

The Character of Time

Contemporary existentialism in its many varieties has given expression to a philosophy of human finitude in which the concept of temporality is central. Martin Heidegger, in *Sein und Zeit*, presents a phenomenological analysis of existence in which the structures of human being (*Dasein*) are rooted in the temporal modes of pastness, presence, and futurity. Existence is understood as a dynamic process of arriving from a past, moving into a future, and deciding in the present in the light of future possibilities. Time is the pivotal category in Heidegger's existential analysis. The time-consciousness found in Heidegger's philosophy (and in that of his contemporaries, Jaspers and Sartre) was already part and parcel of the existential reflections of the Danish existentialist, Søren Kierkegaard. Although Kierkegaard does not systematically develop a theory of human time as does Heidegger, his writings suggest basically the same existential approach.

Kierkegaard's concern, as that of Heidegger, is with the time of immediate experience—time as encountered by the concretely existing subject. This immediately experienced time, Kierkegaard argues, must clearly and consistently be differentiated from an abstract, objective, measured time which has to be spatialized in order to be known. The time of immediate experience is falsified if it is visualized abstractly in terms of a spatiotemporal coordinate. Time, thus

understood, is transformed into a continuing succession of nows or temporal instants coordinated with spatial points. Commonly we think of time as such a succession, says Kierkegaard. We view it as a process of "going-by," which may properly be understood as a definition of time in *general*. But this is not the *particular* time which the self experiences in its concrete immediacy. By defining time as a general process or continuing infinite succession, we already separate time into discrete units of past, present, and future, which simply become an infinite succession of nows succeeding each other in a definite order of coming to be and passing away. But such a definition of time is foreign to immediate experience. The time of immediate experience has in itself no discrete, spatialized succession of nows. When we define time, says Kierkegaard, "it seems plausible to define it also as the present, the past, and the future. However, this distinction is incorrect, if one means by it that this is implied in time itself."¹

We tend to divide time into a series of discrete units or nows because we think of time abstractly and view it in terms of a visual representation in such a way that time becomes identified with a species of spatial extensiveness. The moments of time are thus understood as having the same character as spatial entities on a successive continuum of points. Time and space become identified. "For abstract thinking time and space are absolutely identical (*nacheinander* and *nebeneinander*), and they become so for visual representation."² But the time of immediate experience is not an abstractly visualized and spatialized time. Human time is experienced concretely in the subjective reflections of the existing individual. "If one thinks it possible to maintain this division, it is because we *spatialize* a moment, but thereby the infinite succession is brought to a standstill, and that is because one introduces a visual representation, visualizing time instead of thinking it."³

Existentially understood, time is a unity in which the modes of futurity, pastness, and presence are experienced in their relevance to human purpose and decision. The self's primordial awareness of time is not an awareness of a

succession of discrete nows, but an awareness of a past held in memory and a future projected in anticipation. The past is not a now which has gone by and is *no longer* relevant to my present existence, nor is the future a coming now which is *not yet* relevant to my present existence. Both the past and the future have relevance for my existential immediacy. This interrelatedness of the past and future with the present is the focus of an intricate analysis in *Either/Or*, where Kierkegaard discusses human time in connection with Hegel's teaching on the unhappy consciousness. Hegel had already taught that the unhappy person is a person who is never present to himself, being absent from himself either in the past or in the future. Hegel was right in thus circumscribing the realm of the unhappy consciousness, says Kierkegaard, but he failed to see that the phenomenon must be understood existentially rather than abstractly. Whereas Hegel "beheld the kingdom from far off," Kierkegaard considers himself a native inhabitant of the realm.

One type of unhappiness is when the individual is absent from himself not only with respect to the present but also with respect to the future. He has nothing for which to hope. The future with its expanding range of possibilities is a threat rather than a solace for his happiness. Another type of unhappiness is when the individual is absent from himself in memory. He cannot find himself in his past. His past weighs on him with its neglected and unfulfilled possibilities. This type of unhappy consciousness is unhappy because it experiences the tragic nonfulfillment of its past. The unhappy consciousness is the consciousness which is lost to itself either in memory or in hope. For a unified consciousness to be achieved, or for the self truly to find its authentic self, the reality of both the future and the past must be acknowledged and appropriated in their unified relevance. "In order that the man of hope may be able to find himself in the future, the future must have reality, or, rather, it must have reality for him; in order that the man of memory may find himself in the past, the past must have had reality for him."⁴ In the unified consciousness the reality of the future and the past is maintained, and time is experienced as an interrelated

