective relationship we have with ourselves. The challenge, however, is not simply to understand the nature of the self we each universally share—a task that is sometimes antithetical to Kierkegaard's project—the challenge is to become the particular instance of a self that I myself am. In a sense, I must overcome my self-understanding to see that my self-understanding is the result of my *self's* activity in the first place. I must accept responsibility for the self I choose to be.

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<sup>25</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). 13

For all this, Kierkegaard and Plato are not very far apart. While Plato offers us the type of conceptual understanding of justice not found in Kierkegaard, he also ends the *Republic* in a way that helps us make further sense of Kierkegaard's praxis. Specifically, at the end of that work, Plato offers the *Myth of Er*, a myth that recounts a narrative in which we witness individuals travelling to the afterlife, and getting the chance to choose the life into which they will be reborn. Unless we take seriously the claim that Plato is telling us this so we might remember it in the afterlife, his real point seems to be to remind us that we have chosen the self that we are; and if we realize this, we might be able to change. Moreover, rather than offering us a particular life we should each choose, Plato allows us to watch people choosing a diversity of lives, while urging us to be responsible for the life that we ourselves pick. A major implication of this story is that we are not actually self-identical with the particular life we choose, for this life we choose is chosen by a self other than it. In other words, Plato is appealing to the same agency that is at the core of Kierkegaard's understanding of the self, an agent they both recognize as capable of responsibility, as our freedom and responsibility is not exclusively found in the particular life we happen to choose, but in our very choice of that life too.

Just as Plato offers this lesson by watching different people choose different lives, some choosing well and others poorly, Kierkegaard's praxis can be understood in much the same way.

As Kierkegaard explains:

"Direct communication" is: to communicate the truth directly; "communication in reflection" is: to *deceive into the truth*. It began **maieutically** with esthetic production, and all the pseudonymous writings are maieutic in nature. Therefore this writing was also pseudonymous, whereas the directly religious—which from the beginning was present in the gleam of an indication—carried my name.<sup>26</sup>

Distinguishing between direct and indirect communication, Kierkegaard explains that his writing was often circuitous, and intentionally so, for he explicitly mimicked a Socratic or Platonic style

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<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," 7.

of discourse. Never stating the truth directly, except in the case of his devotional “religious” works,<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard’s project was not to deliver the truth, but to bring his reader to it. “But direct communication presupposes that the recipient’s ability to receive it is entirely in order, but here that is simply not the case—indeed, here a delusion is an obstacle.”<sup>28</sup> Direct communication is what occurs between the faithful, so that, in indirect communication, Kierkegaard’s chosen pedagogical method, we find Kierkegaard’s praxis.

As he mentions, his pseudonymous works, those written under pen names, were all “maieutic in nature.” This use of pseudonyms has garnered much scholarly interest, as they seem emblematic of the difficulty any reader has in interpreting Kierkegaard’s work, for all of the veils he hides behind. For instance, we have Johannes de Silentio, or Johannes of Silence, who penned *Fear and Trembling*, a work ostensibly about faith but whose author does not have faith himself—he is silent. Or, Johannes Climacus—Johannes of the Ladder—the author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, named after a 7<sup>th</sup> century monk who penned a work entitled the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, with Kierkegaard’s works mimicking the sort of religious philosophy found there. We also have Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or*, which was itself composed of works written by the anonymous “A” and by Judge William; Hilarius Bookbinder, the editor of *Stage’s On Life’s Way*; Constantin Constantius of *Repetition*; Vigilius Haufniensis of *The Concept of Anxiety*; Nicolas Notabene of *Prefaces*; and Anti-Climacus of *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. Nor is this list exhaustive, surveying only some of Kierkegaard’s major works. If

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<sup>27</sup> When Kierkegaard speaks of the works that “carried my name,” he is speaking to the devotional works he published in tandem with his philosophical ones. As devotional works, they “directly” expressed Kierkegaard’s own religiosity, rather than concerning themselves with the pedagogical practice of helping others find faith.

<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard, “The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History,” 54.

we were also to include the cast of characters that populate his works, our list would not soon end.

This diversity of pseudonyms, and the “indirect communication” they are said to reflect, has led many thinkers to claim that Kierkegaard prefigures Roland Barthes’ idea of “the death of the author.”<sup>29</sup> This interpretation is certainly reinforced by Kierkegaard’s own admission, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, that he wrote the pseudonymous works, insofar as this admission was then followed by a disavowal:

I am impersonally or personally in the third person a *souffleur* [prompter] who has poetically produced the *authors*, whose *prefaces* in turn are their productions, as their *names* are also. Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them, since it is impossible to have that to a doubly reflected communication.<sup>30</sup>

For instance, of such claims, Daniel Berthold writes:

[Kierkegaard conceptualizes] the relation between self and other as occurring across an abyss of difference that dissolves the authority of the author, and adheres to a philosophy of language in which the author’s text becomes infinitely interpretable according to the position occupied by the reader.<sup>31</sup>

Insofar as Kierkegaard is not any single one of his pseudonyms, and as we might even consider “Søren Kierkegaard” as itself a kind of artistic creation (or, perhaps, just Kierkegaard’s own *Bildungsroman*),<sup>32</sup> these arguments assert that there really is not any author to which we might appeal. Moreover, it is argued that this was Kierkegaard’s point, as he tried to affect his own

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<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977). 142-48.

<sup>30</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). 625-26.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Berthold, *The Ethics of Authorship: Communication, Seduction, and Death in Hegel and Kierkegaard* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011). 12.

<sup>32</sup> In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard implies something of the sort, calling his pseudonymous authorship “a necessary emptying out,” by which he means they were written as part of his own process of spiritual development. Kierkegaard, “The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History,” 86.

authorial death in his writing, even if he was sometimes ambivalent about this end.<sup>33</sup> However, this proves to be a very shallow reading of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's point is not that the author is dead, his point is that if we rely on him as an external authority, we have not found real authority ourselves. And this personal authority rests in an appropriation of self, a self that is hardly a fiction, but that is a real agent. What we are therefore witnessing, in the style of Socrates, is Kierkegaard's own peculiar disavowal of knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

Recent historical work has even demonstrated that Kierkegaard intended to publish many of his pseudonymous works under his own name, often changing his mind at the last minute, making it difficult to ascribe too much meaning to this one peculiarity of his authorship.<sup>35</sup> For instance, this is true of *The Concept of Anxiety*; originally intended to be published under his own name, it was only at the very last minute that he decided to use a pseudonym.<sup>36</sup> This work even mentions a number of quite personal details, such as a trip to Berlin that Kierkegaard himself took, while also being dedicated to his teacher and mentor, Poul Martin Møller.<sup>37</sup> These are hardly signs of an author who is trying to hide from his work, both in terms of public attribution or in terms of the "death of the author." This last minute ascription to a pseudonym repeated itself for *Philosophical Fragments* too, leaving behind a pattern that seems much less thought out than it is sometimes made out to be.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the use of pseudonyms was a common convention in the Danish life of letters, a convention that often

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<sup>33</sup> Berthold, *The Ethics of Authorship: Communication, Seduction, and Death in Hegel and Kierkegaard*: 129-31.

<sup>34</sup><sup>34</sup> In Kierkegaard's dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, he claims that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge was much like Kierkegaard's own: it was ironic. Opposed to an Athenian world whose claims to truth were empty, and opposed to Danish "Christendom," where the same was true, a profession of Socratic ignorance necessarily serves to undermine these lies. See, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With continual reference to Socrates*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). 262ff.

<sup>35</sup> Jon Stewart, "Søren Kierkegaard and the Problem of Pseudonymity," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 32, no. 2 (2012): 424.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

failed to obscure knowledge of the true author, a failure of which pseudonymous authors knew.<sup>39</sup> This practice, however, seems to have allowed an author to transgress certain social mores, as the use of a pseudonym is a disavowal of sorts, whereby an author could spare themselves the personal discomfort of having to answer for their work—even though everyone likely knew.

