

Aristotle and Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics

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IN HIS PHENOMENOLOGY of what he describes as the sphere of the ethical (*ethisk*) Kierkegaard has often been charged with defending an irrationalist conception of choice and has often been understood as arguing for a concept of absolute freedom. Both of these claims are, I believe, erroneous. In order to defend Kierkegaard against such interpretations of his thought I will attempt to indicate the various ways in which Aristotle apparently influenced his conception of a practical, existential ethics. While there is no explicit evidence that various aspects of Aristotle's ethics were, *mutatis mutandis*, incorporated into Kierkegaard's description of ethical existence, there is a great deal of circumstantial evidence that this is actually the case. Many of what have come to be called *Existenzkategorien* are clearly derived from Aristotle's philosophical language. The terminology which Kierkegaard relies upon in constructing his philosophical anthropology or his description of the dialectic of existence is clearly that of Aristotle. To be sure, Kierkegaard does not employ this terminology in order to describe natural processes or the dynamic, universal *nissus* which Aristotle conceives of as pervading the cosmos. Rather, Kierkegaard applies Aristotelian concepts exclusively to the being of man. In this essay I will primarily be concerned with explicating the relationship between Aristotle's thought and the central features of Kierkegaard's phenomenology of ethical existence.

For Kierkegaard, the question of one's ethical or spiritual possibilities is one which is not resolved by objective knowledge (*Videnskab*). Rather, ethical self-transformation requires subjective knowledge or self-knowledge. In the "movement" of the self towards an ethical possibility the irresoluteness characteristic of the "nihilistic standpoint" (*The Concept of Irony*) and the aesthetic sphere of being (*Either/Or*) is overcome by virtue of resolute choice. There is a dialectical tension between one's recognition of the possibility of ethical self-consciousness and one's potentiality for authentic choice. For, the ethical *Kehre* requires a choice to live in terms of ethical categories and in itself has ethical significance. To be sure, one can deliberate about what it is possible for one to do or to become; but deliberation in itself cannot resolve this subjective tension since it is an activity which is without limits. One can deliberate about one's possibilities *ad infinitum*. Excessive deliberation, as Kierkegaard indicates in *Either/Or*, may be a means of postponing indefinitely absolute choice or a commitment to any ethical *telos*. Once a possibility concerning an individual's self-existence is apprehended, the individual is confronted by an either/or which is not subject to a facile, Hegelian mediation (*Vermittlung*). In regard to the possibility of choosing to live in accordance with ethical requirements or avoiding such a commitment as far as possible, the individual encounters

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what William James called a “live option” which involves a “forced choice” concerning something that is momentous. Once one raises the possibility that one can endeavor to lead an ethical existence (which, for Kierkegaard, is an “authentic existence”), there is no longer a question of doubting such a possibility—one must choose it or refuse to choose it. Genuine self-doubting (*Selvfordoblelse*) is impossible in this regard since the individual continues to be throughout the process of doubting, is carried forward, as Kierkegaard puts it, by the momentum of life. In discovering one’s potentiality-for (*kunnen*) ethical existence one has also had one’s subjective concern or interest (*inter-esse*—“to be concerned”) revealed to him. The individual must encounter this ineliminable subjective concern in order to begin to make what Kierkegaard calls the “movement” of choice. Replacing Heidegger’s expression (concerning *Dasein*’s being) in the existential context from which it was taken, one may say that, for Kierkegaard, man is that kind of being who, in his being, has his being at issue insofar as his existence is a matter of passionate concern.

In order for the “pathetic transition” (i.e., the *pathos*-filled transition) to an ethical existence to occur, an individual must be involved in a concerned deliberation about what he has been, is, and is becoming. The ethical *Kehre* is not merely a matter of knowing how one ought to live or what one ought to seek to become; rather, it is a subjective, emotionally conditioned *nisus* towards a transformation of the self, a *metabasis ein allo genos* as Kierkegaard calls it, which is sincerely desired. In “spiritual movement” the state or condition of the individual is essential since spiritual possibilities are only attainable or appropriated in freedom, in the interiority of the self in which the motivation for significant choice is found.

Although it has been said that Kierkegaard’s “ethical view” has to be “reconciled with the Kantian theory of moral law, upon which his notion of ethical personality ultimately rests,”¹ this is a contestable understanding of central features of Kierkegaard’s practical ethics. While it is true that there are some minor indications in the later portions of *Either/Or* that Kierkegaard was aware of the general features of Kant’s ethics of duty, there are numerous aspects of his description of ethical existence which are clearly derived from his reading of Aristotle, the anti-Hegelian Aristotelian Trendelenburg, and Tennemann’s *Geschichte der Philosophie*.²

¹ James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: 1953), pp. 81-82.

² According to Niels Thulstrup: “Kierkegaard owned the Aldine edition of *Aristoteles’ Opera*, I-XI (1562), J.T. Buhle’s edition, I-V (1791-1797), and the first two volumes of I. Bekker’s *Akademi* edition (1831), as well as various other translations, such as I. Bekker’s in Latin (1831). Of the special editions of Aristotle’s various works he had A. Trendelenburg’s edition of *De Anima* (1833) and a stereotype edition of the *Rhetorica*. In German he had Karl Zell’s translation of *Topica* and of *Analytica*, A. Heydemann’s of *Categoriae*, C. H. Weisze’s of *Physica*, Christian Garve’s of *Ethica Nicomachea*, I-II, C. H. Weisze’s of *De anima* and *De mundo*, Christian Garve’s of *Politica*, 1-2, C. L. Roth’s of *Rhetorica*, C. Waltz’s of *Poetica* (also in M. C. Curtius’ older German translation), E. Hepner’s of *De somno et vigilia* and *De insomnis et de divinatione somnum*, and L. Spengel’s of *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*. Of the general histories of ancient philosophy Kierkegaard had used for orientation in Aristotle the copious works of Tennemann and Hegel. But he also knew Paul Möller’s draft of lectures on ancient philosophy (printed in *Efterladte Skifter*, IV), just as he had used G. O. Marbach, *Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie* and H. Ritter, *Geschichte der Philosophie alter Zeit*, 2nd printing, I-IV. In February, 1843, Kierkegaard had obtained Trendelenburg, *Elementa logices Aristotelicae* and *Erläuterungen zu den Elementen der aristotelischen Logik*. In addition to the basic knowledge we must assume Kierkegaard had of Aristotle’s philosophy and especially of Aristotelian logic, he also heard Aristotle discussed in the previously men-

In point of fact, as I have suggested, most of the existential categories which provided the conceptual basis for Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology are derived from Aristotle's metaphysical terminology. Although Kierkegaard's analysis of choice and the ethical development of the individual has characteristics which are unique to his own thought, these analyses are similar, in some respects, to Aristotle's account of choice in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as to his general understanding of the moral self-becoming of man. As I shall attempt to show, there are some rather specific notions in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as in the *Metaphysics* which are identifiable in Kierkegaard's writings concerning the ethical sphere of existence. If it can be indicated that there are at least some significant analogies between Aristotle's and Kierkegaard's conceptions of choice and the moral development of the individual, then it is clear that the typical interpretations of Kierkegaard's existential ethics are subject to revision. In addition, it raises a question concerning the recent claim that it was the "intellectualistic" doctrine of human nature in Aristotle's thought which led to the formulation of an "ethical theory that eventually led to existentialism,"³ a formulation which was in "reaction" to Aristotelian ethics.

