

# Hannah Arendt on Kierkegaard

Copywrite 2003 by Harold P. Sjursen

Hannah Arendt was first introduced to Kierkegaard at the age of 14 when she read Jaspers' *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* ("What Remains? The Language Remains. -- A Conversation with Gunter Gaus," *Essays in Understanding*, p. 9.) Although her understanding of Kierkegaard was much indebted to Jaspers, it cannot be assimilated to his. While Arendt could never be called a Kierkegaard scholar and her writing devoted specifically to him was very sparse, Kierkegaard was mentioned often in her works and she felt she generally understood his position. "I know Kierkegaard reasonably well," was how she put it. In her mind Kierkegaard made once and for all clear the difference between theology as a science and philosophy. This difference derived from the principle of doubt which she saw in Kierkegaard, as in DesCartes, as a point of departure. It was Johannes Climacus eller *De omnibus dubitandum est* which most represented Kierkegaard to her. Kierkegaard's view of love finds certain parallels in Arendt's *amor mundi*.

Arendt viewed Kierkegaard as the founder of existential thinking -- i.e., antiphilosophical philosophizing -- which overcomes metaphysical uncertainty by decisively appropriating that which must be simply because I am, leaping beyond the antinomies of Kant's pure reason, viz., the subjectivity of the existing individual's truth. Arendt understood that this appropriation did not lead to solitary contemplation and systematic thought, the path of philosophy since Parmenides, but to action. Arendt's own problem, and it is here where she breaks from Heidegger, is the same as Kierkegaard's: How does the truth of subjectivity relate to action in the public realm?

Arendt's notion of philosophizing communication as a "loving struggle," something she derived from Jaspers (and said often characterized her communication with him), but not from Kierkegaard or Heidegger, in fact closely parallels Kierkegaard's existing individual's essential communication.

What seems to me to be the case is that, in many important respects, Arendt was really quite Kierkegaardian, both in her methods and in the kinds of issues she chose to engage. In her project to reclaim politics for an estranged intelligentsia she deploys notions of "individuality" and "understanding" which together suggest Kierkegaard's existing individual abroad in the late 20th century. Moreover, Arendt's agonistic Socrates, for her the paradigm of the individual in the public realm, bears a great resemblance to Kierkegaard's Socrates. Indeed Socratic-like individuals are possible only in the public realm. In *The Human Condition* Arendt states that the public realm was "the only setting where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were" and it was "reserved for individuality." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 41.)

Kierkegaard's existing individual can be viewed from several perspectives. These include 1) the category as the focal point of an otherwise seemingly diffuse authorship; 2) the individual as the relation of self-to-self, i.e., as an internally determined category that manifests angst; as the *raison d'etre* of the theory of indirect communication, and in particular the notion of comic apprehension as actualized by the genuine ironist and humorist; 4) as the concrete man of faith who finds himself caught between the twin demands of authority and freedom. Arendt, for whom Kierkegaard's existing individual paradigmatically represents philosophizing, seems to regard these four aspects together. Following Arendt's lead I shall try to interpret Kierkegaard's existing individual as one who philosophizes as a praxis philosopher. I begin by considering the existing individual as the focal point of Kierkegaard's authorship. The individual is central to the authorship in two distinct senses: as "reader" and as dramatic protagonist in a dialogue (the pseudonym). Kierkegaard frequently suggests that his

works resemble love letters, from one individual to another, which are not capable of being correctly understood by anyone other than "that individual" to whom they are addressed. Others may read them, but the meaning may elude them. It is this view which partly explains the rather enigmatic citation from Hamann which Kierkegaard placed on the title page of the original edition of *Frygt og Bæven*. ["Was Tarquinius Superbus in seinem Garten mit den Mohnköupfen sprach, verstand der Sohn, aber nicht der Bote."] In this Arendtian reading of Kierkegaard each of the parties to these private communications --"loving struggles"-- makes possible the position of the other. But such doxic exchange is what creates a public realm and establishes individuals in the first place.

