

Philosophy, Literature, and Politics



Essays Honoring
Ellis Sandoz




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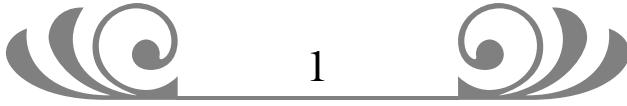
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The Turn toward Existence as Existence in the Turn

David Walsh

The crisis of meaning that has confronted modernity is inseparable from the drive to technology. Not only can nature no longer provide a guide when we subject it to universal dominion, but even the coherence of nature as a concept begins to fall apart. Nature may be the means by which we dominate nature, but the boundary between the natural and the artificial can then scarcely be maintained. All becomes raw material for homogenization and manipulation. Nothing is simply given as a fixed or permanent form; everything is drawn into the process of transformation. The dream of universal mastery finds no limit except one. Mastery cannot master itself. In the end the vast expansion of power is itself unmastered because it is left without purpose or guide. Technology has no goal. But in this realization our philosophical reflection has at the same time illuminated the self-limitation of all instrumentality. Nothing can really be an instrument unless it somehow serves a goal that is not instrumental. Just as in each case the object pursued is regarded as a relative end, so the scheme of instrumentality as such can only function if it is embedded in an order of things that limits its expansion. The process cannot continue indefinitely. It is only from the overwhelming power of technological development that we gain the impression of its omnivorousness. The reality is that the whole structure quickly crumbles unless it is sustained by an order of limits that define and guide it. Formal rationality may seem to exercise unchallenged dominance, but without a substance of ends it falls apart. The pursuit of means is always structured by ends.

Correlative with this philosophic critique of instrumentalization is the growth of the alternative by which it is judged. The still incompletely realized revolution in modern philosophy consists in the progressive articulation of substantive reason. Modern science may have succeeded by virtue of its restriction to the world of phenomena, but modern philosophy has correspondingly found itself within a reality that it knows from within. Technology too is ultimately known from the inner perspective of participation, and this in turn is what enables our philosophical reflection to escape the realm of technique. Unlike the superficial expectation that a technical solution may be found to all the problems of technology, our philosophical meditation unfolds at the heart of the technological project. Refusing to be limited to the realm of appearance, the philosophical penetration of the underlying reality is an opening toward being as such. It is a disclosure of reality from within, in contrast to the illusion of domination from without. In place of the subject standing over against a world of objects, we expand the meditative knowledge of our participation within existence. Illusory superiority is replaced by submission to truth. This is the shift of perspective that has been under way in modern philosophy as it struggled against the subject-object model whose dominance has been so great that the countermovement has scarcely been noticed.

To really comprehend the far-reaching implications of this philosophic revolution, a revolution that does indeed return us to the very beginning of philosophy, we must be prepared to follow out the many threads by which it is unfolded. All that can be attempted here is a sketch, but it cannot be only a sketch. In keeping with the existential shift in philosophy itself we cannot avoid an actual beginning. Philosophy can no longer be talked about; it can only be discussed from within. A non-philosophic account of the movement of modern philosophy would be like describing an event of which we had no experience. No doubt much useful information could be assembled by such a strictly historical approach, but it would miss the core that alone justifies attention to the periphery. Philosophy can only be understood by participating in it. This is a principle that increasingly informs and identifies the philosophic revolution of the modern period. Once we become self-conscious in our discourse attention turns toward the conditions of philosophical reflection itself. Among the conditions that cannot be overleaped is the existence of the philosopher himself. It is in this way that philosophy returns to its classical conception as a way of life. But merely recognizing the indispensability of the existential perspective does not mean that a thinker will fully recognize the implications of the shift. Indeed one of the patterns we will discern is that the modern philosophic revolution is often characterized by the struggle, not always successful, to remain true to itself. If we are to uncover the full dimensions of this move-

ment we cannot remain at the level of intellectual formulations. We must reach beyond what was said to the dynamic of questioning that in many cases yielded developments never fully acknowledged and sometimes even distorted by the thinkers themselves. Given the inconclusive state of much contemporary philosophical discussion the notion that a unifying pattern exists at all is a claim requiring justification. For now all we can do is prepare the way by taking note of the fundamental condition for perceiving its plausibility. We must be prepared to exist within the mode of philosophy. To understand those who worked toward this new way of conceiving philosophy we must place ourselves within the same dynamic. We must be prepared to philosophize about philosophy.