While deliberation is the condition for the possibility of choice, it neither entails nor initiates choice. Deliberation, for Kierkegaard as well as Aristotle, is concerned not with the eternal, the necessary, or the impossible, but with the possible (*dunaton*). Kierkegaard distinguishes between conceptual and imaginative possibility on the one hand, and existential possibility (*Mulighed*) on the other hand. An existential possibility is a possibility which is intimately related to the actuality of the individual, which is a matter of concern, which is related to the authentic, ethical existence of the individual. Against the Hegelian notion of a necessitarian dialectic Kierkegaard had opposed a conception of the contingency of human existence and had insisted that man's capacity for change (*forandring*), for becoming (*Vorden*), and for self-transformation could only be understood in terms of a world in which there is possibility. Although it is a rather large issue which deserves separate treatment,⁴ it is quite clear that Kierkegaard discovered the philosophical basis for his conception of the self-becoming of man in Aristotle's thought. Thus, for example, the following assertion in his *Papirer* is obviously in-

tioned lectures by Martensen under the title, *Prolegomena til den speculative Dogmatik* during the winter semester, 1837-1838 and in 1841 he read K. F. Hermann, *Geschichte und System der platonischen Philosophie*. In 1842 he read Garve's above-mentioned translation of *Ethica Nicomachea* and of *Politica* and in 1842-1843 he studied Tennemann's (vol. III) exposition of Aristotle. In the draft of a polemical piece against J. L. Heiberg's review of *Repetition* he appeals to Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between possibility and actuality, a problem which is also taken up in *Philosophical Fragments*. Aristotle is frequently discussed in the works, not least in *Fragments*, where it is clear that Kierkegaard had studied the works on logic. Aristotle is frequently considered in research on Kierkegaard, but there is no full study of the subject." Cf. Niels Thulstrup's "Commentary" on Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, D. Swenson and H. V. Hong, trans. (Princeton: 1967), pp. 233-235.

³ Frederick A. Olafson, *Principles and Persons: An Ethical Interpretation of Existentialism* (Baltimore: 1967), pp. 5-6.

⁴ The question of the relationship between Aristotle's concepts of potentiality (specifically, "rational potency" or *dunaton kata logon*) and possibility and Kierkegaard's conception of existential possibility has recently been examined from a number of perspectives. Vide: George J. Stack, "Kierkegaard's Ironic Stage of Existence," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, XXV (1969), 193-207; "Kierkegaard's Concept of Possibility," *Journal of Thought* (April, 1970), 80-92; and "The Concept of Existential Possibility," *Folia Humanistica* (May, 1970), 399-414.

debted to Aristotle's metaphysical concepts. After noting that nothing ever comes into existence by necessity, Kierkegaard avers: "Therefore, the change of coming into existence is the change of actuality. In coming into existence the possible becomes the actual . . . everything which can come into existence shows in this very way that it is not the necessary."⁵ To be sure, Kierkegaard is not referring to "coming into existence" *ab origine*; rather, he is concerned with the transitions from possibility to actuality in the development of an individual. Specifically, those transitions brought about by the realization of one's primordial potentiality-for (*kunnen*) choice. The most elementary possibility disclosed in concerned self-reflection is a possibility for choice. This freedom for possibility is itself traceable to man's fundamental potentiality-for which Kierkegaard, before Heidegger, suggested was a distinctive ontological characteristic of man as a being capable of self-reflective consciousness. Put in its simplest terms, "Freedom means to be capable."⁶

While this notion of a fundamental potentiality for choice may, on the surface, appear to be foreign to the Aristotelian conception of man, there is some evidence that this is not entirely the case. Thus, for example, there is a curious reference made in the *Topics* to the "category of capacity" which is related to those things which are worthy of choice (*aireton*). After discussing the relationship between "the capable" and "the productive" (*poietikon*), Aristotle remarks that "every capacity and everything capable or productive is worthy of choice for the sake of something else."⁷ What is curious about this discussion of the "category of capacity" is that Aristotle does not explicitly introduce it in the place in which one would expect to find it—that is, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It would seem that Kierkegaard's use of the existential category of *kunnen* ("potentiality-for") as well as the category of possibility in regard to man's moral development merely makes explicit what was implicit in Aristotle's account of man's ethical development. Although passing reference is made to man's capacity (*dunameis*) to receive or acquire the virtues (*aretai*) in the *Ethics*,⁸ Aristotle does not overtly appeal to his

⁵ *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, eds. and trans. (Bloomington and London: 1967), I, 111. In the passage from the *Papirer* (a passage that will appear in expanded form in the *Philosophical Fragments*) Kierkegaard follows the language of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* quite closely. The following statements from the *Metaphysics* indicate this quite clearly: "What is coming to be is always intermediate between what is and what is not" (*Metaphysics*, H. Tredennick, trans. [London: 1961], II, 2, 994a26). In discussing "qualitative change" (the paradigmatic mode of change which Kierkegaard translates as *forandring*) Aristotle avers that "everything that changes changes from what is potentially (*on dunamei*) to what is actually (*on energeia*)" (*ibid.*, XII, 1069b16). Again, in referring to human action, Aristotle notes that "it is possible (*dunaton*) that a thing may be capable (*dunaton*) of being and yet not be, and capable of not being and yet be." Someone is "capable of doing something if there is nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the potentiality (*dunamin*)" (*ibid.*, IX, III, 1047a21-26). To my mind, it is to passages such as these that one must turn in order to discern the philosophical basis of the existentialist emphasis on the becoming of man (a theme which can be traced from Kierkegaard to Heidegger and, finally, to Sartre), on the general notion that man is not understood only in terms of his *Faktizität*, but must be understood primarily in terms of his projective "movement" towards possibility, towards what he is not yet (*noch nicht*) but which he can be. The existentialist conception of the dialectic of human existence was written upon the palimpsest of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

⁶ *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, eds. and trans. (Bloomington and London: 1970), II, 62.

⁷ Aristotle, *Topica*, E. S. Forster, trans. (London: 1966), 126a30-40; 126b5.

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, H. Rackham, trans. (London: 1962), II, i, 3-4. Although

own metaphysical language in order to describe the "movements" of the self from possibility to actuality by virtue of a repeated choice of right action. Ironically, it is Kierkegaard who explicitly relates the conceptions in the *Metaphysics* to certain aspects of Aristotle's *Ethics*.

The movement towards an ethical existence requires that the individual be subjectively concerned with his own possibilities for choice, decision, and action. In order for what Kierkegaard calls an existential communication to have a relationship to existence, it must be presented in the form of possibility (*maa vaere i Mulighedens Form*).⁹ An existential communication, whether it is directed towards oneself or, by indirection, to another, is a communication of capability, capacity or potentiality. In order to make an "absolute choice" one must engage in a concerned deliberation about one's own spiritual capacities, a mode of deliberation which is similar to Aristotle's concept of *boulēusis* insofar as it is a reflective consideration of what is in one's power (*dunaton*) to choose or to do. For Kierkegaard, the decision to make an absolute choice, to put an end to a reflection upon conceptual or imaginative possibilities alone, is central to ethical existence. Deliberation cannot be brought to an end by more information or new knowledge