Philosophy is not typically written in the first person, as a private affair, although we can recall Kierkegaard's praise of Descartes' *Meditations* for being written precisely in this way.<sup>40</sup> However, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are all written in this way. Oftentimes, we even get to know their author in a quite personal way, as his works typically have a unique flavor of their own, while his pseudonymous authors take more than a few occasions to speak of themselves, and to speak directly to the reader. Far from the death of the author, in reading Kierkegaard, it is hard not to be taken by just how present the author perpetually is. The *Critique of Pure Reason* tells us little about Kant, just as the *Logic* tells us little about Hegel, but a reader really comes to know Kierkegaard in his works, even if sometimes we have to find him beneath the myriad of veils. Reading Kierkegaard's work becomes an effort in intimacy, as his works are so invested with his own personality that even the most abstract of his utterances seems somehow reflective of the underlying author. However, he never allows himself to be identified with any single one of them, except, perhaps, when he identifies with them all. Instead, their limitations are manifest, as Kierkegaard himself is always at least one step removed from the work itself, just as we would never mistake Hamlet for The Bard who penned his words.

Whereas Plato's dialogues gives voice to a multiplicity of speakers, but we are nonetheless aware that Socrates is the one to watch, Kierkegaard gives voice to the same multiplicity of voices, but none become the star. Moreover, they do not debate one another, they

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<sup>39</sup> Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003). 23.

<sup>40</sup> Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," 5. For more on this, see, Chapter 3.

each get a forum of their own. What we witness, therefore, is how one unique subjectivity, be it *faithless* (but wanting to be faithful) Johannes de Silentio, *philosophical* Johannes Climacus, *religious* Anti-Climacus (of *The Sickness Unto Death*), or any of the other pseudonyms, relates to the truth. Rather than articulating the truth itself, Kierkegaard gives voice to lives that live in varying proximities to it, that have different insights into it, and they struggle with appropriating it in various ways—struggles that likely reflect Kierkegaard’s own. We see how real human beings, just like us, struggle with truth; we find characters with whom we can empathize, rather than an author who lectures us to think as he thinks. As Kierkegaard writes: “Never have I fought in such a way that I have said: I am the true Christian . . . No, I have fought in this way: *I know what Christianity is.*”<sup>41</sup> He himself is not one to emulate, even if he does have something to say.

While we should be wary of ascribing too much meaning to the pseudonyms, they do run parallel to the more general claim about the maieutic nature of Kierkegaard’s indirect style of communication. Kierkegaard rarely, if ever, tells us exactly what he thinks. In fact, the pseudonyms themselves serve to reinforce the perspectival nature of his work. Johannes de Silentio and Johannes Climacus might not exist, they both might be Kierkegaard, but they are clearly written from different points of view. De Silentio is humbled by Abraham, his is the simple perspective of an onlooker who stands in fear and trembling at this act; Climacus, however, is very much the philosopher, discoursing at length about the nature of space and time, and a great many other things. Our descriptions could go on at length, detailing the unique character traits of his many authors and editors, not to mention the characters they themselves describe. In this way, it becomes difficult to ascribe to Kierkegaard himself any particular idea, as he only intends to illuminate points of view on the truth, perspectives on it, without offering a definitive account. Such an account works counter to his project of helping his readers find the

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<sup>41</sup> Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," 15.

truth for themselves, for, in seeing the truth in his texts, we relate to the truth as if it were external, and not a vital element of our own subjectivity. As much as we might want to locate the truth *within* Kierkegaard's works, he actively works against this possibility, as this dialectical movement whereby he hints at the truth and then disavows the hint, engages his readers in the process of finding the truth themselves, rather than accepting it from him. So, even while most everyone would have known who had written Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works as they were written, something of which we can be certain of post-1846 when he explicitly lays claim to them in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, what Kierkegaard manages to do is to create doubt about their authority. As mentioned, even when he does lay claim to his works, this claim is dialectically saddled with a refutation of that very claim. They are mine, he says, but I cannot vouch for them.

At the end of the previous section, Kierkegaard articulates an opposition between the religiosity of the single individual and the diversity of worldly difference. Using that as our context, we can now make sense of Kierkegaard's praxis. As an existing "thing," every one of Kierkegaard's books is a worldly thing. It exists amidst the diversity of worldly difference, it does not exist in the transcendental world of religious equality. If we parallel this with Kierkegaard's attack on self-reflection, this should all become clear. As particular embodiments of self-understanding, his individual works might reveal something of his subjectivity, but situated within Kierkegaard's larger understanding of the self as the agent behind self-understanding, Kierkegaard is simultaneously engaged in demonstrating the limits of each of his works—even if he only does so by offering yet another work that brings its unique insight to bear. Just as we might identify with a "worldly" feature of our own selves, just as our uniquely diverse identities might come to mean quite a lot to us, if we understand ourselves solely as our

identities, or solely in terms of the specific works or objects we create, we bind ourselves the material world, a world not only of “mediocre” relativity, but also, one that is governed by cessation.

What results is a body of work that often points to the truth, but that actively dissuades its readers from over-identifying with any single one of them. Whereas Plato often spoke through Socrates, Kierkegaard is more akin to Shakespeare: he speaks through all of his characters, while making it clear that he is none of them. Kierkegaard never directly says what he thinks, even if sometimes it might seem closer to the surface, so that anything we attribute to him directly is something we have to actively impute to him. We can see this in the very sentences he constructs, sentences that point to the truth for us to see, but that do not contain it themselves. In what is perhaps Kierkegaard’s most quoted passage, one with which we are already familiar, he defines the self like this: “The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in this relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself.”<sup>42</sup> Even in this, his clearest explication of the self, Kierkegaard defines the self as a *verb*, not a noun, and an active verb at that. In order for this definition to make sense to a reader, however, we cannot simply “identify” ourselves as a relating self, in the way we might had Kierkegaard called the self “agency” or “freedom,” or some such. These are all definitions we can try on as identities; anyone can themselves myself free just as easily they can call themselves an agent. Identities are static, even if we change our identities over time, making Kierkegaard’s active definition contradictory to identity itself. Instead, for his definition to make sense, we have to actively look for that which is in us that does this relating. Just as *Fear and Trembling*’s Johannes de Silentio claims not to know what faith is, a claim mimicked by *Philosophical Fragment*’s Johannes Climacus, even when Kierkegaard is offering definitions, he is offering

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<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. 13

definitions that are not definitions. They are riddles; riddles that can only be solved through an increase in self-awareness. That is, they do not make sense until you see what he sees for yourself.

As Kierkegaard writes: “And I myself have from the start enjoined and again and again repeated stereotypically: I am “without authority.””<sup>43</sup> This is Kierkegaard’s most common refrain: listen to me, but do not listen to me. It is a refrain that parallels his insight into us: we have an identity, but we are not our identity.

But from the total point of view of my whole work as an author, the esthetic writing is a deception, and herein is the deeper significance of the *pseudonymity*. But a deception, that is indeed something rather ugly. To that I would answer: Do not be deceived by the word *deception*. One can deceive a person out of what is true, and—to recall old Socrates—one can deceive a person into what is true. Yes, in only this way can a deluded person actually be brought into what is true—by deceiving him.<sup>44</sup>

Kierkegaard has told us what he thinks we need to hear: Truth exists, but not “here.” And in the activity of thinking through his work, in the activity of trying on the perspectives he puts on offer, we might come to find ourselves underneath, as the self who has long hidden behind the veils of self-understanding, veils much like those Kierkegaard constructs, veils which might come to act as expressions of our self, rather than obfuscations. Like Kierkegaard, we are never Hamlet, but always, *The Bard*.

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<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard, "On My Work as an Author," 15.

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, "The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History," 53.

## Chapter 10: *Politics*

We have come a long way with Kierkegaard, only to arrive, once again, at the point with which Marx begins. As Marx writes in his 1844 *Manuscripts*:

The object of labour is, therefore, the *objectification of man's species-life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore sees himself in a world that he has created.<sup>1</sup>

For Marx, the things we make do not contain our freedom, they are expressions of it, but they are expressions through which we come to learn about ourselves. As with Kierkegaard, we are not Hamlet, but The Bard. However, for Marx, praxis does not entail the individual appropriation of this freedom, for his concern is with the sociopolitical obstacles to its expression. Focusing on Plato's return to the cave, rather than the escape, Marx turns to politics, building upon the idea that a private ethics is insufficient in a world defined by *systematic* injustice. However, every bit the antifoundationalist that Kierkegaard is, Marx's politics are not defined by a positive vision of a just political order, an order that might be in line with Plato's image of a just polis, as he instead focuses on a critical method for interrogating unjust political orders. Demonstrating how an individual might interrogate their world, without sacrificing their hard fought freedom, in tandem with Kierkegaard, Marx demonstrates that truth and freedom are found in the subject position of the critic, not in the things that they create.

