

## Kierkegaard & Nietzsche: Two Different Passions

Nothing fascinates man more than man himself. Of all the problems he has had to face, none have been more elusive and hard to solve than the problem of what it means to be human. It seems that no two philosophers have the same answer. It would not be hard to believe that no answer exists, but that does not stop men from seeking one. The philosophy that seems best suited for the task is existentialism, which primarily concerns itself with the question of human existence. Two of the most passionate philosophers on the question greatly influenced the twentieth century existentialists. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche see man as something to be confronted and overcome. They have attempted to set aside all presuppositions and concentrate on the problem of existing in this world. Still, they have many differences which serve to make the answer to this problem just as elusive as before.

The first important similarity between the two is their view of man as an intermediary being. Kierkegaard sees man in an "intermediate stage" poised between what he was and what he will become. Existence involves two states which are fundamentally incompatible. For Kierkegaard, "the predicament of the existing individual arises from his being a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal" (CUP 267). All that can be said about an individual is what he was and what he will become. What one is now is simply an ethical agent who is in the process of choosing. To exist does not mean to be in a final state, but always striving toward something. What human beings strive toward is becoming subjective. For Kierkegaard, life is a movement from an essential to an existential condition. Man's essential condition is being related to God. On the other hand, the existential condition arises from his alienation from God. This alienation creates anxiety which in turn creates the desire to once again be in an essential condition. To achieve this means to be related to God, "since this is 'a far higher thing than to be related to' anything else" (qtd. in Stumpf 448). To become related to God one must pass through several stages, beginning with the aesthetic stage. In this stage, the focus is on pleasure for the sake of pleasure. Something is good if it gives pleasure, bad if it does not. However, this pleasure is not necessarily base. The person in this stage can find pleasure in music and philosophy as well. The only problem with this stage is boredom which is the "root of all evil, it is that which must be kept away" (Either/Or 80). When the aesthete becomes bored and realizes that this way of life cannot truly fulfill him, he is faced with a decision. Kierkegaard calls this type of decision an either/or. Either he can remain in despair at the present level or he can change his way of life. The important thing for Kierkegaard is that decisions like these cannot be made simply by reason; however, they must be made. In *Either/Or* Judge William makes this quite clear. "What I have said to you so often I now say once more, or rather I shout it to you: either/or" (167). If he chooses to move on, the next stage is the ethical. In this stage deliberated choice replaces the immediacy of the aesthete. The ethicist chooses to create for himself ethical values with which to live his life. For Kierkegaard, at least for Judge William, marriage represents an ethical value. It signifies more than immediacy by emphasizing commitment to the future. The ethical man is also concerned with self-reflection in order to make his choices. However, the time comes when man realizes that "he is involved in something more profound" (Stumpf 449). He realizes that his failure to conform fully to the moral law is due to the inherent inability to conform. In this case, he is faced with another either/or. He may remain here as well or make a leap of faith.

So for Kierkegaard life is a series of stages. Each person must decide for himself how to approach these levels, but the goal, at least for Kierkegaard, is to achieve the third stage, the religious stage. This consists of not only choosing for oneself, but "in being infinitely interested in the reality of another" (CUP 288).

Nietzsche shares a similar view of man. He calls man a "bridge and not an end" (127). The important thing in man is his potentiality. Man is striving, but for something different. Nietzsche says that for man "Übermensch is the goal" (Solomon 134). An important part of understanding Nietzsche is the interpretation of this word. For Nietzsche, the Übermensch or Superman is an ideal. It represents man constantly striving to overcome himself. The Superman must be always willing to reject what he is now, to become something different. He must never allow himself to become content with present values but continuously create new ones for himself. Much like Kierkegaard's goal to overcome objectivity, Nietzsche sees man's goal as the overcoming of the "all-too-human" in each of us. For each philosopher, overcoming, striving is an important part of becoming what one is. As Kierkegaard said, since man exists "it follows that he is in process of becoming" (CUP 74). The difference lies in their methods for becoming, for overcoming man. Rather than turn inward to find subjectivity and God, Nietzsche says that man should strive to realize his nature manifested in the will to power. However, similar to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche sees life as a series of stages. For most people, values are created for them. These people, whom Nietzsche called the herd, see values as something which should apply equally to all. For Nietzsche, this morality is fine for "paltry people" (qtd. in Stumpf 51). However, for those who have the will to create values for themselves this is a life-denying view. Life-denying because it is essentially dishonest in its view of men. By positing one morality for all men Nietzsche felt that the herd would ignore man's natural Will to Power. By denying the passions and the will to create values, this view of morality would prevent man from overcoming himself. The first step for man, then, is to overcome this herd view of values created for the herd by the priests. Nietzsche calls them the "other worldly," the "despisers of the body" and says they "are not bridges to the Superman" (Nietzsche 147). Once this herd is overcome, man can begin to concentrate on overcoming himself. However, like Kierkegaard's view of the task of becoming subjective, this task of overcoming is not to be finished anytime soon. To exist, to become subjective, to overcome, these are tasks which occupy our entire life. And just as it is not "meritorious" to finish the task of entertaining oneself all day in a matter of hours so to "to be finished with life before life has finished with one, is precisely not to have finished the task" (CUP 147). Indeed, the ideal superman is not to be realized soon. "Never yet has there been an Übermensch" (qtd in Solomon 134).

