



Kierkegaard: A Phenomenologist?

*An exploration of Kierkegaard's relation to Husserl and Heidegger's
phenomenology*

M.A. thesis

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the connection between Kierkegaard and phenomenology. As is well known, Kierkegaard is a complex and peculiar figure in the history of philosophy and his contribution, although significant, is the subject of widely different views and appraisals. This is partly due to his, at times, very complicated style wherein it can be quite difficult for his reader to be sure he has grasped his meaning and intention sufficiently. But his contribution also extends beyond philosophy and is to be seen in religion and literature. Kierkegaard is, perhaps, most famous for being one of the earliest examples of a new philosophical movement which later came to be called existentialism. His contribution to existentialism is generally considered to be so significant that he has often been proclaimed to be the father of the tradition. It is also well known that existentialism has strong ties to phenomenology as some of the same key philosophers played a large part in developing and shaping both movements. But this connection, between Kierkegaard and the phenomenological movement, although certainly recognized, is one which has been investigated to a lesser degree.

When it comes to phenomenology things aren't quite so straightforward either. It is a movement wherein the very foundations have been subject to extensive critique almost from the very beginning, making it difficult to understand phenomenology as a consistent tradition which agrees on core concerns. The difficulty in getting a good grasp on phenomenology lies to a large extent in the fact that its many adherents, such as Husserl and Heidegger which will be discussed in the following but also others, do not necessarily agree on its fundamental principles. Because of this phenomenology itself has been under constant revision and reinvention, so much so that some commentators have denied that it can be spoken of as a coherent, unified philosophical movement at all.

But I will, in the following, hope to show that there are certain core principles which are at the very basis of phenomenology, and these principles and concerns are very similar to ones which are to be found in Kierkegaard's writings. This connection between phenomenology and Kierkegaard has been recognized previously, such as by Merleau-Ponty in his famous introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception*. There he claims that phenomenology is a manner of practicing philosophy which had long been employed before it

attained self-awareness, and takes Kierkegaard as an example of this.¹ But what precisely is Kierkegaard's relation to phenomenology? Is there some way we can view Kierkegaard as a phenomenologist, and his manner of practicing philosophy as phenomenological? Could Kierkegaard's writings be of benefit to phenomenologists? These are the questions which I seek to explore in the following by focusing on key elements in Kierkegaard's philosophy on the one hand, and in the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger on the other.

In the first chapter I will explore the phenomenological method as it is developed and practiced by its two leading exponents, Husserl and Heidegger. I will explore their view of phenomenology and their chief concerns which are not completely identical. Nevertheless, I also seek to show that even though there are, at times, vast differences between their respective conceptions of phenomenology, there are also agreements on fundamental points which justify speaking of phenomenology in the singular.

In the second chapter the focus will be on a fundamental aspect of Kierkegaard's philosophy, his notion that truth is subjectivity to be found in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. I will explore this notion, along with Kierkegaard's peculiar manner of presenting his ideas, because I want to claim that it has deep similarities to fundamental concerns of Husserl. This chapter will therefore be a comparison between the Danish philosopher and the founder of phenomenology, and the points of connection between them.

In the third chapter I will explore the connection between Kierkegaard and Heidegger, especially when it comes to their view of society and the social aspect of existences' effect on the subject. Here I hope to show that there is a very strong connection between the two as certain central concepts of Kierkegaard's in this regard are lifted almost completely by Heidegger and used by him in his phenomenological ontology as I will discuss.

The fourth chapter will be devoted to exploring Kierkegaard's method and style of practicing philosophy. The purpose of this exploration is to show that his method has very close similarities to the phenomenological method. I will seek to show this by concentrating on three of Kierkegaard's main works, *Either/Or*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *The Sickness unto Death*. I want to claim that by his devotion to description Kierkegaard is very much in line with the spirit of phenomenology.

¹ Merleau-Ponty 2008: viii

For the remainder of this introduction, I want to briefly explore the historical connection between Kierkegaard and phenomenology as they might be instructive to keep in mind during the following discussion, as well as be useful in setting the stage for the more detailed exploration that will be carried out in the subsequent chapters.

Husserl and Heidegger's assessment of Kierkegaard.

It might seem strange at first hand that Husserl would concern himself with reading Kierkegaard given their, at first sight, substantially different outlooks and concerns. Yet, it has come to light that the founder of phenomenology not only read the Danish philosopher, but seemed to take him very seriously indeed. Leon Shestov, a Russian philosopher and associate of Husserl's at a later stage in his life, claimed that he was all but ordered to read Kierkegaard by Husserl. Shestov commented: "Husserl...seems to have become acquainted with Kierkegaard...during the last years of his life...it seems clear that Kierkegaard's ideas deeply impressed him."²

This seeming enthusiasm is quite strange as Kierkegaardian themes and ideas are certainly not immediately apparent in Husserl's phenomenological works. Shestov further claimed that:

Learning that I had never read Kierkegaard, Husserl began not to ask but to demand – with enigmatic insistence – that I acquaint myself with the works of the Danish thinker. How is it that a man whose whole life had been a celebration of reason should have led me to Kierkegaard's hymn to the absurd?³

Of course, these remarks could be interpreted in any number of different ways. They certainly do not prove, or not even necessarily indicate that Husserl's phenomenology is in any way

² Shestov, quoted in Michau 2006: 11.

³ Shestov, quoted in Dooley 2010: 170

indebted to Kierkegaard. In order to demonstrate a definite link between phenomenology and Kierkegaard the works of both respective philosophers need to be studied closely, which I propose to do in later chapters. Nevertheless, these remarks are highly intriguing and worth mentioning, if only because we need not speculate if Husserl ever read Kierkegaard, we know so definitively. This speculation of Shestov's, why Husserl was so enthusiastic about Kierkegaard, is also one which I hope to possibly shed some light on in the following.

If we move over to Heidegger, there is a much more visible debt to Kierkegaard, not only in private conversation or in enthusiastic outbursts, but a connection and debt to his actual philosophy and conception of phenomenology. In a famous and much discussed footnote in *Being and Time*, Heidegger evaluates Kierkegaard in the following way:

In the nineteenth century, Soren Kierkegaard explicitly seized upon the problem of existence as an existentiell problem, and thought it through in a penetrating fashion. But the existential problematic was so alien to him that, as regards his ontology, he remained completely dominated by Hegel and by ancient philosophy as Hegel saw it. Thus, there is more to be learned philosophically from his "edifying" writings than from his theoretical ones – with the exception of his treatise on the concept of anxiety.⁴

The tone of Heidegger's comment, although one of a certain level of respect, also seems to seek to downplay Kierkegaard somewhat. It is also interesting that Heidegger more specifically targets Kierkegaard's philosophical works for criticism and recommends rather the more religious ones, the edifying or upbuilding discourses which are generally considered to be much more rooted in Christian dogma and less inclined to philosophical argumentation. In another section of his major work, Heidegger writes of Kierkegaard: "S. Kierkegaard is probably the one who has seen the *existentiell* phenomenon of the moment of vision with the most penetration; but this does not signify that he has been correspondingly successful in interpreting it existentially."⁵ In the fourth chapter I will consider more closely the differences that Heidegger is here referring to, but suffice to say, he does seem to want to keep Kierkegaard at a certain arm's length. This is verified in his seemingly rather condescending

⁴ Heidegger 1962: 235 n.vi

⁵ Heidegger 1962: 338 n. iii

remark that: “For Kierkegaard is not a thinker but a religious writer, and not just one religious writer among others but the only one who accords with the destiny of his age“⁶ Here Heidegger, even though he does exhibit a certain level of respect for Kierkegaard, still goes so far as to deny him philosophical status altogether. In Heidegger’s assessment Kierkegaard is a “religious writer”, not a philosopher. This is a peculiar remark from Heidegger considering the fact that many scholars have decisively shown Heidegger to be heavily indebted to Kierkegaard⁷, a subject which will be discussed further at a later stage.

How should we understand these remarks? It seems very likely indeed that Heidegger tried to deliberately disguise his debt to Kierkegaard as others have commented on.⁸ This can be seen first and foremost in his surprisingly sparse comments on Kierkegaard in his major work, *Being and Time*, even though his debt is clearly visible. As we shall see later Heidegger’s thought is in many ways inextricably linked to key works of Kierkegaard’s, most notably and obviously *The Concept of Anxiety*. This subject will be discussed in more detail in the fourth and fifth chapters, my intent for now is only to highlight the complex and ambiguous connection that Heidegger has to Kierkegaard. What is certain, however, is that Heidegger did study Kierkegaard’s works seriously.

But what of Kierkegaard’s appraisal of phenomenology? Of course, we have to reconstruct and interpret what view he would have of the movement founded by Husserl, if he had lived long enough to become acquainted with it, based on his thought and writings. But there is a certain earlier form of phenomenology that he was without any doubt very familiar with. This is, of course, the one utilized by his famous opponent Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although the concept employed by Hegel is certainly not identical to the one Husserl used, it should nevertheless be helpful to consider briefly the differences and understand what form of phenomenology Kierkegaard was acquainted with.

Hegel’s phenomenology, which is put to use in his above mentioned work, concerns itself with the dialectical development of self-consciousness through historical change. For Hegel, the subject sees itself at an early stage in history as fragmented and devoid of unity and wholeness. Through a dialectical interaction with the object, self-consciousness raises its

⁶ Heidegger 2002: 186

⁷ For example: Caputo 2006: 328

⁸ For example: Rockmore 1992: 20, Weltz 2012, Dreyfus 2001: 299, Poole 2007: 52

awareness through a gradual process of negation and synthesis to the level of what Hegel termed spirit (*Geist*). The whole of history is absolute spirit coming to its own, reaching self-awareness, in consciousness through art, religion and philosophy. Hegel, in essence, views historical change as the gradual education of consciousness: “The series of configurations which consciousness goes through along this road is, in reality, the detailed history of the *education* of consciousness itself to the standpoint of Science.”⁹

How is phenomenology to be understood here? What Hegel shares with the movement that later came to adopt the name is an investigation of „phenomena“, from the standpoint of the subject. But it is only in this very general and broad respect that they overlap. What concerns Hegel is to develop a certain propaedeutic of philosophy (a concern he inherits from Kant) and in order to do this he sets out to describe the historical, dialectical development of the subject and how objects appear to it through progressive, mutual changes. He lays out different shapes of consciousness, different forms of self-understanding, and their respective phenomenology, that is to say, how phenomena appear in different stages of dialectical development. It is in this sense that Hegel’s major work employs a “phenomenological” method. In explaining his method, Hegel states: “Since our object is phenomenal knowledge, its determinations too will at first be taken directly as they present themselves; and they do present themselves very much as we have already apprehended them.”¹⁰

This work was very familiar to Kierkegaard who studied Hegel’s works intensely. The Danish philosopher’s distaste for the great systematician has gone down in history as one of the greatest philosophical antagonisms. Yet, while it is certainly quite true that Kierkegaard felt it necessary to attempt to subvert the system philosophy of his time and the overreliance on what he calls objective reflection, he had a much more complex relationship to Hegel than is generally known. A vast literature has been written on this peculiar relationship and it has been made more problematic than previously assumed.¹¹ For one thing, Kierkegaard himself is a very dialectical thinker and he owes much to Hegel in that respect. But later commentators have also shed light on certain influences of Hegel in Kierkegaard’s writings themselves. For example, Weltz has written about the influence of Hegel’s dialectical phenomenology on Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*.¹² This particular work, and its

⁹ Hegel 1977: 50

¹⁰ Hegel 1977: 53

¹¹ For a good overview of this topic see: Westphal: 2007.

¹² Weltz 2012

alleged use of a certain type of phenomenology, will be discussed in the fifth chapter. I merely want to highlight this connection at this stage in order to show that Kierkegaard is from the outset not necessarily as distant to phenomenology as it might seem at first.

So far, we have established that Kierkegaard was certainly read and appreciated by both Husserl and Heidegger and that Kierkegaard was familiar with, and possibly to a certain extent, influenced by a certain type of earlier phenomenology. It will be the topic of later chapters precisely to what extent Kierkegaard's philosophy can be said to presuppose or even compliment phenomenology. I will begin, in the following chapter, by investigating features of Kierkegaard's philosophy which are closely related to Husserl's phenomenology.

2. The Phenomenological Movement: Husserl and Heidegger

As I pointed out in the introduction, phenomenology is a difficult movement to grasp as it has a complex history of revision and reinterpretation by the various followers of Husserl. In order to investigate Kierkegaard's relationship to the movement we must be clear on what precisely phenomenology entails. I will begin by focusing on Husserl's formulation of phenomenology before I move on to Heidegger's critique and reinterpretation. In the end I will show that, despite differences between Husserl and Heidegger, there are certain common concerns and commitments which both share and make it possible to speak of phenomenology as a unified philosophical tradition.

Husserl's formulation of phenomenology

The most obvious difference between Husserl's phenomenology and Kierkegaard is most likely the fact that Husserl wanted to reshape philosophy as a rigorous science. As early as his influential *Logical Investigations*, Husserl was concerned with grounding knowledge by giving it an unshakeable footing, and defending it from attacks, most notably from the movement known as psychologism. As Husserl explains his project in the aforementioned work: "The outcome of our investigation of this point will be the delineation of a new, purely theoretical science, the all-important foundation for any technology of scientific knowledge, and itself having the character of an a priori, purely demonstrative science."¹³ Although Husserl came to revise his position and key concepts many times over the course of his philosophical career, this fundamental project was in a certain sense the underlying motive of his thinking.

What Husserl hoped to achieve was to develop a presuppositionless philosophy that would clear the ground for knowledge, showing it to be fully and completely justified and not open to skepticism. In this way it would reveal the basis for all human knowledge, including the sciences which presuppose the ground which Husserl wants to investigate without giving it any thorough investigation. What Husserl felt was needed was to simply describe

¹³ Husserl 2008: 14

experience as it is experienced and avoiding any distorting influences from our pre-given knowledge of how we assume things “really are”. While developing the phenomenological method which would serve this task, Husserl proclaims as a guiding light the principle of all principles for this discipline, a methodological rule for phenomenology which he describes in the following manner: “everything originarily offered to us in intuition is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there”¹⁴ In short, nothing extra is to be allowed to slip in and influence our description if we are to investigate experience in its givenness, precisely how it actually is experienced, nothing more or less.

A key insight for Husserl, one that he inherited from his teacher Brentano, is the fact that consciousness is always consciousness *of something*. Every activity of thought always has a certain directedness towards an object. This is true not only of what we would normally consider as objects, such as a book, but also in the case of non-existent objects (a unicorn is a frequent example). This feature of consciousness, its necessary aboutness and object-directedness, Husserl calls intentionality and gives it central significance. Husserl describes this unique feature of consciousness in his *Cartesian Meditations* in the following manner: “Conscious processes are also called intentional; but then the word intentionality signifies nothing else than this universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness of something; as a *cogito*, to bear within itself its *cogitatum*.”¹⁵

Therefore, for Husserl, the slogan of phenomenology is “returning to the things themselves”, that is to say, investigating how objects show up in our experience, how we intend them. The area of investigation for phenomenology is everything and anything that appears before consciousness, whatever it may be, real or imagined. These experiences, or rather, the manner in which the experience intends its object, reveal in turn how objects are given to consciousness objectively, how objectivity itself is constituted. By investigating our experience phenomenologically, Husserl seeks to ground knowledge by uncovering universal structures of consciousness, structures which apply to any and all experiences. Furthermore, in so doing he seeks to combat various forms of skepticism which, for him, had plagued philosophy for too long and led to innumerable misunderstandings and difficulties. Phenomenology was for him not only a new, novel way of doing philosophy but an essential

¹⁴ Husserl 1982: 44

¹⁵ Husserl 1999: 33

task in that it uncovers heretofore hidden aspects: “Once we have laid hold of the phenomenological task of describing consciousness concretely, veritable infinities of facts – never explored prior to phenomenology – become disclosed.”¹⁶

The way to bring forth these features of consciousness is through the method Husserl calls the reduction. There are essentially two forms of separate, but complementary, reductions which together constitute the *phenomenological* reduction.¹⁷ The first reduction consists of what Husserl also calls the *epoché*. By this concept he means a certain method to allow us to describe our experience in its givenness. The method “brackets”, or puts temporarily on hold, our “natural attitude” about our experiences and environment. The natural attitude consists of certain assumptions that we all subscribe to, consciously or not. It is the way the world and the objects in it usually show up for us in experience, the way they are given to us without reflection. This attitude everybody presupposes, even the sciences. Husserl describes this attitude in the following manner in *Ideas I*:

I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space, endlessly becoming and having endlessly become in time. I am conscious of it: that signifies, above all, that intuitively I find it immediately, that I experience it. By my seeing, touching, hearing, and so forth, and in the different modes of sensuous perception corporeal physical things are *simply there for me*, “*on hand*” in the literal or the figurative sense, whether or not I am particularly heedful of them and busied with them in my considering, thinking, feeling, or willing.¹⁸

These assumptions, in effect, work as pre-conceptions which influence and distort our experience in its givenness. For this reason these prejudices and assumptions, even our assumption about the very existence of the world, must be temporarily turned off and only the experience itself described. This we achieve by employing the *epoché*, an operation which

¹⁶ Husserl 1999: 41

¹⁷ It is a matter of some debate how many reductions Husserl envisaged, due to some confusion and lack of clarity in his own writings, so other commentators would likely disagree with the above description of the reductions. But here I have understood the *phenomenological* reduction as consisting of two separate but related moves, the transcendental reduction (including the *epoché* as the condition for it) on the one hand, and the eidetic reduction on the other. This interpretation is supported by: Føllesdal 2009: 112.