The recognition of this necessity is slow to emerge in the history of modern thought but it clearly antedates the so-called “existentialists” of the twentieth century. A persuasive case can be made that Kant marks the beginning of the return of philosophy, more explicitly than with the classical thinkers, to the primacy of existence. The shift is proclaimed in Kant’s assertion of the superiority of practical reason for the disclosure of being.¹ God, the immortality of the soul, and the reality of human freedom are postulates of the moral life, and Kant is very careful to emphasize that this provides no theoretical knowledge of their truth. Since all of our knowledge comes through our sensible intuitions, that of which we can have no experience can never become an object of knowledge. This is the famous end of metaphysics in the sense of a claim to know entities that exist in some abstract realm apart from all possibility of experience. Kant inaugurates the liberation from unreal entities that Nietzsche continues to celebrate. Relief from the burden of unreality is seen as a break from a long imposition dating to Plato. Yet as every reader of Kant can recognize, he does not thereby abandon his concern with faith or metaphysics, for he brings them to a deeper level. This is not merely a haunting of the past. Both in tone and in substance Kant displays the new seriousness about getting at the real truth of things, even to the extent of proclaiming his own search for the pure a priori of reason to be the only adequate metaphysics. What makes him sanguine about the possibility of thereby bringing about a fundamental advance in philosophy is his conviction that the critique of pure reason, both theoretical and practical, puts us in touch with the thing in itself. It is reality known from within, knowledge of the noumenon rather than the phenomenon. In reflecting on the a priori of pure reason, whether in its theoretical or practical

1. This is a view of Kant that is gradually coming into focus. See Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant’s Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

mode, we are no longer apprehending the appearance of what is intended but know it as it is. This means that what is discovered in this noumenal reflection of the self on itself carries with it a force of reality that breaks through the barrier of the phenomenal. We still have no phenomenal basis for our assertions concerning God, immortality, or freedom, but we are profoundly convinced of their reality. As “postulates” of practical reason, they are the indispensable continuities from the reality that is most powerfully evident in our own existence. To the extent that Kant struggles to heighten the human dignity that realizes itself exclusively through the exercise of self-responsibility, he at the same time intensifies the awareness of the dimensions of reality into which human being extends.

This is the excitement that took hold of philosophy in the movement known as Idealism. A whole generation of thinkers looked on the completion of Kant’s philosophical revolution as their project. They understood that Kant had placed the subject, the transcendental ego, at the center of reality and had thereby resolved the gulf that seemed irresolvable within all correspondence theories of knowledge. By making knowledge of the world derive from the subject he had redefined the nature of the problem. Knowledge now meant the categories we impose on sensible institutions, which removes entirely the mystery of how they connect us with the world outside ourselves. Rather than conceive knowledge as something that comes from a source outside, he showed that it is essentially the order we impose on the world of our experience. That left, of course, the great problem of truth. If knowledge consists of the imposition of categories on data, how do we know if our imposition is true in some sense? What does truth mean in this context? These are the questions with which Kant himself struggled in his last great critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, which was the point of departure for the Idealists. Comprehension of reality by means of our categories is true only if our reason is itself continuous with the structure of reality itself. Recourse to a postulate of teleology is again the way in which Kant formulated this derivation, but the Idealists made the existential leap to grasp that this is no longer a claim about knowledge but about human being. Our categories can comprehend reality, not because we can bridge the separation of subject and object, but because our being is already the unity of the two. Human existence is never simply a fact within a world of other discrete facts, but is already that which can see facts as facts. The way to understand reality, the Idealists concluded from Kant, was not to contemplate it as a whole outside of the subject but to recognize that the subject was already the whole or the point through which its self-disclosure took place most completely. They saw that it is practical reason that holds the key to theoretical reason, and they turned their attention to the process of history in which the self-realization of man unfolds into the self-disclosure of reality.