### **Returning to the *Cave*: Antifoundationalist Materialism**

The beginning of modern political thought is often dated to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Arguing that our natural state is one of war, and that political life occurs as a result of a covenant

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, Marx and Engels: 1843-44* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 277.

in which we mutually cede away our individual power to the state, Hobbes articulates a form of political legitimacy that continues to operate today.<sup>2</sup> Founded on our equal vulnerability, we create government in order to keep us safe. However, responding a little over a century later, in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau would argue that Hobbes' project was disingenuous. For Rousseau, our nature is not the cause of war, the specific historical development of domination is. Detailing a history of growing inequality, a history in which the rich amassed an ever greater portion of our collective resources, war emerged as a consequence of these ill-gotten gains. For Rousseau, a state of war emerged as the poor sought to take from the rich in the same way that the rich acquired wealth in the first place: through force.<sup>3</sup> It was not a collective sense of vulnerability that led to the creation of a state to which we are all equally subject, it was the particular vulnerability of the rich that did.

Foreshadowing Marx's analysis in *On The Jewish Question* (and Marx had engaged in a serious study of Rousseau in the summer of 1843, immediately preceding the writing of the *Jewish Question* in the Autumn of that year),<sup>4</sup> Rousseau argues that Hobbes' collective covenant ceding our individual autonomy to the state is not the result of an equality of vulnerability, but an attempt by the rich to defend their possessions. The equality it professes merely hides an underlying inequality. It was only when threatened by expropriation, that the rich finally called out:

Let us unite ... in order to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious, and assure everyone of possessing what belongs to him. Let us institute rules of justice and peace to which all will be obliged to conform, which will make special exceptions for no one, and which will in some way compensate for the caprices of fortune by subjecting the strong and the weak to mutual obligations. In short, instead of turning our forces against ourselves, let us gather

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). 82-84, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Basic Political Writings*, ed. Peter Gay (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 69.

<sup>4</sup> David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). 68.

them into one supreme power that governs us according to wise laws, that protects and defends all the members of the association, repulses common enemies, and maintains us in eternal concord.<sup>5</sup>

Hobbes' Leviathan is not created as a result of collective safety issues, but rather, collective safety issues are exploited in order to justify a Leviathan that codifies the material status quo. For Rousseau, therefore, the strength of Hobbes' argument rests on a misunderstanding: the psychological predisposition that leads to war is not a natural predisposition, but a socially produced one.<sup>6</sup> As such, the truth we might see in Hobbes speaks more to his ability to theoretically represent our particular sociopolitical reality, than it does to his grasp of universal, ahistorical, truths.

For all of Hobbes' empiricism, he strays quite far from material reality, as he attempts to construct a theoretical model of human nature based on his empirical observations. Moreover, if we extrapolate from Rousseau's argument, there is an unstated positivism to Hobbes' work, as it never occurs to Hobbes that the "universal" behavioral traits he witnesses could themselves be socially produced. Instead, he explains sociopolitical life, and the operation of power within it, in terms of an elaborately constructed psychological theory that speaks to a psychology we develop in response to the lives we live, not one we have prior to it. While Hobbes understands human psychology in terms of the "appetites" we wish to satiate and the "aversions" we wish to avoid,<sup>7</sup> with power acting as the medium through which this is achieved,<sup>8</sup> what Hobbes is actually doing is justifying bourgeois sociopolitical reality by enshrining its consequences as its cause.

However, while some might advance a similar claim against Rousseau, arguing that Rousseau's

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<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," 69.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*: 28-38.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 54-62.

analysis of politics relies upon his own theory of human nature, in Rousseau's case, this is not quite true.

Instead of naturalizing the world into which he was born, Rousseau recognizes the contingent nature of history, a fact that means no sociopolitical reality is *de facto* justified, but that all have to justify themselves. This reflects Rousseau's own radical formulation of freedom (one that is spoken of, perhaps unsurprisingly, in spiritual terms), a formulation of freedom not so far from that of Kierkegaard and Marx. For Rousseau:

Nature commands every animal, and beasts obey. Man feels the same impetus, but he knows he is free to go along or to resist; and it is above all in the awareness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is made manifest.<sup>9</sup>

While we might have an emotional and instinctual life that "commands" us, when human beings obey, it is because we freely choose to. Moreover, not only are we capable of self-determination, but the choices we make, including the sociopolitical arrangements we decide to create, in turn, shape us. Rousseau refers to this latter point as our faculty of self-perfection, a faculty that can not only improve us, but that can diminish us too.<sup>10</sup> Freedom not only means that we shape our future, it also means that the future we create shapes us too.

We can therefore see something of a dialectical conception of freedom in Rousseau. As Rousseau understands that history shapes human beings, just as human beings create history, he can levy his critique against Hobbes, while remaining relatively unscathed himself. Rousseau is not attempting to create a theory of human nature based on our historically contingent development, he is attempting to demonstrate our historically contingent development by *overcoming* the intellectual prejudices we derive from it. For Rousseau, in order to see sociopolitical reality, you need to look beyond our ideas about it, to see the material reality

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<sup>9</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," 45.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

underneath. And so, while his dialectical conception of freedom might seem like a theoretical model through which he analyzes reality, it is not. Instead, as we have seen in *Part II*, accepting the existence of this freedom is a prerequisite for delineating between our ideas and the reality they seek to describe. Specifically, while our ideas about reality often serve to mask that reality, material reality itself is not a matter of thought, but of action; it is the product of what we do, not of what we think—even if thought does shape action.

We can see this point in the very question that motivates Rousseau's *Discourse*: how is it that “the strong could resolve to serve the weak?”<sup>11</sup> To get to this question, Rousseau overcomes Hobbes' rationalizing analysis, and recognizes that social stratification does not have a “natural” order, but is a socially constructed thing. In other words, the things we tell ourselves to justify inequality do not hold up to scrutiny, for the cause of inequality does not lie in a natural source, but in a historical one. Here, we find Rousseau's response to Kierkegaard, a response that could equally have been made by Marx: diversity might be the nature of the natural world, insofar as no two people are exactly the same, but the inequalities we find in the sociopolitical world are not the consequences of these natural differences, they are the consequences of historical actions. Applying an idea of the natural world—one that is derived from an epistemological truth about it—to the sociopolitical world, is not only a category error, it is also an active rationalization. As Rousseau pithily puts it:

There is still less of a point in asking whether there would not be some essential connection between the two inequalities, for that would amount to asking whether those in command are necessarily better than those who obey, and whether strength of body or mind, wisdom or virtue are always found in the same individuals in proportion to power or wealth. Perhaps this is a good question for slaves to discuss within earshot of their masters, but it is not suitable for reasonable and free men who seek the truth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The natural world might be defined by an infinite diversity of minutia, but when we theorize this diversity into an idea of diversity, and then apply that theory to the human world, we naturalize sociopolitical differences, and end up doing precisely what Hobbes did; we explain away dialectical freedom by failing to see the human world as a consequence of it. Poverty and wealth do not exist as examples of the world's diversity, they exist because they have been freely created by those who reside within it; they are not identities, they are the material effects of action.

This has been a long detour to Marx, by way of Rousseau, but it is a useful detour, as Rousseau is attentive to the need for subjective emancipation *and* for objective sociopolitical revolution. Therefore, much of Rousseau's work aims to disabuse us of the beliefs that prevent us from seeing material reality, in much the way we have seen with Kierkegaard. However, as the *Discourse on Inequality* further demonstrates, the consequence of such subjective emancipation entails the recognition that material change is also required, in much the way that Marx argues. And so, Rousseau unites in a single work—much as the present work attempts to do—a concern with subjective emancipation with a concern for sociopolitical change. While the role of subjective emancipation is evident in Marx, especially in works such as *On The Jewish Question*, Rousseau's work is useful in reminding us that following the task of such subjective emancipation, not only do individuals stand revealed, but our societies do too. This helps us see that Marx's turn towards material reality, a turn that presupposes the lucidity of subjective emancipation, is the premise behind his own sociopolitical analysis; it is Marx's return to Plato's cave following his escape. Whereas Kierkegaard's return finds him writing in such a way as to help other individuals escape, Marx takes up the challenge of understanding the social reality

that is revealed, by bringing a level of social-scientific precision to the task heretofore unimagined.

