Introduction

Existence and possibility

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The term 'possibility' (*Mulighed*)[1] and its variants occur with curious frequency across Kierkegaard's writings. Key to Kierkegaard's ontology of the self, possibility, is linked to imagination, anxiety, despair, temporality, transition, the moment and a number of other core ideas in his works. The term is also central to Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian logic, in which the underlying questions seem to be: What does freedom have to do with history? How is change possible? What does it mean to begin? Yet, it is a term that has not received sustained critical attention in studies of Kierkegaard. In what follows, I will attempt to establish a philosophical context for Kierkegaard's modal categories, to explain the reception of these categories within Kierkegaard scholarship and to sketch an outline of the meaning and significance of possibility in Kierkegaard's works.

In contemporary philosophy, the categories of 'possibility' and 'necessity' are most often discussed as part of modal logic, a subfield of analytic philosophy that deals with categories of propositions or judgements. The rather narrow logical understanding of these terms does not encompass the sense that they had for Kierkegaard, nor the sense in which these terms have been understood in the history of philosophy and theology, from which Kierkegaard draws. In this wider tradition, the logical use of these terms is grounded in a more fundamental ontology, that is, the modalities of possibility, actuality and necessity are modes of being; they are attempts to think about the nature of what is and about how things come to be. Kierkegaard, as a thinker of existence, movement and beginnings, could not help but be drawn to such questions.

It is Kierkegaard's ontological thought that, to my mind, grounds the different themes and approaches to Kierkegaardian possibility that are represented in this collection, even where ontology is not the explicit concern. Some basic historical context in this area will therefore help to lay the groundwork for an understanding of Kierkegaard's use of possibility and related terms.

Senses of being

Aristotle's recognition in the *Metaphysics* of a diversity of senses of being, particularly his distinction between 'what a thing is' and 'that a thing is' is a seminal moment in the thinking of being.

> There are several senses in which a thing may be said to 'be', . . . for in one sense the 'being' meant is 'what a thing is' or a 'this', and in another sense it means that a thing is of a certain quality or quantity or has some such predicate asserted of it. While 'being' has all these senses, obviously that which is primarily is the 'what', which indicates the substance of the thing.[2]

On the one hand, *what* a thing is, or essence, accounts for our ability to know the world and our experience of continuity through time and change. On the other hand, *that* a thing is, or existence, refers to the sheer contingency of factual being, that there is being (or some particular being) rather than nothing.

Two strands of thinking about these terms emerge in the history of philosophy, existing side by side and forming something of the soul of philosophy, the impulses that drive philosophical enquiry.[3] The first strand is broadly Platonic, affording to 'essence', that which makes a thing what it is or ensures its stable identity. Particular entities are granted shares of being in proportion to their contact with or participation in essence or idea. Full being is that which is eternal, unchanging and universal. Conceiving of essence as being in the fullest sense, and as that to which thought properly relates, ensures the intelligibility of being, or, in other words, seeks to guarantee the identity of being with our thought. This sort of approach is taken up by various scholastic and idealist figures and reaffirmed in Hegel, who, although does not share the details of Plato's ontology, follows the broad strokes of identifying being with the universal or the whole, rather than the particular. This is evident in Hegel's analysis of language at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which the ontological 'truth' of language lies in universal concepts or essences, such that even when one appears to be referring to some particular, the actual referent is a universal.[4] In this broadly Platonic or idealist picture, the temporal and contingent character of existence is rendered obscure or occluded by the focus on being as essence.

The second strand, following Aristotle and Aquinas, denies the move to give priority to 'what is' or 'essence', recognizing that essence tells us nothing about whether a thing exists or how it came to be. The latter question will become central for Kierkegaard, as a thinker of possibility. In Aristotle, that which turns a possibility into an actuality is movement (κίνησις). Existence in this framework

is an act, the coming to be of that which was not, of that which was merely possible being. As Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus describes it in *Fragments*: 'it is the change from not being to being' (*ikke at være til at være*).[5] There is thus no gradation of being; a thing either is or is not, and essence alone does not entail factual existence.[6] Climacus makes the point elegantly: existence is subject to the dialectic of Hamlet – to be or not to be.[7] Thus the need, in this broadly existential strand of ontological thinking, to keep existence and essence radically distinct from one another, while acknowledging that both are present for any actually existing being.

The Platonic–Hegelian approach tends to fold existence into essence as a way of preserving intelligibility, yet at the expense of recognizing the peculiar character of existence as becoming. Kierkegaard relates these difficulties as well as any reader of this tradition. What of beginnings? What of possibility in a radical sense, not some particular possibility or set of possibilities but of possibility as such, of coming into existence? While the idealist strand of metaphysics offers a world that conforms to our thinking of it through our grasping of essences, the second strand profoundly questions this identity between being and thought by acknowledging the diversity of being and confronting existence (likewise movement, beginning, possibility) as that which cannot be rendered fully intelligible. In his own thinking, Kierkegaard seizes on the sense of being as existence, and it is on the grounds of forgetting what it means to exist that Kierkegaard attacks Hegel and other idealist projects. As Climacus describes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, existence is the gulf that separates being from thought.[8] And attending to existence, as a philosophical matter or as a matter of existential commitment, requires accepting that being always exceeds our conceptions of it. The category of existence becomes, in Kierkegaard's hands, a way of positioning himself against what he perceives to be a dangerous tendency in idealist thought to ignore the ontological reality of contingency and, consequently, of freedom. In order to understand these existential phenomena, Kierkegaard calls for a different mode of enquiry, one that emphasizes rather than attempts to eliminate contingency, that attends to moods, affective states and regions of experience typically left out of the frame.