As is well known, Kierkegaard was inclined to deride academics, particularly those professors of philosophy and theology whom he caricatured as bombastic Hegelian systematizers. The portrayal may be unfair but one can infer that Kierkegaard does not intend for his work to be manipulated into systematic treatises. Rather the assertion implied is that the works are intended to evoke personal, existential, responses -- and to be cited neither as dogma nor demonstration. Thus a correct understanding of the existing individual is necessary in order for one to understand correctly what else the authorship has to say. Furthermore, the simple fact that the authorship does offer specific, positive descriptions of an abstract category mitigates against the fairly common interpretation that Kierkegaard was actually just a religious homileticist. This, in Arendt's view, would be like saying that Socrates did no more than encourage his fellow Athenians to think like him. When one considers that the category of the existing individual is the standpoint from which the author speaks and is the perspective to which he speaks as well, the descriptions of it which he offers must be regarded as something like phenomenological invitations. The reader is being asked to look to his own inward experience (i.e., life qua existing individual) in order to verify or falsify Kierkegaard's descriptions. The status of Kierkegaard's claim, then, is that if an existing individual examines his own inward life qua individual he will find there the array of concerns and feelings upon which the authorship dwells. This result, however, does not imply the objective validity of inward experience; it certainly does not mean that inward experience provides an evidential model for a comprehensive system of personal psychology. Nor are these descriptions to be understood as prescriptive, or as normative values. They are rather the imperfect articulations of that which fundamentally can only remain unsaid. Only that reader who has come to Kierkegaard's point of view is capable of making the qualitative leap for which the authorship calls.

The existing individual, Kierkegaard's reader, is not one of the crowd and his point of view is not that of the many. His views and concerns are neither those of the many nor even compatible with those of the many. The difference between the concerns of the individual and the crowd, Kierkegaard asserts, is *toto caelo*. This assertion when considered together with the linguistic fact that Kierkegaard's term for the individual (*den Enkelte*) suggests a singleness, might lead to the conclusion that Kierkegaard's individual is a solitary figure, existing outside the public space. This is not Arendt's understanding. It is made quite clear that this could not be the case in Kierkegaard's commentary on I John 4:20: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." (*Our Duty to Love Those We See in Kaerlighedens Gerninger. Works of Love*, p. 153. Here it is claimed both that man has an essential need for other men that "is deeply rooted in nature," (*Ibid.*) and that men have an obligation to care for other men out of love of neighbor. Thus we see that Kierkegaard's individual is "in the world" in a very basic sense, that his primary concerns are found in the space between man and man, and that he cannot in fact "be" man except insofar as he fulfills this need; while, on the other hand, precisely because he is an individual, his concerns are not worldly concerns, or in Arendt's terminology, are not social. Kierkegaard's individual exemplifies the Arendtian *amor mundi*. This individual, Arendt states,

"in his living existence is higher in rank than, and precedes, the species or the mere thought of mankind." (The Life of the Mind, p. 121.) What is true for the individual is to be found inwardly; the crowd is untruth. This circumstance implies the dialectical relationship that obtains between the individual and the public, and which becomes manifest in Kierkegaard's polemical assertions. However, Kierkegaard claims, like a Socratic gadfly, that polemic which is needed for the sake of the world (*amor mundi*) because it provides the necessary corrective, is always misunderstood by the public. Thus the direct manifestation of the individual-public dialectic is an inaccurate expression of the individual's true inward condition or concern, Arendt puts it this way: "... we cannot solidify in words the living essence of the person." (The Human Condition, p. 181.) and it is also a wrongly stated description of the public. Yet it does not, in Kierkegaard's view, mean either to speak to the public or to describe the public from the public's standpoint. Rather the individual's polemic is intended to be a message to other individuals who will understand, *qua* individual, because they share the same inward concerns.

Kierkegaard makes quite clear that the individual exists in the world because of a duty imposed upon him. It is "Our duty to love those we see," and those whom we see constitute precisely the world into which the individual is thrust. Basing his discussion on I John 4:20 he asserts that if the individual is to stand in the right relationship with God, i.e., if the individual is to enter into existence, then he must not withdraw into an idealized "world"; nor must he try to escape in pursuit of a pseudo happiness which rests on deceptions. "Delusion is always floating; for this reason it sometimes appears quite light and spiritual, because it is so airy." (Works of Love, p. 161.) Such would be to deny fundamentally that which makes possible the realization of selfhood.

So deeply is love grounded in the nature of man, so essentially does it belong to man -- and yet men very often find escapes to avoid this happiness; therefore they manufacture deceptions -- in order to deceive themselves and make themselves unhappy. Soon the escape is clothed in the form of sorrow; one grumbles about humanity and over its unhappiness; one finds no one he can love. To grumble about the world and its unhappiness is always easier than to beat one's breast and groan over oneself. (Ibid., p. 155.)