However, if Marx's turn towards material reality is the consequence of a subjectivity freed to see it, Marx's understanding of human freedom also means that many of his specific insights into the sociopolitical world are tentative, as that world is ever changing. In other words, for all of the precision of his analysis, it is a precision that attempts to explain a world that is constituted by ceaseless, one might say Heraclitean, flux. Not all of Marx's readers have recognized this, as he has had more than his fair share of dogmatic adherents, but many of his more sophisticated readers have. On this problem, there is perhaps no one better than Georg Lukács. Writing in 1919, just nine years after writing his essay on Kierkegaard, we can see that Kierkegaard's influence is not hard to shake. Lukács writes:

Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx's individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious 'orthodox' Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto*—without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.<sup>13</sup>

We might agree with Bertell Ollman that Lukács "may be exaggerating to make his point," but we might also agree that "it is not ... by very much."<sup>14</sup> We might also hope that the role of the individual subject is stronger than it is here, for this formulation of Marx's method lacks an ethics that might orient us as to the actions we take in response to what this method reveals, but Lukács' interpretation of Marx no doubt testifies to his own debt to Kierkegaard. And while an exhaustive account of Marx's sociopolitical analysis would fill volumes (and has), we will

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<sup>13</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971). 1.

<sup>14</sup> Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003). 59.

satisfy ourselves with an analysis of some of Marx's premises, for these not only demonstrate Marx's enduring value, but they provide key tools for a Kierkegaardian subject to begin in their analysis of the sociopolitical world—what Lukács calls a *method*.

Following Marx's criticism of politics, law, and philosophy, a criticism we have seen in such works as *On The Jewish Question* and *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx turns to civil society. While the intellectual realms of law, politics, and philosophy, might speak to how a society thinks of itself, and while they might also structure parts of our lives, those lives are actually lived within civil society. In *Part II* and *Part III* we have seen this, as Marx turns away from our ideas about ourselves and towards our actual lives, just as Rousseau found the origins of our political and legal beliefs in the society that required them as justification. In his 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes of the turn his writing took circa 1843-44, the precise time he moves past an analysis of the veils underneath which society hides, and towards a systematic analysis of society itself.

My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term "civil society"; that the anatomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy.<sup>15</sup>

While we have seen how the overvaluation of a society's self-conception serves to mask inequality, Marx turns away from an analysis of the role that ideas play in maintaining such a status quo, and towards a systematic analysis of the world they seek to maintain. As Marx notes, the legal and political self-deceptions we tell ourselves—deceptions such as our belief in equality, a belief that substantively contains truth but that serves the role of obscuring actual

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<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works, Volume 29: Karl Marx, Economic Works, 1857-1861* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 262.

inequality—fail to provide their own self-justification. That is, if they reflected a reality of equality, then we could explain their origins in terms of it; but as they overshadow a reality of inequality, understanding them requires us to turn towards the world from which they have emerged, a world whose anatomy is based in political economy.

Marx’s insight lies in discovering that our existence is first economic, and only then, legal, political, and intellectual. As a result, the economy, by its very nature, can shape our lives in ways that politics, law, and philosophy, can never approximate. Unlike the latter realms which operate by shaping our consciousness, with the ultimate aim of shaping our actions, political economy reverses this relationship, as it first shapes how we act, with our consciousness following as a result. Simply put, prior to developing legal and political systems, we first find ourselves living economic lives. In Kierkegaard’s language, we might say that the economy structures *actuality*, whereas law, politics, and philosophy, shape *possibility*.

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage of development of the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

As Marx describes the technical nature of the relationship, following from the “material forces of production” available to a society (labor, materials, technology, etc.), social “relations of productions” are formed that organize their use (for instance, slaves and masters, landowners and peasants, wage-laborers and owners of capital, etc.), all of which comes to form the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 263.

comprehensive “mode of production” of a given society.<sup>17</sup> However, as mentioned, what is most important to note is that the mode of production takes precedence over other spheres of existence, constituting “the real foundation” of society, because it exists prior to them—both existentially and historically.

Existentially considered, legal and political structures are self-conscious products of our freedom. That is, we self-consciously create them, but they are creations that are then meant to limit the freedom from which they emerge, by attempting to circumscribe how we choose to act, i.e. by shaping how we imagine *possibility*. In other words, law and politics are ideas we devise to help us organize our lives. They therefore reflect those lives we are already living, as they exist *after* freedom, from the point of view of an anthropology of freedom, *not* before it. As Marx realizes, the mode of production is not a conscious idea we impose on ourselves, circumscribing our action into certain economic behaviors; rather, it is a recognition that the productive actions of a society do not proceed from an abstract consideration of economic theory—even if they are often informed by it—but from the practical necessity of actually having to produce “things.” As this necessity precedes our ability to self-reflect, our economic behavior (the relations of production) develop as a result of *actual* factors, such as the “material forces of production” of a society, rather than developing after we have solved the problem of sustaining our material existence, as is the case with law and politics. In other words, relations of production emerge as a result of a dialogue with economic realities, rather than as a result of self-conscious reflection. This means that unlike law and politics which are mediated through our consciousness, economic production has an immediacy to it, as it is not the consequence of what we think of ourselves, it is a matter of what we do to maintain our lives. And while these spheres of analysis often intersect and overlap, as our lives have both economic and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

political/legal/philosophical significance, it is in this way that political economy proves to be the “foundation.” Rather than studying a society’s self-conception, Marx’s turn towards political economy signals a move towards a society’s actual activity, as this activity reveals a sociopolitical reality that comes first.

Historically considered, Marx believes this insight also bears out, for the very simple reason that a society must first provide for its physical survival before it can determine the legal and political arrangements by which it will live. It must first act before it can self-reflectively think. Moreover, as advances are made in productive forces, i.e. as societies devise new productive techniques and technologies, rendering the old ones obsolete, and as a societies’ actual behavior fills the space created by these developments, law and politics follow along, solving the attendant problems that crop up. Or, as Marx writes, speaking of the extreme example of a full social revolution:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production ... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.<sup>18</sup>

The reverse is hardly true, as economic systems are not conjured out of the ground as the result of ideas we have, but develop in response to practical necessities and the possibilities of production. In fact, these possibilities, as a matter of what is *actually* at hand, are really what Kierkegaard would call *actuality*—a point that further demonstrates the immediacy of economic activity versus the mediated nature of law and politics. For this reason, law and politics can be studied by studying the legal and political ideas by which we organize our lives, even if we will never arrive at their origins in this way, whereas, political economy has to be studied by looking at what societies actually do (and can or cannot do), rather than to its economic ideology. As

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Marx realizes, every legal and political system that ever has been, was created by a society that was already organized economically. Regardless of the intensity and nuance of the connection between this economic “foundation” and the legal and political “superstructure”—and for all Marx’s insight into the primacy of economics we should be wary of slipping into a simplistic economic determinism—it is hard to imagine that our legal and political structures will conflict with the very way that our society, as a whole, survives. We must occasionally use these structures to limit political economy, sometimes with an eye on remedying particular unethical economic practices, but we never *decide* to completely abdicate one form of production for another. We might rarely admit it, but most of us know the hand that feeds us.

For Marx, then, critical thinking is not something that occurs before we live in the world, as we later impose our conceptual objects on it; it is a process that occurs out from the world, as we try and make sense of the very real social structures in which we live. The mode of production is not a conscious idea we impose on the world, it is an acknowledgement of the fact that our work is actually organized in a particular way. Not only has this point been made evident repeatedly throughout the present work, but it lies embedded in the ontological and historical priority of economic production, as this priority acknowledges little more than the fact that we live before we think. Given that this is true, the mode of production is an acknowledgement of the fact that these lives are structured in very particular ways. Regardless of our success in the act of self-appropriation, our very survival continues to depend on our active participation in a mode of production based on exploitation, a mode to which we must conform our actions no matter what we think of it. What follows is that Marx’s sociopolitical analysis—his method—is an attempt to make sense of these very structures, by analyzing the way we all act.