The contingency (*Tilfældighed*) of existence is a consistent theme across Kierkegaard's writings and is intertwined with the notion of possibility.[9] The fact that in life we encounter determinate beings with particular qualities, beings that, to use the traditional conceptual vocabulary, have both an essence and an existence, tells us nothing about how or why a being came to exist. Climacus in *Fragments* associates the 'thatness' of existence, the fact that anything exists at all,

with the feeling of wonder. He describes wonder (*Beundring*) as 'the passionate sense for coming into existence', for 'wherever coming into existence is involved [. . .] there the uncertainty (which is the uncertainty of coming into existence) of the most certain coming into existence can express itself only in this passion [wonder] worthy of and necessary to the philosopher (Plato–Aristotle)'.[10] Climacus here points to the fact that a being which comes into existence never does so necessarily; its coming into existence is rather contingent, that is, a matter of uncertainty, of possibility. While for the Greeks, philosophy begins with 'a passionate sense for coming into existence', for Kierkegaard, in a certain manner, it ends there too – provided that this 'passion' is turned towards the coming into existence of oneself.

In Kierkegaard's reading, Hegel attempts, illicitly, to appropriate existence into the realm of logic, effectively eliminating contingency, and therefore existence in finitude, altogether. As Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis argues in *The Concept of Anxiety*, logic is the realm of necessity; it concerns *what* there is but cannot account for factual existence and how it came to be.

> Neither logic nor actuality is served by placing actuality in the Logic. Actuality is not served thereby, for contingency, which is an essential part of the actual, cannot be admitted within the realm of logic. Logic is not served thereby, for if logic has thought actuality, it has included something that it cannot assimilate, it has appropriated at the beginning what is should only *praedisponere* [presuppose]. The penalty is obvious. Every deliberation about the nature of actuality is rendered difficult, and for a long time perhaps made impossible, since the word 'actuality' must first have time to collect itself, time to forget the mistake.[11]

One way to understand the claim that logic can give no account of existence (or 'that there is') is that existence is a presupposition for logical statements rather than a predicate or a concept that can be added to something. This was the import of Kant's remark that one hundred actual thalers do not contain anything more than one hundred possible thalers.[12] In other words, the actualization of a possibility, the bringing of a thing into existence, cannot be a predicate of a thing, in the same manner as being gold or being heavy.[13] A thing may exist or not, but its coming into existence (its change from 'possible' to 'actual' being) has no part in any logical statements we might make about it. Kierkegaard adopts this point for his own purposes, since, on the other hand, he wishes to maintain that 'there is all the difference in the world between the mere idea of something and its actually existing. Precisely for that reason he rejected what he understood to

be the Hegelian claim that existence can be derived from a purely logical analysis of pure thought'.[14]

To give another example of where Kierkegaard understands his own sense of possibility as a departure from the Hegelian, the 'Interlude' of *Philosophical Fragments* offers an extended understanding of possible and actual being, of the 'transition' or 'movement' by which what is not comes into being.[15] The traditional wisdom, to which Hegel adheres but which is not unique to him, is that possibility is entailed in actuality. If a thing is, if it exists, then it is de facto possible; otherwise it could not have come to be, since its coming to be would be impossible. 'Possible' here is used in the logical sense of the opposite of impossible, and the possible is seen as a precondition for actuality. If something is, then it either must necessarily be, in which case it must also be possible for it to be, or it must have come into existence contingently, in which case it must have been possible for it to come to be.[16] Possibility means, strictly speaking, that a state of affairs is not logically impossible. Kierkegaard departs from this understanding, citing two senses of being: necessary being (broadly equivalent to essence or ideality) and actual or factual being, which is contingent. Climacus insists that necessary being cannot be said either to be possible or to have been possible. In Kierkegaard's ontology, the necessary and the possible are opposite terms, since any necessary being must always be and must always have been, whereas, on the contrary, a factually existing being could either be or not be.

Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, the only sense in which the necessary and the possible may be held together is existentially, rather than logically, and this is because Kierkegaard's model of selfhood involves the relation of incommensurable elements. As Haufniensis describes in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the activity that comprises self is a holding together of incommensurables: possibility and necessity, temporality and eternity, finitude and infinitude. The self as this activity of holding together polarities is an existential achievement, a movement of freedom.[17] If it were instead a logical movement, the synthesis of apparent polarities would merely erase any real difference between them, whereas an existential act, by virtue of Kierkegaard's model of the self, is capable of maintaining difference in identity.

