

Peter F. Drucker, 1933:

The Unfashionable Kierkegaard

The Kierkegaard boom of the last few years is showing the first signs of fatigue. For Kierkegaard's sake I hope it will burst soon. The Kierkegaard of the literary boom is a fellow wit and fellow modern, distinguished from the other members of the smart set mainly by his having lived a hundred years earlier. But this Kierkegaard of the psychologists, existentialists and assorted ex-Marxists bears hardly any resemblance to the real Kierkegaard who cared nothing for psychology or dialectics (save to show them to be inadequate and irrelevant) but concerned himself solely with religious experience. And it is this real Kierkegaard who is meaningful for the modern world in its agony. We have neither Saint nor Poet to make whole the shards of our experience; in Kierkegaard we have at least a prophet.

Like all religious thinkers, Kierkegaard places in the center the question: How is human existence possible? All through the Nineteenth Century this question - which before had been the core of Western thought - was not only highly unfashionable; it seemed senseless and irrelevant. The era was dominated by a radically different question: How is society possible? Rousseau asked it, Hegel asked it, the classical economists asked it. Marx answered it one way, liberal Protestantism another way. But in whatever form it is asked, it must always lead to an answer which denies that human existence is possible except in society.

Rousseau formulated this answer for the whole era of progress: whatever human existence there is; whatever freedom, rights, and duties the individual has; whatever meaning there is in individual life - all is determined by society according to society's objective need of survival. The individual, in other words, is not autonomous. He is determined by society. He is free only in matters that do not matter. He has rights only because society concedes them. He has a will only if he wills what society needs. His life has meaning only in so far as it relates to the social meaning, and as it fulfills itself in fulfilling the objective goal of society. There is, in short, no human existence; there is only social existence. There is no individual; there is only the citizen.

It is hardly possible to exaggerate the differences between Rousseau's "General Will," Hegel's concept of history as the unfolding of ideas, and the Marxian theory of the individual's determination through his objectively given class situation. But they all gave the same answer to the question of human existence: there is no such thing, there is no such question! Ideas and citizens exist, but no human beings. What is possible is merely the realization of ideas in and through society.

For if you start with the question, How is society possible?, without asking at the same time, How is human existence possible?, you arrive inevitably at a negative concept of individual existence and freedom: individual freedom is then what does not disturb society. Thus freedom becomes something that has no function and no autonomous existence of its own. It becomes a convenience, a matter of political strategy, or a demagogue's catch phrase. It is nothing vital.

To define freedom as that which has no function is, however, to deny the existence of freedom. For nothing survives in society save it have a function. But the Nineteenth Century believed itself far too secure in the possession of freedom to realize this. Prevailing opinion failed to see that to deny the relevance of the question, How is human existence possible? is to deny the relevance of human freedom. It actually saw in the question, How is society possible? a key to the gospel of freedom - largely because it aimed at social

equality. And the break of the old fetters of inequality appeared equivalent to the establishment of freedom.

We now have learned that the Nineteenth Century was mistaken. Nazism and Communism are an expensive education - a more expensive education, perhaps, than we can afford; but at least we are learning that we cannot obtain freedom if we confine ourselves to the question, How is society possible? It may be true that human existence in freedom is not possible; which is, indeed, asserted by Hitler and the Communists as well as, less openly, by all those well-meaning "social engineers" who believe in social psychology, propaganda, re-education, or administration, as a means of molding and forming the individual. But at least the question, How is human existence possible? can no longer be regarded as irrelevant. For those who profess to believe in freedom there is no more relevant inquiry.

I am not trying to say that Kierkegaard was the only thinker during the Nineteenth Century who saw the direction in which Rousseau was leading the Western world. There were the Romanticists, some of whom, especially in France, sensed what was coming. There was the futile and suicidal revolt of Nietzsche - a Samson whose gigantic power pulled down nothing but himself. There was above all Balzac, who analyzed a society in which human existence was no longer possible, and who drew an Inferno more terrible than Dante's in that there is not even a Purgatory above it. But although they all asked, How is human existence possible? none but Kierkegaard answered.

