



Kierkegaard's Ironic Stage of Existence

George J. Stack

Volume 25, numéro 2, 1969

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020143ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020143ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Stack, G. J. (1969). Kierkegaard's Ironic Stage of Existence. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 25(2), 192-207. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020143ar>

Kierkegaard's Ironic Stage of Existence

Socrates was and remained the paradigm of the philosopher for Kierkegaard. It was Socrates who first showed the intimate relationship which exists, or should exist, between philosophy and life. The enigmatic being of Socrates fascinated Kierkegaard from his earliest work on *The Concept of Irony* to his last journal entries towards the end of his life. Socrates represented the unique, paradoxical individual who cannot be fitted neatly into any traditional categories. If there is a 'category' into which he does fall, it is the 'category' of the individual, a 'category' which is presented by Kierkegaard ironically since there is, strictly speaking, no *category* of the individual. Kierkegaard's early conception of the philosophical role of Socrates is a key to an understanding of his later philosophy of religion. In his *Concept of Irony* he argued that irony, for Socrates, was "infinite negativity," a nihilistic standpoint. This interpretation of Socratic irony (although later revised by Kierkegaard) had a personal significance for Kierkegaard since he himself had lived through nihilism, had experienced the realization that nothing is true, nothing is certain, that nothing can be known. I say "experienced," since he is not alluding to a purely theoretical nihilism which does not touch the individual, but to an existential encounter with nihilism, an encounter which has profound consequences for the individual. *The Concept of Irony* is itself, in a sense, an ironical work insofar as Kierkegaard occasionally writes in the Hegelian mode but repudiates what he calls the "new wisdom" and remarks: "as if the Idea's own movements should come to expression in me."¹ In this paper it will be argued that Kierkegaard's analysis of Socrates' thought and existence is a covert expression of his own experience of the nihilistic standpoint he attributes to Socrates, that he himself had turned toward the aesthetic sphere of existence and was already attempting in his own thought and experience to overcome the nihilistic stage of existence. The encounter with nihilism was, then, the first 'movement' in the 'dialectic of life,' the beginning of a reflective, personal existence, the necessary propaedeutic to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres of existence. The theoretical dissolution of actuality and ideality was the first movement on the road to the phenomenology of the act of faith. *The Concept of Irony* undermines the traditional account of Kierkegaard's three stages (or spheres) of existence and reveals that Kierkegaard (like Nietzsche and Heideg-

1. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Lee M. Capel, New York, 1965, p.13.

ger) was concerned with the problem of nihilism and the transcendence of this 'moment' in the dialectic of life.

THE MEANING OF IRONY

Although Kierkegaard is ostensibly concerned with the 'concept' of irony in the first part of *The Concept of Irony*, he does not deal with the *concept* of irony at all. Rather, he provides what he calls a 'phenomenological' description of the existence of Socrates.¹ This approach is significant for its obvious anti-Hegelian method of explicating the meaning of a conception or idea (e.g., irony) not in terms of logical analysis but in terms of an individual who is 'living through' the ironic standpoint. To understand the meaning of irony one does not begin with an abstract analysis of essences, but with the concrete, the existential manifestation of the spirit of irony. Hence, Socrates — as understood by Kierkegaard — shows what irony is insofar as he adopts the ironic standpoint and uses irony in his relationships with others. Kierkegaard looks upon Socratic irony as a sign or symptom of the emergence of personal existence, of subjectivity. Here he has followed Hegel — up to a point. For Hegel, irony is the extreme form of subjectivity. And Socratic irony indicates that Socrates had an 'Idea of the good' even though the individual's relation to the good is arbitrarily determined. That is, the subject is conceived of as the deciding and determining 'principle' of what is good.² What is for Hegel only a "negative moment" becomes for Kierkegaard the inchoate recognition of the importance of the subject, of the individual. He refuses to allow the ironic standpoint to be 'absorbed' into a rationalistic system which sees in irony only what is negativistic and discounts its significance for the development of the individual thinker. Since Kierkegaard lived through the nihilistic standpoint and believed that it marked a turning-point in his own personal and philosophical development, he is unwilling to have it treated casually as a mere negative moment in the process of a spiritual dialectic. To be sure, the ironic standpoint must be overcome, transcended; but it also must be 'expressed' and analysed in order to indicate how it can be overcome.

Kierkegaard contends that the fundamental characteristic of Socrates' existence was irony. The ironic standpoint is negativistic since it undermines the conventional confidence which men have in commonsense or reason. Many of the negative results of the Platonic dialogues, we are told, can be seen as the result of the annihilating effect of irony.³ Socrates cut through every pretense to knowledge and

1. *Ibid.*, p.47.