¹⁸ Husserl 1982: 51

deactivates the natural attitude momentarily so our experience can be described without any pre-conceptions. But this should not be understood as somehow doubting the existence of the world, which would be a form of skepticism. Rather, Husserl wants to claim that it opens up to us a new field of (phenomenological) investigation, a field which the natural attitude, in a sense, closes off or inhibits. As Husserl describes the *epoché*, it:

...therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary we gain possession of something by it; and what we (or, to speak more precisely what I, the one who is meditating) acquire by it is my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them, purely as meant in them: the universe of “phenomena” in the (particular and also the wider) phenomenological sense.¹⁹

Although the *epoché* is an essential first step, it makes a further one possible, the transcendental reduction. This is a move which leads us back to the way in which the ego, which the *epoché* reveals to be transcendent, constitutes the natural world and the objects in it. According to Husserl, it reveals the transcendental ego as the foundation from which all meaning and knowledge derives. This reduction reveals how the ego is not merely an object that has the same or similar status to others in the world, but is rather foundational to them. As Husserl describes this unique status of the ego: “..consciousness has, in itself, a being of its own which in its own absolute sense, is not touched by the phenomenological exclusion. It therefore remains as the “*phenomenological residuum*,” as a region of being which is of essential necessity quite unique and which can indeed become the field of a science of a novel kind: phenomenology.[Italics in original]”²⁰

This move makes Husserl’s position a transcendental idealism, which claims that the world is constituted by us and our experience of it. Our experience of the world is inextricably tied up with how it is. As Husserl claims: “Every rightness comes from evidence, therefore from our transcendental subjectivity itself; every imaginable adequation originates as our verification, is our synthesis, has in us its ultimate transcendental basis.”²¹ But these features

¹⁹ Husserl 1999: 20-21

²⁰ Husserl 1982: 65-66

²¹ Husserl 1999: 60

of Husserlian phenomenology have been misunderstood quite frequently. One of the central concepts Husserl employs in this connection is constitution which we must get a sufficient grasp on. It has sometimes been misunderstood as the transcendental subject, through creativity, somehow constructing the world.²² Although Husserl is admittedly rather vague on this point, Dan Zahavi offers a more coherent interpretation. For him: “Constitution must be understood as a process that allows for manifestation and signification, that is, it must be understood as a process that permits that which is constituted to appear, unfold, articulate, and show itself as what it is.”²³ So, although the subject constitutes the world according to Husserl, it is not through a creative process. The transcendental subject should rather be understood as the place where objects and the world manifest themselves. The subject is for precisely this reason the center of attention for phenomenology, it is only in connection with it that anything in the world can be properly investigated.

Another feature of Husserlian phenomenology, which came increasingly to the fore as his philosophy developed, has also been misunderstood and misinterpreted quite frequently, namely the transcendental element. Some have even opted to dismiss or discard it altogether. But Husserl would claim that this would be a serious misunderstanding of what he is trying to achieve, the transcendental element is absolutely essential to phenomenology, as Husserl himself declared: “Only someone who misunderstands either the deepest sense of intentional method, or that of transcendental reduction, or perhaps both, can attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism.”²⁴

The second, complimentary, reduction is the eidetic reduction or what Husserl sometimes calls eidetic variation. This reduction is performed by drawing out the essentiality of an object. To put it another way, we analyze an object and isolate the features that make up the object, the features that it necessarily has to have in order to be classified as that form of object. In employing the eidetic reduction we are performing a certain type of conceptual variation: “The variation being meant as an evident one, accordingly as presenting in pure intuition the possibilities themselves as possibilities, its correlate is an *intuitive and apodictic consciousness of something universal*.”²⁵ In this way, by investigating possibilities through our imaginative variation of the fundamental features of objects, we can uncover universal

²² Zahavi 2003: 72

²³ Zahavi 2003: 73

²⁴ Husserl 1999: 86

²⁵ Husserl 1999: 71

structures inherent in objects, something which is easily missed if a proper investigation is not carried out.

As previously mentioned, these two (or three, depending on interpretation) movements make up together what Husserl labeled the phenomenological reduction. It reveals, or gives us access to, the transcendence of the ego, its existing prior to, and being foundational for, the world. As Husserl claims: “After transcendental reduction, my true interest is directed to my pure ego, to the uncovering of this *de facto* ego.”²⁶ For Husserl, all knowledge is grounded in the subjective experience of the subject. The objects of consciousness, objects understood in the wide sense as whatever appears before consciousness whether real or imagined, are constituted by it, and it is precisely this experience which must be investigated and described if phenomenology is to become the foundational discipline for objective knowledge. What Husserl seeks to uncover are the eidetic, universal structures of consciousness from which objective knowledge derives, the conditions of experience itself.

But this is not to say that Husserlian phenomenology is exclusively concerned with the investigation of consciousness as might perhaps be thought after the above overview. Husserl was very much concerned with straightening out the misunderstanding that his phenomenology was a form of descriptive psychology or a form of introspection. Phenomenology is not solely concerned with the subject. He wants to investigate any possible knowledge, including that of others and the world, the point is rather that consciousness must be taken into account as that which constitutes the world, and thereby our knowledge of others, if this is to be done sufficiently. That is also why, as mentioned above, any attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism would, for him, be a mistake. As he puts it:

Every imaginable sense, every imaginable being, whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent, falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity, as the subjectivity that constitutes sense and being. The attempt to conceive the universe of true being as something lying outside the universe of possible consciousness, possible knowledge, possible evidence, the two being related to one another merely externally by a rigid law, is nonsensical.²⁷

²⁶ Husserl 1999: 72

²⁷ Husserl 1999: 84

Indeed, Husserl placed increasing importance on the role of intersubjectivity and reached the conclusion, in the *Cartesian Meditations*, that objectivity is intersubjectively constituted, that is to say, not solely constituted by the transcendental ego in isolation from other egos.²⁸

Therefore he was very much aware of the problem of solipsism and any attempt to characterize phenomenology as such is a severe misunderstanding. Even though the investigation always takes the transcendental ego as a starting point the goal is very much to elucidate and illuminate the problem of how knowledge of others and the world is possible and constituted by the ego. Husserl is rather clearing the foundation so we can understand how these forms of knowledge are possible. As he claims at the end of his *Cartesian Meditations*:

Thus the investigations concerning the transcendental constitution of a world, which we have roughly indicated in these meditations, are precisely *the beginning of a radical clarification of the sense and origin* (or of the sense in consequence of the origin) *of the concepts: world, Nature, space, time, psychophysical being, man, psyche, animate organism, social community, culture, and so forth.* [Italics in original]²⁹

Although the above discussed features of phenomenology are cornerstones of Husserlian phenomenology, they were both fundamentally reworked by Heidegger immediately following Husserl. It is important for the following discussion that we keep in mind the differences separating Husserl and Heidegger in methodology as well as aim, as Kierkegaard's relevancy may apply only to the one and not the other.

Heidegger's revision of phenomenology

²⁸ Husserl 1999: 150-151

²⁹ Husserl 1999: 154

Perhaps the biggest difference between Heidegger and Husserl is the very object of investigation and the goal which is to be achieved. Whereas Husserl wanted to uncover universal structures of consciousness by investigating experience in its givenness, Heidegger reformulated phenomenology as an ontological investigation, that is to say, the investigation of the meaning of Being. Heidegger, in his major work *Being and Time*, wants to investigate the question of Being using, to some extent, the phenomenological tools developed by Husserl, but he understands them differently. For Heidegger, the way to proceed in this ontological direction is to first analyze the existential structures of the subject, Dasein, as it is the only Being whose Being is a question for it, and to whom an understanding of Being essentially belongs: “This guiding activity of taking a look at Being arises from the average understanding of Being in which we always operate and *which in the end belongs to the essential constitution of Dasein itself.*”³⁰

Another departure from Husserl lies in the fact that Heidegger implements a certain (he would claim) necessary element of hermeneutics into his phenomenology, which he claims is essential to the investigation. It is necessary because this hermeneutical element must be taken into account in any proper understanding of Dasein. Dasein always interprets its surroundings and itself and this prior, pre-given understanding which is always already in place before an investigation is begun, must be explicated if Being is to be sufficiently investigated. Dasein always has some prior understanding of its own Being, its place in the world, and the Being of other entities. Before any investigation is undertaken and in order to investigate this area of Dasein’s Being, a hermeneutic of Dasein in its everydayness is essential.³¹

Heidegger disagrees with Husserl in this respect. Heidegger denies that Husserl’s natural attitude is very “natural” at all. If we recall Husserl’s description of it above, he claims it is the assumptions which are given to us unknowingly, among them the claims derived from the sciences concerning how the objects we experience “really are”. But Heidegger denies this is the default attitude from which we start and which we inhabit in our daily life. We do not first experience objects as Husserl described them, we rather experience them in a practical manner first, we experience objects as something we can use, in a way Heidegger calls ready-to-hand. Only later, for example when the object in question doesn’t function properly, do we

³⁰ Heidegger 1962: 27-28

³¹ Heidegger, quoted in Carman 2006:109

adopt a more distant standpoint, seeing them as what Heidegger calls present-at-hand.³² Heidegger therefore disagrees in a certain sense with Husserl's starting point in investigating the subject. In criticizing Husserl's natural attitude he says: "How am I given in the natural attitude in Husserl's description? I am 'a real object like others in the natural world', that is, like houses, tables, trees, mountains. Human beings thus occur *realiter* in the world, among them I myself."³³ For Heidegger this is not a proper understanding of the subject or the correct starting point for a phenomenology which wants to be presuppositionless.

But what role exactly does phenomenology play in Heidegger's reformulation of the movement and how does he understand the concept? For Heidegger, phenomena is understood as: "that which shows itself in itself."³⁴ But the phenomenologist always already inhabits a certain understanding of the phenomena in question and seeks to organize and interpret it to reveal the prior understanding that underlies it. Heidegger claims: "Just because the phenomena are... for the most part not given, there is need for phenomenology."³⁵ This revealing is important and yet problematic because Dasein can often have misguided assumptions about its own Being: "Interpretation which sets itself the goal of exhibiting the phenomena in their primordially, *should capture the Being of this entity, in spite of this entity's own tendency to cover things up.*"³⁶ So, this pre-given understanding which is in the background of Dasein's everyday understanding of itself and its surroundings must, in a certain way be "wrested" from it, an activity that Heidegger describes as a certain form of violence.³⁷

What happens to intentionality in Heidegger's ontological reformulation of phenomenology? Essentially, Heidegger wants to contest that intention is only an act performed by consciousness in the way Husserl understood it and stresses rather the practical activity of Dasein, how objects in its surroundings show up as ready-to-hand first. This activity is always performed in, and derives its meaning from, a certain social context and surrounding, with an underlying, pre-given understanding.³⁸ In another work, *Basic Problems*

³² Heidegger 1962: 114-116

³³ Heidegger 1962: 37-38

³⁴ Heidegger 1962: 54

³⁵ Heidegger 1962: 60

³⁶ Heidegger 1962: 359

³⁷ Heidegger 1962: 359

³⁸ Heidegger 1962: 73

of *Phenomenology*, he criticizes Husserl's conception of intentionality as being understood in an entirely too subjectivized fashion, downplaying or neglecting the practical activity and context always surrounding the intentional act. He claims: "The usual conception of intentionality misunderstands that toward which – in the case of perception – the perceiving directs itself. Accordingly, it also misconstrues the structure of the self-directedness-toward, the intention. This misinterpretation lies in *an erroneous subjectivizing* of intentionality."³⁹ Heidegger seeks to reveal that there is a lot more going on in intentionality than Husserl gave account of. What needs to be more fully emphasized is the role prior, background understanding and social context has on any understanding the subject (Dasein) has of its own Being and environment. For Heidegger, what Husserl failed to emphasize properly was to what great extent the environment, our social context, shapes us and our understanding.⁴⁰

Instead of Husserl's notion of intentionality, understood as a subjective act of consciousness, Heidegger emphasizes the concept comportment. Heidegger understands comportment as Dasein's directedness towards specific goals or ends in its everyday being. This comportmental character of Dasein belongs to its ontological constitution.⁴¹ This notion is preferable to Husserl's understanding of intentionality because it takes into account the practical activity of Dasein. Intentionality in Husserl's sense falls into the category of comportment but comportment takes into account a wider sphere of Dasein's existence which intentionality presupposes. Heidegger claims: "As structure of comportments, intentionality is itself a structure of the self-comporting subject. It is intrinsic to the manner of being of the self-comporting subject as the comportmental character of this comportmental relationship."⁴²

Here we must be careful not to misunderstand Heidegger and his critique. Even though he seems to prioritize the practical over the theoretical, it would be a mistake to think that he wants to privilege practical intentionality over theoretical. He does put increased focus on the practical in his writings, but this is because that element had been neglected previously. Instead of wanting to reverse the priority of the theoretical, he wants to problematize this

³⁹ Heidegger 1988: 63-64

⁴⁰ It is a matter of some debate how apt this criticism of Heidegger's is. It would apply to the early Husserl of the *Logical Investigations* but later in his writings Husserl came to recognize this problem increasingly more. Indeed, it is precisely this problem he is addressing when he puts increasing focus on the life-world in his *Crises of the European Sciences*. Husserl's understanding of the life-world will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁴¹ Heidegger 1988: 58-59

⁴² Heidegger 1988: 61

distinction and leave it behind. In this sense, his phenomenology is markedly different from Husserl's as he understands intentionality differently. As he claims: "Intentionality is neither something objective nor something subjective in the traditional sense."⁴³ In seeking to understand Dasein in its everydayness, and ultimately explore the meaning of Being, traditional philosophical concepts and notions, such as the subject/object distinction for example, must be left behind as they impede, rather than aid, the investigation. This is the reason Heidegger fashions new philosophical concepts, such as comportment, to capture features of Dasein's existence which has gone unnoticed. Heidegger would therefore claim that Husserl, despite his intentions, is still too mired in traditional philosophy and its pre-conceptions, while his fundamental ontology moves further and reveals a more primordial aspect of the subject and existence.

What is Phenomenology?

Before we proceed we must, after having grasped the fundamentals of both Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, and some of the differences between them, elucidate what the term phenomenology then refers to. There are substantial differences between the above discussed phenomenologists but there must be at the same time deep points of connection if we are to be justified in using the term "phenomenologist" and refer to both of them. We must also be able to use the term phenomenology in a specific sense if any question of Kierkegaard's relevance is to be able to be considered. So, what is phenomenology?

There are of course varying interpretations of what precisely phenomenology is, as well as objections to the possibility of it being a single, unified method or movement. But, in the following I will be operating with a sense of phenomenology in the singular mainly in two different but related aspects. The first feature which I would claim unites Husserl and Heidegger (and ultimately Kierkegaard to a certain extent as I will go on to elaborate on) is their concern with re-thinking fundamental problems which have been inherited by the philosophical tradition. These notions, such as the problem of other minds as an example, in their opinion, have come to work as an impediment, inhibiting philosophical progress and elucidation of fundamental issues of importance. Phenomenology tries to investigate all pre-

⁴³ Heidegger 1988: 314

conceptions and find out if they are justified. Indeed, as with the above mentioned problem of other minds, they are often seen to be misguided pseudo-problems which dissolve if we carry out a phenomenological investigation and re-think these previous philosophical difficulties and see them in a different light.

What every philosopher who is, or has been, called a phenomenologist in some way shares with the rest of the movement, at least to a certain degree, is the commitment to *begin* by investigating the subject and its experiences. The common conviction is that only then can we understand other, higher forms of understanding such as the objective knowledge of the sciences. Phenomenologists proceed from the bottom up, from simple subjective experiences toward more complex and harder to understand forms of knowledge, rather than the other way around. All knowledge, in whatever form, is ultimately founded on simple, everyday experience.