When human self-consciousness occupied such a pivotal role, the temptation to claim possession of absolute knowledge proved, of course, irresistible. But this distortion should not devalue the philosophic shift toward existence that lies behind it. Before Hegel's claim to absolute knowledge could be rendered plausible there had to be the prior recognition of man's openness toward the absolute. It is not our knowledge that makes this relationship possible, but our participation in the absolute mode of being that makes the knowledge of it possible. Hegel gave voice to the turn toward existence as the mode of knowing by his insistence that knowledge could no longer be apprehended as a result.² Propositions had to be replaced by the movement that catches truth as it discloses itself in the unfolding movement of reality. We know ourselves, not by contemplating the self objectively, but by the process of self-realization. Truth is in the movement, never in the dead result. It is unfortunate that this profound insight, which sought to restore philosophy to its original understanding of the love of wisdom, was overshadowed by the counter pull within Hegel to bring the movement to its completion within his system. He is thus the first of the ironic exemplars whose intention of countering the objectifying tendency of thought is subverted by his own inclination to commit the same mistake. Nevertheless, Hegel does stamp the history of philosophy with the discovery of its dynamic quality. Reality is not a fixed condition but one that discloses itself through its movement. This is the turning point in which philosophy becomes historical. The entire empirical course of events becomes material for philosophic reflection because it is in this existential course that the truth of being emerges. Correcting for the Hegelian distortions, while it has taken much of the succeeding two centuries, does not entail a rejection of his fundamental project.

It was his colleague Schelling who first separated what is living from what is dead in Hegel. While never bringing his own project to a satisfactory conclusion, Schelling directed single-minded attention to the point from which he departed from Hegel. It is an issue of fundamental importance that utterly eliminates the possibility of philosophy collapsing back into the deadness of a system, and the real point of departure for the history of contemporary philosophy. Schelling has quite rightly been hailed as the source both for the existential turn and for the postmodern emphasis on the dynamic.³ He is the one

2. See in particular the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

3. A useful account in this regard is Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), while Schelling's own self-location is probably best indicated by his lectures *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). The centrality of freedom in Schelling's thought is the core of his refusal of systematization. See his *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutman (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1936).

who insists that reality always escapes speculation. No matter how comprehensive the speculative grasp may be it cannot include the reality from which it itself is derived. As soon as it makes an attempt to include that wherein it itself stands, it has merely rendered its own ground as no longer its ground, only the marker of where the ground had been. Speculation that attempts to include the living process in which it exists is left only with the dead remains. Living life always escapes the attempt to capture it; to the extent it is captured it is no longer living. Schelling understood that this had been the tragic flaw of Hegel's temptation to yield to the definitiveness of system. Existence always lies outside of that which it has created. Philosophy must therefore bow to this necessity and concede that it can be no more than the love of wisdom. While Schelling did not embrace the full existential implications of this recognition, and thereby proved both an inspiration and a disappointment to Kierkegaard, he did demonstrate the inability of speculation to overleap the boundary that includes itself. The best that philosophy could do then was to turn to life, to catch the disclosure of being in act, and to respect the narrative of myth, which is the mode of discourse concerning what is beyond all discourse.

The priority of existential knowledge is inescapable. Unlike the conventional notion that we recognize ourselves in a mirror by seeing our reflection, it is doubtful that we would know who it is we see there unless we had a prereflective knowledge of the self. We cannot claim to have seen ourselves before, since it is precisely that claim to self-recognition that is in question. At best the image we contemplate in the mirror is only an image. It is never the self that does the contemplating, which remains radically beyond the boundary. This is what the infinite means. It can never be fully unfolded into its creations. Schelling saw this truth with a blinding clarity, while Hegel periodically lost sight of it. Where Hegel allowed the possibility of self-consciousness reaching its culmination, Schelling insisted that the goal could never be attained. This is why Schelling could insist that history can never be reduced to the inner dynamics of consciousness. There is always the irreducible beyond of the process. The ironic consequence is that this preserves history, while the attempt to draw everything into history abolishes it. Now existence is not merely a phase in the production of the end, but an irreplaceable expression of what can never be fully expressed. History as the trace of the infinite renders all existence as a luminous sign. The possibility that human consciousness could capture that by which it is held is an utter impossibility. Only the movement of existential disclosure, responding to the invitation of being, reveals what is contained from the beginning. Schelling's insistence on the unsurpassability of the order in which human consciousness is embedded is the point at which the primacy of existential disclosure is established within modern philosophy.