Of the style of his own thought, Marx writes: “In the analysis of economic forms ... neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both.”<sup>19</sup> Abstraction, for Marx, does not aim to discover *a priori* truths divorced from material reality; instead, its purpose is to look at what Kierkegaard calls the diversity of the world, because, amidst the diversity of human activity exist recognizable patterns, and these patterns reveal the social relations that constitute a mode of production. In other words, Marx looks at society, recognizes that a diversity exists there, but also recognizes that for all this diversity, our activity is actually organized in very specific ways. So, Marx might agree with Kierkegaard that the world is constituted by difference, and that it endlessly changes with the passage of time, but Marx’s project is one of learning how to think about that diversity, because he thinks that you can think about it without thinking it away. As Bertell Ollman writes of Marx’s dialectical method,

... the subject of dialectics is change, all change, and interaction, all kinds and degrees of interaction. This is not to say that dialectical thinkers recognize the existence of change and interaction while nondialectical thinkers do not. That would be foolish. Everyone recognizes that everything in the world changes, somehow and to some degree, and that the same holds true for interaction. The problem is how to think adequately about them, how to capture them in thought.<sup>20</sup>

As an example, for us, given all the diversity in possible jobs and the possible ways we might use our free time, every one of our lives (with the exception of a very few) takes the form of wage-labor. As was the case with Rousseau’s recognition of social inequality, seeing this does not entail the imposition of ideas onto the world, it entails observing and recognizing patterns in how

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Capital, Volume 1," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 35, Vol. 01, Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1996), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*: 59-60.

we all act. Otherwise, the endless flux of the world can easily become an excuse not to theorize it—if, in Kierkegaard’s case, he only meant to disabuse us of our attachment to our beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

Given this, Tom Rockmore concludes that Marx remains every bit an antifoundationalist, as “Marx insists ... that categories which apply to experience emerge from it and must be altered as the experiential object to which they refer changes. It follows that there can be no final ground to knowledge in a foundationalist sense.”<sup>22</sup> Hardly conflicting with Kierkegaard’s assertion that the truth of our freedom can never be captured in any of its products, such as the ideas we create, Marx’s sociopolitical analysis extends this claim, by offering a “method” of sociopolitical analysis in which each of his particular conclusions about society *might* be wrong (and eventually, as history’s wheel turns, they *will* be wrong, except as historical documents). What is rarely noted is that as a method that we might reduce into basic premises, such as the priority of political economy and the nature of abstraction, what actually prevents this method from devolving into yet another set of ideas to which we become subject, is not anything within the ideas themselves. After all, if this was the case, it would invalidate the very core of Marx’s criticism of Hegel. Instead, it can only depend on the antifoundationalist stance of its practitioners, a stance that Marx takes for granted, but which Kierkegaard helps cultivate. Kierkegaard never discovered a method appropriate to sociopolitical analysis, nor did he particularly try, but Marx’s antifoundationalist materialism is a very natural extension of Kierkegaard’s own antifoundationalist praxis.

### **Thinking Class**

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<sup>21</sup> Here we find a compelling rejoinder to the postmodern fascination with difference. Without denigrating the importance of difference, it easily devolves into a conservative anti-politics, as many of its critics have noted.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Rockmore, "Hegel, German Idealism, and Antifoundationalism," in *Antifoundationalism Old and New*, ed. Tom Rockmore and Beth J. Singer (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 108.

Beyond a method of analysis, however, Marx discovers something else; he discovers that an understanding of the social relations of most societies reveals the presence of *class*. However, acknowledging class dynamics does not entail the discovery of permanent ideas we impose on the world, it is a conclusion we draw from it, a conclusion subject to change as the world does. Marx himself clarifies this position, shedding further light on the nature of his social analysis; classes are not *a priori* impositions, but abstractions meant to capture social processes that work themselves out through individual will, much as Adorno suggests that Hegel's world spirit works itself out "through" people, and not "over their heads."<sup>23</sup> Less abstract than "world spirit," class is an acknowledgement that our societies offer us very narrow forms for our freedom to take, despite the diversity of different types of wage-labor, and that these forms reveal a material inequality in how goods are produced. While class is often thought of in cultural terms, as something into which individuals are socialized, for Marx, class reveals the activity in which one engages vis-à-vis the relations of production. In its broadest contemporary iteration, workers sell their labor-power, and capital owners buy that labor.

Speaking of the classes of capitalists and landowners, Marx clarifies *how* he thinks about class:

To prevent possible misunderstanding, a word. I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009). 25

<sup>24</sup> Marx and Engels, "Capital, Volume 1," 10.

This insight, from *Capital, Vol. I*, brings together much of what we have discussed so far. We might not wish to acknowledge that despite our attempts to live an ethical life, as many of us attempt to do, and despite how we might understand ourselves, the very way we derive our livelihood entails participation in a *form* of activity that we rarely acknowledge. While we tend to focus on the specific content of the work that we do, we rarely notice that its form is specific too. Classes take shape precisely because different societies organize work in different ways, they each give it a different form, and Marx's abstractions attempt to describe that fact.

Moreover, it is clear that Marx does not eliminate individual subjectivity for the sake of his class analysis, even though individuals come to "personify" economic categories, as this personification is a matter of the form of our actions, not the content. In other words, this personification is not a matter of identity—it does not mean that all workers are the same; it is a matter of activity—it means that all workers sell their labor-power. Yet, as we often identify with the content of our activity, rather than with its form, for all the clarity that the bourgeoisie has brought to class antagonism by replacing "exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions" with "naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation,"<sup>25</sup> it is still a challenge to see class. As if he were talking to Kierkegaard directly, going so far as to acknowledge the very real possibility that he managed to "subjectively raise himself" above others, Marx wants to draw our attention to the fact that we still participate in particular economic practices regardless of their effect on our subjectivity. Subjective emancipation might put us in a position to encounter material reality, but understanding that reality—and our role within it—requires more than a wiping away of the veils; it requires methodical theorizing.

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 06, Marx and Engels: 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 487.

As we have seen, Rousseau spends much of his time undermining the various kinds of socialization he sees as operative in society. In the *Social Contract* we see more of this, such as when he extends his earlier critique of Hobbes all the way back to Aristotle, arguing that Aristotle's belief in "natural slaves" mistakes "the effect for the cause."<sup>26</sup> Marx, however, largely foregoes a discussion of the "effect" in favor of the "cause." Regardless of what slaves might think, or what is thought of them, and regardless of any socialization that may or may not take place, slavery is a *form* of work—it is a social structure in which our freedom unfolds. Take away everything but the work, and you still have slavery, take away the work, and you have lost it; work is the necessary *and* the sufficient condition, it is the "cause." Unlike modern wage-laborers who labor for pay, selling their labor-power as a commodity, slaves themselves are sold as a laboring commodity. As Marx notes:

Labour was not always a *commodity*. Labour was not always wage labour, that is, *free* labour. The *slave* did not sell his labour to the slave owner, any more than the ox sells its service to the peasant. The slave, together with his labour, is sold once and for all to his owner. He is a commodity which can pass from the hand of one owner to that of another. *He is himself* a commodity, but the labour is not *his* commodity.<sup>27</sup>

Slave societies, as with modern capitalist ones, justify their forms of labor in a myriad of ways; however, what remains the same when you wipe away the veils of justification is the form of labor, the very form freedom must take within a respective society. It is a form that is unique to each mode of production, a form that allows the very existence of a society, and a form to which we must each conform our own individual activity if we too are to survive. Born into a slave society, we cannot become purchasers of wage-labor; born into our own society, we must sell our work to live.

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<sup>26</sup> Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," 142.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 9, Marx and Engels: 1849* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 203.

This leads into Marx's frequent discussions of class antagonisms, most notably that "[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."<sup>28</sup> Marx is not here imposing a set of *a priori* categories onto history, he is acknowledging that work, as the active foundation of every society, has always been organized in an antagonistic way. That is, given the priority of political economy, Marx realizes that there have always been those who work, and those who benefit from the work of others, so that when we conform our social activity to the class in which we live, we either find ourselves working for others, or benefiting from the work of others. In fact, here again we find Marx following a lead Rousseau establishes in his *Discourse on Inequality*, where he argues that real social inequality began following the division of labor.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, when occupations became specialized, thereby necessitating trade, those who are clever enough can realize that if they choose their occupation based on the exchange value of the commodities they produced, they might be able to trade the result of a days' worth of their own work for more than a days' worth of the work of others.<sup>30</sup> What results is that the clever few now earn more than a day's work for their days' worth of work, whereas those with whom they trade, receive less than a days' worth of work for their days work. At an individual level, it seems only prudent to choose the form of work with the most reward, and Rousseau indicates that at first this was an almost natural decision to make,<sup>31</sup> but not only does this alienate us from our work, as is Marx's point in *Part I*, but what I paint as my own cleverness is little more than a rationalization for a socially sanctioned theft (however innocent at first)—one that begins the path to rampant social inequality. However, whereas Rousseau's analysis describes a type of pre-capitalist feudal bartering in which workers at least possess their own work until they

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<sup>28</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 482.