unity. Futurity, pastness, and presence are constitutive elements or moments of selfhood as such. Time as thus experienced is not a continuum of nows. The modes of time (future, past, and present), properly understood, are not discrete and successive nows, but are directions of selfhood out of which and into which the self lives. Kierkegaard sees clearly, however, that a harmonious or unified consciousness in which the temporal directions of selfhood are perfectly integrated is not an empirical possibility. On this point he is still in agreement with the early Hegel. Human history is not the domain of the happy consciousness.

In the interrelated complex of future, past, and present, the future is given priority in Kierkegaard's existential understanding of time. "In a certain sense the future signifies more than the present and the past; for the future is in a sense the whole of which the past is a part, and in a sense the future may signify the whole."⁵ The self in its immediate experience of time becomes conscious first of the future. Self-awareness and awareness of the future are correlated phenomena. The past does not somehow precede the future.⁶ In our immediate awareness the future is always present, relating itself to the past. The existing self "exists" primarily into the future. This primal significance of the future, argues Kierkegaard, never received proper recognition by the Greeks. Inasmuch as the Greeks defined time at all, it was time as time past. They defined time without "relation to the present and the future, but defining it, like the definition of time in general, as a going by."⁷ The philosophical basis for this understanding of time as time past resides in Plato's doctrine of recollection. Kierkegaard, as we shall see later, replaces Plato's category of recollection with the category of repetition.

The mode of futurity at once characterizes the self as possibility and defines it as finite freedom. "The possible corresponds precisely to the future. For freedom the possible is the future; and for time the future is the possible."⁸ Openness for a future which encompasses its relevant possibilities characterizes the self as finite freedom. In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard defines the self as freedom in terms of the polar structures of possibility and necessity.

"The self is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical element in the terms possibility and necessity."⁹ The self as possibility is rooted in the future. But the self is also necessity, which is that structural element in the self which accounts for the self's actualized and "given" status. As necessity, the self is already given to itself in its past decisions, past environmental and social influences—in short, given to itself in its past history. The necessity of the self is its past through which it has been shaped and given form. As possibility is primarily rooted in futurity, so necessity is primarily rooted in pastness. The self as a synthesis of possibility and necessity is a synthesis of futurity and pastness.

An existential interpretation of time gives priority to the future but also affirms the reality of the past. The past, existentially understood, is not a series of discrete nows which have gone by and passed out of reality. I can also be related to my past in terms of possibility. The past holds possibilities which may be repeated in the future. "The past of which I am supposed to be in dread must stand in a relation of possibility to me. If I am in dread of a past misfortune, this is not insofar as it is past, but insofar as it may be repeated, i.e., become future."¹⁰ Here the past and future are inseparably related as directions of selfhood. The past as the field of my actualized possibilities constitutes the necessity of my nature. But this necessity is not irrevocably fixed. My past is never completely finished. It always holds possibilities which may be repeated in the future. If I am in dread of a past fault, says Kierkegaard, this does not mean that the fault is outside of my existential reality because it is past. The fault remains as a repeatable possibility in my future.

Time and Eternity

As the self is a synthesis of possibility (futurity) and necessity (pastness), so also it must be understood as a synthesis of time and eternity. Human time or the time of immediate experience, for Kierkegaard, can be properly understood only in light of its relation to the eternal. The

self is a creature of time but is also conscious of itself as a participant in eternity. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* this unity of the temporal and the eternal in human existence is expressed by Kierkegaard in an allegory which reminds one of the allegory of the charioteer in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Kierkegaard presents an image of two horses hitched to a wagon. One is a winged-horse (Pegasus) and the other is a worn-out jade. The two horses are driven by a driver. The meaning of the allegory is clearly stated. "Eternity is the winged horse, infinitely fast, and time is a worn-out jade; the existing individual is the driver."¹¹ Man is a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.