In addition to their view on man's initial condition, both men agree that the individual is more important than the group. Kierkegaard says that "a crowd in its very concept is the untruth." The crowd can only hinder the individual by making him "impenitent and irresponsible" (Stumpf 447). Worst of all, the crowd hides the fact that individuals are responsible for their actions. For Kierkegaard, the only way to achieve authentic existence is by making a passionate commitment to a way of life (Solomon 88). In order to do this, one must make individual decisions. This involves making a fundamental distinction between the individual and the group. To immerse oneself in the crowd would be letting the "wound of negativity heal over." In other words to stop striving and choosing. Man must be careful, therefore, not to equate what he is subjectively with what others see him as. These external views of the self are merely objective. While each is a part of the self, none of them truly represents the subjective self. The subjective self is one which has a "passionate concern over one's own death and desires (Garellick 19). The truly subjective person is involved in his own existence at all times. Somewhat like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche also rejects the crowd. His view of the effects of the herd are equally negative. The herd morality is a major hindrance to the free spirits who wish to rise above them and achieve the Übermensch. The herd, with their collective view of the good of all, bring down those who wish to exercise their Will to Power. For Nietzsche, there could be no equality, this would simply be a levelling out process. Equality would not bring everyone up to the level of the few, but rather down to the mediocrity of the herd. In this way, Nietzsche is very much an elitist who sees the superman as a goal only realizable by the few. For him great deeds can only be for great men "everything rare for the rare" (qtd. in Stumpf 364).

An important part of both philosopher's view is the role of passion. For Kierkegaard, passion is what drives the self to make either/or decisions. Becoming subjective also involves passion. "Subjectivity culminates in passion" (CUP 206). When confronted with the paradox of Christianity, the only way to accept it is through a passionate commitment. "Christianity is the paradox, paradox and passion are a mutual fit" (CUP 206). Kierkegaard would go so far as to say that "it is impossible to exist without passion" (CUP 276). An important example of this is the illustration of the two cart drivers. One is asleep, but the horses travel along unguided as they have many times before. However, the other driver is actively guiding his horses. In this sense only the active one truly exists. For Kierkegaard, then, existence is a quality. To exist does not mean merely to live and breathe, but actively make choices. To make these choices one must be passionate. When Abraham was faced with the decision to obey God or God's moral law, he could not appeal to any eternal values to settle this contradiction. At such moments all that can guide morality is faith and commitment. "In making a choice it is not so much a question of choosing right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses" (qtd in Solomon 92). For Kierkegaard, reason plays a limited role in the act of choosing. Reason shows us that we have a choice but not what to choose.

For Nietzsche, passion is also important. In contrast with Hegel who had said "nothing great has been done without passion," Nietzsche perhaps would feel that "nothing at all had been done without the passions" (Solomon 121). Contrary to many who had believed there was always a choice between reason and passion, Nietzsche saw no choice between the two. Left to its own devices the more powerful passion would dominate the person. Therefore, the passions need the power of a "form giving force" to give them meaning (Stumpf 359). Nietzsche saw man as a combination of the Apollonian element and the Dionysian passions. Without the power of the will man would be dominated by the "diseased frenzy of the Dionysian" (Stumpf 359). So while the passions were themselves dangerous, they could be transformed into a work of art. To do this Nietzsche referred to a concept later adopted by Freud called sublimation. Reason's role is not to change the passions or to weaken them, but simply to determine their object of expression. "The function of reason is to allow expression of certain passions at the expense of others" (qtd. in Solomon 124). To deny the passions altogether was for Nietzsche a grave mistake and part of the life-denying view of the herd. "An attack on the roots of passion means an attack on the roots of life" (Nietzsche 487).

One misconception about both philosophers is their rejection of reason as useless. Both would agree that reason has its place in the sciences, but for the problems of existence and values reason is limited in power. While both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche reject formal system building, because of the nature of their inquiry, they must use reason to formulate their arguments against it. Kierkegaard is notorious for his criticism of the Hegelian system, because of its lack of emphasis on the existing individual. According to Kierkegaard "one thing has always escaped Hegel and that is how to live" (qtd. in Solomon 78). Whatever lengths Kierkegaard went to avoid the system, his reasoning is still somewhat systematic. While concentrating on the individual, the three stages of existence still appear to be a systematic description of the human condition. However, because there is no logical necessity connecting them, it may not be as systematic as other more rigorous systems. Regardless of whether Kierkegaard has constructed a system, he still maintains that any system will ignore the individual for whom it is constructed. It is important to acknowledge the individual rather than conceal him in the Absolute. Constructing such a system would be like submerging oneself in the crowd. Nothing could be worse for the subjective self than to objectify itself by seeing existence only as part of the whole, the system.