2

Kierkegaard's answer is simple: human existence is possible only in tension - in tension between man's simultaneous life as an individual in the spirit and as a citizen in society. Kierkegaard expressed the fundamental tension in a good many ways throughout his writings - most clearly and centrally when he described the tension as the consequence of man's simultaneous existence in eternity and in time. He took his formulation from St. Augustine; it is the intellectual climax of the *Confessions*. But Kierkegaard gave to the antithesis a meaning that goes far beyond St. Augustine's speculation in dialectical logic.

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

In eternity, however, in the realm of the spirit, "in the sight of God," to use one of Kierkegaard's favorite terms, it is society which does not exist. In eternity only the individual does exist. In eternity each individual is unique; he alone, all alone, without neighbors and friends, without wife and children, faces the spirit in himself. In time, in the sphere of society, no man begins at the beginning and ends at the end; each of us receives from those before us the inheritance of the ages, carries it for a tiny instant, to hand it on to those after him. But in the spirit, each man is beginning and end. Nothing his fathers have experienced can be of any help to him. In awful loneliness, in complete, unique singleness, he faces himself as if there were nothing in the entire universe but him and the

spirit in himself. Human existence is thus existence on two levels - existence in tension.

It is impossible even to approximate eternity by piling up time; mere time, even infinitely more time, will still only be time. And it is also impossible to reach time by subdividing eternity; eternity is inseparable and immeasurable. Yet it is only as simultaneous existence on both planes, existence in the spirit and existence in society, that human existence is possible. St. Augustine had said that time is within eternity, created by eternity, suspended in it. But Kierkegaard knew that the two are on different planes, antithetic and incompatible with each other. And he knew it not only by logic and by introspection, but by looking at the realities of nineteenth-century life.

It is this answer that constitutes the essential paradox of religious experience. To say that human existence is possible only in the tension between existence in eternity and existence in time is to say that human existence is only possible if it is impossible: what existence requires on the one level is forbidden by existence on the other. For example, existence in society requires that the society's objective need for survival determine the functions and the actions of the citizen. But existence in the spirit is possible only if there is no law and no rule except that of the person, alone with himself and with his God. Because man must exist in society, there can be no freedom except in matters that do not matter; but because man must exist in the spirit, there can be no social rule, no social constraint in matters that do matter. In society, man exist only as a social being - as husband, father, child, neighbor, fellow citizen. In the spirit, man can exist only personally - alone, isolated, completely walled in by his own consciousness.

Existence in society requires that man accept as real the sphere of social values and beliefs, rewards and punishments. But existence in the spirit, "in the sight of God," requires that man regard all social values and beliefs as pure deception, as vanity, as untrue, invalid, and unreal. Kierkegaard quotes from Luke 14:26, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." The Gospel of Love does not say: *love* these *less* than you love me; it says *hate*.

To say that human existence is possible only as simultaneous existence in time and in eternity is thus to say that it is possible only as one crushed between two irreconcilable ethical absolutes. And that means (if it be more than the mockery of cruel gods): human existence is possible only as existence in tragedy. It is existence in fear and trembling; in dread and anxiety; and, above all, in despair

3

This seems a very gloomy and pessimistic view of human existence, and one hardly worth having. To the Nineteenth Century it appeared as a pathological aberration. But let us see where the optimism of the Nineteenth Century leads to. For it is the analysis of this optimism and the prediction of its ultimate outcome that gave Kierkegaard's work its vision.

It was the very essence of all nineteenth-century creeds that eternity can and will be reached in time; that truth can be established in society and through majority decision; that permanence can be obtained through change. This is the belief in inevitable progress, representative of the Nineteenth Century and its very own contribution to human thought. You may take the creed of progress in its most naive and therefore most engaging form - the confidence that man automatically and through his very sojourn in time becomes better, more nearly perfect, more closely approached the divine. You may take the creed in its more sophisticated form - the dialectic schemes of Hegel and Marx in which truth

unfolds itself in the synthesis between thesis and antithesis, each synthesis becoming in turn the thesis of a new dialectical integration on a higher and more nearly perfect level. Or you may take the creed in the pseudoscientific garb of the theory of evolution through natural selection. In each form it has the same substance: a fervent belief that by piling up time we shall attain eternity; by piling up matter we shall become spirit; by piling up change we shall become permanent; by piling up trial and error we shall find truth. For Kierkegaard, the problem of the final value was one of uncompromising conflict between contradictory qualities. For the Nineteenth Century, the problem was one of quantity.