2. G. F. W. HEGEL, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, London, 1895, I, p.420.

3. KIERKEGAARD, *op. cit.*, pp.92-93.

led his opponents to self-contradiction or showed them the true meaning of their own philosophical viewpoints by drawing out all of the implications of these viewpoints. Socrates uses rational analysis to undermine reason itself. Hence, Kierkegaard believes that "irony . . . is unable to tolerate the absolute except in the form of nothingness."¹ The phenomenal world (actuality) is negated not in order to posit another reality, but merely to negate actuality itself. The view that Socrates' irony is merely the self-disparagement and nescience which is portrayed in the Socratic dialogues is superficial. Irony is not merely a rhetorical device perfected by Socrates but has a profound meaning.

Irony is capable of inducing a self-consciousness in the individual to whom it is directed. It reduces an apparently abstract discussion to a personal level and suggests that there is a realm of truth which is other than that which is conventionally accepted. One of Socrates' aims (in using irony) was to awaken men from the sleep of moral and intellectual complacency. Irony is used to free men from the dominance of general or abstract conceptions which appeared to convey knowledge, but which actually cloaked ignorance. The ironic standpoint involves an affirmation of the existing subject, the individual who refuses to yield to conventional opinion, who questions ostensible 'knowledge,' who refuses to be explained away by a speculative dialectic. An ironist such as Socrates suggests that most of man's knowledge is not truly knowledge at all, but the presumption to knowledge. The effect of Socrates' inquiries is negative and is intended to be so. The destruction of comfortable certainty, Socrates seemed to believe, would lead individuals to self-conscious reflection, to an awareness of what they do not know, to what they are not. In this regard, Kierkegaard maintains that

Socrates . . . occupied himself with the problem, what it means to be a man . . . Socrates doubted whether we are men at birth; one does not so easily get the chance to become a man or to know what it is to be a man. For the ideality in being a man was what concerned Socrates, and what he sought.²

Irony is in the service of a philosophical self-consciousness, a philosophical anthropology. Kierkegaard's own irony served to 'mask' his deep, personal commitment to Christianity. If Socrates asked, how can I become a man, Kierkegaard asked, how can I become a Christian?

In the *Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard emphasizes the negativity of irony insofar as any knowledge claim is subject to the critical power of the ironic standpoint. Irony is the antithesis of the actual and is

1. *Ibid.*, pp.113-114.

2. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *The Last Years, Journals 1853-1855*, trans. R. G. Smith, New York, 1965, pp.282-283.

oriented in the direction of the ideal infinity of the possible. Irony is a method of dissimulating, hiding one's true motives or feelings; by implication, it is a critical linguistic mode which suggests the possibility of the recognition of a truth which is inexpressible or is of such a nature that it cannot be overtly demonstrated, but which may be 'seen' or directly encountered. It involves a recognition of the multiplicity of possibilities which confront one and the multiple theoretical explanations which are possible. Irony, in effect, is an *expression* of the complex modality of possibility. The contrast between the ideal (even if it is hypothetical) and the real creates the 'tension' of irony. The ironist juxtaposes the contradictory and generates the paradoxical. The ironist, as Kierkegaard put it,

can place himself as a vanishing particularity in connection with the absolute requirement, aye, *set these two together . . .* which signifies the ultimate difficulty of human existence, which consists precisely in putting differences together . . .¹

The scepticism of irony, the recognition of the irreconcilability of contradictions, the sense of infinite possibility turns the individual back upon himself and confronts him with the most significant possibilities, his own possibilities. In the light of this we can understand why Kierkegaard remarks that "no authentic human life is possible without irony."² The tragedy of irony is that it does not bring about commitment. The ironist is concerned with the play of possibilities, the hypothetical explanation of a multitude of problems. In this regard it is interesting to note the hypothetical mode in which Socrates so often expresses himself. An hypothesis is always a *possible*, tentative explanation which is acceptable only insofar as it "saves the phenomena."³ Whenever Socrates seems to be answering a specific question or providing an explanation, he couches his answer or explanation in a hypothetical form or in terms of a "likely story" or myth. Despite the fact that, in a sense, Socrates may be said to have provided some "positive" answers to the questions he raises, it is false to say that he typically presents these answers in the assertoric mode.⁴ Socrates invariably chooses to express himself in the modalities of possibility or probability. Insofar as Kierkegaard stresses this aspect of Socrates' approach to philosophical questions — his refusal of the consolation of certainty — I believe that he is closer to the spirit and intention of Socrates' critical philosophy.

1. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie, Princeton, N.J., 1941, p.449.

2. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Irony*, p.338.

3. PLATO, *Meno*, trans. B. Jowett, New York, n.d., 86 e 2 ff. Cf. J. E. RAVEN, *Plato's Thought in the Making*, New York, 1965, pp.59-63; pp.92-102.