The second sense in which Husserl and Heidegger (and other phenomenologists) can be said to belong to the same movement, despite differences between them, is in the methodology they employ. In order to carry out the above mentioned objective of clarifying fundamental issues, they employ not abstract theorizing or argumentation as previous philosophers relied mainly on, but rather *description*. As Merleau-Ponty, another phenomenologist put it: “It is a matter of describing, not explaining or analyzing.”⁴⁴ That is of course not to say that description is completely absent in the history of philosophy, but with phenomenology it is at the forefront as a fundamental guiding principle, such as Husserl sets it forth in his above mentioned principle of all principles. By relying on description phenomenologists seek to reveal fundamental elements of our daily life and understanding which, although we were always to some extent aware of them, remained obscured. In short, what is needed is not philosophical gymnastics in the form of high flung theories based on logic, calculation, and reflection, but the investigation and description of lived experience precisely *in the way it is experienced*. This is what both Husserl and Heidegger seek to do, although they reach different conclusions and emphasize different elements as crucial and important.

Finally, along with these features of phenomenology which I will go on to claim apply also to a certain extent to Kierkegaard, there is an element to Husserl and Heidegger’s phenomenology which is easily missed. Although Husserl wanted to refashion philosophy

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty 2008: ix

into a rigorous science as we have seen, fundamentally his phenomenology was also in an important sense a practical discipline. It concerns the life of the individual and his whole existence and outlook, not just an activity of intellectual curiosity or truth-seeking in an academic sense. In other words, it has existential significance. As Dan Zahavi puts it: “what is decisive for Husserl is not the *possession* of absolute truth, but the very *attempt* to live a life in absolute self-responsibility, that is, the very attempt to base one’s thoughts and deeds on as much insight as possible”⁴⁵

If we have this notion of phenomenology in mind, I claim that it is very much in line with Kierkegaard’s task, as I will go on to show.

We have now seen that there are substantial disagreements at the very heart of phenomenology. Here the focus has been on Husserl and Heidegger, the phenomenologists which will be discussed in the following, although the same applies to other philosophers within the same movement. One of the main differences is the very philosophical objective, the underlying motivation for their works. For Husserl it was investigating how objective knowledge is constituted in subjective experience, establishing a method which would reveal the transcendental ego and its universal structures. Heidegger reformulated phenomenology as a fundamental ontology, pursuing the question of Being by investigating Dasein in its everydayness. Another fundamental disagreement is the status and possibility of reduction, a move Husserl thought essential but Heidegger felt was problematic and envisaged differently.

Although these differences should be kept in mind, I will in the following go on to show that there are indeed also very deep similarities in outlook and methodology between Kierkegaard and phenomenology if we understand the movement as I outlined it above. Not only that, I hope to show also that Kierkegaard and phenomenology can be mutually supportive. In order to do this, we must first discuss fundamental features of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. This, along with his relation to Husserl, will be the subject of the next chapter.

⁴⁵ Zahavi 2003: 68

3. Kierkegaard and Husserl on Subjectivity, Inwardness, Truth.

After having laid out important features of phenomenology and its two main proponents Husserl and Heidegger, I wish to turn our attention to Kierkegaard and sketch important aspects of his philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to begin to reach a meeting point for Kierkegaard and phenomenology by focusing on what aspects Kierkegaard has in common with Husserl. In the first part of this chapter I will discuss important Kierkegaardian features such as his notion of subjectivity, inwardness, truth and indirect communication before I begin, in the second part, to discuss how these notions can be read as being similar to certain key phenomenological concerns to be found in Husserl.

Subjectivity and indirect communication in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*

A difficulty in reading Kierkegaard that must be addressed briefly before the main discussion is his use of pseudonyms. As is well known, Kierkegaard wrote under a variety of different names with some pseudonyms authoring multiple books, and even with discussion and debate between them in the works themselves. Scholars have been divided on how to approach this aspect of Kierkegaard's, some dismissing it and reading all of Kierkegaard's works as his voice.⁴⁶ But, there does seem to be a consensus among serious Kierkegaard scholars that taking the pseudonyms seriously is essential if any adequate understanding of Kierkegaard's works is to be attained.⁴⁷ The pseudonyms are not merely Kierkegaard's attempt in his lifetime to hide the real author of the work but rather fictional characters of his, each of which has his own style, outlook and concern. In that sense they are an aspect of his philosophy which cannot be separated, they are interwoven with it. Therefore, the views expressed in a pseudonymous work need not necessarily reflect Kierkegaard's own. He himself claimed: "Thus, in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about

⁴⁶ This is, for example, a flaw in Adorno's famous study of Kierkegaard. He fails to take sufficiently seriously the pseudonyms. See: Adorno: 1999

⁴⁷ For example: Poole 2007

them except as a third party...”⁴⁸ For this reason it would be a mistake to attempt to work out a consistent interpretation based on the belief that the voice in all of them is the voice of the same author. We must take the pseudonyms seriously as different authors, and thereby fulfill Kierkegaard’s own wishes when he asked:

Therefore, if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author’s name, not mine – that is, of separating us in such a way that the passage femininely belongs to the pseudonymous author, the responsibility civilly to me.⁴⁹

In the following chapter I will be discussing two of Kierkegaard’s works, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, where Kierkegaard’s account of truth and subjectivity is to be found. The discussion is slightly complicated in light of the fact that these works are authored by a pseudonym named Johannes Climacus. A brief description of this pseudonym and his concerns (as opposed to Kierkegaard’s) are in order if we are to get a clear account of this aspect of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, an aspect which is central for our concern. As I will ultimately show, Kierkegaard’s method in presenting his views in this way are inextricably bound up with his philosophy itself.

Climacus is a pretty strange character. In his first authored work, *Philosophical Fragments*, he goes to great lengths in the introduction in persuading the reader that what he is currently reading is in no way, shape or form a scientific treatise or philosophical work. Instead it is merely what he calls a pamphlet, an insignificant work which the reader should not bother to take seriously.⁵⁰ He denies it any importance, something you would perhaps expect if it was a philosophical or religious work. He even goes so far in the introduction to deny that he has any opinion on anything at all.⁵¹ After having given this strange introduction

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard 1992: 626

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard 1992: 627

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard 1986: 5

⁵¹ Kierkegaard 1986: 5-7

he goes on to discuss the subject which is a number of questions: “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?”⁵² It is not my intention to explore Climacus’ attempt to investigate these questions. I want rather to focus on Climacus himself and his manner of presenting his views in this way, for reasons that will be made clear.

The above questions would seem to be a big challenge for an author who claims that he doesn’t have any opinions, so how does he proceed and still stay true to that claim? In essence, Climacus is consistent in that he doesn’t really make any claims. What follows is a series of what he calls thought-projects which try to tackle the above questions. But while Climacus claims that these thought-projects are speculations of his own it is obvious that they are poorly disguised notions from Christian doctrine. One of these thought-projects is what he calls the absolute paradox, the limits of thought which passion still continually runs up against. Climacus describes the paradox in the following way:

This, then is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think. This passion of thought is fundamentally present everywhere in thought, also in the single individual’s thought insofar as he, thinking, is not merely himself. But because of habit we do not discover this.⁵³

What is the purpose of these “thought-projects”, which are just Christian notions in a thinly veiled form (as he himself ultimately admits⁵⁴)? What does Climacus hope to achieve by setting his ideas forth in this peculiar manner, wherein he claims not to know anything and yet sets forth familiar ideas and notions as products of his own? In order to pursue these questions in more detail, we should move over to the *Postscript*, which is the second of Climacus’ works. The *Postscript* enjoys a special status among Kierkegaard’s works in that he intended

⁵² Kierkegaard 1986: 1

⁵³ Kierkegaard 1986: 37

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard 1986: 109

it to be the last one in his authorship (which explains the word “concluding” in the title). In it Climacus elaborates more fully on many of the themes of the *Fragments*.⁵⁵

Before we move on to the *Postscript* a few preliminary remarks are in order. The work is massive and highly complex and has invoked many different interpretations. One of the biggest debates concerning the work revolves around the truth-status of the various claims that Climacus offers. According to at least one interpretation the work is all a big joke which doesn't really express anything.⁵⁶ It is undeniable that the work is to a large extent a parody of Hegelian philosophy, but various other claims are to be found there and some of them contradict each other. As another commentator, C. Stephen Evans, has pointed out, in the work you can easily find support for both realism and anti-realism.⁵⁷ So there really is no “correct” way to read the work. Evans goes on to explain: “there are no neutral, noncontroversial theories that will give us a method for objectively settling the question as to how Kierkegaard should be read.”⁵⁸ And further: “One's readings of Kierkegaard will inevitably be shaped, to a greater or less degree, by one's global commitments about meaning in general and Kierkegaard's literature as a whole.”⁵⁹ What follows will therefore be a certain interpretation which consists of Kierkegaard, through Climacus, making certain claims about truth and knowledge, albeit in a very satirical tone at times.

It is in the *Postscript* where we find Climacus' self-description. It is safe to say that it is not very positive. He readily acknowledges that he is merely a “loafer” who sits around all day in cafés, drinking coffee and smoking cigars.⁶⁰ Yet he is of a scholarly persuasion and does not want to be a mere loafer, he actually wants to contribute to society. But he finds this problematic as he cannot really compare to what he calls the great thinkers who have explained everything and made knowledge readily available to the public. So he wonders how he should proceed in being a productive and useful member of society. Suddenly he describes when a thought occurs to him one day as he sits as usual smoking his cigar: “You must do something, but since with your limited capabilities it will be impossible to make anything

⁵⁵ So much so that the so-called *Postscript* to the *Fragments* is more than six times longer than the original, an example of Kierkegaard's subtle humor.

⁵⁶ Pyper 1997: 149

⁵⁷ Evans 2007

⁵⁸ Evans 2007: 160

⁵⁹ Evans 2007: 160

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard 1992: 185-186

easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others have, take it upon yourself to make something more difficult.”⁶¹

In Climacus’ opinion everything has become too easy, knowledge is readily available about anything to anyone who wishes because of the great works of geniuses and “benefactors of mankind.” This has led to the misunderstanding that even the individual’s subjectivity is not a question or a problem anymore, any problem or difficulty whatsoever has been already been solved by the help of reflection. As he claims later: “My main thought was that, because of the copiousness of knowledge, people in our day have forgotten what it means to exist and what inwardness is, and that the misunderstanding between speculative thought and Christianity could be explained by that.”⁶²

This forgetfulness of inwardness and existence because of the copiousness of knowledge is something Climacus wants to tackle. But he quickly realizes that the way to do that can’t be to adopt the same methodology as the great thinkers, communicating knowledge in a didactic manner, then he would only be contributing to the problem as it lies precisely in the easy availableness of knowledge. As Climacus explains: “If this is communicated as knowledge, the recipient is mistakenly induced to understand that he is gaining something to know, and then we are back in knowledge again.”⁶³ The only way to go forward is to problematize what people already think they know. This is the reason for Climacus’ strange proceedings in the *Fragments*. The reason he claims the ideas which are to be found there are his own speculations, while they are largely just Christian doctrine, without telling the reader about it, is that he wants something the reader is already too familiar with to become new and strange to him. In a sense he wants to re-introduce certain ideas, such as the paradox, the limits of human knowledge, in a way that would make the reader think differently about them.

Here we come to Kierkegaard’s famous and problematic indirect communication.⁶⁴ This is a controversial aspect of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, with many different interpretations

⁶¹ Kierkegaard 1992: 185-186

⁶² Kierkegaard 1992: 249

⁶³ Kierkegaard 1992: 249

⁶⁴ Communication is a translation of the Danish word *Meddelelse*. Some commentators have pointed out that the English word communication does not really capture faithfully the meaning of the original term. Alastair Hannay, for example, suggests that the words “imparting”, “with-parting”, or even “sharing” would more accurately capture the original meaning. See: Hannay 2003: 12

and suggestions on how to properly read Kierkegaard and the pseudonymous works. Some commentators on Kierkegaard even opt to dispense with it altogether as I have mentioned. But as many have pointed out this would be a grave mistake which would certainly lead to a distorted reading of Kierkegaard's works.⁶⁵ Therefore we should take a closer look at the necessity of indirect communication for Kierkegaard and try and uncover its purpose.

Trying to unravel the mystery of indirect communication is further problematized by the fact that it is Climacus, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, that proclaims the necessity of indirect communication, as opposed to the standard didactic communication of knowledge. Climacus claims that: "it also became clear to me that if I wanted to communicate anything about this, the main point must be that my presentation would be made in an *indirect* form"⁶⁶ This is because:

if inwardness is truth, results are nothing but junk with which we should not bother one another, and wanting to communicate results is an unnatural association of one person with another, inasmuch as every human being is spirit and truth is the self-activity of appropriation, which a result hinders.⁶⁷

Climacus' concern is trying to awaken the individual's inwardness. This can only be achieved by getting the individual to think for himself and relate himself passionately to the truth. He himself, as an individual, must *appropriate* the truth. Communicating in a direct way often fails to accomplish this as knowledge is so abundant, and the reader already thinks he knows so much, that appropriation of something meaningful becomes increasingly rarer. The reader passively accepts whatever is offered to him without it having any existential significance for him. Truth, for Climacus, must be worked for, it is not something that is easily attained and effortlessly communicated directly person to person: "As soon as truth, the essential truth, can be assumed to be known by everyone, appropriation and inwardness must be worked for, and here can be worked for only in an indirect form."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ For example: Poole 2007

⁶⁶ Kierkegaard 1992: 242

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard 1992: 242

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard 1992: 243

But this is what Climacus claims in the *Postscript*. If we are to take the problem of the pseudonyms seriously, as I claimed earlier that we must, how should we then understand Kierkegaard's own position? We cannot just assume that Climacus' and Kierkegaard's views are identical.

There is ample reason to assume that some of the ideas we find in the *Postscript* were close to Kierkegaard's own. First of all, as previously mentioned, the work was supposed to be the last work in Kierkegaard's authorship and his purpose was for it to be his final statement on religion and philosophy. Second, he put his own name as the editor of the work along with writing in his own name a small chapter at the end, even though it was authored by Climacus. This is something he had never done with any of the previous pseudonymous works, an indication that he wanted his own name to be associated with it. Third, at least when it comes to Climacus' account of indirect communication, there is ample support in Kierkegaard's diaries that this was a method that Kierkegaard himself developed and found necessary as a way of communicating through the authorship. He claims in one diary entry:

One of the tragedies of modern times is precisely this – to have abolished the 'I', the personal I. For this very reason, real ethico-religious communication is as if vanished from the world. For ethico-religious truth is related essentially to personality and can only be communicated by an I to an I. As soon as the communication here becomes objective, the truth has become untruth. It is the personality we are to reach.⁶⁹

Kierkegaard was therefore concerned with reaching the reader indirectly, getting him to think for himself about fundamental issues. Kierkegaard saw himself, similar to his hero and ideal Socrates, as merely the occasion for the reader to begin to develop his individuality and appropriate truth for himself, which is why he repeatedly claims in his works and diaries that he is without authority and that his position is an armed neutrality.⁷⁰ He doesn't communicate any doctrine or theory directly. He rather sets forth various ideas and speculations in order to get the reader to think for himself, to awaken his inwardness. The strategy that Climacus adopts in *Fragments* is to set forth ideas which the reader already

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard 1996: 282 (47 VIII 2 B 88)

⁷⁰ For example, Kierkegaard 1996: 115 (38 II A 770)

knows, but by claiming them as his own and downplaying his own significance, the ideas appear in an unfamiliar light. Similarly, we should see Climacus as a strategy Kierkegaard adopts to reach his audience in an indirect manner. If the reader thinks the author of the work, Climacus, is a loafer that has no opinions on anything, Kierkegaard hopes that the reader will approach the ideas in the work differently than if he knew that the real author is deeply knowledgeable in philosophy and theology.

If we keep this in mind we are ready to consider some of the other crucial ideas which are to be found in the *Postscript*. One of these is Kierkegaard's (through Climacus) famous claim that truth is subjectivity. How are we to understand this?

Climacus' notion that truth is subjectivity and lies in inwardness he expresses in the following manner: "To objective reflection, truth becomes something objective, an object, and the point is to disregard the subject. To subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity."⁷¹ What Climacus attacks is the overemphasis on objective thought which, at the same time, downplays or neglects subjectivity, the pinnacle of which is to be found in the Hegelian systematic thinking. But Climacus is by no means attacking Hegel only, this overreliance on objective knowledge is one of the characteristics of his age and it affects the whole of society (the effects of which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter). This characteristic leads slowly to the disappearance of subjectivity and in turn, makes appropriating truth passionately problematic.