Not all of the subsequent turn toward existence took its lead from Schelling. Much of the movement flowed directly from the reaction to the self-enclosure of the Hegelian system. Marx is the most famous among a very talented group of Young Hegelians who saw rather clearly that their master had comprehended everything except life itself. The scandal was that the great culmination of philosophy had not effected the slightest change in how men live. Philosophy had been seduced by the perfection of the system. Now the task was to make philosophy real again by engaging in the struggle to transform the conditions in which human beings found themselves. Rather than permit theoretical reconciliation to conceal the extent of real social and economic conflict, theory must now be directed toward the unremitting dialectic of history itself. No more would philosophy allow itself to be used as a tool of oppression. Unfortunately Marxist philosophy ended by legitimizing a far more extensive regime of oppression. The unmasking of ideology recurrently gives way to a more extreme ideology. When philosophy has embarked on an activist course, the relapse into systematization can prove deadly. So long as theory sought only a contemplative transfiguration of all things, the result was relatively harmless. Once the same drive was manifested among individuals bent on the real transfiguration of reality we end with the totalitarian nightmare. The theoretical impulse to master being ends in the activist drive to remake the world. But this perversion does not minimize the initial realization that theory had failed to transform reality. The totalitarian debacle simply reveals that there is also no reason to expect revolutionary action to accomplish the same goal.

We are thrown back on the only route of transformation that remains. The individual can work on himself and from there begin to effect some wider social change. This is the path of Marx's great unknown contemporary, Kierkegaard, who understood the problem so profoundly that he hoped his books would not become popular.⁴ If they did then they would be swept up in a social movement and would no longer address their real target, the solitary individual. In many respects Kierkegaard had understood the modern condition of philosophy most completely. It had to remain a philosophy of existence, neither forgetting itself in the realm of concepts nor imagining its superiority through systems. Yet despite his unique position and, perhaps, because of it, Kierkegaard is the least understood of modern philosophers. He is familiar through a few slogans about the absurd and the leap of faith which, when one actually reads him, one fails to recognize. Even the ubiquitous three stages turn out not to

4. Kierkegaard, Appendix, "An Understanding with the Reader," in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

function as such within his thought. What Kierkegaard feared in his cultivated obscurity has indeed happened to him. By becoming popular he has become misunderstood. The first wave of that popularity was his identification with the twentieth-century existentialists. Once such a movement has taken shape it is inevitable that its members, including its putative antecedents like Kierkegaard, are all reworked to fit the mold. What they actually said becomes far less important. This has certainly been the fate of the pseudonymous Dane whose strategy of publishing under other names was intended to warn of the difficulty of understanding existential philosophy. Only now with the passage of time has he begun to be read more carefully and in his own right. The result has been a renewed appreciation of his status as a thinker that has placed him at the very center of the postmodern debate.

The failure to recognize the full measure of Kierkegaard's achievement curiously begins with Kierkegaard himself. His own focus on the existential, on the struggle of the individual to live the life of fidelity, tended to forget the implications of this new approach for philosophy. Socrates and Jesus both figure prominently in his writings, but the notion that he was setting both philosophy and Christianity on the course of renewing their foundations emerged only occasionally. Kierkegaard would no doubt have seen such a perspective as a temptation away from his existential task. To this extent, however, one might say that he did not fully understand his role. It was not simply to become a better person; that could have been accomplished without all the voluminous writings. It was surely to chart a path of meaning within the modern world, where the historical symbols of philosophy and Christianity had become opaque and modern men seemed capable of only constructing ever more horrific schemes of instrumentalization. Kierkegaard can rightly be regarded as the first postmodern thinker because he is the first to take up the challenge of meaning in a context where all meaning has collapsed. He knows that all talk of finding a beginning is not only interminable but is merely a way of deferring a beginning. There is no beginning for discourse or action because we have already begun. We are in existence. Our task is to remain faithful to the truth that discloses itself within the process and resist the pull of untruth. Among the latter is the temptation to control the process in which we find ourselves, to make it instrumental to our own purposes rather than to submit to its exigencies. Communication about this condition is itself one of the variants of the temptation. By talking we avoid doing. How can we talk about living without sidestepping what we want to communicate? How do we communicate that which cannot be communicated, which can only be shown, but really only discovered? A profound understanding of language lies behind Kierkegaard's extensive ruminations on how one talks about Christianity within a society of Christians.