4. R. ROBINSON, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, London, 1953, p.122.

The fundamental tendency of the ironic attitude is to reduce all things to possibility, to negate, to become engrossed in the mere play of logical analysis and destructive criticism. Even the most beautiful, the most noble possibility is treated simply as one more possibility. In the ironic standpoint there is no resolution of anything, no commitment. The infinite negativity of irony Kierkegaard describes as characteristic of the nihilistic standpoint. Although Kierkegaard later admits that his portrait of Socrates was one-sided,¹ he saw certain aspects of Socrates' polemical approach to philosophy as anticipations of his own polemical stance in relation to Hegelianism in particular and philosophy in general. That is, he was trying to "work through" his own period of nihilism and to transcend it by virtue of his "sympathetic-antipathetic" analysis of the Socratic existence. In this regard, he refers to irony as similar to a "negative way," a *via negativa*; it is not the truth, but the way.² Socrates is the paradigm of the philosopher because nothing is exempt from his critical analysis; the more *satisfying* the conception or explanation is, the more thoroughly it must be analyzed. A complete irony brings about the recognition of desolation, the consciousness that nothing remains after critical analysis except what is not.³

THE CONCEPT OF NIHILISM

The Socratic critique of knowledge, like Nietzsche's analysis of the known (*das Bekannte*)⁴, reveals that much knowledge is based upon unexamined presuppositions which are uncritically accepted, upon conventionally accepted linguistic forms. The critical examination of the basis of knowledge showed Socrates the radical limitations of all human knowledge. Hence, Socratic wisdom is ignorance, the realization that man knows nothing with certainty. In Kierkegaard's terms man is faced with objective uncertainty (especially in the realm of moral values and the ultimate *telos* of existence). The kind of "knowledge" which Socrates is concerned with is not a dogmatic truth, not a metaphysical truth, but a truth which can be conveyed by means of an existential communication. That is, irony is an "attitude" which is a fundamental characteristic of the dialectic of life, an indirect transmission of the necessity for the transformation of the self. The aim of the ironist is not to transmit an eternal truth, but to arouse the other to exist as an individual, to become himself. Socrates' role as "gadfly" was not in the service of some abstract conception which was a matter of indifference to the individual. Rather, it was intended

1. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p.449.

2. *The Concept of Irony*, p.340.

3. *Ibid.*, pp.142-143.

4. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke*, K. Schlechta, ed., Munich, 1955, II, p.222.

to bring the individual to personal knowledge, to what Kierkegaard calls "concernful knowledge," to the kind of knowledge which Socrates thought to be essential. Thus,

the aim of the conversation is to free the participants to live in their own right. But this cannot take place by a direct transmission of the existence of the one to another. The reality of the experience proper to the one can only furnish the possibility of existence for another. Hence all existential communication must take the form of possibility.¹

The mere entertainment of logical or empirical possibilities from an ironic standpoint, the playful consideration of what "is not" but could be, the fluctuating dialectic of thought is precisely the nihilistic aspect of irony. The individual who adopts such an attitude or perspective is, indeed, free; but it is, as Kierkegaard remarks, a "negative freedom." It is a meaningless freedom, a freedom without purpose, without resolution, similar to what Berdyaev called "meonic freedom." To accept the meaninglessness of actuality, of existence, of what is and will be, is the dominant characteristic of nihilism.²

The "experience" of nihilism is a significant moment in the dialectic of life since it turns the individual back upon himself and generates a heightened sense of his own existence. The experience of nihilism involves the thought that there is certainty nowhere, that the totality of actuality is meaningless, that one can rest in no certainty, that nothing is absolute, that there is no objective truth. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche accepted all of the consequences of their theoretical inquiries, of their scepticism, of their personal commitments. Whereas Nietzsche seems to end in the nihilism he sought to transcend, Kierkegaard interprets it as a necessary stage in the dialectic of life. Kierkegaard's conception of nihilism or its meaning is quite close to that of Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, nihilism entails the loss of meaning and value. Thus,

the feeling of valuelessness is attained when one apprehends that the general character of existence must not be interpreted with the concept of "purpose," of "oneness," or of "truth." . . . The world fails to have in the plenitude of happenings any overarching unity; the character of existence is not "true," is *false*. . . . One has no longer any ground to persuade himself of a *true* world. . . . In brief, the categories "purpose," "oneness," and "being," with which we give a value to the world, are now withdrawn by us — and the world now looks valueless.³

This applies to the ironic nihilist as well. It is the denial of the absolute value of the fluctuating world of appearances. Or, in Nietzsche's terms,

1. Hermann DIEM, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, trans. Harold Knight, London, 1959, p.42.

2. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke*, K. Schlechta, ed., Munich, 1956, p.953.