Reception of Kierkegaard as ontological thinker

Despite the evident ontological considerations in Kierkegaard's work, modern Kierkegaard studies do not tend to treat Kierkegaard as an ontological thinker

responding to the long tradition of ontological thinking within philosophy and theology. But there was a period in the early to mid-twentieth century when questions about Kierkegaard's ontology appeared vital and urgent, and some of the most significant European thinkers of the century were profoundly impacted by Kierkegaard's understanding of existence.

There are primarily two strains of thought during this period that deal with Kierkegaard's ontology and his discussion of possibility as a modality of being: the first is Catholic theology, particularly neo-Thomist thought, and the second is phenomenology and existentialism. These strains often overlap, and both rely on a common Greek and scholastic heritage, particularly Aristotle's accounts of existence, possibility and motion. The Catholic strain is shaped by early twentieth-century *ressourcement* theology, a movement of theological renewal that began in Italy in the mid-nineteenth century and was spurred by Pope Leo XIII's (1810–1903) interest in reviving Catholic theology – especially the writings of Aquinas – for modernity. This movement spread outside of Italy and led to a blossoming of 'new theology' across several European countries. Theologians returned to the Church Fathers for inspiration and reinvigoration of the Catholic imagination, yet, rather than a simple return to the past, this gaze backward formed part of an investment in their own immediate intellectual, religious and political environment. As Joshua Furnal has shown, the Catholic engagement with Protestant sources at this time was more significant than has been previously thought, and many Catholic thinkers were influenced by Kierkegaard's writings. Cornelio Fabro is a central figure, not only as the principal translator of Kierkegaard's works into Italian but also as the author of numerous works of Kierkegaard exegesis, linking the philosopher to key ideas in Aristotle and Aquinas. Other prominent voices in neo-Thomist theology include Karl Rahner in Germany, and Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain in France, all of whom also engaged with Kierkegaard's ideas. In reading Kierkegaard, they saw echoes of an Aristotelian understanding of existence and motion – and of Aquinas's reworking of these ideas, specifically in his notion of being (existence) as act, in distinction from essence. Though Kierkegaard is a far cry from Thomism, particularly in its more formalist aspects, there are compelling reasons to read him within this framework, as we have already seen.[18]

Catholic thought of the period engaged extensively with early phenomenology and existentialism, motivated by a desire both to combat the atheist strands of existentialism and to use existentialist and phenomenological ideas to develop a more vital ontology, one that could compete with the nihilistic framework of modernity. They contended in particular with the ideas of Heidegger, who

likewise sought to develop an ontology that would transcend the enframing (*Gestell*) of modernity. Whether in the Cartesian divide between subject and object or in the homogenization of different kinds and modes of being onto a single plane, Heidegger held that the framework of modern metaphysics did not allow for being as such, the proper object of ontological inquiry, to come into view. It was in part Kierkegaard's focus on existence that offered Heidegger a new way into the problem of being, one that he carried into his exploration of pre-Socratic sources.

Heidegger's debt to Kierkegaard is widely acknowledged in scholarship, if not by Heidegger himself. This debt is evident not only in his discussion of obvious Kierkegaardian themes, such as existence and mood, but in the whole of his philosophical undertaking.[19] George Pattison notes that Werner Brock, one of Heidegger's teaching assistants, attributes to Kierkegaard 'the distinctive and modern sense of existence'.[20] It is Heidegger's appropriation of Kierkegaard for an explicit ontology that leads many others in the early to mid-twentieth century to read Kierkegaard as an ontological thinker as well as the father of *Existenzphilosophie*.[21] In the early 1930s, Jean Wahl published an article-length study of 'Heidegger and Kierkegaard: An Investigation into the Original Elements of Heidegger's Philosophy'[22] that characterized Heidegger as an ontologization and secularization of Kierkegaard's thought. Wahl's study helped, along with the Lev Shestov's *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy* (1936), to launch Kierkegaard studies in France and had an enormous influence on French existentialism.[23] Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Henry and others, were, of course, readers of both Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

Heidegger's thematization of the underlying ontological schema in Kierkegaard's work was thus a significant factor in the reading of Kierkegaard as an ontological thinker, with attentiveness to his treatment of modalities – particularly possibility. Michael Wyschogrod's 1954 study, one of the few book-length treatments of Kierkegaard's ontology, is in fact a comparative study of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and was the first English-language book on Heidegger.[24] While Kierkegaard's own ontology serves as a ground for discussions of the development of the self within an ethical and theological framework, in Heidegger the question of Being serves as the singular point of orientation, and this provides the space to fully explicate ontological structures, especially of existence and time. Likewise, Sartre takes Kierkegaard's innovative thinking of existence to heart in the development of his own analysis of essence and existence, being and nothingness.