The attempt to seize existence on the run is also what animated the other great nineteenth-century loner, Friedrich Nietzsche. It is well known that Nietzsche exalts life over its conceptualization. He abandoned art in the Wagnerian sense because, although it brought us closer to heroic life, it too served only as another form of escape. If he was going to arrive at truth it would have to be by living it. For this reason his *Zarathustra* can never be any more than a bridge toward the goal that lies beyond all writing. The best that literature can capture is the radiance from life, and for this Nietzsche developed the aphoristic style. We might view him, therefore, not as the theorist of nihilism by which he is conventionally identified, but (as he viewed himself) the first European to have gone beyond nihilism. The tortured quality of his thought arises as much from Nietzsche's own inability to understand the novelty of his project as from the failure to break through the boundary of the self. Nietzsche is left railing against truth in the objectivist sense while unable to recognize his own achievement of truth in the existential sense. It is because he cannot bring the tension between them to any resolution that he suffers the conflict so intensely and becomes, as a consequence, the paradigmatic figure of modern and postmodern philosophy. In retrospect we can see, as Heidegger observes, that Nietzsche had thought through a metaphysics beyond metaphysics.⁵ The death of God had never really meant the death of God. It only meant that a spatially imagined divinity was no longer credible, not that Nietzsche himself was no longer held by a mysterious fullness of life. Indeed it is the contrast between the denunciation of truth and the living commitment to truth that attests the utterly existential character of his faith, a faith that would not even permit itself the luxury of acknowledging itself.

The same fear of betraying the existential quest marks the unremitting struggle of Heidegger to unfold the Nietzschean project. It is also unclear to what extent the obstacles are self-created, to what extent the very intensity of the battle each of them wages for fidelity to the luminosity of existence masks an unwillingness to follow the full logic of openness to which they have committed themselves. This inscrutability has made both of them notoriously difficult to interpret. But in another sense such contested interpretations remain beside the point. If we have learnt anything from either of them it is that the value of a thinker is not defined by where he ends up. It is where his thought leads. This is for us the primary concern, although it can be expected that extending the direction in which they move will provide a unique vantage point for an overall assessment of what they accomplished. It may indeed turn out that it

5. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vols. 1–4, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1979–1987).

was the tenacity of their blind spots that accounts for the depth of the struggle in which they articulated the existential exigency of truth. A thinker with fewer personal hangups who reached the goal of existential disclosure more easily might have been less useful to us. In philosophy the results are best when they do not come readily. Those who present themselves to us with all of their often horrible flaws not only compel themselves to wrestle with the blockages but, more important, impose on us the obligation of extending their thought into regions they were themselves not always prepared to go.

This must surely be our attitude toward the great flawed genius of twentieth-century philosophy. Like it or not, Heidegger's towering presence arises from his extended meditation on what philosophy must be when it has definitively adopted the originary perspective of existence. Even in his earlier "existentialist" phase Heidegger shied away from the label, knowing that it still preserved too much of the isolated subject for whom the whole of being could become an object. Heidegger continuously worked to eliminate any such suggestion of subjectivity from his thought. It was at the core of his famous turn from the existential phenomenology of *Being and Time* to the meditative opening toward Being that made all reflection possible. It was the truth of Being, rather than the intentionality of the subject, that made human knowledge and existence possible. *Being and Time* could still suggest a self-contained subject who must anxiously project or decide the meaning of its existence without resort to any disclosure beyond the self. Later, Heidegger came to see that even the self-contemplating subject was never locked within itself. From the very beginning it stood within the opening of Being that made all contemplation possible. In order for us to become conscious of anything we must first be able to think about it as such, that is, as standing in the light of Being. Not only does everything that exists participate in being, without being Being, but it is that relationship that enables us to know what exists, as what is in being. Human being enjoys the special privilege not only of participating in being but of seeing that it does so. From this all of the special features of human existence follow. Animals may live in the world, exist in time, and end in death, but it is only for man that the world, time, and death exist. He alone confronts them as such because he alone beholds them in the light of Being.⁶