3. *Ibid.*, p.678.

the category of "being" is without meaning since there is nothing which is permanent or substantial. This is basically what is meant in the nihilistic standpoint of a Gorgias, the claim that "nothing exists" or is.¹ Invariably, the nihilist points to the relativity of experience and understanding, the endless flux of phenomena, in order to defend his conception of the unreality of unity and being and the impermanence of actuality. In effect, nihilism is an extreme form of subjectivity insofar as the radical contradictions in one's own life-experiences and in human existence in general nullify the rigid categories of pure rationalism or logical analysis. The dissimilarity of individual experiences, perspectives, and modes of thought is (as is the case with Gorgias) one of the bases of theoretical nihilism. Nihilism is not an irrationalist position; on the contrary, as we can see in the case of Kierkegaard's Socrates, Gorgias, and Nietzsche, it is the result of a critical, rational undermining of reason itself, the destructive, negativistic use of reason. The irrationalistic aspects of Nietzsche or Kierkegaard's thought are post-nihilistic recognitions of the significance of an existential value, of 'instinct,' 'life,' 'faith,' or 'individual existence.' Insofar as a thinker postulates a goal to be achieved, a value to be preserved, a mode of existence to be attained, he is not in any sense of the word a nihilist. The true nihilist despairs not only of knowledge, but of existence as well. One must look elsewhere for theoretical nihilism than in the writings of those characterized as 'existentialists.'²

Heidegger's conception of nihilism is fundamentally different from that of Kierkegaard. For Heidegger, the essence of nihilism is the oblivion of Being (*das Sein*), the view that there is no "Being of beings," that there are only beings (*seiendes*) in the process of becoming. The Nietzschean emphasis upon the will to power and the contemporary emphasis on 'technicity' are both instances of a nihilistic standpoint insofar as both of these viewpoints involve a turning away from Being and a concern with dynamism without purpose or meaning. Heidegger claims that Nietzsche's metaphysics is the culmination of Western metaphysics, its own negation. Such a sweeping assertion is difficult to relate to any of Kierkegaard's formulations of nihilism. For Kierkegaard, nihilism is not the culmination of any tendency in Western thought; rather, it is a stage of existence which is a permanent

1. SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VII: "Nothing exists. If anything did exist, we could never know it. If something could be known, it could not be communicated."

2. In regard to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* it has recently been said that "The final outcome of the *Tractatus* is nihilism... the view that value and meaning lie 'outside' the world... a nihilism which negates the very possibility of philosophy itself... this negation is the real meaning of the last pronouncement of the work: 'What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.'" J. C. MORRISON, *Meaning and Truth in Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, The Hague, 1968, p.143.

possibility for man at any time and any place. There is, however, an aspect of Heidegger's conception of nihilism which is present in Kierkegaard's account of it. That is, that nihilism is the result of anthropocentrism and subjectivism. Thus, nihilism is "anthropomorphy, the shaping and viewing of the world in accordance with man's image,"¹ the view that man is the "unconditioned and sole measure of all things." The difference between Kierkegaard and Heidegger on this point can be seen in Kierkegaard's life-long commitment to the view that what is true must be accepted as true by a subject, that the individual (with the exception of God) is the most significant existent. Heidegger appears to adopt this view in *Sein und Zeit*, but has turned his concern and emphasis away from the existing *Dasein* to Being (*das Sein*) as the 'ground' of existence and the meaning of beings.² Although, in a sense, Kierkegaard agrees with Heidegger in holding that the anthropocentric standpoint must be transcended (by establishing a relationship to an eternal Being), he never relinquished his stress upon the importance of becoming a single person. Heidegger's essential ontologism must be clearly distinguished from Kierkegaard's consistent existentialism, from his overt subjectivism.

The transition from nihilism to the aesthetic and the ethical standpoints is already implicit in the ironic attitude of Socrates and is revealed in the attack upon finite understanding, the suggestion that there may be an 'ideality' which transcends the realm of actuality, the stress upon the importance of possibility for human existence. Kierkegaard insists that the individual is understood in terms of possibility and is opposed to the view that the real is the actual (*Wirklich*) alone. The essence of the ironic standpoint is that it is merely a speculative dialectic of thought which entertains a multiplicity of theoretical possibilities. Insofar as these possibilities exist only for thought, they are unable to change the direction of one's life; they are purely hypothetical possibilities which preclude a commitment to a possibility which can be actualized in concrete existence. Socrates is described "as one who stands poised ready to leap into something, yet at every moment instead of leaping into this 'other,' he leaps aside and back into himself."³ Irony reduces all belief and thought to mere possibility and passes from critical reflection to imagination. Hence, Kierkegaard's phenomenology of Socratic irony leads to an analysis of romantic irony. Kierkegaard suggests that Socratic irony either ends in a stultifying nihilism or passes into a romantic irony, an attitude which treats all existence with a "poetic arbitrariness." Such a 'mood' (romantic irony is more the product of emotion and imagination than

1. Martin HEIDEGGER, *Nietzsche*, Pfullingen, 1961, II, p.127.

2. There is an interesting discussion of this shift of concern in Heidegger's thought in Laszlo Versényi's *Heidegger, Being, and Truth*, New Haven, 1965.