Eternity in Kierkegaard's existentialism is understood neither as unending or infinite time nor as dialectical timelessness. *Eternity is a qualification of existence which transfigures the temporality of the self in the moment of decision.* Kierkegaard explicitly rejects eternity understood as unending time—what Hegel had called "bad infinity." On this point Kierkegaard is at one with Hegel. But he is equally critical of Hegel's explanation of eternity in terms of a dialectical timelessness in which eternity is simply annulled (*aufgehoben*) temporal succession. In his penchant for mediation, Hegel mediated the eternal and the temporal and hence lost both. Already in Plato's abstract conception of the instant, says Kierkegaard, we find the seeds of Hegel's doctrine of mediation. In Plato's dialogue *The Parmenides*, the instant becomes the category of transition which lies between movement and rest, somehow accounts for their passage, but does not itself occupy any time. The instant remains a "mute abstraction" which is itself exempt from temporality. "The instant appears now to be that strange being. . . which lies between movement and repose, without occupying any time; and to this and out of this 'the moving' passes ever into rest, and 'the reposing' into movement. The instant therefore becomes the general category of transition. . . but nevertheless the instant remains a mute abstraction."¹² The instant, for Plato, remains outside of time and is itself immune to transition. In another passage of the dialogue, continues Kierkegaard, we become aware of the

consequences of viewing the instant as such an abstraction. It becomes identified with the eternal. The instant as the present "now" lies between the "was" and the "will be" as the eternal present. It becomes neither "older nor younger," but remains eternally the same.

It is this abstract way of viewing the instant that has ushered in the profound confusion of modern philosophy (which for Kierkegaard was virtually identified with Hegelianism). In modern philosophy "the abstraction culminates in 'pure being,' but pure being is the most abstract expression for eternity, and in turn, like 'nothing,' it is the instant." This "dialectical witchcraft," he continues, makes "eternity and the instant signify the same thing."¹³ But eternity and the instant are for Kierkegaard genuine opposites, indicative of an absolute qualitative distinction.¹⁴ The instant is not some strange eternal entity, exempt from the temporal process of becoming, which has the status of a timeless now. The instant understood concretely rather than abstractly remains within the temporal order and becomes the opportune moment for the appearance of the eternal. "The instant is that ambiguous moment in which time and eternity touch one another, thereby positing *the temporal*, where time is constantly intersecting eternity and eternity constantly permeating time."¹⁵ But if there is an absolute qualitative distinction between the temporal and the eternal, then the advent of the eternal in time can be understood only in terms of a paradox. This paradox of the eternal touching or intersecting time in the instant has its fullest expression in Christ as the "Supreme Paradox" or the "Fullness of Time." "The concept around which everything turns in Christianity, the concept which makes all things new, is the fullness of time, is the instant as eternity, and yet this eternity is at once the future and the past."¹⁶ Only this paradox can explain the contradiction of how an eternal happiness is based upon something historical.

The temporal and eternal are not mediated. The eternal remains qualitatively distinct from the temporal, but enters the temporal in the instant as the opportune moment for decision. The relation of time and eternity, for Kierkegaard, is understood existentially. Eternity is a qualification of

temporal existence. The eternal enters time in the context of historical decision.

Contemporaneity, Repetition, and the Moment

The notions of contemporaneity, repetition, and the moment—all central categories in Kierkegaard's thought—have already been suggested in the preceding analysis. We will now attempt to discern their particular significance for his existential view of time. The notion of contemporaneity constitutes an explicit rejection of the externalization and objectivization of the past in existential time. For objectively measured and spatialized world time, the past becomes a series of objectivized nows which in the order of succession have gone over into a fixed and irrevocable past. For existential or human time, the past is not a series of objectivized and fixed nows which have gone by and are no longer real; the past always retains a relationship of contemporaneity to the present. Past events are contemporaneous in that they continue as present possibilities. The past is held in memory not as a completed set of circumstances but as the condition for present action.

The meaning of contemporaneity is discussed by Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Fragments* in connection with the problem of the contemporary disciple. There is no disciple at second hand. Every disciple is contemporaneous with the Absolute which has manifested itself in time. "When the believer is the believer and knows God through having received the condition from God himself, every successor must receive the condition from God himself in precisely the same sense, and cannot receive it at second hand; for, if he did, this second hand would have to be the hand of God himself, and in that case there is no question of a second hand. But a successor who receives the condition from God himself is a contemporary, a real contemporary; a privilege enjoyed only by the believer but also enjoyed by every believer."¹⁷ Basically the same point is expressed in *Training in Christianity*. Here the Christian is defined as one who becomes contemporaneous

with Christ. The significance of the past does not reside in an objectivized past. The objective historical incidents of world time which have occurred during the intervening years are of little importance. The cardinal significance of the Christ-event is that it is a contemporaneous reality in the Christian's personal decision. Christ's coming is not to be identified with an objectivized and fixed historical incident. Rather it expresses a repeatable possibility. Christ "comes again" in each responsible decision.