When Kierkegaard criticized the stance of H.C. Andersen he was charging that it did not accept this duty. Of course to accept this duty is to engage oneself in a virtually perpetual struggle against the "evil world" (mass mentality, the numerical, the crowd) on behalf of the individual. Thus the relationship which derives from our duty to love manifests a fundamental polemic which intends to be simultaneously upbuilding and negating; to strengthen the individual *qua* individual while negating the crowd. It is Kierkegaard's meaning to negate the validity of the numerical principle as he points to the eternal validity made possible in the standpoint of the existing individual.

Kierkegaard's individual is defined, then, by his fundamental concern. His fundamental concern is what gives rise to the dialectical character of the individual-public relation and, moreover, is itself dialectical. When Kierkegaard poses the question, "What is self?" he is asking "What is the concern that characterizes the individual as such?" Kierkegaard's psychology seeks to describe the structural relations of self in order to account for the concern and articulate its parameters. The self as self relating relation is the inward process through which the individual discovers the right relation or harmony which consists in discovering and appropriating that the absolute other makes possible the derived, established relation which is the self. To simplify: The individual inwardly appropriates the fact of his complete and utter dependence on the other, which is equivalent to recognizing his possible non-being. The recognition of this

dependence implies the uncontested significance of the inward process which in turn implies a willing which realizes the right relation of self to other (God). This process is not unlike an Augustinian version of the activity which constitutes philosophy, viz., the soul's inward search for God. And again, as for Augustine, the process is possible only because of the intervention of divine grace. For Augustine this process was animated by love; for Kierkegaard this process is loving.

Kierkegaard's concept of love is central because it underlies the notion of the ethical-beyond-itself (the ethical in the religious) and is what finally justifies the standpoint of the individual. Kierkegaard makes the typical distinction between loving as erotic inclination (aesthetic love) and loving which is a duty. Both forms play a significant part in Kierkegaard's analysis, although the former does so in a purely negative way. In the case of aesthetic love the individual hopes to avoid despair through amusement, diversion and the like. Such tactics, Kierkegaard tells us, always fail and the result is boredom. Within the aesthetic existence sphere boredom is not recognized as despair, but as a mis-relationship of self as that what it is. The response often takes the form of one of the counterfeit expressions of the comic apprehension. These expressions --aesthetic love, ironic appearance, and so on-- do nothing to move the self closer to God (as Augustine would put it) or in Kierkegaard's terms to create the right relation of self to self. But this standing according to both Augustine and Kierkegaard characterizes the "world" which the individual essentially stands against. Thus we have what looks to be the odd assertion that the individual denies the particular possibilities inherent in temporal existence while these are exactly that to which the crowd is attracted. The individual qua individual is not attracted to particular "individual" pleasures while the crowd is.

As Arendt and others have pointed out the existing individual of Kierkegaard is neither the solitary individual found in Stirner nor is he an aristocrat in any sense of the term who stands above the ordinary man. Marcuse seems to have missed Kierkegaard's point when he commented:

There is no doubt, he [Kierkegaard] says, that the idea of socialism and community cannot save this age. Socialism is just one among many attempts to degrade individuals by equalizing all so as to remove all organic, concrete differentiations and distinctions. It is the function of resentment on the part of the many against the few who possess and exemplify the higher values; socialism is thus part of the general revolt against extraordinary individuals. (Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, London: Oxford, 1941, p. 266.)

A remark in *Papirer* answers Marcuse's criticism:

The communists here and abroad fight for human rights. Good, so do I. Precisely for this reason I fight with might and main against the tyranny which is fear of man. Communism leads at best to the tyranny of fearing men (only see how France at this moment suffers from it); precisely at this point Christianity begins. The thing Communism makes such a fuss about is what Christianity assumes follows of itself, that all men are equal before God, i.e., essentially equal. But then Christianity shudders at this abomination which would abolish God and in his place install fear of the masses [maengden], of the majority of people, of the public. (VIII, 1A, 598.)

From this statement alone one might infer that Kierkegaard denies categorically that the individual is superior in any way. Yet this conclusion would not seem to be consistent with his descriptions of the existing individual as genuine ironist. Since the individual author is, in most cases, an ironist, if he is claiming

superiority for himself his polemic would certainly have a different character than Kierkegaard wants to attribute to it. If this were indeed the case the criticism of Marcuse would be valid. However, Kierkegaard makes a careful distinction between speaking from a superior standpoint and being inherently superior. That latter Kierkegaard does categorically deny; no person is, of himself, inherently superior to any other person. That is he is not superior in the view of God, the only perspective that ultimately counts. The world may make judgments, but such judgments always speak from an essentially incomplete position and thus are not finally valid.