But this does not mean that man contains or comprehends the light of Being. Heidegger mightily opposes the tendency to objectify Being, which he regards as the fatal misstep within the history of philosophy, a derailment that begins

6. Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), on the poverty of the animals' world.

almost as soon as the difference between Being and beings is first encountered. The modern revolution is to return to that first moment with a new self-consciousness of the imperative of resisting the assimilation of Being to beings. This so-called “ontological difference” becomes the core of Heidegger’s project. In this way he sought to make the modern shift from intentionality to luminosity definitive. Not only would philosophy not revert to an objectivist metaphysics, but the modern crisis of meaning would have reached a decisive turning point. The enthronement of instrumental rationality, as confirmed by the technological success of the contemporary world, would no longer prevail unchecked. Man’s capacity to dominate reality would be seen as itself dependent on the prior openness toward Being that enables him to contemplate things as they are. The great problem, of furnishing the regime of instrumentalization with an end that would not itself be instrumentalized, had been solved. Being, in Heidegger’s articulation, could never be absorbed into the stream of beings available for manipulation and control because it was itself what made such processes possible. Technological rationality is itself a mode of being, and it is the history of man’s engagement with Being that is being realized within this modern manifestation. History is, in this sense, not the history of man but the history of Being in which man is the point at which the process becomes self-conscious. Hegel had made the mistake of claiming that Being itself had become self-conscious, but Heidegger understood that it is only the participation of beings in Being that reaches luminosity.

Being itself cannot become self-conscious because it cannot be in the mode of a being. This is what turns Heidegger against all forms of onto-theology that assimilate Being to God. Of course this does not mean that Heidegger was an atheist. He could more accurately be described, as he occasionally admitted, as a negative theologian.⁷ Out of faithfulness to God, we might say, he refuses to name him. If Being is that in the light of which everything else is seen, then Being itself cannot be illuminated. Being is what brings beings into unconcealment but remains itself in concealment; otherwise it would become a being. Heidegger resolutely struggles against the conventional understanding of revelation because he sought to understand how the transcendent could be known as transcendent once it had been mediated by the immanent. How can Being be revealed through a being? Being is what can never be revealed no matter how many beings come forward to disclose it. So how then do we know about

7. Heidegger appears to be underlining his agreement with Nietzsche when he remarks: “What Nietzsche is practicing here with regard to the world totality is a kind of ‘negative theology,’ which tries to grasp the Absolute as purely as possible by holding at a distance all ‘relative’ determinations, that is all those that relate to human beings.” *Nietzsche*, 2:95.

Being at all? Our knowledge derives from the trace of Being that remains in beings, for they point beyond themselves. Only in man, however, does this directionality become knowledge. He alone not only points but is aware of it. It is for this reason that man plays a special role in relation to Being. He is the “shepherd” or “guardian” of Being because it is only in him that Being is disclosed and nowhere else in existence. All other beings provide a mute testament to Being, that by which they are disclosed, but only man can give voice to that awareness through language. This special relationship, however, is not made possible because man has the capacity for articulation; rather, he has the capacity for speaking because of his relationship with Being. This is a point that Heidegger struggled mightily to make clear as he sought to complete the shift from a self-contained subject to a subject already constituted by its openness toward Being.