3. *The Concept of Irony*, p.192.

of thought) leads to a nihilistic despair or boredom. In the passage from a concern with Socratic irony (the dialectical play of thought) to a concern with romantic irony (the hedonistic submission to an infinity of aesthetic possibilities) Kierkegaard has already anticipated his description of the aesthetic stage of existence. The surrender to passing moods or the dialectical play of imagination "comes to nothing." In an anticipation of his later emphasis upon choice, Kierkegaard remarks that when one merely postulates "an enormous range of possibilities," "it is not easy to choose."¹ Socrates retains his irony because he has only an obscure awareness of the 'ideality' which led him to undermine the pretensions of human reason and to disparage actuality. Occasionally, Kierkegaard suggests that Socrates apprehended the absolute not as a contentless 'ideality,' but as the divinity itself. He has claimed that Socrates' irony involved a turning inward, a shutting himself within himself, in "order to be expanded in the Deity."² In such occasional remarks we may assume that Kierkegaard is anxious to revise his earlier portrait of Socrates and to assimilate Socrates' viewpoint to his own. Although it is the case that the ironic tension is sustained because it leads one to a recognition of the possibility of a higher being, a transcendent reality, and dramatizes the distinction between the conditioned and the unconditioned,³ it is anachronistic to suggest that Socrates arrived at an 'intuitive' awareness of a transcendent being, God. In this regard, Kierkegaard, on one occasion, categorically denied that Socrates had attained the absolute he sought.

Socrates did not possess the true ideal, nor had he any notion of sin, nor that man's salvation required a crucified God. . . . He therefore retained irony, which . . . expresses his superiority to the world's folly.⁴

The occasional attempts of Kierkegaard to claim Socrates as a proto-Christian are negated by his considered views. Socratic ignorance is only the negative beginning of the 'movement of faith.' The tension of faith involves the recognition of what Kierkegaard calls the "offence of the absurd." Although Socrates was, indeed, capable of awe or wonder he was unable to 'adore.'⁵ What is manifested in Socratic irony is the emergence of heightened self-consciousness, the awareness of the conflict between actuality and ideality which is "the origin and essence of consciousness."⁶

1. *Ibid.*, p.299.

2. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. W. Lowrie, Princeton, 1957, p.120.

3. Paul FRIEDLANDER, *Plato*, New York, 1964, p.150.

4. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. A. Dru, Oxford, 1938, No. 1122, p.403.

5. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *The Lilies of the Field*, Alcan, 1935, pp.92-93.

6. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, trans. T. H. Croxall, Stanford, 1958, p.150.

The value of Socrates' position lies in the recognition that the thinker is an existing individual and that the task of existing is his fundamental task. Socrates discovered that truth is paradoxical, an objective uncertainty. But instead of committing himself to the objective uncertainty of faith, he retained his irony towards the infinite and saw it only as a possibility. Although the Platonic Socrates presents three 'arguments' for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, it is interesting to note that in the *Apology* he is completely uncertain as to his 'fate' after death. As Kierkegaard quite rightly points out, the uncertainty of Socrates does not disturb him at all; "on the contrary, this playing with life, this vertigo inasmuch as death now appears as infinitely significant, now as utter nothingness, is just what pleases him . . . Socrates . . . relishes the . . . syllogistic *aut-aut*" in the face of the infinitely real or what Catullus called "the eternal darkness of an eternal night."¹ In Nietzsche's comment on Socrates' last words we can see that Kierkegaard's emphasis on the nihilistic aspects of Socrates' thought is not entirely idiosyncratic. Nietzsche pointed out that when Socrates says, "O Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius," he was saying that he ought to make an offering to the god of medicine since it was customary to make such an offering when one recovered from an illness. The illness which the dying Socrates alludes to is, of course, life itself.² Socratic irony preserved the tension of opposition, the contradiction implicit in the relationship between the finite and the infinite. Since everything is possible, nothing is certain. The individual who has come to the self-conscious recognition of possibility "has comprehended the dreadful as well as the smiling."³ Although Socrates is aware of what Heidegger calls "the silent power of the possible" (*die stille Kraft des Möglichen*), he is prevented from actualizing the possibility of faith by virtue of his persistent irony. However, the Socratic doubt is due to interest (*inter-esse*. "to be between," "to be concerned") — that is the "I" or reflective consciousness of the individual is "in between" ideality and actuality. This concerned knowledge (rather than abstract knowledge) emerges out of the consciousness of the opposition between actuality (the immediacy of experience) and ideality (conceptualization and language). This interest or concern marks the beginning of existential reflection, an affirmation of the individual. Doubt can be resolved only by means of resolute choice, the projection of the self toward some future possibility. Despite the fact that Kierkegaard claims (in some contexts) that irony is a preparation for the ethical life, this is inconsistent with his phenomenology of the dialectic of life since the ironic standpoint (as manifested in Kierkegaard's account of Socrates) precedes the

1. *The Concept of Irony*, p.117.

2. *Nietzsche Werke*, Stuttgart, 1921, VI, pp.290-291.

3. *The Concept of Dread*, p.140.

emergence of romantic irony (phenomenologically, historically, and in terms of Kierkegaard's own development), the hallmark of the aesthetic stage of life. Before discussing this point, however, we must turn our attention to the question of the importance of possibility for Kierkegaard, especially in the light of its relation to irony.