Where Kierkegaard conceives the human situation as essentially tragic, the Nineteenth Century overflowed with optimism. Not since the year 1000, when all Europe expected the Second Coming, has there been a generation which saw itself so close to the fulfillment of time as did the men of the Nineteenth Century. Certainly there were impurities in the existing fabric of society. But the liberal confidently expected them to be burnt away within a generation or, at the most, within a century by the daily strengthening light of reason. Progress was automatic. And though the forces of darkness and superstition might seem to gain at times, that was only a momentary illusion. "It is always darkest just before dawn" is a truly liberal maxim (and one, incidentally, as false in its literal as in its metaphorical sense). The apogee of this naive optimism was the book which the famous German biologist, Ernst Haeckel, wrote just before the turn of the century - the one which predicted that all the remaining questions would be finally and decisively answered within a generation by Darwinian biology and Newtonian physics. It is perhaps the best commentary on the fate of the nineteenth-century creed that Haeckel's *Weltraetsel* sold by the millions in the generation of our grandfathers (and still hides out on old bookshelves) at the very moment when the universe of Darwinian biology and Newtonian physics was completely disintegrating.

To those whom the optimism of liberalism or Darwinism failed to satisfy, Marx offered the more complicated but also infinitely more profound vision of a millennium that had to come precisely because the world was so corrupt and so imperfect. His was a truly apocalyptic message in which the impossible, the attainment of the permanent perfection of the classless society, is promised precisely because it is impossible. In Marx the nineteenth-century optimism admits defeat - only to use defeat as a proof of certain victory.

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

There has never been a century of Western history so far removed from an awareness of the tragic as the one that bequeathed to us two world wars. Not quite two hundred years ago - in 1755 to be exact - the death of 15,000 people

in the Lisbon earthquake was enough to bring down the tottering structure of traditional Christian belief in Europe. The contemporaries could not make sense of it, they could not reconcile this horror with the concept of an all-merciful God, they could not see any answer to a paradox of catastrophe of such magnitude. For years now we have learned daily of vastly greater destruction, of whole peoples being starved or exterminated. And it is far more difficult to comprehend these manmade catastrophes in terms of our modern rationality than it was for the Eighteenth Century to comprehend the earthquake of Lisbon in terms of traditional Christianity. Yet our own catastrophes make no impression on the optimism of those thousands of committees that are dedicated to the belief that permanent peace and prosperity will "inevitably" issue from today's horrors. To be sure, they are aware of the facts and duly outraged by them. But they refuse to see them as catastrophes. They have been trained to deny the existence of tragedy.

4

Yet however successful the Nineteenth Century was in suppressing the tragic, there is one fact that could not be suppressed, one fact that remains outside of time: death. It is the one fact that cannot be made general but remains unique, the one fact that cannot be socialized but remains personal. The Nineteenth Century made every effort to strip death of its individual, unique, and qualitative aspect. It made death an incident in vital statistics, measurable quantitatively, predictable according to the actuarial laws of probability. It tried to get around death by organizing away its consequences. Life insurance is perhaps the most significant institution of nineteenth-century metaphysics; its proposition "to spread the risks" shows most clearly the nature of the attempt to consider death an incident in human life rather than its termination. And the Nineteenth Century invented spiritualism - an attempt to control life after death by mechanical means.

Yet death persists. Society might make death taboo, might lay down the rule that it is bad manners to speak of death, might substitute "hygienic" cremation for those horribly public funerals, and might call grave diggers morticians. The learned Professor Haeckel might hint broadly that Darwinian biology is just about to make us live permanently; but he did not make good his promise. And so long as death persists, the individual remains with one pole of his existence outside of society and outside of time.

So long as death persists, the optimistic concept of life, the belief that eternity can be reached through time, and that the individual can fulfill himself in society, must have only one outcome - despair. Suddenly every man finds himself facing death; and at this point he is all alone; all individual. If his existence is purely in society, he is lost - for now this existence becomes meaningless. Kierkegaard diagnosed the phenomenon and called it the "despair at not willing to be an individual." Superficially, the individual can recover from this encounter with the problem of existence in eternity; he may even forget it for a while. But he can never regain his confidence in his existence in society. Basically he remains in despair.

