

CHAPTER 2

The Knowing Subject

I

Consciousness, Passion, and Actuality

Kierkegaard was a realist in the sense that he believed there was a distinction between what he referred to as “factual being” (*faktisk Væren*) and “ideal being” (*ideel Væren*) (C, 114n.). Factual being does not, according to Kierkegaard, refer to tangible existence, but to what one could call “objective reality.” That is, it refers to the being of everything that has reality in itself and not simply as an idea.¹ Factual being is thus synonymous, for Kierkegaard, with reality in general, which he variously refers to as “being” (*Væren*), “existence” (*Tilværelsen*), and “reality” (*Realitet*).²

The best place to start in trying to understand Kierkegaard’s views on the nature of the knowing subject is with his views on consciousness. The richest resource in this respect is Kierkegaard’s unpublished work, *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*. Consciousness, asserts Kierkegaard through the voice of Johannes Climacus, the pseudonym under which he had planned to publish the work, is a relation between “reality” (*Realitet*) and “ideality” (*Idealitet*) (JC, 169). He is careful to distinguish consciousness from “reflection” (*Reflexion*) (Pap. IV B 1 c. 147). The categories of the latter, he explains, “are always *dichotomous*” (e.g., ideality and reality,

¹ That this is the sense in which Kierkegaard uses the expression “*faktisk Væren*” is clear from his criticism of Spinoza’s proof for the existence of God. That is, he argues that Spinoza tries to deduce the existence (“*Væren*”) of God from an examination of the essence of the idea of God, whereas Kierkegaard argues that it is impossible to deduce from the idea of something that the thing has “factual being” (“*faktisk Væren*”). That is, Kierkegaard’s criticism of Spinoza is that he tries to prove that there is a god—not that God has tangible existence in the sense of, say, the person of Jesus.

² See Malantshuk, *Nøglebegreber*, 210-212.

and soul and body), while those of the former are “*trichotomous*” (JC, 169), as is expressed when I say: “*I am conscious of this sensory impression*” (JC 169). That is, there is a sensory impression, a consciousness of it and finally an “I” whose consciousness it is. Reflection, argues Climacus, is the *possibility* of a relation between reality and ideality and as such, it is “*disinterested*” (JC, 170). But consciousness as the relation, that is, the actual relation is *interested*, or “is interest” (JC, 170). Consciousness is an “*interesse*” (JC, 170) or a “being between” reality and ideality.

Climacus’s definition of consciousness as trichotomous suggests there is little, if any, distinction in Kierkegaard’s writings between “consciousness” and “self-consciousness.” Consciousness always involves an object, a consciousness of that object, and an *I* whose consciousness it is. Consciousness of objects, either concrete or abstract, would always appear to involve some degree of self-consciousness according to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard does not, however, make consciousness identical to self-consciousness.³ To the extent that he distinguishes the two, consciousness could be described as characterizing a person in an immediate sense and self-consciousness as relating the individual moments of consciousness, or as an *interesse* of *interessers* (i.e., a being between of being-betweens).⁴ Self-consciousness, so defined, is thus interest just as consciousness is interest. The difference is that the interest of self-consciousness is consciousness whereas the interest of consciousness is the object of knowledge, which may happen to be the subject, but only accidentally. That is, the subject of consciousness is not of essential interest to consciousness, but only to self-consciousness.

Kierkegaard is not particularly interested in consciousness as distinguished from self-consciousness. His terminology thus sometimes appears to conflate the two. The interest of consciousness, according to Kierkegaard, is not terribly significant with respect to our existence as particular human being. Only the interest of self-consciousness is crucial to our subjective existence as such.

Interest may be interpreted in two ways. It may be interpreted legalistically as referring to purely formal involvement independent of the presence, or absence, of

³ See, for example, Pap. VII 1 A 182.

⁴ “*Interesse*” is Danish for “interest.” The plural of “*interesse*” is formed through the addition of an “r.”

subjective concern on the part of the “interested” party. The welfare of a ward is, for example, something in which his guardian is “interested,” independently of whether the guardian experiences any subjective concern for this welfare. Interest may also be interpreted, however, to refer to subjective concern.

Both these senses of “interest” are involved in Climacus’s definition of consciousness as “interest.” Consciousness is interest in a purely formal sense in that, as a being between reality and ideality, it is formally involved with both these realms. What is true of either reality or ideality is thus significant for consciousness, independently of whether the conscious subject experiences any concern for these truths. But the fact that this subject is *formally* involved with both ideality and reality is what makes subjective concern relative to these truths possible. Such concern would appear to be a natural consequence of this situation.

If we return to the example of a relation between a ward and his guardian, we can say that the fact that the guardian is legally responsible for the welfare of the ward means we expect her to experience subjective concern for that welfare. We take the absence of such concern to indicate that the guardian has either failed to appreciate the significance of her position, or that there is something psychologically amiss with her. Such concern is not, of course, equivalent to affection. The guardian may experience subjective concern for her ward’s welfare without feeling any affection for the child. That is, we expect her to be anxious that the child’s needs are provided for because she realizes that providing for those needs is her responsibility in both a moral and a legal sense. Her concern for the welfare of her ward stems from the fact that her formal involvement with that welfare has the potential to affect her own circumstances. She may experience feelings of guilt if she fails to look after the child properly. She could experience social repercussions in the form of other people’s condemnation, and she could suffer legal repercussions.