EXISTENCE AND POSSIBILITY

When Heidegger, in *Sein und Zeit*, states that "Dasein is its possibility" and by virtue of this is able to choose himself and become himself,¹ he is speaking in the idiom of Kierkegaard. The claim that Kierkegaard accepted the "traditional and Aristotelian" view that actuality is prior to possibility² is not supported by Kierkegaard's writings on possibility. For, one of the reasons he attacked Hegelianism was because he thought a systematic, rational essentialism destroyed possibility. Kierkegaard contended that human actions are comprehensible only in terms of possibility.³ Although he holds that one form of possibility, that is "conceived reality," is higher than actuality from the "standpoint of thought,"⁴ he did not hold that actuality is prior to possibility in the concrete existence of the individual. To be sure, he did agree that, in one sense, actuality is prior to possibility; that is, that actual beings are temporally prior to the generation of possible beings or that a being which 'has' possibilities is actual in the sense in which he already 'exists.'⁵ But the dialectic of an individual life, the becoming of a self, is characterized by repeated transitions from possibility to actuality. On a purely ontological level, of course, an entity must already be in order to encounter possibilities; but in terms of *existence* (as Kierkegaard understands it) possibility is prior to actuality.

In order to understand Kierkegaard's conception of possibility and its importance, we must recognize that his knowledge of Aristotle was primarily derived from the works of F. A. Trendelenburg, an anti-Hegelian who had stimulated a renewal of interest in Aristotle's thought through his interpretations of, and commentaries on, Aristotle's writings.⁶ Briefly, Trendelenburg emphasized the importance of

1. Martin HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, 1963, p.42.

2. William BARRETT, *What is Existentialism?* New York, 1964, pp.152-154.

3. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *op. cit.*, p.139ff. Cp. Jean WAHL, "Existentialism: a Preface," *New Republic* (October, 1945).

4. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp.284-285.

5. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Hope, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1960, IX, 8, 1049b2.

6. Frederick A. TRENDELENBURG (1802-1872) was a professor of philosophy in Berlin whose most important works were: *Elementa Logices Aristoteleae*, Berlin, 1837; *Logische Untersuchungen*, Berlin, 1840, 2 vols; *Historische Beiträge zur Philosophie*, Berlin, 1846-67, 3 vols.

the conception of motion or *kinesis* in opposition to the Hegelian dialectical principle and stressed purposive activity in terms of the Aristotelian teleology. In addition, he argued that movement is the common essence of existence as well as thought. Kierkegaard was attracted to the views of Trendelenburg because they supported his own break with Hegelianism and supplied the terminology by which he could describe the dynamic character of existence. The use of the term 'transition' in logic is 'chimerical' since its true significance lies in history or in concrete temporal processes. In effect, Hegelianism could not account for the process of becoming or *genesis* and was unable to describe the transition from possibility to actuality in an individual existing being. Kierkegaard saw that Trendelenburg's emphasis upon the Aristotelian notion of movement (*kinēsis*) and on 'qualitative change' (*alloiōsis*) provided him with the theoretical means by which he could discuss human existence. There is here an aspect of Aristotle's understanding of the role of possibility. For, Aristotle had conceived of movement in general as the transition from possibility to actuality.¹ The kind of movement Kierkegaard is concerned with is the mode of transition from possibility to actuality which characterizes qualitative change since this can be accommodated to "historical freedom"² (i.e., the capacity which the individual has to become, to change, to act in accordance with a *telos*). The change which is involved in becoming is an 'actual' change, a change in existence not merely in thought. Hence, for Kierkegaard, "becoming is a change in actuality brought about by freedom."³ It is the 'category' of movement which enables Kierkegaard to describe human existence as a dialectical process of striving and becoming. Hegel was wrong, Kierkegaard charged, in holding that necessity is a synthesis of possibility and actuality.⁴ For these terms properly refer to a 'being-in-act,' a being capable of change. And it is not necessity which characterizes such an existent, but possibility and, hence, contingency.

That Kierkegaard's understanding of Aristotle is not idiosyncratic (except insofar as he tends to borrow concepts which Aristotle used in reference to natural beings or a large class of beings and to apply them to human existence exclusively) can be shown by indicating that when Aristotle refers to 'movement' or 'qualitative change' he suggests (and sometimes more than suggests) that possibility is prior to actuality. Thus, in discussing becoming he remarks that it is 'bet-

1. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, trans. R. Hope, Nebraska, 1961, III, 1; III, 1, 201 a 11; III, 2, 201 b 29ff.

2. *The Concept of Dread*, p.74.

3. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. D. F. Swenson, Princeton, 1944, p.64.

4. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Science of Logic*, trans. W. H. Johnston and L. G. Struthers, London, 1929, II, pp.184-185.

ween ' being and non-being since " what is coming to be is always intermediate between what is and what is not."¹ The futurity of becoming suggests that the present being of an individual being is not exhaustive of what he is and, therefore, one can say, as Heidegger does, that man is what he is (what he has been and what he presently is) and is what he is not yet (i.e., the possibilities of *Dasein* are significant aspects of its being). Such a formulation of the becoming of an individual is not only compatible with Kierkegaard's essential viewpoint (and ultimately traceable to Aristotle's conception of the *genesis* of any finite being), but clearly expresses it. When Aristotle refers to qualitative change (the kind of change Kierkegaard is concerned with insofar as it is a change in attitude, feeling, belief, or action on the part of a human being) he avers that " everything that changes changes from what is potentially (*on dynamai*) to what is actually (*on energeia*)."² Since, for Kierkegaard, the individual is constantly in process of becoming the existence of the individual is characterized by a continuous number of actual transitions which are possible because of the volitional self-projection of the individual towards the future by virtue of a movement from possibility to actuality. Every decisive change in an individual's existence is brought about by the ' reflective ' recognition of possibilities and the attempt to actualize a possibility *in concreto*. Merely to reflect upon alternative possibilities without concern (as in the ironic standpoint), merely to entertain possibilities as curious hypothetical cases, is to preclude decisive choice. ' Movement ' is possible in the qualitative dialectic of existence because of the volitional self-commitment of the individual. Following Aristotle, Kierkegaard held that action requires desire or deliberate choice. Since, for Kierkegaard, there are real, not apparent, choices open to man, the refusal of a possibility which is one's own (what Heidegger calls *eigentlich* or ' authentic ') is a refusal not only of one's self, but the turning away from what could be one's highest possibility. However, since — in finite existence — " everything is uncertain,"³ we can never know with certainty that the possibility we attempt to actualize is the ' highest ' possibility for us. Hence, existence entails risk and even in faith the only certainty is a ' subjective ' certainty. The process of existence, then, is characterized by qualitative transitions from possibility to actuality in uncertainty. The contingency of the future is the condition for the possibility of freedom and for the ' freedom of possibility.' It is clear, then, that the view that Kierkegaard accepted the view that actuality is prior to possibility is fundamentally incorrect. The conception of ' movement ' which Kierkegaard adopted from Aristotle (via Trendelenburg) served as a means of

1. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, II, 2, 994 a 26.

2. ARISTOTLE, *op. cit.*, XII, 1069 b 16.

3. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p.79.

describing the temporal process of becoming which characterizes the dialectic of life and the 'inward' transformation of the self through qualificative change. The ultimate possibility of 'movement' is the "paradoxical movement of faith." But without desire or 'passion' movement or transformation is impossible. This is the sterility of the nihilistic standpoint which Kierkegaard attributes to Socrates. It is a condition of hypothetical reflection, without concern, without passion, without meaning, without purpose, without commitment. For the consistent nihilist, even his own 'standpoint' or position is ultimately negated; nihilism ends in absolute agnosticism, in philosophical silence.

REVISION OF THE STAGES OF EXISTENCE

Although Kierkegaard later modified his earlier portrait of Socrates and claimed that the Socratic irony was the signification of a turn toward an ethical commitment, it is not clear that Kierkegaard is wholly consistent with his own account of the dialectic of life. It is not clear why irony should be selected as the indicator of a shift from an aesthetic mode of existence (characterized by the pursuit of immediate pleasure, aesthetic or sensuous) to an ethical one. In the case of Socrates this simply does not make sense since we must presume that Socrates himself had 'lived through' an aesthetic stage prior to the adoption of the ironic standpoint. In addition, we would have to assume that there is no real distinction between Socratic irony and romantic irony; this contradicts Kierkegaard's own claim that such a distinction should be made. In *Fear and Trembling* it is said that the 'movement' of Socrates is in the direction of agnosticism. Such a view appears incompatible with Kierkegaard's occasional descriptions of Socrates as an 'ethicist.' Socratic ignorance seems more closely allied with the ambiguity of the aesthetic consciousness than it is with the ethicist who attempts to live in accordance with universal moral laws. The resolution necessary for an ethical life is precisely what Kierkegaard saw was lacking in the Socrates he describes in the *Concept of Irony*. It is my belief that we can understand the significance of Kierkegaard's portrait of Socrates if we assume that he was interpreting Socratic irony, in Hegelian terms, as a 'negative moment' in the development of consciousness. But, unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard attempted to penetrate the meaning and significance of this negative moment, this nihilism, in order to indicate how it leads to an I-consciousness, to inwardness, to a search for concerned knowledge. In addition, by virtue of his phenomenology of the life of Socrates, Kierkegaard was able to describe his own early nihilistic standpoint. For Kierkegaard, theoretical nihilism was, at one time, synthesized with a subjective sense of confusion and emptiness. The experience of the absolute meaninglessness of his own life in association with an unending reflection which returned

to the zero-point of doubt was a stage in Kierkegaard's existence. The following journal entry (which is dated three years *before* he completed the *Concept of Irony*) reveals his understanding of his 'situation.'