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With existentialism and Heideggerian phenomenology largely falling out of intellectual favour, and with the growth of Kierkegaard studies as a field, especially within analytic ethics and aesthetics, these ontologically grounded analyses of Kierkegaard's work also fell away. Perhaps such discussions grew to be regarded as a matter for intellectual history or simply no longer seemed capable of yielding any interesting insights. Whatever the reasons, there is a dearth of contemporary scholarship around this topic, and this is especially true of the concept of possibility. There are exceptions, most notably David Kangas's *Kierkegaard's Instant: On beginnings* (2007) which is a profound reading of the Kierkegaardian ontology of possibility in conversation with German Idealism. His analysis develops Kierkegaard's account of authentic repetition or 'repetition forwards' along with Kierkegaard's notion of the instant or the moment, offering an ontology of what he calls 'anarchic' or indeterminate beginnings in Kierkegaard's thinking.[25] Kangas focuses on Kierkegaard's rejection of the Hegelian understanding of beginning, which sees the realization and meaning of the beginning in its teleological fulfilment, in its end, rather than in the contingent act of coming to be. Such a reading makes sense of many of Kierkegaard's claims about possibility and actuality, including Kierkegaard's rejection of the notion, discussed earlier, that actuality (logically) entails possibility. In *God and Being* (2011) George Pattison considers the impact of Kierkegaard's ontology alongside other readings in scholastic and continental thought, including Heidegger and Derrida. Clare Carlisle deals with the sources for Kierkegaard's ontology and relevant themes in her book *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions*.[26] The present study aims to build on these efforts and make explicit the discussion of possibility in Kierkegaard's work, exploring the question from a number of different angles. Chapters have been organized under four general topics: (1) possibility and the philosophical tradition, (2) possibility and experience, (3) possibility and freedom and (4) possibility and hope. Within these, readers will find familiar themes in Kierkegaard's work: anxiety, despair, aesthetic experience, temporality, repetition and faith.

Beyond calculation

One common thread across these chapters is the understanding of Kierkegaardian possibility as radical, transcending the mundane. This is exemplified by Anti-Climacus's formulation in *The Sickness Unto Death*, that 'God is that *all* things are possible and that all things are possible is the existence of God'.[27] Possibility

in Kierkegaard's sense involves a departure from probability or mere practical possibility. At the level of self, the possibility of coming into existence, or the movement whereby a possibility becomes actualized, is a movement of freedom and therefore outside of the realm of 'how things must go'. The attitudes of love, hope and sacrifice (the 'gift of death') are examples of possibility for human being that are not rooted in the immanent possibilities of finitude. Each goes beyond the sphere of practical expediency.

The importance of such a movement can be deduced from several themes in Kierkegaard's works, but particularly in his many scathing remarks about probability, calculation and accounting across his pseudonymous and signed authorship. A calculation of probabilities, while it may appear to be a mature means of reckoning with actuality, is for Kierkegaard an evasion of the anxious responsibility of possibility, a rejection of what he calls in *The Concept of Anxiety* the 'possibility of possibility'. The language of calculation and probability is prominent in Kierkegaard's descriptions of the 'despair of finitude' and the related 'despair of necessity' in *Sickness*, both of which are characterized by having a deficient sense of possibility. One suffering from a despair of this kind 'finds being himself too risky' and so follows the habits of the crowd and becomes 'as exchangeable as a coin of the realm', making only 'prudent calculations'.[28] This is the despair of the 'bourgeois philistine', the conformist, who 'is absorbed in the probable' and is unaware of being in despair.

The self in the despair of necessity loses itself in the habitual, in the 'dank air of the probable', with a false understanding that what is or what has been must, of necessity, continue to be in the future. 'Devoid of imagination . . . he lives within a certain orbit of trivial experience as to how things come about, what is possible, what usually happens, no matter whether he is a tapster or a prime minister.'[29] Such a position continually narrows the circle of freedom, since to view choices as necessary in this sense removes the possibility of an original or authentic relationship to my own actions, my own possibilities. To repeat the same choices again and again out of either habit or conformity, whether they are apparently virtuous or poor choices, likewise removes their value, since they are no longer free in any meaningful sense. To the extent that a self exists in and as possibility, always oriented towards what is not yet, attempts to evade the risk and anxiety that accompany this ontological reality are a kind of absent-mindedness or self-absence. As Richard Purkarthofer describes, such selves are 'undead', for they 'do not exist in the strict sense of the word'.[30]

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis writes that 'When origineity (*Oprindeligheden*) in earnestness is acquired and preserved, then there is

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succession and repetition, but as soon as origineity is lacking in repetition, there is habit (*Vanen*)'.[31] 'Repetition' is Kierkegaard's term for the genuine achievement of self-identity or self-continuity in time. It is the holding together of the eternal and the finite, essence and existence, an activity that is an ongoing and never finished. True repetition, in this sense, is a generative 'repetition forwards'. Kierkegaard's ontology of self as a being-toward-the-future means that the activity of becoming oneself, of becoming present to oneself, must be tended to and cared for, held in the balance, or it collapses. In *Sickness*, 'Yet a self, every moment it exists, is in a process of becoming, for the self *kata dynamin* [potentially] is not present actually, it is merely what is to come into existence'.[32] The despair of necessity, the embrace of actions that seek to limit and close off the riskiness of life by sheltering in the probable, thus amount to a death of the self.

When Kierkegaard refers in *The Concept of Anxiety* to being 'educated by possibility' or, in *Sickness*, seeing oneself 'in the mirror of possibility' he suggests something much more radical than plotting out possible outcomes or adapting oneself to the practical limits of one's situation.[33] *Do not even the tax collectors do so?* Kierkegaard asks instead for a transformation of vision: of how one sees oneself and the world. There is an art to seeing possibility, to seeing oneself in the mirror of possibility. In Chapter 11, John Lippitt points to one striking instance of this in *Works of Love*, where Kierkegaard contrasts possibility, specifically the possibility of the good, with 'the "tough slime" of "practical sagacity" or shrewdness [*Klogskab*]'.[34] Here, to hold on to calculated shrewdness is the opposite of the hopeful expectancy of love.