<sup>29</sup> Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," 67.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

trade it, as Marx realizes of modern work, current workers never own anything of what they produce. For all the remuneration I might receive, an absolute inequality is written into the structure of modern work, as the entirety of my work belongs to another. That is, as *Part I* argues, I sell my very freedom in order to survive.

Insofar as a societies' mode of production speaks to how it has organized work, it describes what Lukács calls a "totality," as its parts cannot be understood separately.<sup>32</sup> Just as slaves need masters, and wage-laborers need a wage-payer, a mode of production speaks to a social relationship that gives shapes to its activity. While Marx argues that there has always been an antagonism within these relationships, he also acknowledges that the natural necessity of work lies behind the "whole," even if it does not justify any specific mode of production.

Speaking of capitalism, Marx describes it like this:

The interests of the capitalist and those of the worker are, therefore, *one and the same*, assert the bourgeois and their economists. Indeed! The worker perishes if capital does not employ him. Capital perishes if it does not exploit labour, and in order to exploit it, it must buy it. . . .

*To say that the interests of capital and those of labour are one and the same is only to say that capital and wage labour are two sides of one and the same relation. The one conditions the other, just as usurer and squanderer condition each other.*<sup>33</sup>

Marx realizes that capitalism has its intellectual corollaries, the "bourgeois economists" who justify this economic relationship as in everyone's best interest, and Marx does agree that it is a symbiotic relationship insofar as each needs the other for it to continue—and for society to continue. In fact, this helps explain why economic revolution is more difficult than social or political revolution, as *everyone* derives their means of existence from it. Our very survival depends on the economy with an intensity that our relationship to the political or legal realms never approximates.

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<sup>32</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*: 8.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," 214-15.

However, as Marx notes in the *Manifesto*, workers "... have nothing to lose but their chains,"<sup>34</sup> even if such freedom, the freedom from having "a world to win,"<sup>35</sup> might cause anxiety. In fact, in losing the economic basis for our means of existence, in making it seem as if we were losing our very lives and the lives of those around us (as if we were losing Isaac), we get another example, perhaps one of the clearest, for this parallel. Yet, Marx's particular insight is that within an economic relation of production to which we all feel dependent, historically, there has always been an internal antagonism, an antagonism that has been different with the different modes of production. Regardless of how we think of ourselves, our own individual existence, as well as the existence of our societies, have always required us conform our activity to one side of an antagonistic, exploitative, relationship. And this antagonism does not exist in the realm of ideas, in *possibility*, it exists in the material realm, in *actuality*. As we have seen Marx argue in the *Manifesto*, the bourgeoisie has replaced "exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions [with] ... naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation,"<sup>36</sup> thereby making class antagonism starkly clear—even if it can still be difficult to apprehend. However, what he hopes becomes clear is that class is not a matter of how people view one another, it is a matter of what some people force others to do. Class is not an identity, it is an activity.

So, Marx not only aims to maintain a constant contact with the material reality he seeks to describe, a contact that entails a constant *rethinking* of one's abstraction, but his very abstractions are themselves fluid, as class describes an activity or process, and not a static terminus. After all, being a worker does not entail the adoption of an identity, it entails the *activity* of selling one's labor-power for money; likewise for the owners of capital, for they are defined by their active purchasing of this labor. Class is not a way of finding a final answer as to

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<sup>34</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 519.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 487.

society's internal mechanics, it is an acknowledgement that no such answer is permanent, as even classes themselves describe the actions of its members, and not a static identity. As Bertell Ollman notes, Marx's abstractions differ from typical abstract concepts insofar as they are not static ideas, but they describe "processes."<sup>37</sup> Taken together, rather than finding a final theoretical formulation of oppression upon which we can rely, Marx instead orients us to the realm in which our lives unfold (i.e. civil society), asking us to focus on our activity rather than our ideas about that activity, and he reminds us that this activity, while oppressive, remains ever fluid.

### **Why Class Matters**

The use of natural necessity as a justification for a particular mode of production echoes Rousseau's earlier argument that transposing natural facts into the sociopolitical world is both a category error, and also, a rationalization. As Marx writes in *The German Ideology*:

... as soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.<sup>38</sup>

Work, even that which we do for our physical survival, can be eminently fulfilling. In fact, it should be, as it is the expression of the freedom that makes us human. It is only our current form of work that alienates us from it, an alienated form that makes use of the "natural" necessity

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<sup>37</sup> Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*: 68.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 5, Marx and Engels: 1845-47* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 47.

behind it, so that we do not ever experience this “natural” necessity except in a deeply politicized way. In other words, when individuals starve today, when they lack the “rewards” of wage-labor, regardless of where in the world they happen to live, it is *not* for lack of food. In fact, Marx stands in awe of the productive capacity of the capitalist bourgeoisie, as its technological advances have not only made natural necessity a thing of the past, they have opened up untold vistas for the future. The bourgeoisie:

... has been the first to show what man’s activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades.<sup>39</sup>

Instead, modern hunger exists simply because food that exists, or that can exist, is not being distributed. And this is a sociopolitical problem, not a natural one.

If Kierkegaard’s pedagogical approach urges us to turn towards others in order to foster authentic relationships with them, if it requires us to help them overcome their subjective impediments on the path to a life of loving freedom, it also forces us to accept the very real structures that weigh down upon them. If our neighbor is starving, it is one thing to help them find spiritual sustenance, it might even follow that we should help them find food, but if their starvation is the result of being starved, and being starved in a systematic way, our love for them should likewise impel us to engage such a “system.” In other words, if we see poverty as one of the diverse locations within the infinite diversity of the world, if we see it as an identity within the world’s totality, if we see it purely as a matter of socialization that needs to be overcome, our deepest ethical sensibilities might incline us towards compassion. However, if we recognize poverty as an action, as something that is done by the rich towards the poor, that very same ethical sensibility has to travel beyond a compassionate attitude towards the poor, and towards a

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<sup>39</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 487.

defiant attitude towards the rich—not for *who* they are, but for *what* they do. In such a case, failing to acknowledge the systematic nature of these categories is itself an ethical lapse, one that can be rationalized in countless ways, but all of which remain rationalizations. That being said, wealth and poverty are, in fact, the kinds of categories of which Kierkegaard is concerned, as they are categories that speak to what you have, and not to what you do. However, the categories of workers and owners are not, and these categories, rather than those of wealth and poverty, are those that drive Marx's analysis.

We began this work with a comparison of Kierkegaard's concept of despair and Marx's concept of alienation. There, we saw that these approximated one another in their effect on the self, differing primarily as to cause, with Marx seeing its cause in the necessity behind work, and Kierkegaard seeing it as residing in necessary developmental processes of self-consciousness. While it has been repeatedly argued that these causes are mutually reinforcing, and not opposed, another difference in their conceptions lay in the role that Kierkegaard saw in guilt. For Kierkegaard, in acting inauthentically towards ourselves and towards others, we are necessarily failing in our duties to them, and this failure leads to a mounting guilt that proves to be a major impediment in self-appropriation. However, now that we have a better understanding of Marx's understanding of class, guilt (and innocence) are useful ways in which to wrap up this discussion.

As Marx understands class as a matter of activity, there is a disassociation that easily occurs between our economic activity and our understanding of ourselves, insofar as what we think of ourselves bears no direct relationship to our role within the mode of production. What this means is that if we consider ourselves solely as individuals, as we most often do, we might think of ourselves as ethical, because in our interpersonal interactions with others we might be. It

is easy to imagine a corporate leader, for example, who conducts their interactions with other individuals with the utmost personal integrity. In fact, part of the reason it is easy to imagine such an example is because it is no doubt true that such people exist. Yet, as Marx would have it, such an individual is nonetheless participating in an exploitative activity regardless of how they think of themselves, and regardless of how that self-image may or may not translate into ethical behavior, as their economic behavior precedes this self-reflective activity. In other words, before they think about themselves, they are already engaged in exploitation.