Contemporaneity is a necessary condition for a doctrine of forgiveness. The melancholy man is in a state of melancholy because he is unable to forget his guilt. It has become part of his memory and weighs down upon his past as a *character indelibilis*. But this past is not irrevocably fixed. When the melancholy man becomes a believer, he still remembers his guilt—but now he remembers it *as forgiven*. The guilt is still there, written into his past, but a new determinant is now added which transforms the meaning of his past—the determinant of forgiveness. He now moves in a new stage of existence. He remembers his guilt not as a burden but as forgiven.¹⁸

The category of repetition, like that of contemporaneity, occupies a central place in Kierkegaard's reflections on time. In his book entitled *Repetition*, he proclaims this category as the new category which needs to be brought to light. As the Greeks "taught that all knowledge is recollection, so will modern philosophy teach that the whole of life is repetition." Repetition as the new category is "the interest of metaphysics," the "solution in every ethical view," and the "*conditio sine qua non* of every dogmatic problem."¹⁹

The metaphysical import of the category resides in its explanation of the relation between the Eleatic school and Heraclitus on the problem of becoming or the problem of permanence and change. Only through the employment of the category of repetition can we account for becoming. The Greek concept of recollection was never able to explain this most basic fact of reality. Recollection is always directed backwards and, consequently, life is understood only in terms of the past. Repetition, on the other hand, is directed toward

the future. It understands life as being "recollected forwards." When the Greeks advanced their doctrine of recollection, they simply asserted that "all that is has been." When Kierkegaard describes life as repetition, he affirms that "existence which has been now becomes."²⁰ It is in this sense that the category of repetition explains the fundamental fact of becoming. The existing self is that which it has been (necessity) and becomes that which it is not yet (possibility). Repetition accounts for this basic phenomenon of existence.

As the Greeks were unable to explain becoming or movement with their category of recollection, so also Hegel's logical categories of mediation and reconciliation are irreparably poverty-stricken in coping with this basic datum of reality. Logic cannot admit of movement because logical entities are simply states of being. They are determinations of essence which are necessary and given, and, hence, cannot account for something becoming that which it is not yet.²¹ Consequently, everything that Hegel has to say about becoming and movement in his *Science of Logic* is illusory. He interprets reality in terms of a timeless, rational process in which a logical necessity rules. Becoming is simply a becoming in pure thought whereby opposites are posited and combined into higher unities. But in this timeless and logical becoming of pure thought the concrete historical becoming of the existing self has been lost. Hegel's system lacks the category of repetition which alone can account for the historical movement of the self toward its future possibilities. On this point Kierkegaard chooses Aristotle over Hegel. "When Aristotle says that the transition from possibility to actuality is a *κισησιζ*, this is not to be understood logically but with reference to the historical freedom."²²

Repetition figures not only as the primary category for metaphysics, but also as the solution for ethics and dogmatics. Through repetition past possibilities of action became future possibilities for the ethically existing subject and are repeated in the moment of decision. The act of choosing is the fullest expression of the ethical, for it is in the act of choice that the self achieves its unity and integrity. Through repetition the "discord in my nature is resolved, I am again unified."²³ In

the act of repeating I take up my past, project it as a future possibility, and choose it in the opportune moment. It is also at this point that we see the significance of the category of repetition for dogmatics. Through repetition the believer receives the gift of God in a new immediacy. Job had lost everything to the point of despair. Hope was about to vanish and despair conquer. But at that very point where human understanding pronounced it impossible, Job received double. "Job is blessed and has received everything *double*. This is what is called *repetition*."²⁴

The significance of the moment in Kierkegaard's thought has already become apparent. It is in the moment that the eternal enters time and it is in the moment that the self unifies and integrates itself in the act of choosing. Throughout the whole of Kierkegaard's existential reflections on time the moment has this twofold significance. It denotes the opportune time for God's revelation of himself, and provides the condition for the unification of the temporal directions of selfhood in the act of decision.