I have attempted, in my discussion, to indicate the distinctive subjective teleology which characterizes human development (as distinguished from the notion of a universal "natural teleology" which pervades the being of non-human entities, with the exception of the "unmoved mover" or "god"), this notion of man's capacities and their realization raises some interesting issues. For, in one sense, the account given of Aristotle's concept of human action in F. A. Olafson's *Principles and Persons* is quite accurate even though it is, I believe, somewhat misleading. Whereas it is quite correct to say that, for Aristotle, "principles of right action will be derivable from the *telos*, or proper end, of man; and this end will be implicit in the 'nature' that is peculiar to human beings" (p. 7), it is misleading to suggest that the attainment of man's natural end is related to the understanding of a principle that is a necessary truth. If this "intellectualistic" aspect of Aristotle's ethics is stressed too much, then, as Olafson points out, a question may be raised concerning the possibility of someone acting otherwise even though he knows what he ought to do. A purely formalistic understanding of Aristotle's ethics may tend to neglect the underlying ontology of man implicit in Aristotle's thought. Because man is a morally indeterminate being and because he has a capacity for good or evil, he can act contrary to the way in which he knows he ought to act. And because choice is a synthesis of desire and reason there is an emotional basis for choice which is the motivating factor in human action. To be sure, as Olafson remarks, "the proper goal for any being is determined by the *kind* of being it is, i.e., by its nature" (*ibid.*, p. 8). However, the teleology which characterizes human action is a subjective teleology. The moral development of man is a contingent process insofar as the "essence" or "nature" of man may never fully be realized in a lifetime. In the case of man exclusively, the realization of his "nature" requires persistent striving. For Aristotle, as well as for Kierkegaard and Heidegger, the essence of man is an ideal *goal* which one ought to seek to attain in order to be an authentic human being. For man, and only for man, the realization of his "nature" or "essence" is something that is presumed to be within his power to realize (or not realize), is something that may be approximated by virtue of repeated choices. Only man can endeavor to become what he ought to be ("what he was meant to be") through deliberate choice. Since, for Aristotle, only a mature man is capable of choice (*proairesis*) (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III, ii, 2-3) and only man is capable of true action (*Magna Moralia*, G. C. Armstrong, trans. [London: 1962], I, xi, 1), there is implicit in Aristotle's thought a radical ontological difference between man and other finite beings. In this sense, I believe, it can be said that man transcends the "natural teleology" which Aristotle himself seems to conceive of as universal. There seems to be a theoretical tension between the immanent, natural teleology of the *Metaphysics* and the implied subjective teleology presented in the *Ethics*. Needless to say, Kierkegaard practically ignores the former and places his emphasis on the latter.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Vaerker* (Copenhagen: 1901-1906), VII, 310. Cited in F. E. Wilde, *Kierkegaards Verstandnis der Existenz* (Copenhagen: 1969), p. 113. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie, trans. (Princeton: 1941), p. 320.

since it remains a purely cognitive activity. Kierkegaard's repeated criticism of excessive deliberation in *Either/Or* may be understood as an impressionistic commentary on Aristotle's remark that "thought by itself moves nothing, but only thought directed to an end, and dealing with action."¹⁰ Only decisiveness can bring deliberation to an end. And for Kierkegaard, as for Aristotle, such a decisive choice has a volitional component as its motivational *nisus*. As Kierkegaard puts it, "It is not . . . a question of the choice of something in particular, it is not a question of the reality of the thing chosen, but of the reality of the act of choice."¹¹ The act of choice implies purposive action, an intentional "movement" of the self towards a posited possibility. Without this subjective teleology, deliberation could proceed *ad infinitum* or one could fall into irresolution. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard did not fail to notice that Trendelenburg maintained that "*ohne einen richtenden Zweck, ohne eine innere Bestimmung . . . keine Ethik*."¹²

If one is unaware of the influence of Aristotle on Kierkegaard's thought, one is bound to be puzzled by Kierkegaard's persistent use of the word "movement" in his discussion of the "dialectic of choice" and his description of the various phases of ethical existence. On the question of the extent to which Kierkegaard was, in fact, influenced by the Aristotelian concept of movement (*kinēsis*) there is no need for speculative reconstruction or a search for analogies. Kierkegaard is quite explicit in regard to his adoption of Aristotle's concept of movement. It is, in point of fact, the central existential category in his philosophical anthropology.

In his search for a chink in the armor of the Hegelian system, he thought he had found it in what he thought to be the inadequacy of Hegel's concept of "transition" or movement (*Bewegung*). First in his *Papirer*, later in *The Concept of Dread* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he had criticized Hegel's notion of movement in logic. He averred that any claim that there is actual movement in logic is chimerical since movement has meaning in relation to the historical, the actual, to what is becoming. Both in his criticism of Hegel and his search for a concept that could serve as the basis for his dynamic, projective conception of human existence, Kierkegaard seized upon Aristotle's concept of *kinēsis*, applying it, characteristically, exclusively to man's becoming. In his *Papirer* he wrote: "The category which I was anxious to make central, i.e., the category of movement (*κίνησις*) . . . forms one of the most difficult problems in the whole of philosophy.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, ii, 5.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, W. Lowrie, trans. (New York: 1959), II, 180.

¹² "Ethics is not possible without a guiding purpose or an inner direction" (A. Trendelenburg, *Logische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: 1870), II, 106). While Kierkegaard was admittedly deeply influenced by Trendelenburg, it is interesting to note that he practically ignores Trendelenburg's teleological interpretation of Nature or the development of natural phenomena. Much of what Kierkegaard assimilated from his reading of Trendelenburg was taken out of a context in which Trendelenburg was formulating a conception of organic development in universal teleological terms in which he only incidentally referred to human purpose. In this regard, Kierkegaard approached Trendelenburg more or less in the way in which he approached Aristotle—threading his way through his writings eclectically, bracketing those aspects of his thought which were not deemed relevant to Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology. There is no doubt that the following passage from the same work caught his eye. In discussing purposive action, Trendelenburg argues that "*Die Wirkung ist hier Zweck, und dieser Zweck ist wieder Ursache. Das Nachfolgende wird zu einem Früheren; die Zukunft, die noch nicht da ist regiert die Gegenwart. Das Verhältniss der Ursache dreht sich geradezu um . . . denn das Ende wird zum Anfang*" (*ibid.*, 22).

In modern philosophy [viz., Hegelian philosophy] it has been expressed differently, i.e., as . . . mediation."¹³ It was Trendelenburg who brought Kierkegaard to a recognition of the ambiguity of the Hegelian mediation. Although Hegel seemed to be suggesting that movement was being brought about by virtue of logic alone, Trendelenburg pointed out that he was, in actuality, presupposing it in his dialectic. In his *Geschichte der Kategorienlehre* Trendelenburg had employed Aristotelian terminology in order to argue that movement is the common essence, the underlying presupposition, of thought and being. For, it is by virtue of *kinēsis* that being *kata dunamin* passes into being *kat'entelecheian*. It is the process of *kinēsis* which brings about the transformation from potential being to actual being.¹⁴ While there may be, in a manner of speaking, movement in dialectical thinking and in the dialectical process of actual becoming, the claim that there is movement in logic is, strictly speaking, absurd. For, in logic, the becoming (*Vorden*) proper to actual movement has no place since logic is concerned with what *is*, with abstract, essential forms or what Husserl will later describe as a priori idealities. The historical becoming of an individual cannot be appropriated in a system of logical relations. The very concept of movement, Kierkegaard argues, implies a "transcendence," a transcendence towards what is not yet, towards "the possible." In *The Concept of Dread* Kierkegaard concludes that

the word "transition" cannot be anything but a witty conceit in logic. It belongs in the sphere of historical freedom, for transition is a *state*, and it is actual. . . . Therefore, when Aristotle says that the transition from possibility to actuality is a *κίνησις*, this is not to be understood logically but with reference to the historical freedom.¹⁵

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Papirer*, P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, eds. (Copenhagen: 1909-1948), IV (C), 97. Cited in Hermann Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, H. Knight, trans. (London: 1959), p. 32.

¹⁴ A. Trendelenburg, *Geschichte der Kategorienlehre* (Berlin: 1847), pp. 159-163. This interpretation of Aristotle's thought had a dramatic effect on Kierkegaard insofar as he says that it gave him the "technique" by which to undermine Hegel as well as to describe the movements of the self. Working against a Hegelian framework, Kierkegaard argued that the rational dialectic of Hegel could not deal with transition in terms of qualitative dialectic or qualitative change. He had learned from Trendelenburg that the claim that there is movement in a dialectic of pure thought is not valid insofar as logical relationships are quantitative. Hegel's attempt to rely on pure thought and logical constructions as well as to assume an immanent dialectic of thought can only be sustained by an implicit appeal to experience or a surreptitious appropriation of empirical elements into the rational, dialectical process. In this regard, Kierkegaard remarks that: "Everything depends upon making the difference between quantitative and qualitative dialectic absolute. The whole of logic is quantitative or modal dialectic, since everything is and everything is one and the same. Qualitative dialectic is concerned with existence." *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, A. Dru, ed. and trans. (New York: 1959), p. 98.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, W. Lowrie, trans. (Princeton: 1944), p. 74. A variation on this theme, specifically in relation to the existential category of repetition, is found in the *Papirer*. In discussing the "transcendence of motion" Kierkegaard remarks that "If motion is allowed in relation to repetition in the sphere of freedom, then its development in this sphere is different from logical development in this respect, that *transition is a becoming*. In the sphere of logic transition is mute. . . . In the sphere of freedom . . . there is possibility (*Mulighed*), and actuality (*Virkelighed*) emerges as a transcendence. Therefore when even Aristotle said that the transition from possibility to actuality is a *κίνησις* he was not talking about logical possibility and actuality, but about the possibility and actuality of freedom, and therefore he quite rightly posits motion." *Papirer*, IV (B), 117, 288 ff. Cited in Walter Lowrie's "Introduction" to *Repetition*, W. Lowrie, trans. (New York: 1964), pp. 20-21.