The extreme example of a worldly judgment which is mistaken because it is incomplete is to be found in the story of Abraham. In Kierkegaard's retelling of the story, which does not satisfy the rigors of biblical scholarship, Abraham's actions are --from a worldly point of view-- utterly inexplicable. No rational apology of any sort could be articulated. Therefore the judgment of the world which would condemn him morally was wrong, not because it was incorrect in its determination of what the universal-ethical expects, but because it was not possible for it to appropriate the divine perspective from which Abraham's action could be seen to be right. What Abraham did, or would have done, simply cannot be said in a manner that could justify it. (This is one reason why Kierkegaard retells the story under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio.) But, as everyone knows, it was not Abraham's decision to kill Isaac; Abraham was the tormented instrument of God. Ethics, and with it reason, was suspended and Abraham became the utterly transparent instrument of divine imperative. In this conception the individual, Abraham, or the "Knight of Faith" as Kierkegaard calls him in this case, possesses no inherent superiority because he is totally at the mercy of God. The "positive third" which defines and establishes is inwardly appropriated as the final and absolute authority, while the single (but not solitary) existing individual recognizes that he is himself completely without authority.

That the existing individual is "without authority" became Kierkegaard's epitaph for the individual qua author. In one sense this makes the same claim as the proposition which asserts that the authorship consists of various communications from one individual to another. To have authority would mean to be in the position to be able to articulate to the world what is true for it. However, this is simply impossible because of what Kierkegaard calls the "absolute incommensurability between inwardness and outwardness." That which characterizes human concern as such, the truth for which the individual would live or die as Kierkegaard puts it, is purely inward, subjective. To speak with authority would mean to speak no longer as an individual, but rather as a particular spokesman for outward objectivity. But to speak as a particular spokesman for outward objectivity is to abnegate your own viewpoint as individual. As such you are not "saying" the truth, you are instead "stating" (i.e., reporting) the objectively discernible state of affairs. Objective science (and here Arendt would include theology as an objective science) can be carried on by anyone because, Kierkegaard claims, it is personally benign. Most might agree to this position with respect to some of the objective sciences but not others. The question of the possibility of value neutrality is raised. In particular one must ask how politics fits into this analysis.

Kierkegaard addresses but does not answer this general problem in considering the specific case of the priest, who represents the paradigm case of the particular person who speaks with authority as against the existing individual who is always and essentially without authority. The special obligations of the clergy to articulate the objective propositions of theology have already been mentioned. But the existing individual's lack of authority has another dimension to be considered. So far the existing individual has been characterized as one defined in terms of concern, possessed by inward relations which are grounded in the God-relation. It has been suggested that to be an individual and to be "of the world" (in contrast to being "in the world") reflect two irreconcilable domains. However, if the individual is, as Kierkegaard says, a synthesis which includes the temporal and the

finite, then it hardly seems likely that the individual could exist in a manner utterly and completely free of social determination. In fact Kierkegaard does not make this claim, as should already be clear. Kierkegaard does offer the basis of a social-political philosophy and it is to be found in his descriptions of the individual to the world. This, too, should be clear. What remains to be considered is how the social-political circumstances of an age affect the standpoint of an individual vis á vis the world. Since the individual is, by nature, in the world, it will follow that these circumstances do have a specific effect on the individual per se. THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE TWO AGES This work of Kierkegaard's is the critical review of a pseudonymously authored novella, *The Two Ages*. Although the author of the novella used a nom de plume, viz., "the author of an everyday story", her identity was not concealed and was common knowledge. She was Fru Thomasine Gyllembourg, the mother of J. L. Heiberg (who in 1826 had introduced Hegelianism into Denmark and disputed the merits of Kierkegaard's dissertation on irony). Heiberg's name appeared as publisher on the title page of his mother's works. Fru Gyllembourg's novella was presented to the public in a manner not unlike Kierkegaard's own aesthetic works. In the Preface to her novella Fru Gyllembourg wrote:

The power of the age's spirit over the individual's innermost feelings, over his most private relations and his judgments of himself and others; the opposition wherein identical human passions, virtues and weaknesses are presented in the different ages: to the degree that I have found it in my own and others' experience. (Quoted in the Danish editor's notes to Kierkegaard's *Literary Review*, VIII, p. 9.)