The moment is the time for decision. This decision receives its proper expression only in the ethico-religious stage of existence. Although the aesthete experiences the moment in the aesthetic stage, he experiences it unauthentically. The romantic lover lives in the moment but he can only experience it once, and he experiences it in an abstraction from existence. The moment for him is simply an erotic present which functions as a discrete objectivized now. Romantic love, exemplified in the aesthetic stage, is contrasted with conjugal love, which characterizes the ethical stage. In romantic love everything is concentrated in the moment but is not repeated. Conjugal love, on the other hand, strives for repetition. The "ideal husband is not one who is such once in his life but one who every day is such."²⁵ The central determinant in the ethical stage is resolute choice. The romantic lover experiments with love but does not commit himself in marriage. The married man, exemplifying ethical existence, has made a commitment through resolute choice and has thus liberated himself from a dispersion in the immediacy of the present. Decision unifies and centralizes the self. The aesthete is always "eccentric"

in that he has his center in the periphery which means that he has lost his centeredness and thus lost himself. The ethical man has his center within himself. The aesthete loses himself in the erotic present, retreating from his future and forgetting his past. The ethical man lives in anticipation and memory, projecting his future and repeating his past. He is a unified self because he holds together his future and his past in the moment of decision.

The Time of Internal History

As a temporal being always in the process of becoming, the existing subject has a personal history. This personal history constitutes its very being. Remembering a past and anticipating a future, the self is indelibly historical. It is this personal history which distinguishes the self from an object of nature. Nature is exempt from the temporal and historical becoming which characterizes the existing self, and it is this which accounts for the security of nature. "Nature's security is due to the fact that time has no significance for it."²⁶ To be sure, objects of nature come to be in time and are qualified by the temporal process with respect to before and after, but this qualification is that of an objectively measured and spatialized world time rather than existential or human time.²⁷ Natural objects are in time; the human self has time. The time of nature is time objectively measured in terms of spatial coordinates. The time of human existence is time historically lived in immediate experience. Hence, properly understood, the self has a *history* rather than a nature.

Not only is it necessary to distinguish between history and nature, but one must also distinguish between two kinds of history. "As it is related to the individual life, history is of two kinds: external and internal."²⁸ The basic distinction of content involved is that external history is history as observed from the outside, or chronological history, which becomes the subject matter for historiography. Internal or inward history is history as experienced by the existing individual or history as lived and apprehended from within.

To illustrate the distinction between the two histories, Kierkegaard draws up the image of a knight who has fallen in love with a princess. To possess his love the knight slays five wild boars, four dragons, and delivers three princes who are brothers of the princess whom he loves. For external history the significance of the adventure resides in the external objective incidents which culminate in the knight's conquest of his beloved. For internal history the significance of the adventure turns on the lived experience of the knight as he is inwardly acquiring his possession. The touchstone of internal history is involvement and inwardness in which each moment of time takes on existential relevance.²⁹

The distinction between external and internal history is also expressed in Frater Taciturnus' psychological experiment entitled, "Guilty?/Not Guilty?," which appears in *Stages on Life's Way*. Understood in terms of external history alone, the lover who breaks the engagement with his beloved is judged as being guilty of infidelity. Viewed externally, the breaking of the engagement gives proof that he never loved her; or, if indeed he loved her once, he is now incapable of repeating the moment. Understood from the standpoint of internal history, however, we find that he breaks the engagement and leaves her precisely because he loves her. Because of his melancholic spirit he knows that he could never provide her with the happiness which she so innocently desires. Hence, he terminates the engagement but his love remains, and he constantly strives to repeat this love inwardly. The verdict of internal history is that he is not guilty.³⁰

The relation of Kierkegaard's distinction between external and internal history to his existential view of time has already become apparent. External history is based on the spatialized and measured time of nature which is understood as a succession of discrete nows. External events happening in time are affirmed to embody full reality in the spatial present. In such a view the moment passes and lapses into an objectivised past and loses its contemporaneity or existential significance. Internal history, on the other hand, is rooted in existential time in which the three modes of time as given in immediate experience are held in an integrated

unity. The past is never simply past. It holds future possibilities which can be repeated in the authentic moment. Past history becomes contemporaneous in the act of repetition and is never past in the sense of being a completed or finished series of nows. In its historical existence the self lives out of the past and into the future, for the past is always a future possibility. In this temporal and historical projectedness it unifies itself by appropriating its past and future possibilities in the moment of decision.