As is implicit in Aristotle's ethics, it is by repeated movements from potentiality to actuality through choice that an individual forms his character or attains, as far as this is possible, self-realization.

The concept of movement is applied to the transformations of the self which are relevant to the spiritual or ethical development of the individual, to the qualitative changes which are brought about through choice. In describing the ethical becoming of the individual Kierkegaard relates the notion of *kinēsis* to repetition (*Gjentagelse*). Although Kierkegaard conceives of ethical repetition as a fresh renewal of the resolution to pursue an ethical *telos*, there is a sense in which this notion is not entirely foreign to certain aspects of Aristotle's conception of moral development. For one is said to acquire moral virtues through *praxis* or by virtue of repeated right action (*eupraxia*). Surely Kierkegaard agrees with Aristotle that one does not become just (or, for that matter, resolute) by knowing what justice is, but by being just, by performing just actions. Since, for Aristotle, one does not acquire a moral virtue merely by a particular occasion on which one makes a morally right choice, there is a sense in which repetition does play a role in Aristotle's concept of ethical existence. Although Kierkegaard does not explicitly say that one acquires moral virtues through habit (which, in turn, generates a disposition to act in accordance with relevant virtues *in futuro*), it seems to be the case that this notion is implicit in some of his *obiter dicta* concerning ethical existence. Thus, for example, in discussing the "ideality" of resolution, Kierkegaard remarks that it is the dominant factor in moral existence. Resoluteness "consolidates life and reassures the individual in his own mind." The act of resolution is the ethical act *par excellence*,¹⁶ an act which is an expression of human freedom and the basis for the consolidation and integration of the self which strengthens one's capacity for moral decisiveness. While Kierkegaard does tend to emphasize the novel aspect of repetition in ethical self-existence, there is a sense in which his assertion that "the goal of movement for an existing individual is to arrive at a decision, and to renew it,"¹⁷ is not entirely alien to the spirit, if not the letter, of Aristotle's account of moral development. In his account of the acquisition of moral virtues Aristotle does seem to suggest that repetitious *eupraxia* is basic to this process. Thus, he remarks that

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Ways*, W. Lowrie, trans. (New York: 1967), pp. 112-115. The energy and *pathos* which interpenetrates resolute choice or resolution receives emphasis in Kierkegaard's account of the ethical becoming of the individual because he held that "determination, decision also open up, and therefore it is also called resolving; with resolution or in the resolution the best powers of the spirit open up." Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, I, 419. Needless to say, that mode of *existentiell* (a German neologism clearly derived from Kierkegaard's expression for the "existential," *det Existentielle*) choosing which involves the "choosing to choose a kind of Being-one's-Self" which Heidegger calls *Entschlossenheit* or "resoluteness" practically corresponds to Kierkegaard's conception of resolution. Furthermore, when Heidegger remarks that "*Die Entschlossenheit ist ein ausgezeichnete Modus der Erschlossenheit*" (the ostensible etymological relationship between *Entschlossenheit* ["resoluteness"] and *Erschlossenheit* ["disclosedness"] is convenient since Heidegger states the precise relationship between these two concepts as Kierkegaard did—in this regard, it should not be overlooked that *Erschlossenheit* is derived from *erschliessen*, "to open," "to open up"), one can see what a careful student of Kierkegaard he was. Cf. *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: 1963), p. 297.

¹⁷ For *en Existerende er Bevaegelsens Maal Afgjørelse og Gjentagelse*. *Samlede Vaerker*, VII, 268.

we did not acquire the faculty of sight or hearing by repeatedly seeing or repeatedly listening, but . . . because we had the senses we began to use them. . . . The virtues on the other hand we acquire by first having actually practised them. . . . We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts. . . . Our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities.¹⁸

Aside from the pervasive influence of Aristotle's notion of *kinēsis* (modified and given anthropomorphic significance) on Kierkegaard's conception of the dialectic of life, the appropriation of the concept of potentiality, and the possible relationship between Kierkegaard's existential category of repetition and Aristotle's general conception of the acquisition of moral virtues, the apparent influence of Aristotle's thought on Kierkegaard's "dialectic of choice" is probably the most interesting and most controversial of the relationships between the two. In a recent attempt to construct an ethical interpretation of existentialism it has been argued that Kierkegaard conceives of choice as a free, self-transcending act by which an individual "makes himself by choosing himself."¹⁹ Furthermore, it is said that moral choice requires a free, unsupported flight, that it is a "non-cognitive, non-inferential movement."²⁰ This general interpretation of Kierkegaard's concept of choice is one which assumes that Kierkegaard put forward a conception of absolute freedom of choice and/or a conception of irrational choice. Before trying to indicate that this kind of interpretation is quite questionable, there is one point made in this reference to Kierkegaard that requires clarification. This will require a brief digres-

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, i, 4-7.

¹⁹ Olafson, *Principles and Persons*, p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.* In explicating this "movement" Olafson makes a statement which is quite questionable. He notes that the non-inferential, non-cognitive movement of choice is designated by Kierkegaard as "existence." In addition, it is said that man's existence is irreducible to thought or logic or to an essential nature. In illustrating this point he refers to the passage in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in which Kierkegaard says that "*Gud tænker ikke, han skaber; Gud eksisterer ikke, han er evig. Mennesket tænker og eksisterer*" ("God does not think, He creates; God does not exist, He is eternal. Man thinks and exists . . ."). The point of this remark is to indicate that only man *can* exist insofar as an authentic existence (which, for Kierkegaard, is an *entelecheia* which one should endeavor to attain) involves, amongst other things, movement, becoming (*Vorden*), temporality (*Timeligheden*), persistent striving (*Straeben*), absolute choice, the repetitious attempt to realize one's own existential possibilities, a reflection upon the ineluctability of one's death, becoming subjective, becoming a self, endeavoring to realize in one's personal existence (*personlige Eksistens*) what Kierkegaard calls in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (318) "whatever is essentially human." Resolute choice, insofar as it is individuating, is *one* manifestation of an authentic existence. Existence, for Kierkegaard, is an activity which is also the *telos* for an individual who chooses to live an authentic life. Insofar as an individual expresses this existence in actuality, he becomes "what he was meant to be" and, as Kierkegaard puts it in *Either/Or* (II, 297), "expresses at once the universal-human and the individual." Although it requires far more argumentation than space allows, I believe that it can be shown that Kierkegaard, before Unamuno and Heidegger, had suggested that the essence of man lies in existence. In this regard, Michael Wyschogrod was too facile in his dismissal of Etienne Gilson's remark that "to identify subjectivity with existence, as Kierkegaard always did, was but to turn existence into one more essence" (*Being and Some Philosophers* [Toronto: 1949], p. 188; cited in Michael Wyschogrod, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger* [New York: 1954], p. 28, n. 1). Needless to say, I believe that Gilson was on the right track even though his discussion indicates that he was a long way from understanding the precise details concerning how Kierkegaard thought the essence of man could be expressed in subjective existence. Martin Heidegger, however, did not neglect to incorporate many of these details into his ontological description of *eigentlich Existenz*.

sion from my central concern, but one which is both relevant to an understanding of Kierkegaard and to certain aspects of Aristotle's influence on his thought.