The importance of this point is demonstrated by way of a brief comparison with other forms of oppression, such as sexism and racism. While both entail oppressive activities, both are maintained by way of a set of beliefs, as racist and sexist ideas lead to racist and sexist acts. Overcoming such ideas is therefore the path towards overcoming their practice. As such, the narrative we have seen with Kierkegaard, a narrative in which we overcome our subservient relationship to the realm of ideas, is a narrative that ends these practices of oppression, as it is a narrative in which such beliefs are overcome. However, as Marx argues, economic exploitation is not maintained by way of an ideology of capitalism, but by its practice. In fact, as Marx further argues, for all the variety of ideological veils behind which economic exploitation hides, it stands revealed with a historically unprecedented starkness. As a purchaser of wage-labor, when I engage in the activity of purchasing labor, this activity does not depend on particular thoughts I have about my workers, it depends on the fact that this is the way in which my society sustains itself. I might think highly of my workers, I might even be generous in my treatment of them, but so long as I am buying their labor, I am producing profit at their expense.

What all of this means is that I might feel *innocent*, as I do not harbor any particular prejudice against others. Moreover, I might even have engaged in the difficult struggle of

overcoming the prejudices into which my society has socialized me. Yet, as Marx argues, to truly see our guilt, to truly see how we may be complicit in oppression, we need not look at the ideas we have about others, but instead, to the activities in which we engage, activities that might only make sense when contextualized in terms of a social totality. In other words, my own private act of going to work might appear quite different than it actually is, if seen in a broader context. As most of us tend to do, we think of our work in terms of the specific activity in which we engage, an activity that often has socially redeemable content to it, and this content might make it seem as if all we are engaged in is that socially redeemable job. However, this is to focus on the content, rather than the form, of our activity; yet this form is inseparable from the content. If we look at the form, we might see that we are complicit in acts that are only apparent after we have engaged in a positive project of theorizing our social world. This is the project towards which Kierkegaard's work truly leads, as it presents an added layer of guilt—an added level of activity in which we participate—atop those Kierkegaard himself exposed. Kierkegaard did not see this dimension of the material world, but his understanding that this world is where our actions truly lie, regardless of the veils beneath which they hide, anchors Marx's very analysis. Kierkegaard brings us to the world, and Marx explains it.

As Kierkegaard helps reveal, our activity is not solely understood by its explicit content, but it also needs to be understood in terms of the use towards which it aims. For us, our work is not aimed at the social benefit it provides, it aims at the production of profit. To see this, we need to be able to theorize beyond our private lives, beyond the content of our jobs, to see how our own private activity gains meaning by virtue of the social totality in which it occurs. Just as slavery is not found in the particular job a particular slave happens to have, but in the form of that work, and just as many slaves engage in important and socially beneficial work that might

proffer a legitimate sense of self-worth, the exploitation of capitalism is not found in the particular job we do, but in its form. Yet, to see this form requires an understanding of the social world that only results from positively theorizing about how work is organized, as it cannot be revealed by the individual act of overcoming prejudice. Thinking about our individual lives can help us overcome the socialization that results from oppression, but it is only by understanding oppression as a material, rather than intellectual, practice, that we might learn the scale of the forces opposed to human dignity—forces that just as easily oppress the prejudiced as the unprejudiced.

Finally, these debates have taken on urgency recently, as postmodernism's concern with a recognition of diversity has superseded a materialist interest in class. While recognition is certainly important, as the recognition of being loved is essential for the individual act of self-appropriation, a politics that begins and ends with recognition fails to understand the need to understand oppression as a material practice, rather than one that exists by way of our self-consciousness. As the present work has argued, the type of recognition we find in Kierkegaard is an essential ingredient of freedom, which then needs to be situated in a world in which oppression is not seen as depending on what we think of one another, but on what we do. While the present work aims to demonstrate why Marx's material political analysis is a necessary complement to Kierkegaard, and why this complement is a fuller expression of the ethical dimension of that freedom, it should be easy to see how Kierkegaard might lend himself to postmodern analysis, rather than to material analysis. With the rise of postmodernism, we might say that we have lived through a Kierkegaardian era.

Given the preoccupation with recognition in recent decades, as postmodernism's preoccupation with prejudice has trumped an interest in class, it is perhaps little surprise that a

substantial increase in inequality has corresponded to the Left's belief that oppression is not materially based. Perhaps the best history of this trend is David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, as it demonstrates the limits of postmodern analysis, while further demonstrating how easily this discourse lends itself to the type of positivist apologetics latent in Rousseau's criticism of a belief in equality, or Marx's same criticism that followed almost a century later.<sup>40</sup> Beyond Harvey's work, we find both Walter Benn Michaels and Nancy Fraser making the argument for a return to a material analysis of class, and doing so with an acute awareness of the contemporary state of political analysis. Of these two, Michaels is most forceful in his criticism of the politics of recognition, ultimately finding little room for it in any project of emancipation. This is no doubt an overcorrection for a Left project long derailed, but it does lead to compelling formulations of why class needs to be the overarching concern for any project of sociopolitical emancipation. According to Michaels:

The difference between these problematics is, as we used to say, essential, since insofar as exploitation is at the core of class difference, class difference is ineluctably linked to inequality, where cultural difference, of course, is not. Cultures, in theory if not always in practice, are equal; classes, in theory and in practice, are not. From this standpoint, the rise of culture, or of the so-called new social movements, or of the problem of identities and identification, or—more generally—of the problem of the subject has functioned as the Left's way of learning to live with inequality.<sup>41</sup>

Updating an argument we first saw with Rousseau, and then again with Marx, Michaels recognizes that the “cultural turn” has led to a diminished Left, one that serves as a rationalization for inequality.<sup>42</sup> Treating class as if it were a matter of identity and not action, leads to a politics in which recognition of diversity supersedes an acknowledgement that the

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<sup>40</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the end of history* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). 17.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How we learned to love identity and ignore inequality* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006). 7.

problem of class is not recognition, but exploitation, and the inequality it creates. As Michaels argues, these two political outlooks have fundamentally different approaches to difference: the politics of recognition leads to an *appreciation* of cultural difference, whereas the politics of class leads to an *elimination* of class difference.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, treating class as if it were culture is little more than a sophisticated intellectual rationalization, one that demonstrates, for all of postmodernism's treatment of abstract philosophical argument as anathema, unless it is anchored to a material analysis, its discourse remains hopelessly lost in the clouds.

This insight has led to Michaels' vilification among many on the Left. Hardly blind to the ways in which racism and sexism can act as tools for the creation and perpetuation of inequality, Michaels' recognizes that an antiracist and antisexist policy that is not tied to a class politics does not necessarily diminish inequality, it simply redistributes it in a race and gender blind way. As Michael's notes, given the choice between recognizing the diversity of its employees, and paying them more, the former option is a much easier choice for corporate managers to make—and reflects the recent burgeoning interest in promoting a corporate culture of diversity.<sup>44</sup> But the underlying issue of class is inequality, and to the extent that sexism and racism do exist, Michaels' wants us to see them also as matters of class. There is nothing inherently unequal about any gender or race (the latter of which, Michaels rightly argues, does not really exist);<sup>45</sup> the problem is how we treat people we identify in a particular way, as we use these "identities" to distribute inequality—both economic, and otherwise. So, Michaels' insistence on class is a way of refocusing attention away from matters of identity recognition, identities that in some sense do not really exist (unless we are willing to engage in essentialist arguments), and towards the actual behaviors they often justify. There is something very Kierkegaardian in Michaels'

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 12-13, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 21-49.

approach, for all his insistence on a material analysis, as the starkness of his suggestions are pitched towards an audience that needs a radical corrective. Michaels, in a very real sense, is saying what Left intellectuals most need to hear.

As for Nancy Fraser, she is more concerned with the ways in which identity and class interrelate, as “capitalist societies are permeated by ideologies,” but she also realizes that “their effects are mediated by the operation of impersonal system mechanisms, which prioritize maximization of corporate profit,” so that “[o]nly an approach that theorizes the imbrication of recognition and distribution can adequately theorize those processes.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, the politics of recognition fail to account for the impersonal mechanisms of capitalism, and the ineluctable force they exert on social life. Yet, ideologies permeate and interact with these mechanisms, structuring how they unfold, so that only by accounting for their interaction can a fuller picture of global social structures be rendered. As she writes:

What, then, represents a better approach? All the considerations marshaled here point in a single direction, to a two-dimensional framework that encompasses both recognition and distribution. Avoiding not only vulgar economism but also reductive culturalism, such a framework would not reduce capitalist society to a network of recognition relations. To understand that society, rather, it would analyze the interplay of two distinct ordering dimensions, mutually irreducible but practically intertwined: an economic dimension, associated with marketized interaction, and a cultural dimension, associated with value-regulated interaction.<sup>47</sup>

Fraser’s concern is to recognize the often mutually reinforcing role that ideology continues to play in solidifying the material nature of economics, as both ideology and class present impediments to freedom. Class analysis without an understanding of the subjective dimensions of freedom implied by recognition, lend themselves to “vulgar economism,” while focusing

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<sup>46</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Distorted Beyond All Recognition: A Rejoinder to Axel Honneth," in *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Debate* (New York, NY: Verso, 2003), 214-15.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

solely on subjective dimensions without an understanding of the material reality that structures our individual lives leads to a “cultural reductivism.”