But while Climacus’s definition of consciousness as interest in a purely abstract sense makes concrete interest possible, even leads us to expect such interest, it is not immediately apparent *how* the transition from the one type of interest to the other is effected. There is no existence code that would correspond to the legal code and thus spell out for a person exactly what sort of practical significance various truths, or aspects of reality, have in relation to his or her existence.

It appears Kierkegaard believes the transition from abstract to concrete interest is accomplished through suffering. This suffering is not the result of a particular misfortune. That is, it is not accidental, but essential to human existence. Human existence is temporally defined. That is, it is constantly in the process of becoming. “All becoming [*Tilblivelse*],” asserts Climacus, who appears again as the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Crumbs*, “is a suffering [*Liden*]” (C, 142). “The birth [*Tilblivelse*] of consciousness,” asserts Kierkegaard in a draft of *Johannes Climacus*, “is the first pain of existence” (JC, 257). That is, the consciousness of change is itself characterized by change. Thus the suffering Climacus associates with change becomes associated with consciousness itself to the extent that the object of consciousness is change.

“[E]xistence [*Existents*],” continues Climacus in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, “when one becomes *conscious* of it, yields [*giver*] passion” (CUP, 294 emphasis added). To the extent that one is conscious of existence, he suffers, and to the extent that he suffers (*liden*), he is passionate (*lidenskabelig*). That is, consciousness is associated with suffering, and this suffering generates concrete interest in the sense of subjective, or passionate, concern for one’s existence.

“Passion and interest,” observes Heinrich Schmidinger, “are considered by Kierkegaard to be equivalent concepts.”⁵ This point can be made more clearly if we return again to the example of the guardian and her ward. The formal interest she has in the child translates naturally into concrete interest because her consciousness of the formal interest generates a kind of suffering. That is, her awareness that her own welfare is connected to the child’s creates in her a natural anxiety for the child’s welfare.

Consciousness as interest, or as a being-between reality and ideality represents what one might call the formal involvement of a person in these two realms independently of whether the person experiences any subjective concern in relation to this involvement. To the extent, however, that this involvement gives rise to a kind of suffering, which is to say to the extent that the object of a person’s consciousness is

⁵ Heinrich Schmidinger, *Das Problem des Interesses und die Philosophie Sören Kierkegaards* (The Problem of Interest and the Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard) (Friburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1983). See also Jörg Disse, *Kierkegaards Phänomenologie der Freiheitserfahrung* (Kierkegaard’s Phenomenology of the Experience of Freedom) (Friburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1991).

existence, the transition from abstract to concrete interest is not merely possible, it is natural. The concern of an organism to avoid suffering is generally considered to be part of the instinct for self-preservation. It would appear prerequisite to the survival of living organisms and thus a necessary presupposition of any definition of natural or rational behavior.⁶

The suffering (*Liden*) that characterizes the consciousness of existence generates a passionate (*lidenskabelig*) concern for its alleviation. Concrete interest is thus synonymous with passionate interest. The point may also be made, however, by saying that passion is what distinguishes merely abstract interest from concrete, or actual (*virkelig*) interest. Interest in the sense of subjective passionate concern appears to be the vehicle for the transition from ideality, or possibility, to actuality. “For one who exists,” asserts Climacus in the *Postscript*, “what interests him most is existing, and his being interested *in* existing [*at existere*] is his actuality [*Virkeligheden*]” (CUP, 263).⁷ The fact that a person *has* an interest in existing would not appear to be enough to give him actuality in the technical sense. It would appear that Kierkegaard believes one must actively *take* an interest in his existence in order to achieve an authentic, or *actual*, existence. Thus Climacus asserts in the *Postscript* that “as a composite of the finite and the infinite, an *actual* human being has his actuality precisely *in keeping these together*” (CUP, 253; emphasis added).⁸ That is, a person’s actuality is the result of a passionate interest that he takes in his existence.

⁶ This does not compel one to conclude that the avoidance of suffering is always rational or that the choice of suffering can never be rational. It means merely that under normal circumstances, the avoidance of suffering is in keeping with the nature of all living organisms. Certain kinds of suffering may rationally be chosen in order, for example, to avoid other and more life-threatening sorts of suffering. One may choose, for example, to endure the suffering of withdrawal in order to avoid the greater suffering which can ultimately be associated with an addiction.

⁷ Emphasis added.

⁸ “Kierkegaard,” explains Hügli, “considers the Hegelian distinction between “existence” (i.e., *Dasein*) and actuality to be correct. That is, the outward appearance of a thing is merely “*daseiend*.” It attains actuality only to the extent that it is taken up into the idea [*die Idee*]” (Hügli, 103).