What I have often suffered from was that all the doubt, trouble, and anguish which my real self wanted to forget in order to achieve a view of life, my reflective self sought equally to impress and preserve, partly as a necessary, partly as an interesting stage, out of fear that I should have falsely ascribed a result to myself.¹

What Kierkegaard refers to (in a later journal entry) as an "absolute spiritual incapacity" is clearly an expression of the nihilistic period through which he is living. The only 'movement' he is capable of at this time is the *movement* of thought. Hence, he tends to see Socrates as the 'dialectician' who "conceived everything in terms of reflection."² When he speaks of Socrates' nihilism he is exaggerating the negative aspects of Socrates' thought in order to express, albeit indirectly, his own negativism. If this is the case, *The Concept of Irony* is a disguised representation of the nihilistic stage of life which, as Kierkegaard suggests, is perhaps a necessary stage in the development of the individual. Hence, the ironic standpoint he attributes to Socrates was his own. It is an existence which, as such, leads to nothing. For, "irony is an abnormal growth . . . it ends by killing the individual."³ In order to transcend the *cul-de-sac* of nihilism Kierkegaard made the transition to a mode of existence characterized by romantic irony or aestheticism. Although this stage of existence must be transcended as well, it at least provides momentary satisfactions and enjoyments. But the unending pursuit of the momentary, the immediate, leads to boredom and despair. Just as the nihilistic standpoint ends by under-mining itself, so, too, does romantic irony lead to its own dissolution — the un-

1. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, vi (1838), p. 41. Cf. *Either/Or*, II. In what is obviously a self-reference Kierkegaard has Judge William give his young friend (A) the following advice: "For the sake of your salvation . . . stop . . . this passion of annihilation which rages in you; for this is what you desire, you would annihilate everything, would satiate . . . doubt at the expense of existence. "Cf. also Karl Jaspers' accusation that Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity was one of world-and-life negation. Kierkegaard, he says, "no longer shrank back from anything in thought. Everything permanent was as if consumed in a dizzying suction; with Kierkegaard . . . other-worldly Christianity . . . shows itself in negation (the absurd martyrdom) and in negative resolution." *Reason and Existence*, trans. W. Earle, New York, 1955, pp.24-25. There is some evidence for this in Kierkegaard's last journals (1853-1855) in which existence is said to be a crime, that one comes into existence by means of a crime, that the world is a prison-house from which the only escape is death. *The Last Years, Journals 1853-1855*, p.113. In the light of such remarks one might conclude that if Kierkegaard had been unable to make the 'leap of faith' he would have been a nihilist.

2. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author*, trans. W. Lowrie, New York, 1962, p.41.

3. *The Journals of Kierkegaard* (1838), p.58.

ending search for aesthetic or sensuous pleasure leads ineluctably to the inability to enjoy anything, to despair and boredom. But aesthetic consciousness and its irony leads to the search for an ethical commitment.

It has been argued, then, that we must reconstrue traditional accounts of Kierkegaard's stages of life. We must understand the qualitative transitions of the dialectic of life in the following way: the first stage of existence is marked by the emergence of critical reflection, doubt, the analytical destruction of dogmatism and conventional certainty, the contemplative recognition of hypothetical possibilities, a scepticism about the actual and the ideal — the nihilist standpoint; the second stage of existence is characterized by the search for sensual and aesthetic enjoyments, the pursuit of an apparent infinity of finite satisfactions in immediacy; the third stage of existence (the ethical) involves a commitment to live in terms of universal moral laws, a sense of duty, a determination to act in accordance with moral maxims or principles, the use of 'practical intelligence'; the fourth and final stage of life is the religious which entails a faith in an 'objective uncertainty,' an absolute relationship between the individual and an absolute person, an acceptance of the paradox of Christian faith. In regard to these 'stages' of life it must be borne in mind that they do not describe a necessary series of transitions. At any moment of one's life it is always possible to exist in one stage or sphere or the other. Human existence is not characterized by necessity, but possibility and contingency. There is some value in each of these spheres of existence: in each an important aspect of human experience and reflection is revealed. Despite the portrayal of Socrates as a nihilist (a view which Nietzsche also shared) in the *Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard could still say that "The Socratic secret . . . is that the movement of the spirit is inward, that the truth is the subject's transformation of himself."¹ Nihilism, then, has the positive function of generating a search for meaning and significance in regard to what is an 'object' of profound concern — one's own being and the direction and meaning of one's life. It forces one to search for meaning for oneself in and through the complex, uncertain dialectic of life, to abandon comfortable certainties, and to achieve an openness to the possibility of faith. Although a negative way, it is a forceful stimulant for the development of concerned knowledge, a quest for a truth for which one may live and die. Whether Kierkegaard's characterization of Socrates' existence and thought is wholly justified or not, it is a significant 'phenomenology' of nihilism, one which undoubtedly had a profound personal meaning for Kierkegaard.

George J. STACK.

1. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp.37-38.