Society must make it possible for man to die without despair if it wants him to be able to live exclusively in society. And it can do so in only one way - by making individual life meaningless. If you are nothing but a leaf on the tree of the race, a cell in the body of society, then your death is not really death; you had better call it a process of collective regeneration. But then, of course, your life is not real life either; it is just a functional process within the life of the whole, devoid of any meaning except in terms of the whole. Thus as Kierkegaard foresaw a hundred years ago, an optimism that proclaims human existence as existence in society leads straight to despair. And this despair can

lead only to totalitarianism. For totalitarianism - and that is the trait that distinguishes it so sharply from the tyrannies of the past - is based on the affirmation of the meaninglessness of life and of the nonexistence of the person. Hence the emphasis in the totalitarian creed is not on how to live, but on how to die; to make death bearable, individual life had to be made worthless and meaningless. The optimistic creed, that started out by making life in this world mean everything, led straight to the Nazi glorification of self-immolation as the only act in which man can meaningfully exist. Despair becomes the essence of life itself.

5

The Nineteenth Century arrived at the very point the pagan world had reached in the late Roman Empire. And like antiquity, it tried to find a way out by escaping into the purely ethical - by basing virtue on man's reason. The great philosophical systems of German idealism - above all Kant's, but also Hegel's - dominated the age because they identified reason with virtue and the good life. Ethical culture and that brand of liberal Protestantism that sees in Jesus the "best man that ever lived," with its slogans of the Golden Rule, of the "categorical imperative," and of the satisfaction of service - these and related ethical formulae became as familiar in the Nineteenth Century as most of them had been in antiquity. And they failed to provide a basis for human existence in modernity just as they had failed two thousand years before.

In its best representatives, the ethical concept leads indeed to moral integrity and moral greatness. Nineteenth-century humanism, based half on Plutarch, half on Newton, could be a noble thing. (We have only to remember the great men of the last nineteenth-century generation, such as Woodrow Wilson, Masaryk, Jaurès, or Mommsen.) Kierkegaard himself was more attracted by it than he realized. Though fighting every inch of the way, he could never quite free himself from the influence of Hegel; and Socrates, symbol of the ethical life, remained to him the apogee of man's natural history.

But Kierkegaard also saw that the ethical concept, while it may give integrity, courage, and steadfastness, cannot give meaning - neither to life nor to death. All it can give is stoic resignation. Kierkegaard considered this position to be one of even greater despair than the optimistic one; he calls it "the despair at willing to be an individual." And only too often the ethical position does not lead to anything as noble and as consistent as the Stoic philosophy, but turns into sugar coating on the pill of totalitarianism. This is, I feel, the position of many an apologist for Soviet Russia; he hopes that man will find individual fulfillment in the ethical attempt at making his neighbor happy and that this will suffice to offset the reality of totalitarianism. Or the ethical position becomes pure sentimentalism - the position of those who believe that evil can be abolished and harmony established by good intentions.

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

Is then the only conclusion that human existence can be only existence in tragedy and despair? Are the sages of the East right who see the only answer in the destruction of self, in the submersion of man into the Nirvana, the nothingness?

Kierkegaard has another answer: human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy; it is possible as existence in faith. The

opposite of Sin (to use the traditional term for existence purely in society) is not Virtue; it is Faith.

Faith is the belief that in God the impossible is possible, that in Him time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful. Faith is the knowledge that man is creature - not autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center - and yet responsible and free. It is the acceptance of man's essential loneliness, to be overcome by the certainty that God is always with man, even "unto the hour of our death."

In my favorite among Kierkegaard's books, a little volume called *Fear and Trembling*, he raises the question: What distinguished Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, from ordinary murder? If Abraham had never intended to go through with the sacrifice, but had intended all the time only to make a show of his obedience to God, then Abraham, indeed, would not have been a murderer, but he would have been something more despicable: a fraud and a cheat. If he had not loved Isaac but had been indifferent, he would have been willing to be a murderer. Yet Abraham was a holy man; God's command was for him an absolute command to be executed without reservation; and we are told that he loved Isaac more than himself. The answer is that Abraham had faith. He believed that in God the impossible would become possible - and he could carry out God's command and yet retain Isaac.