The question of Being cannot be separated from the question of man. In his exploration of the dynamics of revelation, Heidegger shows, the “revelation” of Being is possible only because man is already constituted by the revelation of Being from the beginning. Problems arise for Heidegger we might say because of the very relentlessness of his pursuit of revelation in the originary sense. He cannot abide any of the stopping points along the way in what Judaism or Christianity call revelation. None of these satisfy the requirement that revelation must bend its efforts toward what cannot be revealed. The result is an intoxicating and disorienting pursuit of what cannot be reached. In the name of sustaining a tension that is unsustainable Heidegger loses all points of reference within existence. His notorious political misjudgments are not the cause of this; they are its symptom. Nor do the blunders represent only an occasional lapse. They seem to form a pattern that his best critics have discerned as the betrayal of his own fundamental impulse. It seems as if the refusal of all intermediaries makes the tension toward a revelation of Being that cannot be revealed so unsupportable that it collapses into some intramundane manifestations as an all too welcome substitute. The danger of apocalyptic thinking is that it tends toward various forms of an immanent apocalypse. It is for this reason, Heidegger’s critics have suggested, that all of his strictures against the metaphysics of presence have not been enough to prevent him from falling victim to the same tendency.⁸ The Being that lies perpetually beyond disclosure is increasingly burdened with the expectation of its disclosure. Once that pressure has mounted the danger of opting for a substitute becomes almost irresistible.

8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

The scandal of Heidegger's dalliance with Nazism has been the most notorious case. Apocalyptic thinking veers precipitously close to the pseudo-apocalypse. The fact that a Heidegger was repeatedly prepared to run the risk says something about the hold of such thinking on the modern imagination. In many ways the style of immanent apocalypse can be seen as the culmination of the modern drive for mastery. What, after all, could be more gratifying than to be the individual or the generation that extends its control over reality totally? Behind the urge for technical control lurks the dream of comprehensive domination. The impulse can be so overwhelming that it blocks out all other considerations, including the realization that the achievement of total control abolishes any further technological progress. A willingness to obliterate the very process from which science itself has derived is mirrored in the willingness to obliterate the planet in the name of the final transfiguration of all things. What is fascinating about Heidegger's case is not the banality of evil into which he was drawn but the fact that he was susceptible to the lure of the false apocalypse despite the contrary implications of his own thought. Public attention has naturally been drawn to the spectacle of his astonishing political collaboration with the worst totalitarian regime of the century, as if one more tale of human wickedness would somehow insulate us from the enormity of the events. The challenge by contrast is to understand how a man like Heidegger could yield, indeed cheer, the advent of evil despite his own ability to unmask it. It is surely not our place to sit in judgment on Heidegger, since we are not privy to his soul. We do, however, have access to his thought, where the task is more straightforward. It is to understand how even a philosophic mind that strains against the closure of existence can nevertheless succumb to precisely the same temptation. How was it possible for Heidegger to perceive the parousia of Being in the beings of the Third Reich?

The journalistic side of philosophy has been preoccupied periodically with Heidegger's failure as a man.⁹ Philosophy itself has always needed to pursue the more indispensable question of the failure of his philosophy, for there it is our humanity that is at stake. If Heidegger represents the limit of philosophy we have to ask whether it is sufficient for the task it has set itself. Is the case of Heidegger merely the failure of the man or is philosophy itself implicated? This is the question with which philosophy has wrestled increasingly as it has come to recognize the stature of his achievement. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that he has carried the modern philosophic revolution the furthest. The shift from subjectivity dominating a world of objects to the luminosity of

9. A useful updated account is Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

existence that never succeeds in grounding itself has been brought to its fullest realization in his thought. Many others have made the leap intuitively, but Heidegger, perhaps by dint of the obstinacy of his struggle with objectification, has made the transition to the perspective of participation inescapably articulate. This is why he is the defining philosophic mind of the century. Without displaying an extensive range of philosophic interests, Heidegger has nevertheless compelled us to recognize the necessity of moving from the contemplation of reality to the reality of contemplation. Prior to all knowledge there is the existence that therefore can never be fully known but can become luminous. How then was it possible for Heidegger to fall back into the claim of the primacy of knowledge? If we take seriously the direction on which he had set philosophy then we must take equally seriously the necessity of preserving philosophy from the pitfalls into which philosophers too may fall.