The two ages which she experienced, and which in the novella she tries to characterize in relation to the inner life of an individual, were the age of revolution in the 1790's, and the contemporary period in which the novella was written (it was published in October, 1845), which is called the present age. It is the distinction between the spiritual climate of opinion in the two ages which draws Kierkegaard's attention to the book, and which he then goes on to develop much more thoroughly in his review.

Kierkegaard's Review merits special attention for several reasons. First it shows Kierkegaard's reaction qua existing individual to a pseudonymously authored book. It therefore suggests a model for the way he would have liked his own pseudonymously authored works to be read. He does not subject the work to a detailed examination, try to organize it into a system nor extract a doctrine from it. Importantly he does not engage in a polemical exchange with Fru Gyllembourg as he did with H.C. Andersen, but takes her pseudonymity seriously. Kierkegaard's Review is a direct statement of his own; it is not pseudonymous, neither ironic nor makes use of irony, and is not intended as a corrective. This work, unlike any of Kierkegaard's other published writings is without irony, corrective or polemic.

The above criticism is my own interpretation of what I have learned from the author, and therefore if anything immature, untrue or foolish is contained in it, it is my own doing. Anyone who finds it false should look to me, but anyone who finds truth in it, finds his outlook strengthened or enriched by it, is referred to the teacher --the author of the novella. The task in my review ... has not been to judge or condemn the ages, but only to depict them. (*Literary Review*, p. 138.)

With that declaration Kierkegaard expresses his gratitude to the teacher in time who occasioned not his reflections, but his decisive appropriation of an idea. This decisive appropriation, as opposed to the contemplative reflection of the philosopher, Kierkegaard understood as the special prerogative of the poet. Arendt,

for whom understanding is ultimately what she calls imagination, held a quite similar view. In her words:

What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in the consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story. (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 192.)

In the Review when speaking of the age of revolution Kierkegaard first limits the scope of his remarks by saying that he is not engaged in "an ethical-philosophical evaluation of its justification but of the reflexive consequences of its determinateness." *Ibid.*, p. 76. Kierkegaard is concerned with the consequences of the age insofar as they are actions turned back upon the subject, the individuals making the revolutions. It is with consequence in this special sense that Kierkegaard is concerned, and not with any of the social or economic goals that dominate the rhetoric which defends each of the two ages. In leaving aside the social and economic Kierkegaard's politics is quite Arendtian.

Kierkegaard's major premise is that the age of revolution is essentially passionate. (The existing individual's passion or pathos is best understood as something like the shock Plato reports at the wonder of existence and which Arendt characterized as "something which is endured." This formulation of Arendt aptly describes the attitude of pathos or passion of the existing individual in an age of revolution.) (Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics" in *Social Research* [no. 57], p. 99.)

From this premise of the essentially passionate nature of an age of revolution Kierkegaard proceeds analytically-historically to deduce several other essential features embodied in an age of revolution. These features are: 1) form, 2) culture, 3) capable of becoming violent, 4) decorum, 5) immediacy of reaction, 6) being essentially manifestation.

The age of revolution is essentially passionate and therefore has essential form. Even the most vehement expression of an essential passion *eo ipso* has form, for this is its manifestation, and therefore again has in its form an apology, a tone of reconciliation. Only for a completely extraneous and perfunctory dialectic is the form not the alter ego of content, and thereby the content itself, but something irrelevant. (*Ibid.*)

The argument at this point might seem trivial, were it not understood in the context of Kierkegaard's teaching of the absolute incommensurability of inwardness and outwardness. The form is the essential manifestation of that which cannot by its nature come to presence outwardly. The form is the apology, as it were, for what can neither be the outward, visible actions of revolution, which constitute its form, are not spurious accidents, but rather particular dissimulations of the inward passion which is the essence of revolution. There would, of course, always be apparent form; in an age of revolution the form is essential because of the passion which supports it. Furthermore, because the form is essential, it can be comprehended existentially-dialectically. In terms of Kierkegaard's frequent analogy it is the contrast between a love letter, written in deep feeling of passion, and a letter to a casual acquaintance, trow together somewhat haphazardly. regarding the latter Kierkegaard asserts: "a completely extraneous dialectic would be able to deal with it only as a speciously important question of form." (*Ibid.*, p. 76.)