This should be understood in the correct sense. The point is not that objectivity is some form of illusion or that there is no such thing as objective knowledge. Rather, the only truth worth the name comes through the subject's own appropriation of it, it is in this sense that truth is inwardness and comes from within, not from without. To put it another way, truth is not merely a matter of *knowing* something passively, it is rather essentially a practical activity, something the individual *does*. As Climacus claims: "*Objectively the emphasis is on **what is said**; subjectively the emphasis is on **how it is said**.*" [italics and bold type in original]⁷² How knowledge is attained is just as important as what precisely it is that the subject possesses knowledge of. What Climacus is criticizing is the fact that (in his time) people proclaim to know a multitude of different things, which they think is the truth, without

⁷¹ Kierkegaard 1992: 192

⁷² Kierkegaard 1992: 202

this knowledge affecting their existence in any way. To him, they do possess objective knowledge of a variety of subjects, but they are mistaken in their belief that they possess truth. Truth requires appropriation and existential commitment. To be an individual and deepen ones inwardness is to relate oneself passionately to the truth, and passion, for Climacus, is: “the highest pitch of subjectivity.”⁷³ The problem with objective reflection is that if it is misunderstood as *the* way towards truth, even of existential matters, proper subjective truth which requires passion is forgotten (although it need not necessarily be so, we can easily imagine scientists passionate for objective knowledge, but these scientists would precisely be relating themselves subjectively to the objective truths of the sciences, science for them would precisely have existential significance.) If truth is to have bearing on the subject’s existence it must come to realize it by itself. Therefore Climacus makes this claim concerning knowledge:

All essential knowing pertains to existence, or only the knowing whose relation to existence is essential is essential knowing. Essentially viewed, the knowing that does not inwardly in the reflection of inwardness pertain to existence is accidental knowing, and its degree and scope, essentially viewed, are a matter of indifference.⁷⁴

With an increase in objective thinking, as Climacus claims had occurred in his age, subjectivity gradually diminishes as people appropriate truth less and less. The reason individuals are less likely to commit themselves is that they are under the mistaken assumption that they already know everything there is to know about a particular subject through objective reflection. But the opposite is also true for Climacus. Through increasing subjective, inward reflection the subject manages to free itself from the dominance of objectivity:

Subjective reflection turns inward toward subjectivity and in this inward deepening will be of the truth, and in such a way that, just as in the preceding, when objectivity was advanced,

⁷³ Kierkegaard 1992: 199

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard 1992: 197

subjectivity vanished, here subjectivity as such becomes the final factor and objectivity the vanishing.⁷⁵

What Climacus is attacking is not objective knowledge *per se*, but rather, the individual's relation to it. What he is championing for is the subject's turning inward rather than outward, not to seek knowledge externally, through direct, external communication, but by changing its relation to what it knows through appropriation. By doing this subjectivity increases while objectivity and its hold on the subject decreases. To summarize, Climacus is criticizing (and at times parodying) the notion that matters pertaining to subjective, practical existence can be approached and understood through objective reflection. This misguided notion leads gradually to the diminishing of inwardness.

As is well known, Kierkegaard was religiously motivated throughout his whole authorship. This is no less true here. The point he is ultimately driving at is that truth is fundamentally ethical-religious truth, this is the highest form of knowledge for the individual which, when appropriated, subjectively changes and re-describes his entire existence.⁷⁶ Christianity in Kierkegaard's age had come to be understood through objective reflection which to him was deeply worrying as it misses the point of the profound religious truth which can only come from within, in inwardness. But this does not mean that Kierkegaard's works don't have wider implications. Even though Kierkegaard suggests that religious truth is the highest, what is important for the subject is its *own* relating to its *own* truth. It is the "how" of knowledge that is essential, not the "what", as objective reflection treats it. This is expressed in the following passage which deserves to be quoted in full:

When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this

⁷⁵ Kierkegaard 1992: 196

⁷⁶ Kierkegaard 1992: 198

relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.[italics in original]⁷⁷

For Climacus the subject can be in truth even if what he relates himself to, the “what”, isn’t true in an objective sense. As an example of this we can consider an individual that is passionately committed to a political doctrine and makes various claims to support his view. Even though economists, political scientists, historians etc. would perhaps disagree and decisively refute many of this individual’s claims, for Climacus he would nevertheless be in the truth because he has the right relation to his own ideas. They are his own in the sense that he has appropriated them and they structure his existence. This individual would, for Climacus, have deeper inwardness than an individual that passively accepts irrefutable scientific knowledge derived from objective reflection if he doesn’t at the same time relate himself passionately to it and if it doesn’t have any bearing on his life. As we saw above, it is the relation itself that matters more than the content. The way to truth is an essential part of truth.

Even though Kierkegaard himself was religiously motivated and his whole authorship aimed at awakening the subject’s inwardness and get him to relate himself passionately to ethical-religious truth, these notions laid out in the *Postscript* can be brought to bear on other issues. But how do they appear in light of phenomenology? In the next section I will investigate similar claims to be found in Husserl in the hopes of finding a common meeting ground between the two philosophers.

Kierkegaard and Husserl on subjectivity and reductions

The preceding discussion concerning Kierkegaard’s defense of the subject, subjectivity and inwardness against its misguided understanding through objective reflection should, to some extent, be familiar to the concerns of phenomenology. As we saw in the first chapter, this is a concern which Husserl to some degree shared.

⁷⁷ Kierkegaard 1992: 199

Husserl was, at least in his later writings, also concerned about the sciences' neglect of the subject in their knowledge claims and pursuit. For him it was also essential that the subject and its intentional processes be taken into account in any philosophy and/or science. The fact that this had not been sufficiently done in his time had led to obscurities and confusions at the very basis of these disciplines. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, inspired by Descartes, he claims: "anyone who seriously intends to become a philosopher must "once in his life" withdraw into himself and attempt, within himself, to overthrow and build anew all the sciences that, up to then, he has been accepting."⁷⁸ The task is therefore ultimately one which is given to the solitary individual and he has to take upon himself:

Philosophy – wisdom (*sagesse*) – is the philosopher's quite personal affair. It must arise as *his* wisdom, as his self-acquired knowledge tending toward universality, a knowledge for which he can answer from the beginning, and at each step, by virtue of his own absolute insights.⁷⁹

The point here is one which rhymes easily with Kierkegaard's according to the discussion in the first part of this chapter. It is not enough to passively accept knowledge which comes from outside, the subject should rather come to realize it on its own through appropriation. The subject has a responsibility to realize its own truth.

If we come back to the remark from Zahavi quoted in the previous chapter and see Husserl's phenomenology as an attempt to live a life in absolute self-responsibility, one that is: "not a neutral impersonal occupation, but a praxis of decisive personal and existential significance."⁸⁰, we can see that Husserl and Kierkegaard do indeed share a commitment in this regard. What matters is not merely the knowledge that is attained, but in what manner it is done. The way towards truth is seen as inextricably linked to the end result and no less important. They both stress the importance of the individual's own practice and activity in attaining knowledge. A fundamental phenomenological concern is the shift in focus from the

⁷⁸ Husserl 1999: 2

⁷⁹ Husserl 1999: 2

⁸⁰ Zahavi 2003: 68

“what” to the “how”, a focus which would also seem to have concerned Kierkegaard as we have now seen.

As we have also seen in the first chapter, the phenomenological reductions are a crucial cornerstone of Husserlian phenomenology. Is anything similar to be found in Kierkegaard? If so, it would certainly strengthen the ties between him and phenomenology.

Other commentators have indeed pointed to a relation between Husserl’s notion of the suspension of the natural attitude and Kierkegaard’s philosophy. The relevant notion in Kierkegaard’s writings is what he calls the teleological suspension of the ethical. To explain this notion briefly Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, wants to save the biblical Abraham who was commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, from being a murderer. But if we view him through ethical categories this is clearly not possible, then he is lost. Johannes asks if there is any way he can be viewed not as a murderer but as taking a higher stand than the ethical. Johannes ultimately claims that Abraham, by obeying God’s command, transcends the ethical and, as a single individual relates himself absolutely to the absolute. As he claims: “The story of Abraham contains, then, a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the single individual he became higher than the universal. This is the paradox, which cannot be mediated.”⁸¹

What does Husserl’s notion of the reductions have to do with all of this? As Michau has pointed out⁸², there are certain resemblances between Kierkegaard’s teleological suspension of the ethical and Husserl’s phenomenological tools. The most obvious point of contact is that both processes involve a suspension of something. For Kierkegaard it is the ethical relation to one’s surroundings, the way the individual understands his role in the world, what gives it meaning for him and structure his commitments. But what precisely does this consist in? In a certain sense this is, for Kierkegaard a naïve assumption about the world, one that is given without reflection, and when this attitude is suspended it is done for the sake of something higher (the universal and eternal).

For Husserl, as we saw in the first chapter, we suspend the natural attitude in order to gain a new perspective on something familiar, in a certain sense a new way of looking at our surroundings. Furthermore, by utilizing the *epoché*, we gain access to the transcendental ego

⁸¹ Kierkegaard 1983: 66

⁸² Michau 2006

and uncover something that was previously hidden or unknown. As Husserl claims at the end of the *Cartesian Meditations*: “I must lose the world by epoché, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination.”⁸³ This is also to be found in Kierkegaard’s notion of teleological suspension of the ethical where we temporarily give up our previous attitude, in both cases we lose the world only to regain it again. Both Husserl and Kierkegaard see this process as something that is entirely taken up by the individual. It is his responsibility and there are no short-cuts or easy methods possible. This process is an entirely solitary act.

But what is gained by this? In a certain sense for both it is a re-describing of the world. We suspend the naïve assumption but we return to a radical new understanding of the world which we previously inhabited. For Kierkegaard we relate ourselves to the absolute absolutely and to the relative (previously ethical understanding) relatively. For Husserl, through the phenomenological attitude, we gain access to the transcendental ego and the knowledge of it as prior to and constituting the world. The objects of consciousness which are to be investigated can now, for the first time, be investigated phenomenologically. So we gain a radically new perspective.

Furthermore, for both Kierkegaard and Husserl, they place great emphasis on it being a matter of responsibility if an authentic, existential life is to be achieved. In both cases there is also no complete rupture with the previous, naïve understanding of the subject’s existence and surroundings. We suspend or modify our previous attitude and this re-describes our perspective and understanding, we gain access to another way of perceiving, but it is not any form of radical break which changes everything. In this connection, Johannes de Silentio’s description of the Knight of Faith in *Fear and Trembling* is instructive. He imagines him as anybody else, doing the exact same things as everybody else, completely indistinguishable from the crowd:

And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he does it with such

⁸³ Husserl 1999: 157

precision and assurance that he continually gets finitude out of it, and no one ever suspects anything else.⁸⁴

In short, what is at stake here for both Kierkegaard and Husserl lies in the subject's inwardness. It cannot really be perceived from the outside except in an indirect manner, authentic existence is a matter of the subject's own relation to itself and its manner of experiencing its own existence.

To investigate the connection between Kierkegaard and Husserl's phenomenological concerns further, I will now look at Husserl's last work and especially his concept the life-world.

Husserl's life-world and the crisis of European sciences

It is important to notice the full title of Husserl's work where the life-world is explored: *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. It may seem a little strange that here, in Husserl's last major work which was still unfinished at the time of his death, he should still be concerning himself with an introduction to transcendental phenomenology, something that he had been concerned with before, most notably in his *Cartesian Meditations* which was also subtitled as an introduction to phenomenology. What this indicates is that Husserl was in some sense unsatisfied with his earlier efforts, which we have already discussed in the first chapter, and is here improving on his previous works.

This isn't the first time that the notion of the life-world shows up in Husserl's writings but here he gives it a special emphasis and importance. We have already seen how Husserl was dissatisfied with science's neglect of subjectivity in its investigations and this is also true in this work. It is here that we can find Husserl's most explicit and sustained critique of the sciences. What is the problem with science in his view? The sciences start out from a third person viewpoint and completely disregard the role of subjectivity in acquiring objective

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard 1983: 40-41

knowledge, as we have previously seen. But what he starts to emphasize in this work is the shared common world which is the foundation from which the sciences build: “science is a human spiritual accomplishment which presupposes as its point of departure, both historically and for each new student, the intuitive surrounding world of life, pre-given as existing for all in common.”⁸⁵

What has happened is that science, in its objectivizing of nature, has made the world less familiar to us, has moved us further away from our actual, lived, experience instead of making it more intelligible. Sciences, whether it is physics, biology, mathematics and so forth, claim to be the sole purveyors of truth. Scientific theories of various phenomena are *the truth*. But what this means is that our subjective experience of the world is regarded as being a lesser form of experience. It is precisely this claim that Husserl wants to contest. When science gains this kind of foothold, as the only place where truth can come from, other questions which don't fit into the scientific framework, such as spiritual matters as Husserl calls them, or matters of human existence, become uninteresting or not worthy of science. This is because they do not fit into the scientific methodology, and therefore, ordinary experience is left out of scientific investigation. This is a process Husserl calls naturalization. What this leads to is a kind of moving away from our familiarity with the world and the increasing unintelligibility of it.

What Husserl means by the life-world is the immediate world of experience which the sciences rest on but they themselves overlook. Science has moved away from its grounding in actual experience and proceed rather from a third-person view from nowhere. But in denying its original foundation, science, and our understanding which relies on science, is to a certain extent alienated from itself. As he writes: “The sciences build upon the life-world as taken for granted in that they make use of whatever in it happens to be necessary for their particular ends. But to use the life-world in this way is not to know it scientifically in its own manner of being.”⁸⁶ That is why it becomes necessary to reveal this fundamental area of subjective, human experience and Husserl claims that it is precisely his transcendental phenomenology which is capable of fulfilling this task.

To explain Husserl's concept more clearly, the life-world is our intersubjective, pre-given world of experience, the experience of which comes before science and from which

⁸⁵ Husserl 1970: 121

⁸⁶ Husserl 1970: 118

science's objective knowledge springs. Husserl had concerned himself with intersubjectivity before as we have already seen, but here he takes a slightly different approach by emphasizing that there is always already a common shared world in our subjective experience. These areas of human experience are not revealed by science, rather they are already given to us in our common understanding, in our daily life and perception. But it is also important to understand that the life-world is not a fixed, unchanging area of human experience. Our understanding of certain objects can become influenced by scientific discoveries to such an extent that they become pre-given in the world of everyday experience. As Dan Zahavi puts it: "As time goes by, theoretical assumptions are assimilated into daily praxis, becoming part of the lifeworld: We all assume that the Earth is round, for example, although few of us have seen it; we frequently employ aids whose use is scientifically motivated, say vitamins or sun oil."⁸⁷

Here it is easy to misunderstand Husserl and think that he is against science. But this is not the case. Husserl is not attacking science or criticizing it directly. Indeed, Husserl admired the sciences and their accomplishments as he often stressed in his writings. His goal was precisely, with his phenomenology, to fashion a scientific philosophy which would eliminate skepticism. Husserl's aim should rather be seen as an attempt to improve our scientific understanding of the world by revealing the foundation which science has overlooked. By doing this through his transcendental phenomenology, all human knowledge, scientific but also cultural and religious, will be clarified and improved and when science is shown to be rooted in the life-world the connection between our everyday experience and science will be restored. The difference in approach from science lies in the fact that Husserl starts from subjectivity and the life-world as the ground from which higher knowledge is built. As he explains:

In this life the meaning and the ontic validity [Seinsgeltung] of the world are built up – of that particular world, that is, which is actually valid for the individual experiencer. As for the "objectively true" world, the world of science, it is a structure at a higher level, built on prescientific experiencing and thinking, or rather on its accomplishments of validity [Geltungsleistungen]. Only a radical inquiry back into subjectivity – and specifically the subjectivity which *ultimately* brings about all world-validity, with its content and in all its prescientific and scientific modes, and into the "what" and the "how" of the rational

⁸⁷ Zahavi 2003: 130

accomplishments – can make objective truth comprehensible and arrive at the ultimate ontic meaning of the world.⁸⁸

What I want to suggest is that Husserl and Kierkegaard share a very similar concern in this regard. Although Kierkegaard doesn't use the term, he was also very deeply concerned about the erosion of the life-world because of the pervasiveness of objective knowledge. As one commentator has put it, Kierkegaard's concern is to "Reenchant the *Lebenswelt*" by asserting that truth comes from subjectivity, not from objective reflection or direct communication.⁸⁹

For both Husserl and Kierkegaard the subject is necessarily socially embedded and this embeddedness structures and influences heavily its subjective experience. They are both concerned with the possible negative implications of this inescapable influence, implications which they would claim have gone unnoticed and they wish to reveal. They both wish to rehabilitate and reestablish the subject's own meaning of its surroundings and existence, something which has been wrested away from it and it had become unaware of. As Kierkegaard in his own voice, not that of Climacus, describes his project at the end of the *Postscript*, the use of pseudonyms is an attempt: "once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers."⁹⁰ As for Husserl, the objective is not to completely discard all previous knowledge, they are rather attempting to re-think our previous knowledge by revealing its underlying base, the ground which has been obscured.