Possibility in (aesthetic) experience

Another theme that unites several chapters is the importance of aesthetic experience to the understanding of possibility. Because aesthetic possibility is sometimes described negatively by Kierkegaard, it is worth taking a moment to argue for its importance to the whole of his thought, even in the explicitly religious conception of repetition as the actualization of the self's possibility. It is also worthwhile to consider the role of possibility in the structure of experience more generally, in order to sketch the outline of a phenomenology of possibility, developed more fully in chapters 3–5.

As Rick Anthony Furtak argues in Chapter 2, there is much to be learned from the aesthetic experience of possibility and the rich affective life of those who, like

Proust's narrator in *À la recherche du temps perdu* and Kierkegaard's aesthetes, revel in possibility – imagining possible lovers, possible selves, relating to the world and others in myriad ways (usually, in Kierkegaard's telling, amorously).

The pseudonymous author 'A' from *Either/Or* describes the aim of the aesthetic life as the cultivation of the interesting, which is a means of evading the yawning abyss of boredom that lurks beneath every endeavour. One of the tips given by 'A' in 'On the Rotation of Crops' is to avoid becoming overly invested in any particular person, activity or project, since to give too much interest to any particular would lead to dissipation and eventually to a confrontation with boredom. The aesthete, as 'A' recommends, treats every experience, no matter how engrossing or mundane, as an occasion for imaginative reflection or 'recollection'. Such an outlook, in one sense, puts the subject in the role of spectator (or artistic director), not just for events as they unfold but even in relation to one's own life. 'A' remarks that it is a 'singular feeling when in the midst of enjoyment one looks at it in order to recollect it'.[35] The suggestion is that life must be experienced at a certain remove in order to consistently cultivate the interesting; this is a version of the Romantic principle of aesthetic distance or irony.

While Kierkegaard has plenty of criticisms of this principle, he recognizes in the figure of the aesthete a capacity that is essential for the development of spirit, namely the ability to put oneself at a remove, in the broadest sense, to entertain possibilities that do not belong to the realm of the expedient or ready-to-hand. In the 'Crop Rotation' essay, 'A' refers to this ability as the art of 'arbitrariness' whereby one can, for example, upset an expected trajectory, such as a love affair, or find amusement in the most mundane of circumstances (e.g. enjoying a boring lecture by attending closely to the bead of sweat dripping from the lecturer's nose). To adopt such a position, to distance oneself from the immediate in this way, offers perspective beyond the economic relationships or relations of exchange that dominate finite life. Of course, putting oneself at a remove also exacts a price, and those familiar with Kierkegaard will recognize that his model of self-development does not end with a departure from the finite but with a return.

What may be overlooked or lost in viewing life at a remove? As George Stack writes of aesthetically grasped possibility: 'It is the constant process of reflecting upon only hypothetical possibilities which are apprehended contemplatively or in a disinterested manner which is one of the stultifying traits of the romantic aesthete. For an individual unable to commit himself to anything except the pursuit of sensual pleasure or aesthetic pleasures, there are no concernful

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possibilities.'[36] The contemplation of possibility in a disinterested mode, at a remove from questions of meaning in a deeper sense, risks becoming a kind of 'stupefaction'[37] and despair. Such an attitude is characterized in *The Sickness Unto Death* as the 'despair of possibility'. It is a form of misalignment of self that is characterized by a deficient sense of necessity, urgency or responsibility, wherein possibilities proliferate in imaginative reflection but are not fully one's own. A lack of what Kierkegaard calls interest (*interesse*) in relation to what is or what may be, can prevent one from ever engaging with 'actuality' in a meaningful way, that is, a way that concerns oneself. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard offers the example of Friedrich Schlegel's novella *Lucinde*, especially the character of (Julius's lover) Lisette, as a warning against existing in an aesthetic relation to possibility. Kierkegaard remarks that Lisette would 'write her whole story as if it were that of someone else'.[38] This mode of engagement with possibility, as merely hypothetical or general, rather than one's ownmost possibility, amounts to a kind of arrest or withering of self[39] even as it appears to be the artistic creation of self and world. At the limit of such a character, the self remains unactualized, having spent all its energies in daydreaming of possible futures and becoming exhausted at the task of realizing any particular one of them.[40] These critiques are familiar, and they must be borne in mind in any reading of what Kierkegaard means by possibility.