It is F. A. Olafson's understanding that Kierkegaard maintains that the individual makes himself by choosing himself. Now, in one sense, this is quite correct, but, in another, it is somewhat misleading. First of all, we must recognize that Kierkegaard makes a distinction between "aesthetic choice" (which, incidentally, is a far more likely candidate for the paradigm of "irrational choice" than the kind of choice which Kierkegaard is concerned with in *Either/Or*) and "absolute choice." An aesthetic choice is described as not being a choice in the strict sense of the word since "one chooses only for the moment, and therefore can choose something different the next moment."²¹ Such a "choice" does not commit one to any "life project" and is merely an expression of preference which was not preceded by deliberation, an emotional, fleeting, "immediate" preference. It involves a kind of passive yielding to a temporary mood, a momentary impression which is typically an *adiaphoric* matter. An absolute choice (of which the choice of oneself is an instance, even though its meaning is ambiguous in the context I am considering) is one which involves a confrontation with a significant "either/or." Although Kierkegaard first suggests that the primary either/or is the choice of good or evil, he almost immediately incorporates this into a statement of a more general either/or. That is, as he puts it, "My either/or does not in the first instance denote the choice between good and evil; it denotes the choice whereby one chooses good *and* evil/or excludes them. Here the question is under what determinants one would contemplate . . . existence and would himself live."²² What Kierkegaard means by this, I believe, is that one must choose to live in the sphere of the *ethisk* or choose to avoid understanding the world as well as one's own life in terms of ethical categories. In regard to the latter, he probably has in mind either a nihilistic mode of being or an aesthetic mode of being. What is interesting about this "absolute choice" which Kierkegaard presents as a possibility for man is that it more or less forces an individual who takes it seriously to choose to live either an authentic existence (i.e., one which requires an intensification of ethical self-consciousness) or an inauthentic mode of being which precludes an understanding of the world or of man in ethical categories, which prohibits an appeal to moral principle (and, hence, to moral judgements or expressions of approbation or misapprobation). That an absolute choice of an inauthentic mode of being is itself paradoxical (i.e., insofar as an individual who has confronted himself in self-consciousness with such a choice can never escape from the *knowledge* that he has deliberately chosen to live an inauthentic life) is testimony to Kierkegaard's ability to persuade reflective individuals that they ought to endeavor to live authentic lives. At any rate, such an absolute choice requires deliberation and reflective self-consciousness, a serious consideration of the direction that one wants one's life to take. Perhaps, in such a mode of choice, as Olafson avers, no "justificatory syllogism" is appealed to; but it is not the case that absolute choice is, in any sense, irrational. This is

²¹ *Either/Or*, II, 171. "An aesthetic choice is [properly speaking] no choice. . . . The aesthetic choice is either entirely immediate and to that extent no choice, or it loses itself in the multifarious" (*Ibid.*, pp. 170-171).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

even more apparent in the next instance of absolute choice which will be briefly discussed: that is, the absolute choice of oneself.

There is perhaps nothing else in Kierkegaard's writings that is so often misunderstood as the meaning of choosing oneself, despite the fact that his discussion of what he means in *Either/Or* is quite lucid. Kierkegaard holds that in choosing oneself the personality is consolidated, individuated, and the individual chooses himself ethically. This absolute choice of oneself means, as Kierkegaard points out *en passant*, an act whereby the individual reflects upon himself and seeks a knowledge of what he has been and is now. Kierkegaard explains that he did not use the Socratic expression *gnothi seauton* instead of "choose oneself" because this endeavor to know oneself is only the beginning of the dialectic of ethical existence, not its goal.²³ In this self-reflective activity the individual discovers both the "actual self" and the "ideal self" (or, the necessity in oneself—what one has been and is—and one's potentialities or "the possibility" in oneself). In attempting to discern the actual self, "the individual . . . becomes conscious of himself as this definite individual, with these talents, these dispositions, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, by this definite environment. . . . Being conscious of himself in this way, he assumes responsibility for all this."²⁴ For Kierkegaard, then, choosing oneself means attempting to understand the causal factors which have shaped one's actual self. It is, as he puts it in *The Sickness unto Death*, an appropriation of the necessity in oneself. Freedom, for Kierkegaard, is not, as it was for Spinoza, the "recognition of necessity"; rather, it is the recognition of the necessity in one's self (i.e., the causal factors which have conditioned one's being) and the possibility in one's self.²⁵ It is at this point in our discussion that we encounter another tangential relationship between Aristotle's and Kierkegaard's thought.

In his conception of the self and its "inner teleology" Kierkegaard repeatedly appeals to an Aristotelian conception of potentiality both in his *Papirer* and his

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 255. This view, as well as the notion that "a man who is to live ethically [must] become so radically conscious of himself that no adventitious trait escapes him" (*ibid.*, p. 258), is quite similar to some recent accounts of the role of self-knowledge in acquiring freedom for possibilities. Thus, for example, in Stuart Hampshire's discussion of the value of Spinoza's assertion that "freedom is the recognition of necessity" he remarks that it is a "misstatement of a truth" insofar as it suggests that one may become "an exception to the causal law." However, one can say that "knowledge of the factors that have been influencing my conduct without my knowledge does in itself open to me new possibilities of action. . . . I can think of the causal factors explaining my past behavior as something that I may . . . try . . . to circumvent or . . . counteract in future. . . . I have brought to the forefront . . . something that I could not even attempt either to combat or to promote, because it was working its effects in the dark . . ." (*Thought and Action* [New York: 1959], p. 190).

²⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, W. Lowrie, trans. (New York: 1954), pp. 163 ff. For Kierkegaard, the necessity (*Nød*) of the self comprises the causal factors which have shaped one's life and are factors which, for the most part, have been acquired independent of choice. At times, Kierkegaard suggests that the necessity in the self encompasses all that one has been up to the present (e.g., the "actual, imperfect self" of *Either/Or*). In general, Kierkegaard conceives of the self as a dynamic synthesis of necessity and possibility. The "potential self" alluded to in *The Sickness unto Death* is tantamount to the possible, "ideal self" which is described as the goal of ethical existence in *Either/Or*. To my mind, there is an analogy between this conception of the self and the implicit notion in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* that *Dasein* may be conceived of as a synthesis of *Faktizität* and *Möglichkeit*.

soi-disant "aesthetic works." In relatively early journal entries Kierkegaard refers to man's primordial "oughtness-capability," his "potentiality-for" (*kunnen*) a genuine ethical existence, his potentiality for becoming a self.²⁶ The presupposition of ethics is that moral self-consciousness is, in a manner of speaking, present "in" the individual. In his indirect existential communication the "existing ethicist" (in the manner of Socrates) assumes "that every human being is the same κατὰ δύναμιν."²⁷ In the teleological dialectic of the act of existence (*existere*), as opposed simply to "being there" (*vaere til*), there is a movement of the self towards the realization of one's ethical potentialities, towards individuated, authentic selfhood. The continuity of the notion of the "potential self" can be traced from the *Papirer* through most of Kierkegaard's works. The view that in an absolute choice of one-self one discovers the imperfect, actual self as well as the possible, ideal self (*Either/Or*) is recapitulated in a slightly different way in *The Sickness unto Death*. In discussing the self as a dynamic, relational synthesis, Kierkegaard avers that

a self, every instant it is, is in process of becoming, for the self κατὰ δύναμιν does not actually exist, it is only that which it is to become . . . the self is just as possible as it is necessary; for though it is itself, it has to become itself. Inasmuch as it is itself, it is the necessary, and inasmuch as it has to become itself, it is a possibility.²⁸

Of course, as I have already indicated, this projective *nisus* of the self requires subjective interest or concern (*interesse*) as a motivational basis for decisive choice. Although Kierkegaard does not specifically refer to it, there is a basis for his own conception of the relationship between the self-conscious recognition of one's potentialities and choice in Aristotle. Thus, for example, in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle discusses beings possessing "rational potencies" (*logon dunatai*) and remarks that such beings, who are capable of setting up "processes rationally," can determine the effects which are produced insofar as there is a "deciding factor"—i.e., *orexis* ("desire") or *proairesis* ("deliberate choice").²⁹ What is interesting about this passage is that Aristotle does not apply this subjective teleology to his account of man's moral evolution even though it is clear that it is man alone who truly has "rational potencies" which can be brought to fruition. For, as Aristotle puts it in the *Ethics*, neither children nor the "irrational animals" are capable of exercising choice (*proairesis*);³⁰ by implication, then, only a self-conscious, mature man is actually capable of choice. Since the possibilities about which one deliberates (in relation to ethical existence) are intimately related to one's potentialities, Kierkegaard is not idiosyncratic in referring to man's existential possibilities in terms of the notion of *dunamis*.³¹

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, I, 306-307.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

²⁸ *The Sickness unto Death*, pp. 163, 168.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, H. Tredennick, trans. (London: 1961), IX, v, 3.

³⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, ii, 2.

³¹ If this interpretation is valid, and if the relationship between Aristotle's philosophy and Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology which I have been concerned to explicate is justified, then it is not the case that a distinctive mode of human potentiality has been neglected. That is, it is not the case that "the power to do a specific thing on a particular occasion . . . is the fundamental kind of power, and of potentiality, which philosophers have tended to neglect, particularly in the context of an individual's freedom of decision" (Stuart Hampshire, *Freedom of the Individual* [New York: 1965], pp. 16-17).

It is clear, at any rate, that Kierkegaard interrelated human potentialities, the movement from potentiality to actuality and deliberate choice in terms of an Aristotelian conception of man and his unique potentialities. However, there is no evidence that Aristotle himself was entirely aware of the implications of his assumption of a subjective teleology in the *Ethics vis-à-vis* the immanent, objective teleology propounded in the *Metaphysics*. Intuitively, it would seem, Kierkegaard seized upon the distinctive character of the intentional teleology of ethical development. As he expresses it in *Either/Or*:

If there is to be any question of teleology there must be a movement, for as soon as I think of a goal I think of a movement. . . . The individual has his teleology in himself, has inner teleology, is himself his teleology. His self is . . . the goal towards which he strives. . . . Here the movement is a real movement, for it is the work of freedom.³²

This conception of a purposive movement of the individual towards a *telos* conceived of as a good is a fundamental Aristotelian notion. And, as I have already indicated, this movement is distinctive insofar as it is initiated by an agent (in contrast to the Aristotelian conception of natural beings which are "moved" in terms of a pervasive teleology to which they are subject). While Aristotle tends to conceive of deliberation—as a mode of thought—as an activity which involves a kind of movement, he notes that in regard to "productive activity" thought, in itself, moves nothing. In the movement from potentiality to actuality in man's becoming there must be a motivational *nus* which brings about qualitative change (*alloiosis*) in an individual in time.³³ It is at this point at which some relationships between Aristotle's and Kierkegaard's concept of choice can be discerned.

Before one makes an absolute, existential choice, as Kierkegaard expresses it, "the personality is already interested in the choice before one chooses."³⁴ This interest is nothing but a reflective, concerned deliberation about the "object" of choice. In Aristotle's terms, "choice involves reasoning and some process of thought" since "previous deliberation seems to be implied by the very term *proaireton*, which denotes something *chosen before*."³⁵ Lest it be thought that the attempt to relate Kierkegaard's concept of choice to Aristotle's concept of *proairesis* is arbitrary or capricious, it may be mentioned that Kierkegaard noted with interest

³² *Either/Or*, II, 278-279.

³³ Trendelenburg's view that movement, in the strict sense, must be related to time is quite faithful to Aristotle. For, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is said *ἐν χρόνῳ γὰρ πᾶσα κίνησις* (X, iv, 2). In a footnote to Aristotle's reference to "movement" in this context, H. Rackman remarks that "*κίνησις* here has its wider sense of any process of change that actualizes what is potentially. . . . In its proper sense *κίνησις* is limited to change of quality, quantity, or place" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, H. Rackman, trans. [London: 1962], p. 500, n. α). Clearly, however, Aristotle is using *κίνησις* in a *restricted* and unique sense insofar as he refers to "thought directed to an end" as "the moving cause of productive activity" (in this case, for the *telos* of *eupraxia* or "doing well") and, hence, has reference to a unique mode of movement involving only a qualitative change in the life and existence of a particular individual (or "primary substance") which is initiated by, and directed by, that individual. Again, that Kierkegaard discerned this unique applicability of the concept of movement to the transformations of the self is testimony not to philosophical eccentricity, but to his imaginative and creative interpretation of Aristotle.

³⁴ *Either/Or*, II, 168.

³⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, ii, 17.

(in his journals) that Aristotle's term could mean "forechoice" or "purpose."³⁶ In Kierkegaard's terms, *proairesis* can be understood as an anticipation of choice in subjective concern, a "movement" of the individual towards a possibility having significance for his own moral or personal development. For Kierkegaard, as well as Aristotle, concerned deliberation is a condition for the possibility of reasoned choice. To be sure, Kierkegaard averred, as did Aristotle, that there can be no deliberate or resolute choice without "desire" or *pathos*. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard remarks that "ethically the highest pathos is interested pathos, expressed through the active transformation of the individual's entire mode of existence in conformity with the object of interest."³⁷ The ethical pathos is the "pathos of resolve," not an irrational leap into the unknown. Kierkegaard agreed with Aristotle that "the irrational feelings [*ta aloga pathe*] are just as much a part of human nature as reason,"³⁸ that thought must be brought into relation to desire in order that choice take place. The *pathos* and energy of choice which Kierkegaard emphasizes in *Either/Or* is not a form of reckless passion; rather, it is interpenetrated by rational self-consciousness. While ethical existence is, indeed, concerned with the "pathos of action," Kierkegaard points out that one should not "misunderstand my talk about passion (*Lidenskab*) and *pathos* to mean that I am proclaiming any and every uncircumscribed immediacy, all manner of unshaven passion."³⁹ Just as Aristotle held that there is no action without desire, so, too, does Kierkegaard maintain that there is no "action without interest," without concern or *pathos*. As I have already indicated in my discussion of the nature of an absolute choice of oneself, Kierkegaard has recommended a rather demanding mode of self-knowledge as a pre-condition of other choices. While this emphasis upon the "how" of choice tends to shade off into the Socratic aspect of his conception of ethical existence, it is by no means a defense of a notion of "irrational choice." In regard to morally relevant action, Kierkegaard held that action is related to "a resolution thought through." For, in the absence of this "clarity of resolution," it would be more proper to say that we are acted upon or that things happen to us "rather than that we act."⁴⁰ Right action presupposes a reasonable degree of self-knowledge in order that we are assured that our actions are based upon conscientious reflections and are not "in the service of unclarified cravings."⁴¹

Just as Aristotle had argued that choice is either "thought related to desire or desire related to thought,"⁴² so, too, did Kierkegaard conceive of choice as a

³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, I, 48.

³⁷ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie, trans. (Princeton: 1941), p. 350.

³⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, i, 27.

³⁹ *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, A. Dru, trans. (London: 1938), p. 133.

⁴⁰ *Papirer*, III (C), 14.

⁴¹ *Edifying Discourses*, D. F. Swenson and L. M. Swenson, trans. (Minneapolis: 1943), IV, 23. A similar view is expressed in *Either/Or*, II 168: "when the choice is postponed the personality chooses unconsciously, or the choice is made by obscure powers within it."