The reason for this obscurity also comes largely from the same source. Kierkegaard calls it objective thinking or reflection whereas Husserl calls it, in *The Crises of European Sciences*, science and its naturalization. But in both cases they realize that this phenomenon is a certain *attitude* which the subject takes up. It is not the default way of experiencing the world, the only way to truth, as it would claim. It leads to a separation and distance between itself and how life is actually experienced and lived. The subject itself is even banished as insignificant from the concerns of this attitude and its knowledge claims. If we share Husserl's view that the theoretical attitude is already a "voluntary epoché of all natural praxis."⁹¹, we can see both his and Kierkegaard's writings as an attempt to restore this very

⁸⁸ Husserl 1970: 69

⁸⁹ Dooley 2010

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard 1992: 629-630.

⁹¹ Husserl 1970: 282

praxis, placing it at the forefront again and seeing it as essential, not insignificant as it had been judged to be by objective thought. There is a deeper, more foundational manner of existing and experiencing the world which is prior to the theoretical attitude and has been covered up by the source of the present misunderstanding, which they both diagnose as being the overemphasis on objective thinking and the neglect of the subject. What Husserl and Kierkegaard try to do is reveal this base, whether it is called the life-world or the various stages of existence you find in Kierkegaard's writings (these will be explored in more detail in the fifth chapter.)

But as we saw above, that is not to say that Husserl views science altogether negatively. What he wants to achieve is precisely to restore faith in reason and the sciences by clearing the foundation which has been overlooked. In this sense he wants to reestablish a connection between our lived experience and the objective knowledge of the sciences. But this relation to objective knowledge is also quite similar to Kierkegaard. His main target of critique was the Hegelian systematic thinking which prioritizes objective, systematic thinking and gives insufficient attention to the subject. That is still not to say that he viewed Hegel only in a negative light. Indeed, Kierkegaard is a highly dialectical thinker in the style of Hegel and was heavily influenced by him in his own philosophy. As one commentator states: "There is appropriation as well as negation, and Kierkegaard is never simply anti-Hegelian."⁹² The main criticism Kierkegaard has against Hegel is his neglect of subjective experience, similar to Husserl's point against the sciences. Both can be seen as trying to restore the connection between subjectivity and objectivity by focusing on our lived experience, the way the subject itself experiences its surrounding world, the experience from which objective knowledge springs.

In both cases they also perceive a very real danger stemming from this crisis, the neglect of subjective experience. The danger lies in the complete de-personalization of the subject and its growing alienation from itself and its surroundings. This escalating danger could bring about catastrophic consequences, although not in the usual sense. As Husserl writes:

There are only two escapes from the crises of European existence: the downfall of Europe in its estrangement from its own rational sense of life, its fall into hostility toward the spirit

⁹² Westphal 2007: 101

and into barbarity; or the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy through a heroism of reason that overcomes naturalism once and for all. Europe's greatest danger is weariness. If we struggle against this greatest of all dangers as "good Europeans" with the sort of courage that does not fear even an infinite struggle, then out of the destructive blaze of lack of faith, the smoldering fire of despair over the West's mission for humanity, the ashes of great weariness, will rise up the phoenix of a new life-inwardness and spiritualization as the pledge of a great and distant future for man: for the spirit alone is immortal.⁹³

I want to claim that this is very similar to the struggle which Kierkegaard also took upon himself, although they approached this crises from different angles, Kierkegaard from a theological perspective and Husserl first from a scientific then increasingly a transcendental-phenomenological one. In both cases they want to restore subjectivity to its proper place and change our relation to objective knowledge. If we compare the above quote from Husserl to Kierkegaard's (through Climacus) claim that:

...if it is forgotten that the hard currency of the ethical must be present in the inwardness of the individual, if it is to be anywhere at all, if a whole generation could forget this, then that generation – even if it were assumed that not one single criminal existed but only utterly decent folk (which, by the way, enlightenment and culture cannot unconditionally be said to bring about) – is nevertheless essentially poverty-stricken ethically and is essentially a bankrupt generation.⁹⁴

We can see that they do indeed share the same concern, namely to restore inwardness to its proper place and guard against the overreliance on objective or theoretical thought which leads to the increasing alienation of our own experience of the surrounding world. If this is not done and the task is not taken sufficiently seriously, or worse yet, not even seen as a necessary task at all, individuals and society will suffer greatly by being spiritually impoverished. This is not only an intellectual concern for philosophers or thinkers, they would claim, but a matter of the highest existential significance which the subject must take upon itself.

⁹³ Husserl 1970: 299

⁹⁴ Kierkegaard 1992: 546

In this chapter I have been focusing on concerns which Kierkegaard and Husserl shared. We have seen that Kierkegaard thought it necessary to communicate with his reader indirectly in order to make what was familiar to him unfamiliar, so he would see it in a new light. In order to achieve this he adopts what he calls indirect communication and writes through pseudonyms such as Johannes Climacus. We also explored Climacus' claim that truth is subjectivity, the claim that what is essential is the subject's relation to truth which arises from inwardness, a notion which had been covered up by objective reflection.

This concern is largely shared by Husserl. Husserl also emphasized subjective experience and tried to investigate human knowledge from the ground up, instead of starting from a third-person view from nowhere. He explores the life-world, our common foundation in lived experience and tries to restore our subjective experience of the world, the foundation which had been neglected by the sciences. Both warn against the dangers of this depersonalization of the subject and alienation of our lived experience by the sciences neglect of it and try to change the nature of our connection to objectivity.

In the next chapter we will shift our focus to Heidegger and explore Kierkegaard's connection to his phenomenology.

4. Kierkegaard and Heidegger on (In)authentic existence: The Present Age, Leveling and *das Man*

We have seen that by placing the subject at the forefront, and beginning their investigation from subjectivity, Husserl and Kierkegaard are on similar territory. We will now consider Heidegger's relation to Kierkegaard by examining certain concepts which both employ. I hope to show that the debt owed to Kierkegaard by Heidegger is considerable and that Heidegger's phenomenology is to a large extent based on Kierkegaard's analysis of the present age.

Kierkegaard's present age

It is fair to say that Kierkegaard's assessment of what he calls the present age (meaning, of course in Europe, especially Denmark, around the middle of the 19th century) is negative in the extreme. We have already seen his negative portrayal of the effect that objective reflection can have on the subject's inwardness in the previous chapter. His negative remarks concerning the present age are to be found in most of his authorship, along with his diaries, but it is in *Two Ages: A Literary Review* (authored by Kierkegaard himself, not a pseudonym) where we find his most sustained and scathing critique of his age.

Kierkegaard claims that the present age is characterized by reflection and that this condition has led to a complete lack of passion for anything substantive. People are engaged in mere sensuousness and superficiality: "The present age is essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.*"⁹⁵ This lack of passion has led to a society of impoverished subjects which don't act on their own volition through personal commitment and resolve. In contrast to his age, which he claims is an age of reflection, he claims the previous, 18th century was an age of revolution, an age of action.⁹⁶ But with the gradual vanishing of the subject's

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard 2009a: 68

⁹⁶ Kierkegaard 2009a: 65-66, 68

inwardness because of its misunderstanding of objective reflection, real action becomes increasingly difficult. Here there seems to be a distinction Kierkegaard makes between objective knowledge and true action, which is related to our discussion in the previous chapter on the necessity of appropriation of truth. Truth as subjectivity can only arise through the individual's passionate appropriation, and here Kierkegaard emphasizes the role of action. As he claims: "what people two by two in conversation, what individuals as readers or as participants in a general assembly understand brilliantly in the form of reflection and observation, they would be utterly unable to understand in the form of action."⁹⁷ There is a difference between knowing something, that is to say, possessing knowledge of something that has been communicated to you directly, and you receive without effort, and actually engaging in an activity and gaining knowledge through appropriation and action. A person who is actually engaged in an activity which structures his existence is essentially more truthful than a person who passively accepts certain ideas without committing himself to them, even though the former person subscribes to ideas which may be objectively untrue and the latter doesn't.

But what precisely is it that brings about this lack of passion in the present age? We have already seen that Kierkegaard diagnoses the problem as stemming from the misunderstanding of objective reflection but this seems rather vague. It is therefore here that he introduces his concept of leveling in an attempt to conceptualize the problem of the age and how it appears in everyday life.

For Kierkegaard leveling is the process by which all qualitative distinctions, between individuals as well as between goals and pursuits, are flattened out and made irrelevant. Kierkegaard claims that the present age is largely characterized by an envy which shows itself in leveling: "Envy in the process of *establishing* itself takes the form of *leveling*, and whereas a passionate age *accelerates, raises up and overthrows, elevates and debases*, a reflective apathetic age does the opposite, it *stifles and impedes, it levels*.⁹⁸ Because of the drive of the age towards equality all individuals are placed on the same footing. The crowd, which is an empty abstraction, takes priority over the individual subject and he associates with it rather than his own self in inwardness. All individuals which do try to rise up over the crowd and achieve some kind of distinction are quickly put in their place by the

⁹⁷ Kierkegaard 2009a: 74

⁹⁸ Kierkegaard 2009a: 84

leveling process. Kierkegaard describes leveling as a: “quiet, mathematical, abstract enterprise.”⁹⁹, which, although it influences the whole age and everyone in it, is not under the control of any specific persons: “Leveling is not the action of one individual but a reflection-game in the hand of an abstract power.”¹⁰⁰ The individual relates himself to an empty abstraction, the crowd, and in the process his inwardness is covered up and his ability to make authentic choices through his own resolve becomes problematic, if not impossible: “The individual does not belong to God, to himself, to the beloved, to his art, to his scholarship; no, just as a serf belongs to an estate, so the individual realizes that in every respect he belongs to an abstraction in which reflection subordinates him.”¹⁰¹ As we saw in the previous chapter, the subject is in truth when it commits itself to an idea which it comes to recognize by itself, through inwardness, and lives its life according to it. But this becomes increasingly problematic when all qualitative distinctions are leveled, making it difficult to perceive authentic choices.

Through the leveling process meaningful distinctions, the ability to correctly perceive what is important and what is not, are abolished and placed on the same level. This leads further to the degeneration of meaningful communication of individuals to empty, superficial chatter: “What is it to chatter? It is the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking.”¹⁰² The age is characterized by lots of speaking, even more so than in any previous age, but Kierkegaard’s point is that this is not necessarily proper communication. Chatter is empty noise which serves the purpose of disguising the fact that there is no real communication taking place. If all qualitative distinctions between individuals are leveled through this phantom process which Kierkegaard points out, communication between individuals takes the form of empty, hollow noise wherein meaningfulness is lacking. This further leads to less appropriation because individual’s do not see the need to appropriate anything meaningfully, they already think they know everything about anything through chatter. He claims that this process will eventually lead to human speech becoming: “pure abstraction – there will no longer be someone who speaks, but an objective reflection will gradually deposit a kind of atmosphere, an abstract noise that will render human speech

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard 2009a: 84

¹⁰⁰ Kierkegaard 2009a: 86

¹⁰¹ Kierkegaard 2009a: 85

¹⁰² Kierkegaard 2009a: 97

superfluous...”¹⁰³ In this perilous situation the only thing an individual can do if he is to retain his inwardness is to withdraw into his subjectivity and remain silent : “Only the person who can remain essentially silent can speak essentially, can act essentially. Silence is inwardness.”¹⁰⁴

The present age puts the crowd, what Kierkegaard calls the public, “a monstrous abstraction”, over against the individual.¹⁰⁵ It is precisely this public which is the subject of some of Kierkegaard’s most derogatory remarks. He claims that: “The public is all and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless.”¹⁰⁶ There is a very real danger for the individual associating himself completely with the public because in so doing he can never really develop his inwardness and achieve authentic existence by making his own choices, committing himself absolutely through his own, personal resolve. His opinions become the public’s opinion, which is really no opinion at all because the public is in essence an illusion, a meaningless abstraction, everyone and no one. The concrete individual is abstracted, subsumed into the public, and in the process does not become himself.

Kierkegaard also claims that the leveling process and the public reach their highest expression in the press.¹⁰⁷ In his time the press was in an early stage of development and was generally considered a great democratic achievement in that it gave more people a chance to voice their opinion on public affairs and thereby influence society and its course. But Kierkegaard had very little positive to say about the press and found it to be a source of danger. By giving everybody a voice the press, consciously or not, upholds the illusion that everybody’s voice matters equally. This levels any distinction between individuals who really have something genuine and meaningful to express, and empty chatter that has nothing to contribute. Furthermore, the press, as an impersonal medium of communication, brings about an impersonal form of communicating, absolving the speaker of responsibility for what he is saying. Kierkegaard writes in a diary entry:

¹⁰³ Kierkegaard 2009a: 104

¹⁰⁴ Kierkegaard 2009a: 97

¹⁰⁵ Kierkegaard 2009a: 90

¹⁰⁶ Kierkegaard 2009a: 93

¹⁰⁷ Kierkegaard 2009a: 93

Without the daily press and without anonymity one always has the consolation that it is a definite individual person who voices the error, gives impudence expression etc. In that case there's hope that many will shrink from being that individual, and one knows in any case who he is. But the somebody who is nobody (and therefore has no responsibility) can put any error into circulation without a thought of responsibility and with the help of the most dreadfully disproportioned communications medium, that is terrible! And that this irresponsible error should then be taken up by the public which is again nobody! There is no one anywhere, and that is why there is error everywhere...¹⁰⁸

As a quick side-note, but also to further illuminate Kierkegaard's assessment of the present age, we can view the internet in our time as being an even more extreme source of the negative effects of the public and the press, as Hubert Dreyfus has pointed out.¹⁰⁹

Kierkegaard was extremely prescient in this regard. Indeed, it seems at times that his analysis fits closer to our age. His evaluation of the press as leveling qualitative distinctions, detaching knowledge and opinion from any meaningful commitment through action, and absolving the speaker of any responsibility for his opinions, would seem to apply even more aptly to the anonymous blogs and commentators found on the internet. The internet is a sea of information wherein anyone can comment on anything he or she wishes without any requirement of expertise or even basic knowledge of the subject at hand. If we follow Kierkegaard this is surely an even greater source of leveling than the press in his own time. Meaningful contributions from knowledgeable experts on substantial matters are, of course, to be found on the internet but they are very easily lost in the information overload, making it increasingly harder to navigate and distinguish between meaningful communication and superficial chatter. As Dreyfus puts it: "What Kierkegaard envisaged as a consequence of the press's indiscriminate and uncommitted coverage is now fully realized on the World Wide Web. Thanks to hyperlinks, meaningful differences have, indeed, been leveled. Relevance and significance have disappeared."¹¹⁰ It should be relatively safe to claim that Kierkegaard identified a certain phenomenon, leveling, in its early stages and that this process has escalated to a higher degree in our times.

¹⁰⁸ Kierkegaard 1996: 290 (48 VIII I A 540)

¹⁰⁹ Dreyfus 2009

¹¹⁰ Dreyfus 2009: 78

I have here been focusing mainly on a specific work of Kierkegaard's which is not one of his better known writings. As I said before it is there where we can find Kierkegaard's most detailed analysis of the state of his present age. But that is not to say that it is only there where we can find this critique. Most of his works, along with the diaries, are littered with negative remarks concerning the public, the press and the present age. This negative assessment even finds its way into his upbuilding discourses, which is peculiar considering that these discourses are supposed to be edifying and positive in contradistinction to the more philosophical works which are more concerned with wresting the reader from various illusions and misconceptions which he has fallen under. As an example, in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard writes: "The human being who in despair turns away from those first thoughts in order to plunge into the crowd of comparisons makes himself a number, regards himself as a beast, no matter whether he by way of comparison became distinguished or lowly."¹¹¹ Here Kierkegaard also finds it necessary to point out the dangers of identifying too closely with the crowd.