But all of Kierkegaard's warnings about the danger of 'floundering about'[41] in possibility and ignoring the actual, it is clear that he regards the ability to recognize possibility, and the exercise of imagination that enables such recognition, as crucial to spiritual development. In *Practice in Christianity,* Anti-Climacus reminds readers that the imagination is the 'first condition for what becomes of a person' while the will is the second and 'decisive' condition, since it is required for taking possession of possibilities as possibilities *for oneself*.[42] Imagination is the faculty that allows for engagement with possibility, with what may be. In *Sickness*, Kierkegaard refers to the imagination as the 'infinitising reflection', speaking approvingly of Fichte's grounding of the categories in imagination.[43] Furthermore, 'the imagination is the whole of reflection's possibility; and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the self's intensity.[44] There are a number of ways to understand imagination or a sense for possibility as the first condition for an authentic way of existing. In a basic sense, the ability to entertain even 'hypothetical, abstract, conceptual possibilities'[45] is, as discussed earlier, a movement beyond the realm of the probable or expedient.

A second meaning concerns the way the world opens up to us through possibility. It is not merely that the aesthete entertains possibilities as an

intellectual or conceptual exercise, but that he *sees* these possibilities in the world. In other words, it is not quite true, though Kierkegaard sometimes formulates it in this way (especially in *The Concept of Irony*) that the aesthete simply hovers above life and fails to engage with actuality. Kierkegaard is critical in many places of what he views as the hermeticism of the aesthetic life, the aesthetic tendency to approach life as the artistic production of the subject and so to be, in Augustine's words, *incurvatus in se* (curved in on itself). However, he also acknowledges the dimension of receptivity in the aesthete, which is at odds with the picture of a self-enclosed existence. The passivity associated with aestheticism is not only a penchant for idleness, as in 'On the Rotation of Crops', or a lack of decisive and consistent action, but also a sensitivity or openness to the world. One notes this dimension at moments in the Seducer's Diary, for example, when Johannes, rather than aggressively pursuing Cordelia, awaits the 'occasion' for her to emerge from the home of her aunt, offering up his prayer to chance: 'Surprise me, I am ready.'[46] In this reliance on the occasion, the aesthete recognizes something ontologically important, and something that goes against the more prevailing wisdom in Kierkegaard that the aesthetic life is prone to a self-enclosedness. Likewise, the aesthete's attunement to moods (e.g. boredom), cannot be understood as a relation to a merely subjective state. Moods such as boredom, anxiety and despair are, for Kierkegaard, not subjective emotions but ontological in nature, that is, revelatory of ontological structures. Boredom is a relation to 'the nothing that interlaces existence',[47] and anxiety is an awareness of the 'possibility of possibility'.[48] This ontological dimension of mood is of course further developed by Heidegger, especially in *Being and Time* and in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Heidegger makes clear that moods and what they disclose do not issue from the consciousness of the subject but *present themselves to* the subject. The same must be said for possibilities.

To think of possibilities as imaginatively projected upon the world by a subject is to mistake the 'location' of the possible as interior to consciousness and to misunderstand the fundamental nature of imagination in all experience. Such a picture tends to have, as a corollary, a neutral and indifferent external world, a world that is not essentially related to 'subjective' possibilities. But Kierkegaard's account of possibility does not simply reinscribe this modern metaphysics of subject and object, nor does it seek to overcome it by privileging one or other of the terms. As later phenomenologists, particularly Heidegger and Jan Patočka, argue, to accept the terms of subject and object as they are given means to accept the nihilism that accompanies such a metaphysics and to deny the unique position of human being in relation to being. Deleuze too, with

a different set of concerns, diagnoses the philosophical errors that proliferate from this metaphysics.

Speaking in theological terms that are more germane to Kierkegaard's thought, the modern metaphysics of subject and object denies the reality of our creatureliness and our relationship to the author of being. For possibilities to present themselves to the subject, in the way that experience says they do, or for human beings to have an affective sense for ontological reality, as Kierkegaard insists that we do, suggests our intimate link between our own existence and that of being as such. While there is qualitative difference in Kierkegaard between finite existence and infinite being, his model of self as a holding together of incommensurate poles offers a fundamental sense of relation through difference.

Following a long history of theological thinking, Kierkegaard in *Fragments* conceives of only eternal being as necessary, in relation to which all other beings are contingent. To be necessary, as discussed before, means that it is not possible not to be, and that it is therefore impossible to come into existence, since coming into existence would imply a non-being that precedes existence.[49] In Kierkegaard's understanding, Hegel errs in making the being of nature and of humanity part of the self-realization of divine being. The unfolding of being in immanence, as a self-development, removes the diversity of being and the fundamental incommensurability between Being and beings that Kierkegaard seeks to preserve. The stakes for Kierkegaard could not be higher, since it is central to his understanding of freedom that this incommensurability be maintained.[50]

Possibilities, then, are not projected onto the world as moving images upon a screen. Possibility is rather the space of emergence or becoming, the coming into being of that which need not be, and imagination, as a feeling for what is not or not yet, is required to recognize possibilities. Kierkegaard follows Kant in seeing imagination, in its productive and reproductive capacity, as crucial to the experience of a sensible world. It is 'not a faculty like the other faculties . . . it is the faculty *instar omnium* [for all faculties]'.[51] Imagination plays a foundational role in our phenomenal experience of the world, namely as that which discloses 'a world' at all. The world *offers itself* as rich with possibility, and this is especially true of our engagement with real or imagined others, who, as Somers-Hall argues in Chapter 5, represent for us possible ways of being. Furtak shows, further, how our affective moods allow us to experience the world in different lights, disclosing different possibilities to be actualized.