Nietzsche agreed that the philosopher's job ought not to be constructing a system, but rather to be concerned about the problem of human values. For him, philosophy was not the "unriddler of the universe," but a critical tool, which could declare itself against pre-

vious opinions (Stumpf 358). In the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche says that "the will to a system is a lack of integrity" (Solomon 108). For him, to claim that one has a system is to believe that all answers have been found and there is no longer a need to question. However, the purpose of philosophy is to always ask questions. Unlike Kierkegaard, Nietzsche did not see the system as a denial of the subjective individual, but rather as a way of ignoring the truth. It was not that the system gave false truth, it gave no truth at all. Indeed, for Nietzsche the problem is not that the system gives only objective knowledge, but that it gives only subjective knowledge. That is, the system does not do what it intends to do, which is to give universal knowledge. It is not the job of a system to give subjective truth, that it does is why it fails. More important than the system, for Nietzsche, were individual problems that concern man. However, most philosophers had not been content with this. Each small solution was not valued for itself, but only as a part of a larger system. Other philosophers saw these minor problems which Nietzsche committed himself to as "contemptible." "To solve all with one stroke, that was the secret wish" (qtd. in Solomon 109).

For both philosophers becoming what one is involves striving toward something. Both also saw the present state of man in their age as a hindrance to this striving. In particular, the present state of "Christendom." Kierkegaard said that this Christianity had become "the greatest possible uniformity of a factory product" (qtd. in Solomon 73). Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche agreed that belief in God had been affected by secularization, and the present attempts to rationalize the belief in Christianity were futile. The fact that Kierkegaard believed Christianity to be an important step toward subjectivity, and that Nietzsche felt that it was a stumbling block to the Will to Power, meant that both had to face this issues in order fully to explain how one could become what one is.

For Kierkegaard, these facts about Christianity lead him to reformulate what Christianity is. Unlike many past religious philosophers, for Kierkegaard, there can be no rational description of God. But neither is there a need for this. "To prove the existence of one who is present is the most shameless affront." It would be much better were we to "mock God out and out" (CUP 485). For Kierkegaard, there is no rational justification for belief in God. To rationalize God "is in all eternity impossible because God is Subject" (qtd. in Stumpf 449). Christianity is "surely the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox" (CUP 194). What makes it paradoxical is the concept of the "God-man." That there was such a time in history when God descended to Earth and became man is absurd. It is peculiar here to note that for Kierkegaard, who rejects reason as a tool for such subjective knowledge, reason is what leads to faith. Without reason to show the paradox of Christianity there would be no need for faith. This, however, is as far as reason can go. It is clear to Kierkegaard that attempting to rationalize Christianity "has corrupted it" (Garellick 33). Rationalizing it has made Christianity simply a set of doctrines which anyone can easily believe in. But Christianity is essentially a set of absurd doctrines. Glossing them over was precisely the problem Kierkegaard found with Christendom. Christianity is not something one can simply be born into, rather it involves an active commitment to the paradox. To believe is to risk everything and "leap into the arms of God" (qtd. in Stumpf 447).

For Nietzsche, the absurdity of Christianity is not something to be reconciled by faith, but a reason for rejecting it. He felt that it was dishonest to use faith in God to escape the irrationality. His first criticism of Christianity is that it is essentially weak. While Christianity seeks the Truth about the world and morality, it perhaps has its answers formulated, but when it finally turns inward to seek the truth about itself, there Christianity is lost. Nietzsche feels that insofar as Christianity is falling it should not be rescued, but rather he says "what is falling that one should also push" (qtd. in Solomon 118). Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity is at times passionate. In the *Will to Power* he says that Christianity is "the most fatal and seductive lie that has ever yet existed." He refused to accept "the morality of paltry people as the measure of all things" (qtd. in Stumpf 50). This, then is Nietzsche's other important criticism of Christianity, that it views morality as uni-

versal and binding on all men equally. In positing such a morality Christianity was essentially dishonest, first in assuming that all men are equal and secondly by ignoring the passions. "The church fights passion with excision in every sense: its practice, its 'cure,' is castratism" (487). However, for Nietzsche, abandoning Christianity was not an end, only a beginning of a new era. Nietzsche believed that "at last the sea, our sea, lies open for us" (qtd. in Stumpf 358). Without the hindrance of God, man could at last begin to strive for the *Übermensch*. For Nietzsche, becoming what one is could only be done if the essentially life-denying philosophy of Christianity could be thrown off. It is important to rid oneself of this because it ignores man's most natural passions. Nietzsche's example here is the maxim "love your enemy." However, it seems to him that nature dictates "ye shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Not accepting the Dionysian aspect would be dishonest; "let us be so far honest toward, ourselves!" (qtd. in Stumpf 362).