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, ii, 5. Earlier in the *Ethics* Aristotle had said that "a man stops enquiring how he shall act as soon as he has carried back the origin of action . . . to the dominant part of himself [i.e., intellect or reason]." In the next paragraph, however, he describes choice as "the deliberate desire of things in our power." The concept of *proairesis* is practically synonymous with βουλευτική ὁρεξις. Hence, choice includes a non-rational motivational factor. For Kierkegaard, too, choice seems to entail a dialectical

synthesis of concerned reflection and *pathos*. I believe that James Collins is correct (up to a point) in saying that Kierkegaard "under the broad term 'will' . . . includes not only the power of resolution itself but also the operations of intellect and the passions, insofar as they are governed by a concern for . . . the actual condition of the individual."⁴³ What Kierkegaard calls the "dialectical movements" of choice seem to incorporate precisely the complex interrelationship between reason or thought and desire described by Aristotle. Certainly, it is plausible to assume that Kierkegaard did not entirely misunderstand Aristotle when he saw that the "pathetic transition" characterizing the "qualitative change" in an individual was effected by an emotional *conatus* (i.e., desire) insofar as reflection, thought, or reason *per se* is insufficient for deliberate choice. To be sure, it is not "the will" which chooses, but the psychophysical individual ("the actual self"), the person at a particular stage in his life-history. Implicitly, Kierkegaard tends to agree with Aristotle that "man is the origin of his actions."⁴⁴ While it has been argued that Aristotle's accounts of *boulēsis* and *proairesis* are attempts to proffer an account of the will,⁴⁵ this particular relationship between Aristotle's ethics and Kierkegaard's existential ethics is not central to the kind of analogies I have tried to draw.

Before turning to a discussion of some other substantial relationships between Aristotle and Kierkegaard, there are a few minor, but revealing, instances of an apparent appropriation of Aristotelian assertions. Thus, for example, what seems to be unique in Kierkegaard's practical ethics—that is, the stress upon the ethical value and significance of choice in itself—is quite similar to Aristotle's view that "choice . . . appears to be intimately connected with virtue, and to afford a surer

relationship between reasoning and *pathos*. The similarity between Aristotle's and Kierkegaard's concept of choice is even more obvious in St. Thomas Aquinas' summary of the Aristotelian analysis of choice. "The term *choice* expresses something belonging to reason or intellect, and something belonging to will. . . . It is evident that . . . reason precedes the will and directs its acts . . . in so far as the will tends to its object according to the order of reason; for the apprehensive power presents to the appetite its object. . . . Choice is substantially, not an act of reason, but of the will; for choice is accomplished in a certain movement of the soul towards [what] is chosen." *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, qu. 13, art. 1.

⁴³ James Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 75. Collins' expression "a concern for . . . the actual condition of the individual" is misleading since the category of concern is related to what one *can* become. In ethical existence one is concerned not only with one's actuality, but with one's authentic possibilities, with the realization of the "ideal self" which is the task of ethical becoming. As Kierkegaard puts it in his *Johannes Climacus*, a concerned consciousness intentionally relates "ideality" (which, in an ethical context, means what one ought to be) and "actuality" (again, in an ethical context, what one has been and is now); when "ideality is brought into relationship with actuality" possibility appears. The dialectical tension of ethical existence involves this persistent relating of the ethical "ideality" to the actual self, a process which Kierkegaard regards as fundamentally *paradoxical*. *Vide: Johannes Climacus or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, T. H. Croxall, trans. (Stanford, 1958), p. 149.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, VI, ii, 5; III, iii, 15: "It appears . . . that a man is the origin of his actions, and that the province of deliberation is to discover actions within one's own power to perform."

⁴⁵ Some interpreters of Aristotle such as A. Grant, W. D. Ross, A. K. Griffin and T. Ando have argued in defense of such a view. Cf. J. J. Walsh, *Aristotle's Conception of Moral Weakness* (New York: 1963), p. 174. In his study of Aristotle's ethics R. A. Gauthier has argued that *boulēsis* is a condition in which "appetite" is completely attended to by reason. When, however, *boulēsis* is provided by reason with the full means for its actualization, then *proairesis* occurs. R. A. Gauthier, *La Morale d'Aristote* (Paris: 1958), pp. 23-24. If this interpretation is valid, then the concept of *boulēsis* is analogical to Kierkegaard's concept of "concernful consciousness" or concerned deliberation (as distinct from the "dialectic of reflection" or objective consciousness [*objektive Reflexion*] which is disinterested).

test of character than do our actions.”⁴⁶ Again, in regard to the concept of character and its dissolution, Kierkegaard seems to be echoing Aristotle when he claims, in *Either/Or*, that where there is multiplicity in the self there is a dispersion of the self, a tendency towards immorality. This notion, as well as the view that “character is simply to be one thing,”⁴⁷ is reminiscent of Aristotle’s reference to the Pythagorean notion that “error is multiform . . . evil a form of the unlimited . . . and good of the limited,” and his quotation of a verse from an unknown source: “Goodness is simple, badness manifold.”⁴⁸

In addition to these possible influences on Kierkegaard’s thought, there is the repeated Aristotelian stress on choice insofar as “it is our choice of good or evil that determines our character,”⁴⁹ and the correlative suggestion that we tend, for the most part, to choose the good. Perhaps some of the sting of Kierkegaard’s insistence that we tend to choose the good can be removed if we juxtapose this statement with Aristotle’s first line in the *Ethics*: “Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit and choice [for some reason *proairesis* is, most often, not translated in standard versions of the *Ethics*], seems to aim at some good.”⁵⁰ This general notion that man, for the most part, seeks the good (according to his light) was certainly suggested to Kierkegaard by a variety of statements made in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this general sense, then, Kierkegaard is asserting an Aristotelian sentiment when he avers that “the ethical consists in the consciousness of wanting to do the good.”⁵¹ To be sure, this is not to say that one *cannot* choose to act in an immoral way, to choose evil. But Kierkegaard is consistent with the general orientation of Aristotle when he argues that there has perhaps been no man who ever acted exclusively in accordance with a principle of evil.⁵² For Kierkegaard, at any rate, even an individual who deliberately chooses to act immorally although he *knows* that he ought not to do so is still existing within the sphere of the ethical since he still conceives of his actions “under the determinations of good or evil.” The moral nihilist is precisely an individual who is attempting to transcend these “determinations.” The tension of ethical existence, for Kierkegaard, is man’s potentiality for good or evil; without this dual capacity he would not, in any sense of the word, be free. But this, too, is a fundamental principle of Aristotelian ethics insofar as Aristotle maintained that “virtue . . . depends on ourselves. And so . . . does vice. For where we are free to act we are free also to refrain from acting, and where we are able to say No we are also able to say Yes.”⁵³

In addition to the various factors already referred to in my explication of the

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, III, ii, 1.

⁴⁷ Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, I, 437.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, II, vi, 14. This Pythagorean notion finds explicit expression in Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death* in his description of the self. For, it is said that “to submit to the necessity in oneself [what is called, in *Either/Or*, “choosing oneself”], to what may be called one’s limit,” is necessary in order to prevent dispersal of the self in the unlimited (i.e., possibility). “Personality is a synthesis of possibility and necessity” (*The Sickness unto Death*, pp. 169, 173).

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, III, ii, 11. “And we choose . . . things we . . . know to be good.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I, i, 1.