Abraham was the symbol for Kierkegaard himself, and the sacrifice of Isaac the symbol for his most innermost secret, his great and tragic love - a love he had slaughtered although he loved it more than he loved himself. But the autobiographical allusion is only incidental. The story of Abraham is a universal symbol of human existence which is possible only in faith. In faith the individual becomes the universal, ceases to be isolated, becomes meaningful and absolute; hence in faith there is a true ethic. And in faith existence in society becomes meaningful, too, as existence in true charity.

The faith is not what today is so often glibly called a "mystical experience" - something that can apparently be induced by the proper breathing exercises or by prolonged exposure to Bach. It can be attained only through despair, through suffering, through painful and ceaseless struggle. It is not irrational, sentimental, emotional, or spontaneous. It comes as the result of serious thinking and learning, of rigid discipline, of complete sobriety, of humbleness, and of the self's subordination to a higher, an absolute will. The inner knowledge of one's unification in God - what St. Paul called hope and we call saintliness - only a few can attain. But every man is capable of attaining faith. For every man knows despair.

Kierkegaard stands squarely in the great Western tradition of religious experience, the tradition of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure, of Luther, St. John of the Cross, and Pascal. What sets him apart, and gives him this special urgency today, is his emphasis on the meaning of life in time and society for the man of faith, the Christian. Kierkegaard is "modern," not because he employs the modern vocabulary of psychology, aesthetics, and dialectics - the ephemeral traits which the Kierkegaard boom ballyhoos - but because he concerns himself with the specific disease of the modern West: the falling apart of human existence, the denial of the simultaneity of life in the spirit and life in the flesh, the denial of the meaningfulness of each for the other.

Instead, we have today a complete divorce, the juxtaposition of "Yogi" and "Commissar" - the terms are, of course, Arthur Koestler's - as mutually exclusive possibilities: an either-or between time and eternity, charity and faith, in which one pole of man's dual existence is made the absolute. This amounts to a complete abdication of faith: the "Commissar" gives up the entire realm of the spirit for the sake of power and effectiveness; the "Yogi" assigns human

existence in time (that is, social life) to the devil and is willing to see millions lose their lives and their souls if only his own "I" be saved. Both are impossible positions for any religious man to take, but especially for a Christian who must live in the spirit and yet must maintain that true faith is effective in and through charity (i.e., in and through social responsibility).

But at least both are honest positions, honestly admitting their bankruptcy - in contrast to the attempt at evading the problem by way of the various "Christian" political parties in Europe, Protestant and Catholic, or the movement for "Social Christianity" still powerful in this country. For these attempts substitute morality and good intentions for faith and religious experience as mainsprings of action. While sincere and earnest, while supported and sometimes led by good, even by saintly men, they must not only be as ineffectual in politics as the "Yogi" but must also fail, like the "Commissar," to give spiritual life; for they compromise both life in time and life in eternity. That Austrian cleric and Catholic party leader who, in the thirties, came out for Hitler with the argument, "At least he is opposed to mixed bathing," was a ghastly caricature of the Christian moralist in politics; but he caricatured something that is ever present where morality is confused with faith.

Kierkegaard offers no easy way out. Indeed it could be said of him, as of all religious thinkers who focus on experience rather than on reason and dogma, that he greatly overemphasizes life in the spirit, thus failing to integrate the two poles of human existence into one whole. But he not only saw the task; he also showed him his own life and in his works that there is no escape from the reality of human existence, which is one in tension. It is no accident that the only part of Kierkegaard's tremendous literary output that did not originally appear under a pseudonym but under his own name was the *Edifying Discourses*. Not that he wanted to conceal his authorship of the other works - the pseudonyms could not have fooled anybody; but the "edifying" books alone translate faith into social effectiveness and are thus truly religious and not just "Yogi." It is also not an accident that Kierkegaard's whole work, his twenty years of seclusion, of writing, thinking, praying, and suffering, were but the preparation for the violent political action to which he dedicated the last months of his life - a furious one-man war on the established church of Denmark and its high clergy for confusing morality and tradition with charity and faith.

Though Kierkegaard's faith cannot overcome the awful loneliness, the isolation and dissonance of human existence, it can make it bearable by making it meaningful. The philosophy of the totalitarian creeds enables man to die. It is dangerous to underestimate the strength of such a philosophy; for, in a time of sorrow and suffering, of catastrophe and horror (that is, in our time), it is a great thing to be able to die. Yet it is not enough. Kierkegaard's faith, too, enables man to die; but it also enables him to live.