Kierkegaard's warning against the danger of the public's subsuming of individuals into an empty abstraction also finds its way into his *Works of Love*. In this work Kierkegaard is mainly concerned with Christian ethics, especially the commandment "love thy neighbor", and how this has been misunderstood and misapplied in modern society. But in this work Kierkegaard also criticizes and warns against the overemphasis on worldliness and societal participation which leads to de-personalization and the loss of subjectivity. For Kierkegaard equality, whatever its positive consequences, also poses a substantial risk for the individual:

To bring about similarity among people in the world, to apportion to people, if possible equally, the conditions of temporality, is indeed something that preoccupies worldliness to a high degree. But even what we may call the well-intentioned worldly effort in this regard never comes to an understanding with Christianity. Well-intentioned worldliness remains piously, if you will, convinced that there must be one temporal condition, one earthly dissimilarity – found by means of calculations and surveys or in whatever other way – that is equality.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Kierkegaard 2009b: 190

¹¹² Kierkegaard 1995: 71-72

This indicates strongly that the negative understanding of the state of the present age and the public was an issue that concerned Kierkegaard very deeply. Indeed it seems that this is precisely what he was reacting against, the disappearance of inwardness and subjectivity, the individual's ability to make authentic choices and commitments, in the present age by way of objective reflection and leveling. His analysis of society is a closer analysis of the effects and consequences that this disappearance amounts to: individuals getting lost in the crowd, the public, and through leveling are increasingly only capable of meaningless, superficial chatter instead of proper communication.

But we should be careful not to misunderstand Kierkegaard here. Although, as we have seen, he had a very negative view of his contemporary society and advocated withdrawing from it, "remaining silent", in order to preserve and deepen one's inwardness, of course he did recognize that the subject is essentially a social being and must live in community with other subjects. As another commentator on Kierkegaard puts it, by describing the world of subjectivity in its various guises, Kierkegaard is precisely reminding us what we often do not notice, namely, how it is to exist as "an embodied and embedded self."¹¹³ It is only because of the dire state of the present age that living an authentic social existence among others has become problematic, and therefore a withdrawing from society into inwardness is necessary if the subject is to guard itself against these harmful influences. Through leveling qualitative distinctions have been abolished and it is therefore up to the subject itself to posit the meaningful distinctions. Ethical-religious truth which arises from inwardness has been superseded and pushed to the side by objective reflection and leveling. In order to attain an authentic existence, the subject must break the spell of objectivity through a withdrawal:

The individual must first of all break out of the prison in which his own reflection holds him, and if he succeeds, he still does not stand in the open but in the vast penitentiary built by the reflection of his associates, and to this he is again related through the reflection-relation in himself, and this can be broken only by religious inwardness, however much he sees through the falseness of the relation.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Grøn 2010: 82-83

¹¹⁴ Kierkegaard 2009a: 81

It is only after this temporary break is achieved that the subject can return to society and live a proper, authentic existence with others, not merely as a faceless number in the abstract crowd, unaware of its deeper self and potentiality. People who fail to achieve this and rate worldliness as the highest and most important, in effect, “pawn themselves to the world”¹¹⁵

Another point which I wish to raise here is that this analysis of Kierkegaard’s of the present age should not be understood as some form of historical-sociological theory about society and its development. What is most interesting concerning the preceding discussion for our purposes is that the leveling process and the state of the present age is first and foremost a problem for the self, not society itself. That is to say, Kierkegaard’s concern is directed toward how society shows up for the individual in its subjective experience. To put it another way, I want to claim that what Kierkegaard is here concerned with is the subject’s *phenomenological experience* of its own surroundings, which is influenced by the leveling process in a negative manner, making it increasingly problematic for the subject to commit itself to authentic choices, as all choices are rendered meaningless, and therefore making it difficult for the subject to perceive them, much less act on them. In short, Kierkegaard is engaged in an investigation of subjective experience, from the standpoint of the subject itself.

To strengthen this claim I will now consider Heidegger which, as we shall see, is closely related to Kierkegaard in this regard.

Heidegger’s *das Man* and ontological conception of leveling and chatter

Moving over to Heidegger from the preceding discussion is not difficult as Heidegger uses many of the same concepts as Kierkegaard in a near identical manner, as we shall see in a moment. But first we should investigate Heidegger’s understanding of authentic and inauthentic existence. There are deep similarities between Kierkegaard’s views expressed above and Heidegger’s notion of inauthenticity. For Heidegger Dasein’s authenticity gets

¹¹⁵ Kierkegaard 2008: 38

covered up by *das Man*¹¹⁶, an impersonal societal force which dictates social norms and values. As Heidegger explains this concept: “The “who” is not this one, not that one, not oneself [man selbst], not some people [einige], and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the “they” [*das Man*].”¹¹⁷ The power and influence of this impersonal force, of which we are still part just as everyone else is, is such that Dasein loses itself in it, it gets dissolved, and all authentic choices and responsibility for its own existence is handed over to *das Man*. As Heidegger claims:

We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as *they* see shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what *they* find shocking. The “they”, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.¹¹⁸

Even though Heidegger claims that living according to the dictates of *das Man* is an inauthentic existence¹¹⁹, he does recognize that this mode of existence is for the most part unavoidable. We are always necessarily social creatures, embedded in a certain societal context, and therefore living an inauthentic existence to some extent is necessary. *Das Man* belongs to Dasein’s primordial constitution and is therefore inescapable.¹²⁰ Sometimes we simply must lose ourselves in the crowd and experience the world through the interpretation of others, this is simply an inescapable fact about our existence which we must come to terms with. Heidegger isn’t not criticizing or warning against this phenomena, rather, he is just analyzing a certain existential feature of Dasein.

But despite this an authentic existence is possible. This consists of Dasein, in a certain sense, taking charge of its own Being and the interpretation of itself and its existence. It is in a

¹¹⁶ *Das Man* has traditionally been translated as “the They”. But this translation has been contested. Hubert Dreyfus suggests rather “the One” as a better translation in order to emphasize that everyone is part of this phenomenon. It is not entirely separate from Dasein. See: Dreyfus 2001: xi

¹¹⁷ Heidegger 1962: 164

¹¹⁸ Heidegger 1962: 164

¹¹⁹ Heidegger 1962: 166

¹²⁰ Heidegger 1962: 167

way a wrestling of its authentic existence away from the all-embracing power of *das Man*. But this should be understood in the correct manner. What Heidegger is getting at is not that we completely break free of *das Man* and the social sphere. This would be impossible as *das Man* is an unavoidable part of the structure of Dasein's existence. Instead, achieving an authentic existence is a modification which does not require anything exceptional on the part of Dasein: "*it is rather an existentiell modification of the "they" – of the "they" as an essential existentielle.*"¹²¹ We come to see *das Man* for what it is, thereby changing our relation to it.

This analysis of *das Man* bears a striking resemblance to Kierkegaard's discussion of the public. But what is even more interesting for our purposes in this regard is that Heidegger also employs the concepts of leveling and chatter in his existential analytic. I want to take a closer look at how Heidegger uses these concepts as they clearly point to an even more substantial link between Heidegger and Kierkegaard.

For Heidegger, Dasein always inhabits a shared meaningful world. Dasein does not first find itself in a world only later to encounter others in it, rather, the intersubjective element is always necessarily present from the very start. The other is always presupposed in Dasein's existence through Dasein's use and understanding of the equipment it finds in its environment. This fundamental feature of Dasein's existence Heidegger calls being-with-others. In this respect Heidegger sees the problem of other minds, which has plagued philosophers and philosophy for centuries, as a pseudo-problem which is not solved but rather dissolved through proper phenomenological description of Dasein in its everydayness. As he writes:

The Dasein is not at first merely a being-with others so as thereupon to emerge from this being-with-one-another into an objective world, to come out to things. This approach would be just as unsuccessful as subjective idealism, which starts first with a subject, which then in some manner supplies an object for itself. To start with an I-thou relationship as a relationship of two subjects would entail that at first there are two subjects, taken simply as two, which then provide a relation to others. Rather, just as the Dasein is originally being with others, so it is originally being with the handy and extant. Similarly, the Dasein is just as little at first merely a dwelling among things so as then occasionally to discover among these

¹²¹ Heidegger 1962: 168

things beings with its own kind of being: instead, as the being-with others *and* being-among intraworldly beings.¹²²

Heidegger sees Dasein's existence as fundamentally characterized by being with others. But this necessarily social dimension of Dasein's being is threatened by certain dangers which make achieving an authentic existence problematic, such as *das Man*. In analyzing the social aspect of Dasein, Heidegger also employs the concepts "the public" and "leveling" in a similar manner to Kierkegaard's analysis. He claims: "Distantiality, averageness, and leveling down, as ways of Being for the "they", constitute what we know as 'publicness' ["die Öffentlichkeit"]. Publicness proximally controls every way in which the world and Dasein get interpreted..."¹²³

Heidegger criticizes, in a similar vein as Kierkegaard, the dangers of "the public". They both point out that precisely because the public sphere, what Heidegger calls *das Man*, is everyone and no one, a meaningless abstraction, it levels down all meaningful distinctions between individuals and usurps their individual understanding and choice: "By publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone."¹²⁴ Heidegger here also emphasizes the danger when everything becomes familiar and accessible, when nothing needs to be worked for and is perceived to be easily attainable by anyone. The danger lies in this covering up. If Dasein (or the self) cannot correctly perceive its own choices, how can it make an authentic choice or understand itself in a genuine, meaningful manner?

This aspect of existence Heidegger calls falling. What Heidegger means by this concept is Dasein's, in a sense, fleeing away from its own responsibility for its own existence. It is the avoidance of taking a meaningful stand. Instead it gives up its responsibility and interprets itself solely in terms of its surrounding world, the public sphere. Although Dasein is always, in its very essence, being-with-others, it can become too absorbed in this aspect that it loses itself or falls:

¹²² Heidegger 1988: 296-297

¹²³ Heidegger 1962: 165

¹²⁴ Heidegger 1962: 165

The everyday interpretation of the Self, however, has a tendency to understand itself in terms of the 'world' with which it is concerned. When Dasein has itself in view ontically, it *fails to see* itself in relation to the kind of Being of that entity which it is itself. And this holds especially for the basic state of Dasein, Being-in-the-world. What is the motive for this 'fugitive' way of saying "I"? It is motivated by Dasein's falling; for as falling, it *flees* in the face of itself into the "they".¹²⁵

This falling shows up in Dasein's communication in the public sphere. According to Heidegger communication is: "Discourse which expresses itself."¹²⁶ Proper communication consists of a disclosure of Being for the listener through language.¹²⁷ That is to say, something authentic is revealed, an individual interpretation of Being through Dasein's existence. But all this is lacking in what Heidegger calls idle talk or chatter.

Idle talk is a superficial form of communication in which nothing new is revealed. It is rather the previous interpretation of the public which gets passed around endlessly as gossip or superficial chattering. This reveals itself not only in the discourse of individuals but can show up also in writing in the press, a phenomenon Heidegger calls scribbling.¹²⁸ The reason this form of communication is mere idle talk is that (and here we should be reminded of Kierkegaard) there is no proper appropriation of what is said involved: "Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own."¹²⁹ Similarly to Kierkegaard, for Heidegger, appropriation is the only real understanding. Just possessing knowledge of something attained easily is substantially different than really grasping it through appropriation, by making it one's own. Just passively attaining knowledge of a subject through direct communication is more superficial and meaningless than making the knowledge have bearing on your existence, acting, through your own resolve, on your own deeply held conviction.

Idle talk is a cause for concern because it decreases this appropriation of knowledge and Dasein's curiosity and willingness to inquire personally into important matters: "idle talk

¹²⁵ Heidegger 1962: 165

¹²⁶ Heidegger 1962: 211

¹²⁷ Heidegger 1962: 211-212

¹²⁸ Heidegger 1962: 212

¹²⁹ Heidegger 1962: 213

discourages any new inquiry and any disputation, and in a peculiar way suppresses them and holds them back.”¹³⁰ Idle talk can have harmful effects on Dasein’s existence. If it is not counteracted and guarded against, it can influence Dasein’s whole existence and self-understanding, which in turn affects its being-with-others and being-in-the-world:

When Dasein maintains itself in idle talk, it is – as Being-in-the-world – cut off from its primary and primordially genuine relationships-of-Being towards the world, towards Dasein with, and towards its very Being-in. Such a Dasein keeps floating unattached [in einer Schweben]; yet in so doing, it is always alongside the world, with Others, and towards itself.¹³¹

The preceding discussion should be readily familiar if we recall the discussion of Kierkegaard’s view of the present age in the first part of this chapter. Indeed, it seems that Heidegger’s conception of the public, leveling and chatter or idle talk is almost identical to Kierkegaard’s concern. On the basis of this it should be safe to say that Heidegger is quite substantially indebted to the Danish philosopher, even more so than he acknowledges in *Being and Time*, a point that I previously raised in the introduction.

Nevertheless, there are also certain differences that must be mentioned. The most obvious one is the fact that Heidegger detaches Kierkegaard’s concepts completely from any Christian considerations. Heidegger, in effect, secularizes Kierkegaard’s analysis in this respect as Hubert Dreyfus puts it.¹³² For Kierkegaard the highest stage of existence is what he calls religiousness B, where the self, by relating itself to itself absolutely also at the same time relates itself to God.¹³³ The problem he had with the present age was that this possibility was closed off as leveling had abolished all qualitative distinctions, making the religious stage as good a choice as any other. If there are no meaningful differences between choices, then there aren’t really any choices at all. There is nothing at stake in making one choice over against

¹³⁰ Heidegger 1962: 213

¹³¹ Heidegger 1962: 214

¹³² Dreyfus 2001: 299

¹³³ Kierkegaard 1992: 556

another. Nothing gives the choice made any meaning, leading increasingly to the abstaining from personal choice altogether.

We don't find references to God in Heidegger's analysis of Dasein.¹³⁴ He certainly does not depend on God for authentic existence to be possible. But he is similarly aware of the difficulty of achieving an authentic existence in a social surrounding. Another big difference lies also in the fact that for Heidegger the concepts he takes over from Kierkegaard are for him descriptions of ontological structures of existence. Whereas Kierkegaard had analyzed the present age as unique in its superficiality, sensuousness and lack of meaningful communication, these factors are inescapable for Heidegger as they are an unavoidable part of Dasein's existence. They are not merely characteristics of a certain age.

There is furthermore a difference in how they measure the possibility of authentic existence. For Kierkegaard nothing less than a complete (although temporary) withdrawal into inwardness and subjectivity is necessary if the religious stage is to be attained. The subject is not to rely on others and should especially avoid identifying with the crowd. Kierkegaard of course does not neglect or fail to realize the subject's necessary social embeddedness. On the contrary, precisely this fact makes the authentic choice so difficult as it is much easier to act and be like others. But nevertheless he does believe that making a truly individual choice is possible. A choice which is completely the individual's and no one else's.

This possibility is more problematic for Heidegger. For him, as a consequence of our being-with-others in a shared world, all choices which are presented to us come from our surroundings. Dasein is characterized by facticity rather than the possibility (however difficult it may be) of radically leaping into the religious stage of existence through personal resolve. For Heidegger, facticity is Dasein's limitation by outside, external factors. Dasein is, to a certain extent, fixed by its socio-historical situatedness and context. We project our possible choices into the future based on our current situation which is severely limited by our facticity:

¹³⁴ Here I mean the early Heidegger. Heidegger had quite a lot to say about God in his later period, such as his famous claim that: "only a God can save us now". But the later Heidegger is not under discussion so this issue will not be pursued.

As something factual, Dasein's projection of itself understandingly is in each case already alongside a world that has been discovered. From this world it takes its possibilities, and it does so first in accordance with the way things have been interpreted by the "they". This interpretation has already restricted the possible options of choice to what lies within the range of the familiar, the attainable, the respectable – that which is fitting and proper.¹³⁵

But that is not to say that Dasein's existence and self-understanding is completely conditioned by its facticity and all possibility for authenticity closed off. As we have seen, authentic existence, for Dasein, lies in a modification of its previous understanding, changing its relation to its self and its surroundings.

Despite these differences, based on the above discussion, I hope to have shown conclusively that there is a definite connection between Kierkegaard and Heidegger in this regard, a connection somewhat disguised by Heidegger himself as previously mentioned. If we view Heidegger's analysis as a phenomenological investigation it is certainly unproblematic to read Kierkegaard in a similar manner, given the very close similarities. As I mentioned above, for Kierkegaard, as for Heidegger, the concern is how the present age, the public, the press, leveling etc., show up for the subject in its experience and the effects that they have on the self and its existence. In both cases we find an investigation of subjectivity.

In this chapter I have been focusing on Kierkegaard and Heidegger's concern with the social aspect of the subject's existence. Both diagnose the subject's social surroundings as having a decisive influence on its development and structure and not only in a positive sense. The subject is in constant danger of losing itself due to various societal forces. Kierkegaard assessed his present age as being struck by a process which he called leveling, which flattens out all qualitative distinctions and makes it problematic for the individual to make authentic choices. This leveling is to be seen clearly in the press and the public sphere and its consequences are, among others, the degeneration of communication into meaningless chatter.