This notion of form is structurally parallel to the distinction of Kierkegaard's between genuine irony and the ironic appearance. The relation is that genuine irony is a species of essential form while the ironic appearance is an instance of

specious form. If this is the case, then it will follow that: 1) a revolutionary's actions (in a revolutionary age) will completely dominate his personality, and 2) the particular activities of the revolution cannot be taken to specify the fundamental, passionate idea which is the true spirit of revolution. The revolutionary, then, resembles the genuine ironist like Socrates in his essential traits. Thus it would seem that an individual becomes a revolutionary or a genuine ironist dependent, at least partially, upon the age in which he was born. In saying that the age of revolution has essential culture Kierkegaard makes the same point again. When he asserts that "a maid passionately and powerfully made up is essentially cultured," (Ibid.) he means that just as the particular, outward circumstances of a maidservant's life bespeak nothing of the quality of her love, so too the particular social-political-economic circumstances (or particular modes of coping with these circumstances) do not stand to verify the presence or absence of culture.

In contrast to essential culture Kierkegaard names various sorts of pseudo-culture --the essentially dispassionate affectations by which people play at being cultured-- which, to put it in other terms, is only the pretense of form. When Kierkegaard makes clear the distinction between an age of violence and a revolutionary age, by allowing that an age of revolution "is capable of being violent, riotous, wild, ruthless," (Ibid.) he also tacitly assumes the other possibilities: a revolution which is not violent and a period of violence which is not a revolution. For a revolution in its essentially passionate life and worldview is only potentially violent in service of its underlying idea and, conversely, is incapable of turning upon its own idea. A revolution is restrained, guided by its own motivation, and because of this "is less open to the charge of crudeness." (Ibid.) That an age of revolution may or may not be violent, Kierkegaard simply passes over. The argument that violence necessarily accompanies basic social change did not occur to him to take seriously. So when he discusses the consequences of a revolutionary age upon individual revolutionaries, the revolution is discussed as though it were no more than an involved, passionate, and decisive debate as in Kierkegaard's mind, it could be.

Thus Kierkegaard portrays the individuals in a revolutionary age as sharing in an underlying idea, the one motivation of the revolution, and this both uniting them and qualifying their participation as individuals.

When individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately united ... they are united on the basis of an ideal distance. (Ibid.)

This unity of the individuals in their devotion to the revolutionary ideal is precisely the same, in Kierkegaard's view, as the unity of individuals in the genuine Christian congregation. Thus Kierkegaard's view of the Church acquires a social-political significance beyond its immediate object. Similarly, his attack on Christendom polemically states what could also be drawn as inferences from his analysis of the present age.

The comic remains the means by which the individual avoids the suffering of a passionate or dispassionate age; insofar as irony and humor are able to create a space around the existing individual his integrity and passionate concern with the idea can survive. The comic serves as a two-way conduit between inwardness and outwardness, both undermining the significance of outward demands for the individual and by presenting the individual's genuine standpoint in a form which is understood only by other existing individuals.

The Category of Essential Communication

It is clear that the existing individual addresses the public in various moods, determined to some extent by the cultural-political context, i.e., the "age" in which the individual speaks. Also, it has been argued, according to Kierkegaard when the existing individual qua existing individual addresses the public, no matter what the age and regardless of his mood, the speech is polemic. The speech must be polemic because the existing individual is related to the public



dialectically. There will always and unavoidably be conflict because of this essential opposition. Two examples of such conflict from different ages are Kierkegaard's examples, viz., that of Socrates and the attack on the established Church. Had Kierkegaard himself not drawn attention to it the similarity might have gone unnoticed: outwardly the events bear little resemblance. Socrates, after all, tells us in the *Crito* that it is our duty to obey the laws, even when we have reason to believe they are unjust. Throughout the discussion Socrates remains calm and pious, despite his approaching execution. Kierkegaard's attack, on the other hand, is outspoken, flamboyant, motivated by a sense of incipient crisis. On another level, too, the events seem to be quite dissimilar, but it is precisely on this level that Kierkegaard seems to find an important similarity. Socrates, at least as we know him from the Platonic dialogues, is ever rational. It is rational discourse, unswayed by either public opinion or personal emotions, which Socrates strives toward, the principle to which he wishes to remain true. Kierkegaard stands for quite a different principle. According to him rational discourse had been subverted, misused to support invidious distinctions and specious arguments. Furthermore, its inherent limitation is clear as it can make no sense of the absolute paradox. Thus Kierkegaard does not, like Socrates, strive to rise above both the individual and the public. He asserts that the truth is to be found on the side of the individual. Yet it is here where Kierkegaard perceives his own fundamental allegiance to Socrates. It is also at this point where the category of "essential communication" becomes significant.