Of course, there is much more to say about possibility than is disclosed in the aesthetic life or in phenomenal experience in general. As with all of Kierkegaard's

conceptual categories, the meaning of possibility evolves and has distinctive meanings in his religious texts. In their contributions to this volume, Marek, Das, Lippitt and Becker-Lindenthal explore the distinctively religious import of possibility. Even so, the aesthetic feeling for possibility through imaginative activity remains important. In chapters 1 and 4 of this collection, Hanson and Maughan-Brown discuss the sense in which the religious understanding of actualizing one's ownmost possibilities relies on imaginative activity and involves a parallel dynamic to what is seen in the aesthetic: between receptivity and creativity, inheritance and originality.[52] As Hanson argues, 'the religious thus in [Kierkegaard's pseudonym Frater] Taciturnus's words "plays the same role as the aesthetic, but as the superior"'.[53] In faith, as Kierkegaard understands it, there is a shift from a recognition of or awareness of possibility as such to the distinctly existential question: Is it possible for me? Do I will this possibility for myself? [54]

Postscript

I was drawn to the question of possibility in Kierkegaard's work, in part, because it seemed to answer to a growing sense of cultural anxiety and instability. The germ for this book came in 2019, just before the global pandemic that was to upend life for the next two years. A series of economic and political crises had already preceded the pandemic, while the climate crisis and the inability of existing infrastructure to respond meaningfully to it was becoming impossible to ignore. In such moments of crisis, our anxiety naturally awakens us to what Kierkegaard calls 'the possibility of possibility'.

What does it mean to think about possibility now, when our own possibilities seem at the same time impossible to predict and more and more circumscribed to a narrow circle of probability? On the one hand, the pace of technological development in the twenty-first century is without historical antecedent; it is nearly impossible to have foresight about what this development enables and what problems it creates, problems which more than ever are planetary. Viewed from this angle, it must be admitted that current feelings of uncertainty, instability and anxiety, however perennial such feelings may be, have a solid material foundation. But in another sense, it is equally true that the possibilities for human life have shrunk with the homogenizing forces of global capitalism and the adoption of probabilistic models in ever more areas of human activity. Seen from this vantage, as Heidegger pointed out, the possibilities for being and

for human beings have narrowed, and being is seen as little more than a standing reserve of forces or resources.

It is in this spiritual atmosphere of generalized anxiety that Kierkegaard's remarks about possibility began to stand out to me and demand consideration. Whether or not readers share my sense of the current landscape, there is much to be learned from Kierkegaard's examination of modality, not least an ontology that helps to rethink uncertainty, anxiety, despair and related phenomena in a more rigorous and ultimately more hopeful light. I hope readers will find resources and insights in this volume to accompany them through times of spiritual sickness and in the face of problems that seem insurmountable. As Kierkegaard reminds us in *Sickness*:

> This is the struggle of faith, which struggles insanely, if you will, for possibility. For only possibility saves. When someone faints, people shout for water, eau-de-cologne, Hoffman's drops. But for someone who is on the point of despair it is: get me possibility, get me possibility, the only thing that can save me is possibility![55]

Notes

1 The German equivalent is *Möglichkeit*.

2 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII:1 ZI, 1028a9ff.

3 This reading is influenced by Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952). The brief history presented here is adapted from the first chapter of Michael Wyschogrod's book *Kierkegaard and Heidegger: The Ontology of Existence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1954). Wyschogrod names his first chapter 'Being and some problems', with a clear nod to Gilson.

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. and trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 61–8: §95–110.

5 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 210.

6 The exception, in Aquinas, is God.

7 Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments,* 41: IV 209. The note here is worth quoting at length. Kierkegaard, speaking of Spinoza, claims that it makes sense to speak of levels of being and the perfection of being only when speaking of essence, what Kierkegaard calls 'ideal being'. 'With regard to factual being [existence], to speak of more or less being is meaningless, A fly, when it is, has just as much being as the

god [. . .] for the Hamlet dialectic, to be or not to be, applies to factual being. Factual being is indifferent to the differentiation of all essence-determinants, and everything that exists participates without petty jealousy in being, and participates just as much. It is quite true that ideally the situation is different. *But as soon as I speak ideally about being, I am speaking no longer about being* [existence] *but about essence*'.

8 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, vol 1., ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 189–90.

9 See Gabriel Ferreira, 'Contingency', in *Kierkegaard's Concepts.* Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm. *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Recourses, Reception*, vol. 15, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (London/New York: Routledge, 2014).

10 Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 80, IV 244.

11 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 9–10.

12 See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 567: A599 / B627.

13 This is a refutation specifically of Anselm's ontological argument, in which being is treated as a predicate that could be added to the essence of a thing (specifically to the concept 'that then which none greater can be conceived'). Kant claims, by contrast, that being (as existence) functions as a presupposition for any attribution of a predicate to a thing.

14 George Pattison, *God and Being: An Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90.

15 Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 73–5.

16 See the discussion of the phrase *ab esse ad posse* in Chapter 2.

17 'All coming into existence occurs in freedom, not by way of necessity' (Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 75).