We also saw how Heidegger employs much of the same concepts as Kierkegaard such as leveling and chatter, although he understands them as being ontological features of Dasein's existence, rather than a peculiar characteristic of a certain age as Kierkegaard would

¹³⁵ Heidegger 1962: 239

have it. Nevertheless, this points to a substantial debt owed by Heidegger to Kierkegaard and strengthens the claim that Kierkegaard was, at the very least, a significant precursor to phenomenology. To strengthen this claim further, and see if Kierkegaard can be viewed as more than just a precursor to phenomenology, we will, in the next chapter, focus on Kierkegaard's method, his style of doing philosophy.

5. Phenomenological Description in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works

In the preceding chapters we have seen how Kierkegaard and phenomenology share a very similar concern. This concern is the disregard for subjectivity and overreliance on objective thinking which leads to a distortion and neglect of lived experience. In this chapter I want to further our investigation into Kierkegaard's relation to phenomenology by focusing on another aspect which Kierkegaard and phenomenology share, namely, the very method they employ in investigating subjectivity. As I claimed in the first chapter, phenomenology is a method that relies largely on description, rather than abstract argumentation, in its investigations. This is a methodology, which I will argue, that Kierkegaard shares to a large extent.

Either/Or

We have seen in the second chapter how Kierkegaard used a very peculiar method in his authorship, what he called indirect communication. The thought behind it was trying to get the individual reader to think for himself, to awaken his inwardness, not by passively accepting new knowledge, but by problematizing what the reader already knew, making him see it in a new light. For this purpose Kierkegaard used pseudonyms which are not merely alternative names to disguise the real author but rather fictional characters which have their own point of view, thoughts, and opinions which do not necessarily reflect Kierkegaard's.

But I want to claim that in employing the pseudonyms and engaging in indirect communication Kierkegaard is engaged in a method which resembles phenomenology to a large degree. What is going on in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works? Kierkegaard, in a sense, puts himself in the shoes of an individual which inhabits a certain way of existing, which entails a specific life-view. The pseudonymous author has his own manner of existing and this way of life is reflected in his views and opinions. What Kierkegaard is doing in his writings is describing how existence appears before an individual who is in this form of existence. Kierkegaard isolates three basic stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and

the religious.¹³⁶ Within these stages existence and value, what is important and what is insignificant, appears before the subject in a substantially different manner. Any ontology always appears through these three stages, altering whatever it is that appears: “The metaphysical, the ontological, is [er], but it does not exist [er ikke til], for when it exists it does so in the esthetic, in the ethical, in the religious, and when it is, it is the abstraction from or a *prius* [something prior] to the esthetic, the ethical, the religious.”¹³⁷ That is to say, what is is never perceived directly, it is always filtered by the stages of existence. Depending on the stage, things show up differently in our surroundings. Therefore the stages come first, prior to any speculative thought which is influenced by them. Kierkegaard does not argue for one stage rather than another explicitly, instead he describes how things appear before one who is engaged in a specific mode. He mostly lets his creations, the pseudonymous authors, argue amongst themselves while he himself, the true author, stands behind and observes.

This can be seen in Kierkegaard’s first major work of his authorship, *Either/Or*. In the first part we come across the various papers of a person who is only titled A. The papers deal with vastly different subject matters and the connection between them is not overtly obvious. But what is shown in these papers is the individual author’s view of existence, his values and being in the world. This stage of existence is called the aesthetic and is characterized by enjoyment and immediacy. For a person embodying this stage of existence, life and the surrounding world is valued according to what is interesting and what is boring, rather than any higher form of valuation. Enjoyment and beauty are the goals which A revolves around. These goals are attained in immediacy and he criticizes or parodies all attempts to put value on means and ends which others would claim are higher. A lives entirely for the moment and his own personal satisfaction. Choices are essentially meaningless as A doesn’t recognize the value inherent in the choice, such as whether to marry or not. His attitude toward choices is nicely summed up in the first part of the work, entitled *Diapsalmata*:

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over

¹³⁶ Kierkegaard 1992: 294

¹³⁷ Kierkegaard 1988b: 476

them, you will regret it either way. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it. ... Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life.¹³⁸

In contrast to this stage of existence, the second part contains the letters of a person called Judge Wilhelm who is acquainted with A. Wilhelm criticizes A's way of life and argues rather for an ethical stage of existence in which the value system is differently structured. What Wilhelm points out is that a subject stuck in the aesthetic stage is completely at the mercy of external factors, something which A accepts passively. Rather than evaluating things according to whether they are interesting or boring and merely striving for enjoyment and beauty at the expense of everything else, the ethical stage of existence is characterized by duty wherein your own personal feelings and interests are transformed and aimed at something higher. Wilhelm claims that in the ethical stage an individual places more emphasis on the inner than in the aesthetic stage and strives to become himself through duty and passionate commitment.¹³⁹ This duty is best embodied in the institution of marriage, something which A shuns and ridicules relentlessly but Wilhelm defends passionately, claiming it to be the highest *telos* of an individual life.¹⁴⁰ As Wilhelm sums up the difference between the stages: "the aesthetical in a man is that by which he is immediately what he is; the ethical is that whereby he becomes what he becomes. He who lives in and by and of and for the aesthetical in him lives aesthetically."¹⁴¹ By moving over to the ethical stage, the individual, in a sense, becomes himself to a higher degree, a possibility which is curtailed in the aesthetic stage.

The way the subject moves on from the aesthetic stage to the ethical is by choice. The aesthetic individual has been deeply influenced by the leveling process we encountered in the last chapter. He abstains from any significant choice and finds all choices, whether to marry or not for example, equally meaningless and worthless. But when he moves over to the ethical stage he, in a sense, chooses himself, chooses to become himself by placing value on

¹³⁸ Kierkegaard 1988a: 40

¹³⁹ Kierkegaard 1959: 178-180

¹⁴⁰ Kierkegaard 1988b: 101, Judge Wilhelm also appears in the work *Stages on Life's Way* which I reference here. In this work he similarly defends the institution of marriage passionately, advocating the ethical stage of existence.

¹⁴¹ Kierkegaard 1959: 182

something higher than mere enjoyment and immediacy. As Wilhelm claims: “only by choosing absolutely can one choose the ethical. By the absolute choice the ethical is posited...”¹⁴² He further claims that: “In choosing itself the personality chooses itself ethically and excludes absolutely the aesthetical, but since he chooses himself and since he does not become another being by choosing himself but becomes himself, the whole of the aesthetical comes back again in its relativity.”¹⁴³ Through its own personal choice the subject changes and its existence gets re-described in a substantially different manner. But that is not to say that it is a complete transformation, the vestiges of the previous stage of existence are still there, they just show up in a different way and the subject relates itself to it differently.

It is not my intention to go any further in exploring the content of this particular work and the various nuances of these two stages of existence according to Kierkegaard, I want rather to point to Kierkegaard’s *method* in presenting his views in this way. What he is illustrating is two different stages or ways of life which structure the existence of the individual who inhabits it (the religious stage is hinted at in the end with a religious sermon that states: “against God we are always in the wrong”¹⁴⁴, which indicates that both stages presented in the work are insufficient for an authentic subject, but apart from that this third stage is not addressed explicitly in this work.) But the way he goes about illustrating these stages is by actually writing from the point of view of an individual whose experience is structured by the stage in question. In essence he describes what an aesthetic or ethical individual experiences, how objects in his surroundings show up for him. That is to say, Kierkegaard, the true author of the pseudonymous works, is committed to *describing* from a *first-person perspective*.

What is also interesting for our purposes is that, although the writings are presented as the work of a concrete individual, a specific point of view of a fully fleshed out person, they are clearly not to be taken as a completely unique viewpoint. They are rather meant to capture the essence of a certain stage of existence which is shared in common by many individuals. In a sense they could be called, in a Husserlian vein, an eidetic reduction of a particular way of existing, a certain life view. If we read Kierkegaard in a Husserlian light we can see that the subject intends objects (objects understood in the phenomenological manner of whatever appears before consciousness) differently according to the stage of existence

¹⁴² Kierkegaard 1959: 181

¹⁴³ Kierkegaard 1959: 182

¹⁴⁴ Kierkegaard 1959: 348

which the subject currently inhabits. Kierkegaard isolates the kernel which the stage in question, whether it be the aesthetic or ethical, embodies and then goes about describing how existence shows up for an individual who dwells in that stage. He is engaged in a process of revealing certain structures of experience, a project that can be seen as closely related to Husserl's. Kierkegaard would not claim that all individuals who inhabit the aesthetic stage of existence are completely identical, even though they may have specific features in common, they are still unique individuals after all. But they share a certain attitude, a certain way of perceiving existence and what they judge as important and worthless. The things in their surroundings show up for them in a certain manner and it is precisely this attitude which Kierkegaard tries to capture with his description of the stages of existence which can be seen as the foundation of experience.

This method of Kierkegaard's is to be found in his first major work but it is one that he kept practicing and is also to be seen in his later, more overtly philosophical ones as well. To illustrate this I will take a closer look at two of Kierkegaard's later writings. Again, what mainly concerns us here is the method which Kierkegaard employs.

The Concept of Anxiety

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis, analyzes anxiety (*angest*) as the title indicates.¹⁴⁵ For him anxiety is a directionless mood, a state of mind which comes about when the individual stands face to face with his own freedom. In that sense it is not to be equated with basic emotions such as fear, hatred etc. as these feelings have some object which they are directed towards, (fear of spiders, hatred of a minority group for example). Anxiety on the other hand is a deeply revealing state as it shows the immense freedom of the individual, his capacity to make his own radical choices, for better or for worse. As Haufniensis famously explains anxiety (a description which would later be taken up by Sartre):

¹⁴⁵ The original English translation of this work from 1949 translated *angest* as dread.

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.¹⁴⁶

Although anxiety may at first come across as a negative state, an uncomfortable one for the subject, this is not what Haufniensis would claim. On the contrary, anxiety reveals the subject's individuality and freedom. It is precisely because of the individual's being spirit that anxiety is even possible for him. The self for Kierkegaard is composed of the infinite and finite, a worldly as well as eternal component, and these two factors are synthesized in what Kierkegaard calls spirit: "Man, then, is a synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal."¹⁴⁷ Anxiety is to be understood as a direct consequence of this and is therefore a uniquely human condition which has possible beneficial effects for the subject. Through anxiety the subject can relate itself to its components differently and thereby become itself more fully. This possibility is revealed by anxiety: "Because he is a synthesis, he can be in anxiety; and the more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man [...] in the sense that he himself produces the anxiety."¹⁴⁸

But, seeing as this is Kierkegaard writing after all, there is a theological dimension to his analysis of anxiety. He ultimately ties anxiety to sin in the sense that the anxiety in the biblical Adam was the precursor of original, hereditary sin. Adam's decision to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge was the first instance of anxiety experienced in the world. God forbade Adam to eat from the tree but this prohibition at the same time revealed Adam's freedom to choose, a state of anxiety. After Adam ate from the tree, good and evil came into existence and sin was posited. In this sense anxiety was the direct precursor of sin although sin also brings about anxiety: "Sin entered in anxiety, but sin in turn brought anxiety along with it."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Kierkegaard 1980: 61

¹⁴⁷ Kierkegaard 1980: 85

¹⁴⁸ Kierkegaard 1980: 155

¹⁴⁹ Kierkegaard 1980: 53

Although Kierkegaard himself claims in the subtitle of the work that his deliberation on anxiety and sin is psychologically oriented, we can also read it as being very much in line with phenomenological concerns. After all, his analysis is not, in its essence, a historical or theological investigation, but rather, an investigation of subjectivity first and foremost. He is concerned with investigating what anxiety *shows us* about subjectivity, how subjectivity appears before itself and that it comes to apprehend itself differently through anxiety. To put it another way, it is the lived experience of anxiety which is under description. It is precisely through anxiety that the subject is given to itself as subjectivity and consequently the possibility of becoming itself, altering its self-understanding, opens up. If we think of phenomenology as the investigation of subjectivity through description we can see Kierkegaard's analysis as being in this spirit. As Arne Grøn points out: "What is described and analyzed in *The Concept of Anxiety*, then, is human subjectivity coming to itself, as selfhood. The analysis of anxiety can be read as a phenomenology of subjectivity."¹⁵⁰

The weight Kierkegaard places on anxiety in his investigation of subjectivity should also be readily familiar to any reader of Heidegger's *Being and Time* as he also gives it great importance. Heidegger similarly claims that anxiety is a mood without any directedness towards an object. It is a mood without any intention which reveals an important part of Dasein's existence. For Heidegger, anxiety is a phenomenon in which: "*the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety.*"¹⁵¹ What anxiety discloses for Dasein is its own individuality and its possibilities. Anxiety is anxiety over the world as such and Dasein's status in it. But through it Dasein encounters itself, in a way, experiences itself as "uncanny."¹⁵² Through this anxiety the possibility of authenticity opens up because of the anxiety's consequent individuation of Dasein, leading to its reflecting upon itself and its own existence and possibilities. Dasein moves away from *das Man*, and the public interpretation of Being and can start taking its own stand on its existence. It is precisely because anxiety detaches us from our usual engagement in the public and idle chatter that this becomes possible. This is a possibility which becomes available but Dasein can also choose to flee in the face of this responsibility and into inauthenticity. In doing so it, in a sense, chooses not to become itself.

¹⁵⁰ Grøn 2010: 87-88

¹⁵¹ Heidegger 1962: 231

¹⁵² Heidegger 1962: 231

Heidegger's analysis of anxiety is, to a large extent, identical to Kierkegaard's. The biggest difference is the same one we encountered in the last chapter. Heidegger divorces Kierkegaard's analysis from its theological connotations and secularizes it. For Heidegger anxiety is a feature of Dasein's existence that has nothing to do with sin or theological deliberations. Another aspect that must be mentioned in this regard is that Heidegger sees the Being of Dasein (or the self as Kierkegaard would call it) constituted by the position which Dasein takes on itself, similarly to Kierkegaard. That is to say, how Dasein understands itself is a crucial aspect of its Being. But unlike Kierkegaard, Heidegger denies that the self is made up of a synthesis of the finite and infinite in spirit. Instead of spirit, Heidegger uses the concept existence: "man's 'substance' is not spirit as a synthesis of soul and body; it is rather *existence*." ¹⁵³

But if we understand Heidegger's analysis as a phenomenological investigation, the same should also largely apply to Kierkegaard based on the above discussion. In both cases they are concerned with investigating subjectivity through description by showing how the subject (Dasein) encounters itself through anxiety, a mood which is not directed towards a particular object, and the consequences this has. In both cases anxiety reveals to the subject its own self, how it appears before itself, and the possibility of becoming itself (or not).

I now wish to supplement this claim by looking at *The Sickness unto Death*, the work we now turn to.

The Sickness unto Death

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus¹⁵⁴, the pseudonymous author, gives his well-known account of the self: "The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation

¹⁵³ Heidegger 1962: 153

¹⁵⁴ Anti-Climacus is a direct reference to Johannes Climacus who we have already encountered in the third chapter. Whereas Climacus denies that he is a Christian, Anti-Climacus seems to be much more religiously motivated. The "anti" in the name should be understood in the latin sense of "higher than" or "above". Anti-Climacus is a pseudonym which has a unique status among Kierkegaard's creations. A commentator on Kierkegaard writes for example that: "it is generally recognized that Kierkegaard "stands behind" the ideas expressed in *The Sickness unto Death* in a sense that is not true of all the pseudonymous writings..." (Glenn 2002: 5). Kierkegaard himself in his diaries claims that: "the new pseudonym, though mark well, one that is higher than my personal existence, is precisely the truth about my nature, it expresses the outer limit of my

which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relating to itself."¹⁵⁵ The self is not a fixed, singular and transparent entity as it had often been understood in the Cartesian tradition, but is rather composed of different aspects which relate to each other. As he says the self lies rather in the *relation relating* to itself. The stand which the self takes on its own self makes up its constitution. It can relate to itself in different ways and therefore the self can come in various different guises. The self understands itself differently according to its various relations to itself and most of these understandings are what Anti-Climacus calls conditions of despair. The escape from despair is possible but only by truly becoming itself, something: "which can only be done in the relationship to God."¹⁵⁶

For Anti-Climacus the self is at the same time finite and infinite, it has a material and finite aspect as well as an eternal dimension. These two different aspects of the self he understands in the sense that: "the finite is the confining factor, the infinite the expanding factor."¹⁵⁷ These two components of the self are synthesized in what he calls spirit, an account we have already come across in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Within the self, there is a continuous, underlying struggle between the material and eternal aspects, or more precisely, between the self's different relating to these aspects. As he states: "A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short a synthesis."¹⁵⁸ But more importantly, the self, understood as a relation to itself, is precisely always in a process of becoming itself through its relating to its different aspects. It is precisely in this relating that despair lies.