It seems clear that both philosophers see man as an incomplete being striving for something. Whether it be a subjective relationship with the self and God or the Will to Power striving for the *Übermensch*, both agree that man is "an intermediary being," "a bridge." This seems to be a valid position, for if man was an end and complete here and now, there would seem to be little point to living. If you complete a job successfully, there is nothing left to work on, so the natural thing to do is move on to another task. If the task at hand is living, becoming, and you finish it now, then to what is there to move on? As Kierkegaard said you have not finished life until life has finished with you. If it were meant that man should come into the world complete, it would be better not to come in at all for fear of losing that. Still, man could live such a life only concerned with finding pleasure. However, it seems that men, at least some, are condemned to think. Such a life of pleasure is merely the aesthete's existence. Soon, however, some will come to the same predicament as Kierkegaard described and become dissatisfied with life. When confronted with the emptiness that Kierkegaard describes at this point, to find that man is the end, as far as we can go, would seem to compound this despair. It seems that even now in the face of science, man's desire to consider himself as a special being, unique in the world, creates a drive to posit an end for man. It simply seems better to see man as a starting point toward something, whether it be God, immortality, or some temporal goal or ideal such as the *Übermensch*. Though Kierkegaard and Nietzsche would disagree about the other's method of striving and what they are striving for, both would surely realize that to argue over the method and the goal would be, in the end, to undermine their respective views, which concentrate on the individual and his problems. Though for Nietzsche, Christianity is a lie and life-denying, it does have functional value for Kierkegaard, therefore, it may be true for him. Likewise, Kierkegaard would see Nietzsche as somewhat of an aesthete, because of his insistence on aesthetic values and his emphasis on living life as a work of art in his earlier works. Also, because on the surface, Nietzsche seems to reject values, which in fact he does not. But since there is no necessity for moving through the stages, Kierkegaard would have little problem leaving Nietzsche where he is. However, since Nietzsche is concerned with values, he may be in the ethical stage. So much the better. In the end, each would have to resolve that it is up to the individual to decide what course to follow and how to follow it in order to realize whatever goal they feel they are striving for.

The main problem, then, with both views is the amount of emphasis placed on the individual. If people lived in a vacuum, they would be able to spend their time on becoming what they are. However, people may not be able to become what they are without others. The fact that this philosophy concentrates on the individual indicates that it addresses the few, not because some people are not individuals, but because some individuals may not identify with self value creation. In this respect, Nietzsche's view of the herd is essentially accurate. There are those who will never and perhaps should never, create their own values. It would be dangerous for some to do this. Just as dangerous, then, is Kierkegaard's emphasis on choice over what is chosen. It is clear that neither view was meant to be universalizable or applied to society as a whole.

That man's goal should be to overcome himself seems to be a positive enterprise. It seems to follow, then, that one morality, for Nietzsche Christianity, could not work for all men. To assume that it could would ignore the fact that men were created unequal. This fact should not be avoided. To Kierkegaard's credit, he does not claim that Christianity is the goal for which all men should strive. He realizes the absurdity of it and that only through faith can one accept it. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for Nietzsche, then, is simply his rhetoric. That he sees most people as part of the herd and urges us to "declare open war" with Christianity, leads many to view Nietzsche's philosophy as violent and unethical (qtd. in Stumpf 51). However, it seems that Nietzsche's goal for philosophy was simply honesty. The goal is to take what we know about ourselves and the world and formulate values. The goal may perhaps be achieved by self-inspection rather than elaborate system building. That many feel the need to have values come from some external eternal source is fine for them. When these values are imposed on others, then problems arise. However, in saying this it is helpful to realize the fine line that exists between rejecting a life-denying philosophy if it is not right for someone and rejecting social order based on the same argument. Although it may seem contradictory to say that man can create values for himself as long as they conform to some basic set of social rules, in reality, this is a consideration that must be faced. Even in a society based on individual freedom, no one can act in a way that infringes on others. It seems clear that neither philosopher would condone such action, but because of the nature of their work, such an interpretation could be made. In the end, Nietzsche "found strength where one does not look for it; in simple, mild, and pleasant people" (qtd. in Solomon 135). Whatever man's goal is we would do well to remember what Kierkegaard said about the human condition. "Every human being must be assumed in essential possession of what essentially belongs to being a man" (qtd. in Stumpf 450).