Kierkegaard maintains the distinction between the communication of knowledge and the communication of human concern. It is clearly the latter which is of profound significance for Kierkegaard and which his authorship seeks to realize by means of the techniques of indirect communication. Kierkegaard considers that Socrates, in contrast to the Platonic portrayal, was indirectly communicating human concern which polemically addressed the public in a manner that went quite beyond rational discourse. To see this we consider Kierkegaard's justification of his conception of Socrates in the first chapter of *The Concept of Irony*. At that point Kierkegaard contrasts the Platonic and Aristophanic conceptions of Socrates.

Plato and Aristophanes have in common the fact that both their interpretations are ideal, but inverted with respect to each other; Plato has the tragic ideality, Aristophanes the comic. (*Concept of Irony*, p. 159.)

It is easy to see that a Socrates selflessly aiming towards rational insight --who is executed for that-- is a tragic figure. On the other hand an eccentric and self-indulging Socrates whose attitude is one of indirection quickly becomes a buffoon.

No doubt neither conception of Socrates is by itself fully correct; taken together the genuine historical Socrates may emerge. But in addition, the Aristophanic conception may be closer to the Greek public's notion of Socrates.

... to idealize Socrates according to a standard whereby he became wholly unrecognizable would lie entirely outside the interests of Greek comedy. That the latter was not the case is also confirmed by antiquity, which reports that the performance of the *Clouds* was honored by the presence of its severest critic in this respect, by Socrates himself, who, to the satisfaction of the public, stood up during the performance so the crowd assembled in the theater could convince itself of the proper resemblance. (*Ibid.*)

Such drawing attention to himself on the part of Socrates Kierkegaard took to be quite significant and emulated on several occasions. Like Socrates he was prominent in the audience of a play which ridiculed him (Andersen's *En Comoedie i det Grønne*, wherein a parrot symbolizes Kierkegaard), he brought attention upon himself throughout the entire *Corsair* affair, and during the height of his attack on the established Church he would situate himself at a cafe table in public view so that those going to and from church services would know that he obviously had not done

so.

It is this side of Socrates which, according to Kierkegaard, modifies, i.e., limits and structures his personality and makes essential communication possible. It is only an actual personality which can represent adequately an idea. This indeed was one function of Greek comedy.

That a merely eccentric and ideal conception would fall outside the interests of Greek comedy is also confirmed by the penetrating Rüttscher, who brilliantly argues that the essence of Greek comedy lay in apprehending actuality ideally, in bringing an actual personality on the stage in such a way that this is seen as representative of the Idea, and that this is the reason one finds in Aristophanes three great comic paradigms: Cleon, Euripides, and Socrates, whose persons comically represent the striving of an age in its threefold direction. Whereas the minutely detailed conception of actuality filled in the distance between audience and theater, the ideal conception once more estranged these two forces, insofar as art must always do this. Moreover, it is undeniable that Socrates actually presented many comical aspects in his life, or to say it clearly once for all: he was to a certain extent what one might call an oddity. (Ibid., pp. 159-160.)

Thus Kierkegaard relies on Aristophanes' descriptions to put Socrates in proper perspective historically, and then seeks to explain Socrates' relation to the world, in the context of the events which surrounded him and which he helped to precipitate, in terms of this synthesized conception. Out of this Kierkegaard developed the notion of essential communication which the authorship attempts to actualize.

To say that Socrates was something of an oddity is clearly not enough to explain essential communication. Of course Socrates was not simply one of the crowd and it is furthermore true that he was noticed partly because of his physical features and eccentric personal habits. But these facts would in no way explain the force of the Socratic enterprise or the possibility of essential communication. In order to do this Kierkegaard must go beyond a mere synthesis of the Platonic and Aristophanic conceptions of Socrates. It is here where irony enters in:

If, however, one will suppose that irony was the constitutive factor in Socrates' life, one will have to admit that this presents a much more comic aspect than allowing the Socratic principle to be subjectivity, inwardness, with all the wealth of thought this entails, and locates Aristophanes' authority in the seriousness with which he, as an advocate of the older Hellenism, must endeavor to destroy this modern nuisance. This seriousness is too ponderous but would limit the comic infinity which as such knows no limit. By contrast, irony is at once a new standpoint and as such absolutely polemical toward older Hellenism, and also a standpoint which continually cancels itself. It is a nothingness which consumes everything and a something which one can never catch hold of, which both is and is not; yet it is something in its deepest root comical. As irony conquers everything by seeing its disproportion to the idea, so it also succumbs to itself, since it constantly goes beyond itself while remaining itself. (Ibid., p. 161.)