As the present work has demonstrated, it is freedom that anchors the thought of Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard, providing the value through which their work should be read. It is through freedom that questions of religion and secularity lose their antagonism, and it is through freedom that we can also synthesize concerns with subjectivity as the locus of oppression with an understanding of the objective, material dimensions of oppression. Individual emancipation without a concern for sociopolitical revolution is an unfinished project that threatens to devolve into an apologetics for oppression; material sociopolitical analysis that fails to root itself in the fundamental importance of individual freedom is a project without content, one that threatens to become as oppressive as that which it seeks to replace. This dialectic, a dialectic of radical freedom, was born in the contemporaneous work of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx. More importantly, it lives on in what Sartre recognizes as “the tasks that await us.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 98.

## **Conclusion: *Of Love and Revolution***

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"  
(Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream*)

Writing from jail, and smuggling his words out on pieces of discarded newspaper, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. composed his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Responding to incrementalist clergy who preferred legal over direct action, and who saw Dr. King's political demonstrations as themselves the disruption, he urged his audience to look beyond a "superficial" social analysis that painted him as the problem, and towards the "underlying causes," for then they would understand that he had "no alternative."<sup>1</sup> Eloquently detailing the political history that led to the point of direct action, Dr. King explains why demonstrations have become necessary, as otherwise he knows that no change will come. Moreover, rather than criticizing him for his demonstrations, he would have preferred that these clergy members "had commended" the demonstrators "for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation."<sup>2</sup> Citing the biblical prophets and the Apostle Paul as forebears, Dr. King states that he is in Birmingham because, like his

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, NY: Signet Classic, 1992), 65-66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

predecessors before him, he is “compelled to carry the gospel of freedom.”<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this work has been to philosophically articulate this gospel of freedom.

Dr. King’s appeal—his “gospel of freedom”—rests on two interrelated points. First, it relies on a sense of love that he believes lies at the heart of Christianity, and which unites all humankind, for “Jesus [was] an extremist in love.”<sup>4</sup> He writes of what follows from this:

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea.<sup>5</sup>

As King argues, bonds of community unite us all, so that an attack on one part is an attack on the whole. He cannot sit idly by and watch injustice unfold, for to do so would be an abdication of that part of himself through which he relates to others; it would be an abdication of his love. In writing to the clergy who denounced his direct action, King makes an appeal to their love, he asks them to acknowledge its’ “higher moral law,” as this higher law entails “a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.”<sup>6</sup> While the clergy members to which he wrote might not have been swayed, many among the larger audience likely were. And in being so swayed, they were taking a step in the direction of being better, and freer, human beings.

However, King’s appeal is not solely a spiritual appeal to our better nature; it is also a sociopolitical argument. *Loving freedom* might give us the ethical commitment to break unjust laws—doing so “openly” and “lovingly”<sup>7</sup>—but identifying them is not always easy, nor is determining how to act. Direct action is necessary because of the specific nature of Jim Crow,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 70-72.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 72.

because of the specific events in Alabama that brought him from Georgia, and because of Dr. King's astute analysis as to the path towards justice. Love brings us to the world—a world comprised of other individuals—but there is little in love itself that will help with *this* analysis, outside of an ability to recognize injustice, and a commitment to its eradication. Love is not enough—it also requires thought and action. This is the story of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx.

Martin Luther King, Jr. might seem a far cry from the philosophical battles of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, but he is not. Not only does he embody the ethical commitment to fighting injustice that this work has articulated, coupled with an acute mind for analyzing their systematic nature, but his intellectual development traces a direct lineage back to Kierkegaard himself—and also, less pronouncedly, to Marx. It is little secret that in addition to being influenced by the African-American religious tradition in which he was raised, he was also deeply influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Tillich and Niebuhr were themselves indebted to the theological revival initiated by Karl Barth, a revival in which Søren Kierkegaard played a foundational role. Moreover, both Niebuhr and Tillich were also indebted to Marx, and to socialism more generally, so that Dr. King was situated precisely at the nexus of Kierkegaard and Marx. Granted, this was one or two steps removed, but his intellectual development took place in a world permeated by their thought. In fact, towards the end of his life, Dr. King became increasingly radicalized as he shifted his focus towards opposing Viet Nam and to combatting poverty, in an anti-imperial and anti-capital direction that saw him drawing in more of what we might call Marx's influence.

While we should not overstate the influence of Kierkegaard and Marx as a matter of intellectual history, as a lived embodiment of much of what this work has argued, it is hard to

find a better example than Dr. King. Given that Marx and Kierkegaard were both concerned with the lived reality of the truth of freedom, rather than its philosophical transmission, we might say that they would both have preferred the lineage of King to that of academic philosophers. Their thought was a thought of praxis; it took place in Copenhagen's streets, Europe's workers' associations, and Dr. King's Birmingham. As both Kierkegaard and Marx knew, the challenge of justice was not the challenge of intellectually apprehending justice; the challenge was to live it. And Dr. King lived justice.

This work began by arguing that a useful hermeneutic for understanding the intellectual developments of the last hundred years was to see them as a matter of 19<sup>th</sup> century thought reinterpreted through the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As acknowledged in the introduction, this is an oversimplification of a complex lineage of thought, but it is a useful oversimplification for reclaiming something of the continuity of Western thought—and something of its promise. For all the political ruptures through which we have lived, and for all the intellectual revolutions that have sought to make sense of them, *we* have not changed very much. We have seen atrocities that make the wildest prophecies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seem tepid by comparison, we have lived through horrors that have seemingly upended everything we once thought of as true, yet ultimately, we continue to remain responsible for it all. And so, if we have examples that seem to warrant the very best of our radical critiques, we also have examples, like Dr. King, that warrant the more difficult challenge of thinking, and becoming, freedom. The unimaginable crimes through which we have lived are not reason to give up on freedom, they are examples of the challenges of responsibility.

For all the fragmentation through which we have lived, we continue to live in the shadow of Hegel. The rational development of history might depend much more on our free creation of a

rational future than it does on a natural unfolding of an idea, and this is certainly for the better, but just as the intellectual developments of the past century reflect our attempt to make sense of, and hopefully, become responsible for, its events, so too of our future. Our ideas reflect the reality through which we live, but not because they determine it, but because they reflect our attempts to understand what it is we have done. We live our lives *ex post facto*; forever trying to accept responsibility for what our freedom has only now just done. And so, we live with guilt, however unacknowledged it might be. This is Kierkegaard's leap. Rather than living our lives after the fact, we must leap into the present, we must leap into freedom.

However, as Marx understood it, history might be a history of freedom, a history Kierkegaard captures by arguing that “[e]very cause ends in a freely acting cause,”<sup>8</sup> but history is not only the history of my freedom, it is the history of your freedom too. And that history, a history of collective *ir*responsibility, presents problems that a personal appropriation of freedom cannot solve. While he did not foresee the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marx did recognize how awesome and terrifying our freedom could be, as it was newly empowered by the bourgeoisie and its technological advances. For Marx, “[m]odern bourgeois society ... is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.”<sup>9</sup> *This* is the ethical and political challenge of our era. What does our responsibility dictate when confronted with previously unimaginable power? Yet, this has always been the challenge—if, through our irresponsible failure to appropriate freedom, we are forever confronted with a new set of horrors we only later realize we are capable of committing, as “the

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<sup>8</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 06, Marx and Engels: 1845-1848* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 489.

owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.”<sup>10</sup> It is a challenge answered by those like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., those who are explained by Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx, and those of whom George Eliot wrote that “... the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”<sup>11</sup> We might hope that they are less hidden in the future.

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<sup>10</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Preface.

<sup>11</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 1991). 889.

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