18 For a detailed account, see Furnal's introduction and Fabro's text on 'Actuality', both in *The Selected Works of Cornelio Fabro*, vol. 2. *The Selected Words of Cornelio Fabro vol 2: Selected Articles on Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Nathaniel Dreyer (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2020). See also John Heywood Thomas, *The Legacy of Kierkegaard* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), ch. 5. Kierkegaard's interest in Aristotle came in part through the work of F. A. Trendelenburg, for whom he had high praise. Furnal quotes one of Kierkegaard's journal entries from 1844 concerning his reading of Aristotle and Trendelenburg. 'But the Greeks remain my consolation. The damned mendacity which was ushered into philosophy with Hegel, the unending insinuation and betrayal and the marshalling and belaboring one or another Greek passage! Praised be Trendelenburg, one of the most sober-thinking philosophers I know' (SKS 18, 231 / Pap. V A 98 / KJN JJ:288 [1844–45]).

19 For more on Heidegger's relationship to Kierkegaard, see Noreen Khawaja, 'Heidegger's Kierkegaard: Philosophy and Religion in the Tracks of a Failed Interpretation', *The Journal of Religion* 95, no. 3 (2015): 295–317).

20 Pattison, *God and Being*, 12–45.

21 See Karl Jaspers, *Existenzphilosophie*, 4th ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974).

22 'Heidegger et Kierkegaard: Recherche des éléments originaux de la philosophie de Heidegger' was first published in *Recherches Philosophiques* 2 (1932–33): 349–70. It was republished with minor revisions in Jean Wahl, *Études kierkegaardiennes* (Paris: Fernand Aubier, 1938), 455–76, and republished again in Jean Wahl, *Kierkegaard: L'Un devant l 'Autre*, ed. Vincent Delecroix and Frédéric Worms (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1998).

23 Stewart, John, *Kierkegaard and Existentialism* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 397.

24 Wyschogrod, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger*. See also the 1950 lectures of the Danish theologian K. E. Løgstrup on Kierkegaard and Heidegger, recently translated into English as 'Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's Analysis of Existence and its Relation to Proclamation', trans. Robert Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

25 'A posited beginning is dialectically identical to its projected end: the beginning only really is once it shows itself as the beginning of a determinate, that is, concluded, process. Yet what attracts A's thinking is a beginning that never *departs toward* any end [. . .] Such would be an ab-solute or anarchic beginning' (David J. Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant: On Beginnings* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 45–6).

26 Claire Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany, NY: State University New York Press), 2005.

27 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death,* trans. Alistair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), 71. My emphasis.

28 Ibid., 64–5.

29 Ibid., 71.

30 Richard B. Purkarthofer, 'Origineity and Recognisability: On Kierkegaard's Ontology', *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 105, no. 3–4 (2013): 805–21 (814).

31 Ibid., 808. Purkarthofer quotes from SKS 4, 448.

32 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 60.

33 See Jakub Marek's treatment of 'education through possibility' in Chapter 6.

34 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 251 / SKS 9, 250. This 'slime' emerges from 'cook[ing] over the slow or the merely earthly blazing fire of passions' a combination of attitudes that Kierkegaard associates with living without the eternal: 'habit, sagacity, aping, experience, custom and usage' (ibid.).

35 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 294.

36 George Stack, 'Kierkegaard's Concept of Possibility', *Journal of Thought* 5, no. 2 (1970): 80–92.

37 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 295.

38 Ibid., 295–6.

39 Lisette ironically ends her own life, that which ought to be the object of utmost interest, in a mode of aesthetic disinterestedness. She comes to view her death as artistically fitting and therefore necessary ('Lisette must die, must die now: that is the will of an iron fate!'). See Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments,* trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1971), 87.

40 Kierkegaard speaks in similar terms of the 'exhaustion resulting from reflection' in *The Present Age*. See also *The Sickness Unto Death*, 66, where the self 'exhausts itself floundering about in possibility'.

41 Ibid., 66.

42 Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 186.

43 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 61.

44 Ibid.

45 Stack, 'Kierkegaard's Concept of Possibility', 80.

46 *Either/Or*, vol. 1, 327. See also Kierkegaard's description of the occasion as understood in the aesthetic sphere (234–6).

47 Ibid., 291.

48 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 38.

49 'Precisely by coming into existence, everything that comes into existence demonstrates that it is not necessary, the only thing that cannot come into existence is the necessary, because the necessary *is* . . . No coming into existence is necessary – not before it came into existence, for then it cannot come into existence, and not after it has come into existence, for then it has not come into existence. All coming into existence occurs in freedom, not by way of necessity' (Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 74–5).

50 'If the past has become necessary [. . .] it would follow that the future would also be necessary. If necessity could intervene at one single point, then we could no longer speak of the past and the future [. . .] The past has indeed come into existence; coming into existence is the change, in freedom, of becoming actuality' (Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 77 IV 241).

51 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 60.

52 For a discussion of these terms and their relationship, see Stephen Mulhall's *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Purkarthofer, 'Origineity and Recognisability'.

53 See Chapter 1 of this volume. Hanson quotes from Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*: *Studies by Various Persons*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 442.

54 See Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 440.

55 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 69.