As Arne Grøn has pointed out¹⁵⁹, what is interesting about Anti-Climacus's notion of the self is its *negative* treatment. Anti-Climacus doesn't give much description of what the self is, apart from the above account, which is largely the standard Christian notion of man being composed of an earthly as well as eternal aspect. His discussion is rather focused on revealing all the different ways in which the self is *not* itself, a condition he calls despair. I

nature." (Kierkegaard 1996: 430 (49 X 2 A 66)). Therefore we can be reasonably certain that the views expressed in the work are very close to Kierkegaard's own.

¹⁵⁵ Kierkegaard 2008: 9

¹⁵⁶ Kierkegaard 2008: 31

¹⁵⁷ Kierkegaard 2008: 32

¹⁵⁸ Kierkegaard 2008: 9

¹⁵⁹ Grøn 1997: 14

will go further into this in a moment, first we need to understand more closely what despair involves.

For Anti-Climacus there are three forms of despair, one of which afflicts every self at some point in its development. The first is what he describes as an unconscious despair wherein the self is not aware that it has a self and that this self is in despair. But nevertheless it is and even more so because of its ignorance of its own condition. According to Anti-Climacus this first, unconscious form of despair is the most common in the world.¹⁶⁰ Most individuals just go along with the everyday flow of things and relate themselves to an abstraction, the public or the crowd as we have already seen in our discussion in the previous chapter. It amounts to not having a self at all because these individuals lack any sense of inwardness or self-reflection. They do not relate themselves passionately to anything meaningful, they lack all commitment. As he describes this condition:

By seeing the multitude of people around it, by being busied with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such a person forgets himself, in a divine sense forgets his own name, dares not believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd.¹⁶¹

Next comes the form of despair which Anti-Climacus calls: "In despair not wanting to be oneself. The despair of weakness."¹⁶² This form is then further divided into despair over the worldly on the one hand and the eternal on the other. What Anti-Climacus is getting at here is the psychological-existential condition of the self, consciously failing to actualize itself. That is to say, the self is situated in a certain position; social, political, historical, personal etc. and comes to understand that all these factors taken together do not necessarily constitute the self (unlike the first form of despair where this knowledge is lacking.) The self knows that there is something deeper to it than just the mere everyday actuality of its immediate existence. But the self is as a result in despair because it, in weakness, refuses to change, it doesn't want to be itself. As Anti-Climacus describes this kind of despairer: "he struggles in vain. The

¹⁶⁰ Kierkegaard 2008: 51

¹⁶¹ Kierkegaard 2008: 36

¹⁶² Kierkegaard 2008: 57

difficulty he has stumbled on requires a complete break with immediacy, and he does not have the self-reflection or the ethical reflection for that." ¹⁶³

The third form of despair is: "The despair of wanting in despair to be oneself – defiance." ¹⁶⁴ Here the self not only envisages alternative possibilities for itself but actualizes them, creating itself in a different and more authentic manner. While the second form of despair was characterized by weakness, the self, denying or fleeing itself, this form is associated with defiance. The self has moved beyond concerns for superficial everyday matters and outside pressure. It overcomes the crippling existential paralysis and inauthentic existence of the previous forms of despair and understands itself as open to self-creation without shirking from this realization: "Here despair is conscious of itself as an activity; it comes not from the outside in the form of a passivity in the face of external pressure, but directly from the self." ¹⁶⁵

But why is this condition still despair, rather than the escape from it as it would perhaps appear to be? Even though this is, according to Anti-Climacus, the rarest type of despair, it is still nevertheless despair precisely because the self, in its self-creation, still misunderstands itself as being the lord and master over its own reality. Its conception of itself is now as an isolated subject entirely detached from either its own weakness or societal conditioning and pressure. This third mode of despair is no less serious even though Anti-Climacus seems to indicate it is nevertheless a step above the first two and the form of despair closest to escaping despair. ¹⁶⁶ As Anti-Climacus understands this mode: "far from the self succeeding increasingly in being itself, it becomes increasingly obvious that it is a hypothetical self. The self is its own master, absolutely (as one says) its own master; and exactly this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and joy." ¹⁶⁷

Then the question of course is: what type of self is not in despair? To summarize, the non-despairing self is the self before God, not constituted by external factors but also avoids the other pole, withdrawing inwards and conceiving itself as pure self-creation. As he claims: "the self is only healthy and free from despair when, precisely by having despaired, it is

¹⁶³ Kierkegaard 2008: 65

¹⁶⁴ Kierkegaard 2008: 81

¹⁶⁵ Kierkegaard 2008: 82

¹⁶⁶ Kierkegaard 2008: 82

¹⁶⁷ Kierkegaard 2008: 84

grounded transparently in God."¹⁶⁸ The self becomes itself through a dialectical process wherein its two different components, the finite and infinite, are realized in spirit through faith. But what is important here for our purposes is that this process takes place within the self, in its self-relating.

In a similar way to his presentation of the two different stages of existence in *Either/Or*, what Kierkegaard gives us here is the basic essence of being in despair. Although this is an affliction which individuals struggle with, and is therefore highly subjective, Kierkegaard analyzes certain structures which the condition has in common for all. From this point of view Kierkegaard is performing a certain kind of eidetic reduction, isolating the *eidōs* of despair.

Furthermore, the method he employs is largely based on description as in the previous works discussed earlier, showing how despair shows up for the individual, and influences his experience. He is, in the spirit of phenomenology, focusing on the “how” rather than the “what”. In the *Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard showed us how the subject encounters itself through anxiety as we have seen. But in *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard’s (phenomenological) description takes a slightly different road. Whereas Climacus, the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript* and *Philosophical Fragments* claimed that he was not a Christian, the author of *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus is intensely religious, even more so than Kierkegaard himself. Kierkegaard claims in his diaries that Anti-Climacus is Christian “to an extraordinary degree”, and that he places himself: “higher than Joh. Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus.”¹⁶⁹ Kierkegaard’s method here is writing from the viewpoint of a passionately religious person and describing how theological matters show up for him. To put it another way, the manner of presenting the account is inextricably woven with the account itself.

As I have already pointed out, the peculiar part of this work is that Kierkegaard is most concerned with how the self is *not* itself. It is through a negative treatment that he hopes to bring the self to light. The self can fail to be itself, as when in despair it does not want to be itself, but, as Arne Grøn has pointed out, in this denial of the self, in its not wanting to be itself, it is still given to itself in a negative way. The self is nevertheless self-given to itself in its denial. It is precisely this self-giveness of the self in a negative manner which is shown in

¹⁶⁸ Kierkegaard 2008: 32

¹⁶⁹ Kierkegaard 1996: 394 (49 X I A 517)

Kierkegaard's analysis of the self in despair.¹⁷⁰ Grøn further claims that *The Sickness unto Death* can therefore be read as a negative phenomenology: "...it makes sense to operate with the idea of a negative phenomenology in reading Kierkegaard. The method in *The Sickness unto Death* is to look for what is implied in what appears, or what is hidden in what is shown."¹⁷¹

If we read Kierkegaard as a phenomenologist in these works, his method as a form of descriptive phenomenology of the self, it would be more in line with Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology rather than the Husserlian transcendental one. If we recall Heidegger's claim that was quoted in the second chapter that: "Just because the phenomena are...for the most part not given, there is need for phenomenology."¹⁷², we can see Kierkegaard as being similarly guided by this realization. Kierkegaard seeks precisely to reveal features of the self that have gone unnoticed. As Dahlstrom, who also comments on Kierkegaard's phenomenological sensibilities in this regard, puts it: "In Kierkegaard's phenomenology of human freedom, progressively realized through stages of despair, one finds the same effort to disclose the essence of the respective despair and freedom that, as it were, lurks hidden but operative in the existence of the person despairing."¹⁷³

For Kierkegaard the self is constituted by its relation to itself, that is to say, what the self is depends to a large extent on the position it takes on its own self. The self can change these positions on its own self through its own choice and in so doing its self-givenness and self-understanding also changes dramatically, thereby changing the self. As Grøn states about Kierkegaard's notion of despair as not being oneself: "This means that the problem of self-givenness and self-understanding, which is at the core of phenomenology, is complicated. We are not just given to ourselves. We are given to understand ourselves."¹⁷⁴ It is precisely this self-becoming and self-understanding in self-givenness which Kierkegaard seeks to show using a method which bears significant resemblance to phenomenology, understood as a descriptive enterprise wherein the self is at the forefront.

There is another sense in which Kierkegaard is here engaged in an enterprise closely similar to phenomenology. If we recall the definition I made in the first chapter,

¹⁷⁰ Grøn 2010: 90-91

¹⁷¹ Grøn 2010: 92

¹⁷² Heidegger 1962: 60

¹⁷³ Dahlstrom 2010: 74

¹⁷⁴ Grøn 2010: 92

phenomenology, whether in the hands of Husserl or Heidegger, is also characterized by the re-thinking of any previous metaphysical or epistemological pre-conceptions which are inherited by the history of philosophy. This is done in order to reveal fundamental features of consciousness and existence which has been overlooked because of the distorting influence of these pre-held convictions. Husserl and Heidegger disagreed on precisely how this was carried out and how much was to be put out of play as we saw in the first chapter, but the conviction that this was necessary in order to investigate subjectivity properly remained virtually the same.

Based on the above discussion (and also the one in previous chapters) we can see Kierkegaard as sharing this conviction. He similarly seeks to reveal despair as a hidden element of subjectivity which has hitherto gone unnoticed. The reason it has gone unnoticed is that objective thought, Hegelian systematic philosophy especially, is fundamentally incapable of investigating subjectivity in its givenness due to its prior commitments, the priority of objectivity. What is needed is to push this way of looking at the subject aside and describe the subject as it appears to itself. There are differences, notably that Kierkegaard certainly does not push to the side all pre-conceptions. As we have seen, he is already, to a large degree, committed to a Christian account of the subject. But he doesn't just accept this Christian account, rather he attempts to re-think it and tries to get the reader to appropriate the truths of Christianity on their own. Christianity certainly plays a greater part in Kierkegaard than in Husserl, but Husserl's phenomenology is also precisely an attempt to re-think these various foundations of knowledge and not just accept them without investigation, which is what Husserl means by his claim to presuppositionlessness. As we have also seen, Heidegger disagreed with Husserl on precisely this point, to what extent phenomenology can be presuppositionless and what needs to be taken into account if subjectivity is to be described accurately. The Christian element in Kierkegaard's philosophy need therefore not necessarily exclude him from being read as a phenomenologist as some commentators have suggested.¹⁷⁵ As Sartre, commenting on Kierkegaard's Christianity, put it:

...the experience which turns back upon itself after the leap, comprehends itself more than it knows itself. In other words, it sustains itself in the milieu of the presuppositions that are its foundation, without succeeding in elucidating them. Hence a beginning that is a dogma. A

¹⁷⁵ For example: Pattison 2011

particular religion produced Kierkegaard: he could not pretend to emancipate himself from it so that he could rise above it and see it as historically constituted.¹⁷⁶

We could, from this point of view, see Christianity as being, for Kierkegaard, precisely the sort of foundational element of subjectivity that must be taken into account if the self and its experiences are to be faithfully described. Christianity cannot be pushed to the side or bracketed because that operation would lead to a distorted description, or, as Anti-Climacus would claim, despair. Again we see Kierkegaard as being closer to Heidegger than Husserl. For Kierkegaard, the subject's Being-in-the-World is bound up with Christianity whether he professes to be a Christian or proclaims himself a die-hard atheist. As Sartre goes on to state about Kierkegaard's view of his contemporaries: "Thus whatever they did, they remained wedded to their faith and their dogmas while vainly attempting to negate them by using other words to express their demand for an absolute. Their atheism was in fact a *pseudo-atheism*."¹⁷⁷

Kierkegaard embraces Christianity as a foundation, the basis from which we must begin in investigating the subject. But this must be understood in the correct sense. Kierkegaard is not concerned with the historical, institutionalized Christianity, the one which he famously attacked and denounced. In the *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus considers if eternal happiness and faith is based on historical knowledge and the result is clearly negative.¹⁷⁸ His Christianity is located in subjectivity, it is a matter of the individual's relating itself through faith in inwardness. It shows up in subjective experience and determines the experience in different ways. Whether the subject has faith or not is irrelevant, for Kierkegaard it places a heavy burden on him all the same. As we saw above, the hidden elements of the self, what it isn't aware of concerning itself, is no less revealing than the ones that are on the surface. Christianity places a demand on the subject, but it is entirely up to its own self to decide how to act in the face of this demand, to strive to become itself or flee and choose not to be itself.

¹⁷⁶ Sartre 1972: 155

¹⁷⁷ Sartre 1972: 156

¹⁷⁸ Kierkegaard 1985: 87

In this chapter we have been focusing on Kierkegaard's method, the way he presents his views, as it appears in three of his works. We have seen that, to a large extent, he is committed to description rather than theorizing through argumentation. This is a methodology he has in common with phenomenology which seeks to investigate the "how" rather than the "what". In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard performs an eidetic reduction of two particular manners of existing, what he calls the aesthetic and the ethical sphere, and proceeds to describe how existence shows up for an individual engaged in that particular sphere, from a first-person perspective. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard describes how the subject appears before itself through anxiety, a directionless mood which has the possibility of altering the subject's self-understanding. And, if we follow Arne Grøn, we can see Kierkegaard as being engaged in a form of negative phenomenology in *The Sickness unto Death*, where treating the subject in a negative manner, how it is not itself, nevertheless shows us a lot about the subject's self-givenness.

Kierkegaard shares with phenomenology not only the commitment to description as a fundamental methodology, but to a large extent also the conviction that re-thinking any previous metaphysical or epistemological inheritance is essential. But the difference lies in the fact that Kierkegaard claims that Christianity is essential and cannot be put out of play, a claim that Husserl and Heidegger would deny. Nevertheless, as we have seen in a previous chapter, Husserl and Heidegger also disagreed on what features of the subject's existence must be taken into account. This does not necessarily exclude a reading of Kierkegaard as a phenomenologist, rather, we can see him as a form of Christian phenomenologist who also disagrees with Husserl on phenomenology's claim to presuppositionlessness.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of the preceding discussion it should be safe to proclaim Kierkegaard as a significant precursor to phenomenology. We can view him as being an earlier example of the same trajectory in the history of philosophy wherein the subject and the sense it makes of its own surroundings and experiences, its active role, are realized as being essential in philosophical investigation. This trajectory reaches a more self-conscious, systematic outline in Husserl's conception of phenomenology, but we can see Kierkegaard as being concerned with many of the same questions. If we come back to the remark by Merleau-Ponty mentioned in the introduction, we can agree with him that Kierkegaard was an example of a philosopher committed to the spirit of phenomenology before the movement reached its self-realization.

Kierkegaard shares with phenomenology the commitment to begin by investigating the subject and its experiences. The subject receives greater focus because Kierkegaard and phenomenology agree that it is from there that all higher forms of knowledge have their beginning. In both cases it is also essential for the subject to think for itself about the essential matters at hand, as such both Kierkegaard and phenomenology claim that their respective philosophies are a matter of great existential significance. The way Kierkegaard and phenomenology seek to investigate subjectivity is also largely in the same manner, through description.

But can we go further and claim Kierkegaard as a phenomenologist in any sense? As mentioned in the introduction, Kierkegaard is a very complex figure in the history of philosophy that defies any easy categorization, Heidegger even denied him status as a philosopher, as we also saw. So proclaiming Kierkegaard as a phenomenologist out-right would be very problematic, and not likely to be fruitful as it would involve discarding or de-emphasizing other important aspects of Kierkegaard's thought and writings.

Yet, as I hope to have shown, Kierkegaard's manner of practicing philosophy is one which is, in some respects, very close to phenomenology. In that sense some of his works offer up the possibility of being read as phenomenological investigations. In his use of indirect communication to awaken the reader's inwardness, get him to think for himself about essential matters, and his commitment to description from a first-person perspective as the

way to investigate subjectivity, Kierkegaard should be of considerable interest to phenomenologists. His descriptions of notions such as anxiety and despair are extremely revealing and rich in their vividness and detail and could be of benefit to phenomenological investigation. Furthermore, Kierkegaard was driven by an aspect that did not concern Husserl and Heidegger overtly, namely religion. If Kierkegaard is read as a phenomenologist, his works could contribute to the phenomenology of religious experience.

In this paper I have been exploring the connection between Kierkegaard and phenomenology. I have focused on certain aspects of Kierkegaard's philosophy on the one hand, and Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology on the other, which struck me as being very close to each other and deserving of a closer exploration. That is not to say that the relation between Kierkegaard and phenomenology is exhausted in the above discussion. There are likely other points of contact that I have not explored. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that the connection between Kierkegaard and phenomenology is more considerable than might be thought at first sight, and that Kierkegaard's works deserve a closer look by phenomenologists or those interested in the phenomenological tradition.

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