⁵¹ *Either/Or*, II, 269.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, III, v, 2. In his *Papirer* Kierkegaard noted that “[Aristotle] . . . says . . . that free action lies totally in a man’s power” (*Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, I, 399).

relationship between Aristotle and Kierkegaard, there is one thread of influence which is clearly detectable and which is central to the existential ethics of Kierkegaard. Practically *in toto*, Kierkegaard appropriated Aristotle's conception of man as morally indeterminate. After discussing the question of the liberation of the self from a "bondage" which it itself had created, Kierkegaard refers to a passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle avers that the virtuous and the vicious man had the power to become one or the other. Since Kierkegaard seems to be quoting from memory (since his reference is not quite accurate), it is perhaps better to refer to Aristotle's original statement. In discussing the "voluntary" nature of the acquisition of virtue or vice, Aristotle argues that

it depends on us whether we are virtuous or vicious. . . . [I]t is manifest that a man is the author of his own actions, and if we are unable to trace our conduct back to any other origins than those within ourselves, then actions of which the origins are within us . . . are voluntary. . . . When you have thrown a stone, you cannot afterwards bring it back again, but nevertheless you are responsible for having . . . flung it, for the origin of the act was within you. Similarly, the unjust and the profligate might at the outset [ἐξ ἀρχῆς] have avoided becoming so, and therefore they are so voluntarily.⁵⁴

To my mind, this passage is the key to much that may appear obscure in Kierkegaard's account of ethical self-existence. For it is this notion that, *ab initio*, each man had a potentiality for virtue or for vice which pervades his emphasis upon the "decisive moment" of choice, the admonition to make an "absolute choice" in regard to the direction of one's life. It is also related to the notion that man possesses a primordial "potentiality-for" which is "originally" morally indeterminate. In this regard, it might be said that Kierkegaard endeavored to explore the meaning of this "original" condition of man before he became a moral or an immoral individual. Indeed, I believe that his appropriation of this Aristotelian notion led him to formulate his conception of a "return" to fundamental possibilities which have already been there—potentially—in the being of the individual. Furthermore, this general understanding of the becoming of the self seems intimately related to Kierkegaard's view that man is free to return to possibilities which he had not previously sought to actualize.

Aside from the possible ways in which Kierkegaard seems to have applied this notion of an original freedom of man in his philosophical anthropology, I believe that it is this same concept which lies at the heart of his emphasis upon the category of repetition. For, as Michael Wyschogrod has said, "repetition is not totally novel but . . . it is rather a combination of the old and the new in a somewhat unspecified way. . . . In repetition there is an element of the pre-existing but there is an equally present element of the new, the creative, the adventurous."⁵⁵ Is it possible

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, v, 3, 14. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, D. Swenson and H. V. Hong, trans. (Princeton, 1962), p. 21, n. 4: "The vicious and the virtuous have not indeed power over their moral actions; but at first they had the power to become either the one or the other, just as one who throws a stone has power over it until he throws it, but not afterwards."

⁵⁵ Michael Wyschogrod, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger* (New York: 1969), p. 36. An insightful summation of Kierkegaard's concept of repetition is found in George Price, *The Narrow Pass: A Study of Kierkegaard's Concept of Man* (New York: 1963), p. 199: "the self, before it can 'become,' must go back to what it once was: its possibility and its freedom to

that what remains ambiguous in Aristotle's conception of moral development (e.g., what the precise meaning of the phrase "at the outset" is, what this potentiality for becoming a self or for losing oneself means in terms of an ontology of man) was appropriated by Kierkegaard and transformed into his conceptions of existential possibility and of repetition? Is there implicit in Aristotle's conception of human self-realization the notion that the repeated movements from potentiality to actuality require repeated free acts of deliberate choice insofar as there appears to be a *caesura* in the movements of the self from possibility to actuality which can only be overcome by a fresh choice? Perhaps such questions cannot be answered with confidence. That they can be raised—legitimately, I believe—is additional testimony to the relationship, as diffuse as it may be at certain points, between various aspects of Aristotle's ethics and what many would regard as the antipode of that ethics—Kierkegaard's existential ethics.

Bearing in mind the various *Existenzkategorien* which have already been discussed (e.g., choice, concern, qualitative change, becoming, repetition, etc.), there is perhaps no other passage in Kierkegaard's writings which brings together in significant relationship so many Aristotelian notions as the following one from *Philosophical Fragments*. In discussing "coming-into-existence" (not originally, but in terms of the origination of a project or an action), Kierkegaard asks:

In what sense is there change in that which comes into existence? Or, what is the nature of the coming-into-existence kind of change (κίησις)? Qualitative change (ἀλλοίωσις) presupposes the existence of that which changes. . . . This coming-into-existence kind of change . . . is not a change in essence, but in being. . . . But this non-being which the subject of coming into existence leaves behind must itself have some sort of being . . . for every change presupposes something which changes. But such a being which is nevertheless a non-being, is precisely what possibility is; and a being which is being is indeed actual being or actuality; and the change of coming into existence is a transition from possibility to actuality.⁵⁶

In this appropriation of Aristotelian categories Kierkegaard simultaneously handled two problems with which he was confronted. On the one hand, he had a philosophical argument against the Hegelian notion that "necessity is a synthesis

be what it was meant to be must be restored to it. Therefore it moves forward by becoming what it once was." It is instructive to note Martin Heidegger's facility in incorporating Kierkegaard's insights into his fundamental ontology of *Dasein*. Thus, it is said that "Dass die Entschlossenheit ausdrücklich und die Herkunft der Möglichkeiten weiss, auf die sie sich entwirft, ist nicht notwendig. . . . Die auf sich zurückkommende, sich überliefernde Entschlossenheit wird dann zur 'Widerholung' einer überkommenen Existenzmöglichkeit. Die Wiederholung ist die ausdrückliche Überlieferung, das heisst der Rückgang in Möglichkeiten des dagewesenen Daseins" (*Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: 1963], p. 385).

⁵⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 90-91. Lest it be thought that this passage represents only the views of the pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, or is merely a fragment from an "aesthetic work," it may be useful to point out that Kierkegaard (with no disclaimer) presented similar views in his *Papirer*. Thus, he notes that "This change, coming-into-existence [e.g., of a plan or project] is from non-being to being [*ikke at være til at være*]. But this non-being from which it is changed must be a kind of being [*en Art af Væren*], because otherwise we could not say that the subject of coming into existence remains unchanged in coming into existence. But such a being which is nevertheless a non-being we certainly could call possibility [*Mulighed*], and the being into which the subject of coming into existence goes by coming into existence is actuality [*Virkeligheden*]" (*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, I, 111).

of possibility and actuality” or that there is a necessitarian structure to all becoming and, on the other hand, he had the language by which to describe the dynamic movements of the self from possibility to actuality in temporality by which an individual strives for self-transformation or, in a manner of speaking, achieves a μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος. It is clear, at any rate, that it was by virtue of Aristotle’s metaphysical categories that Kierkegaard found the Ariadne’s thread which enabled him to escape from the necessitarian labyrinth of Hegelian metaphysics. Even the emphasis upon the radical contingency of human existence had its prolepsis in certain aspects of Aristotle’s metaphysics. Thus, for example, in discussing the perishability of what is potential, Aristotle remarks that “everything which is potential may fail to be actualized. Therefore that which is capable of being may both be and not be. Therefore the same entity is capable of both being and not being. But that which is capable of not being may possibly not be; and that which may possibly not be is perishable.”⁵⁷ By rescuing the contingency of man’s becoming from the jaws of Hegelian necessity (“All coming into existence takes place with freedom”), Kierkegaard had to pay the price of the radical *Zufälligkeit* of man’s existence. Obviously, it was not too high a price to pay for the preservation of man’s finite freedom, his freedom to do what is in his power to do.

The shadow of Aristotle falls upon almost every purely philosophical page Kierkegaard wrote. By virtue of his imaginative and impressionistic interpretation of Aristotle, Kierkegaard managed to inject a strain of Aristotelian thought into the heart of existentialism. To be sure, there are significant differences between Kierkegaard and Aristotle (especially in terms of the ultimate goal of ethical existence), differences which should not be overlooked. However, the significant lines of influence cannot be denied and should not be ignored, especially by those who implicitly *oppose* the rationalism of Aristotle to the “irrationalism” of a Kierkegaard. What is of philosophical interest in Kierkegaard’s assimilation of Aristotle’s thought is that he was able, in his eclectic manner, to synthesize specific aspects of the *Metaphysics* (giving them a purely anthropomorphic coloring) and the *Nicomachean Ethics* and resynthesize them in the crucible of existential *pathos*.

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⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, H. Tredennich, trans. (London: 1961), IX, viii, 15-16.