The irony of which Kierkegaard speaks here is genuine irony and it is the force by which Socrates is able to withstand the affronts of the public. Thus it becomes again clear that irony is a factor of singular importance. It is irony which in determining the form of Kierkegaard's authorship sets it on the same track as the Socratic enterprise. Insofar as Socrates was an ironist he was capable of essential

communication and on this level can be compared with Kierkegaard. The authorship as a series of love letters to other existing individuals may be admitted to the category of essential communication. It is essential because it bespeaks the inward condition of an existing individual as such, independent of all contingencies. It is therefore, in Kierkegaard's sense, the truth. The truth, however, does not admit of straightforward statement. Because irony is "a nothingness which consumes everything and a something which one can never catch hold of" (Ibid.) it can serve as the form for truth saying. The truth is yet never directly stated, but is contained therein to be understood, i.e., inwardly appropriated by other existing individuals.

To say that the authorship is an attempt to achieve essential communication does not account fully for its polemical character or the nature of its polemic attacks. It does not follow from the assertion that the truth cannot be stated straightforwardly that an attempt to reveal the truth will result in bitter polemics. The answer to this question is to be found in Kierkegaard's notion of corrective. The authorship is a Socratic stinging-fly intended by Kierkegaard as a polemic against mass-mentality. One may say that the entire function of the authorship was to split the public, the crowd, in order to make available the humanly essential possibilities of individual existence. The particular polemical utterances are not of lasting significance. They are born of the circumstances and since circumstances change they soon lose their specific applicability. They are derisive in order to provoke self-examination during an age when, Kierkegaard believed, it was urgently needed. Thus the particular flavor of the authorship is determined by what Kierkegaard perceived to be the lack in the present age. The degree of outspoken polemic is a function of Kierkegaard's perception of the crisis in his own age. This means that the authorship presents a two-edged sword. The one edge is designed to split the public. It is adversarial, even abusive. The other is to cut away what is unneeded, to open itself to existing individuals, to reveal the truth. These two functions correspond generally to the two major phases of the authorship (which were produced simultaneously): the aesthetic and the religious. The aesthetic works challenge mass man to judge for himself; the religious are edifying, up-building, addressed affectionately to that one existing individual. Both are polemic-dialectic, but the tone and mood vary greatly. Likewise no single one of the works is to be understood as an essential communication. Rather, the authorship understood as a whole is Kierkegaard's attempt to issue a polemic from the standpoint of an existing individual which will communicate essentially the truth.

Who is the Existing Individual?

The existing individual has been portrayed according to the outline provided by the theory of the existence spheres, i.e., in his aesthetic, ethical and religious moods. In general he should be placed in the moment of transition in the border spheres of irony and humor. In the "Fullness of time: (Øieblikket) the synthesis of body and soul is present to him; he is both the silent Knight of Faith and the outspoken polemicist. The individual is singular but not solitary; he is completely without authority but nevertheless author.

It is the existing individual who in his pursuit of the self must strive to actualize this condition in others as well. Kierkegaard did not articulate a specific social or political philosophy. Kierkegaard's political position can perhaps be compared to Augustine in *Civitate Dei*.

Perhaps the most apt characterization of the politics of Kierkegaard's existing individual comes, although indirectly, from Hannah Arendt. In the Preface to *Men in Dark Times* she writes:

In [Heidegger's] description of human existence, everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of "mere talk" that irresistibly arises out of the public realm, determining every aspect of everyday existence, anticipating the sense or the nonsense of everything the future may bring. There is no escape ... from the

"incomprehensible triviality" of this common everyday world except by that withdrawal from it into that solitude which philosophers since Parmenides and Plato have opposed to the political realm. ... [such] dark times are ... not identical with the monstrosities of [history] ... they are no rarity. [But] even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination will come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth ... (Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. ix.)  
Such men and women are Kierkegaard's existing individuals.