Instead of simply dismissing Heidegger as a “historicist” or a “decisionist,” the most acute readers have acknowledged the necessity of going beyond him by going through him. The issue becomes that of carrying Heidegger’s project beyond himself by mounting a critique from within. In this way the transformation of philosophy that had been under way is carried forward by arguing that Heidegger had not been Heideggerian enough. This is why the leading postmodern thinkers are both under the shadow of Heidegger and his most vigorous critics. They take him to task for capitulating, despite his protestations, to an immanent apocalypse. His talk of the concealment of Being that makes all unconcealment or truth possible still suggests the parousia of Being. In part this is an inevitable consequence of the language he employs, which is still very much tied to a metaphysics of presence, as if an object were present before the subject. For all of his efforts to resist subjectivity, Heidegger still thinks of philosophy in a contemplative mode that privileges the perspective of the contemplator, who is thus outside of Being. The consequence was not only the tilt toward the intramundane apocalypse of National Socialism, but the more profound closure toward existence once the tension toward Being had been abolished. When the eschaton is drawn into time there is no more possibility. Existence is closed by its completion. This totalizing tendency of even Heidegger is perceptively discerned by Lévinas and Derrida, both of whom in their respective ways insist on a non-attainable eschaton as the only adequate horizon for humanity. What an “apocalypse without apocalypse” means in its specifics may not always be clear from their formulations, but it does mark a definitive turn away from any possibility of revelation.

The apophatic quality of this orientation has often been viewed as merely inscrutable rhetoric. Such an accusation, however, misses the crucial advance

that a thinker like Lévinas introduces into the theoretical complex delineated by Heidegger. Lévinas represents a shift toward a more decisively existential perspective. Where Heidegger had used the existential emphasis as a starting point for a philosophic meditation that ultimately remained contemplative, Lévinas insists that the extraction of a contemplative fruit constitutes a betrayal of the existential impulse. His famous formulation that he is prioritizing ethics over ontology captures the essence of the move. Lévinas leaves the philosopher no room for relaxation. There is never a moment of escape in which he would be free to calculate or contemplate, because there is never a point at which the debt of moral obligation has been satisfied. Wherever we construct a compound of privacy the face of the other is already there before us. Responsibility toward the other is the condition of our existence that can neither be abandoned nor abolished. Philosophy becomes therefore not a disclosure of existence; but rather existence is itself the disclosure of philosophy. There is no independent mode of philosophy apart from the imperative of living out the imperatives of our moral life. Lévinas thus brings the turn toward existence to its completion by showing that a merely theoretic philosophy has become impossible. It is no accident that the contemplative mode has derailed into the totalizing, because it has turned its back on the primordial structure that is there before all possibility of structure. In this sense we never find what we are looking for in philosophy, according to Lévinas, but are always on the way toward it. Even the way cannot be hypostasized because then it would cease to be the way and become a rest stop.¹⁰

To accuse Heidegger of such reification may be a bit disingenuous since he is the one who most emphasizes the dynamic character of philosophy, but the critique does call attention to the difficulty of maintaining the purity of the event. If even Heidegger could end by tilting toward an external perspective on it then the danger of dominating the other is very real. Lévinas finds a crucial safeguard against this tendency by going behind domination itself. The possibility of domination arises from its impossibility. We can dominate the other only because we are already in a relation of responsibility toward him; we can turn our backs on the person who calls us by turning away from the face. What we cannot do is eliminate the relation that makes domination possible. Without the priority of the face of the other, placing us under obligation before all

10. This is a line of reflection developed in his two great works, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

freedom, there would not be the possibility of rejection. Lévinas has thought through the primordial character of transcendence in a way that is more originary than Heidegger's explorations.

Where Heidegger had sought the openness toward Being by going through beings, Lévinas focused on the being of the other as the movement beyond Being. Now it may be that the difference between them is not large, and it may turn out that Lévinas's "otherwise than Being" overlaps with Heidegger's "Being beyond beings," but the dynamic of responsibility toward the other more adequately marks the existential character of the disclosure. Lévinas eliminates the possibility that we might withdraw to a viewpoint outside of Being by identifying the relationship as one of responsibility. We are already called to act on behalf of the other before we can even think of who we are. There is no self that is prior to the relation to the other.

It is the unsurpassability of this relationship that makes it impossible for domination to succeed. We can never get back to the point at which the self exists in splendid isolation, as if there could be a moment at which the demand of the other ceased to be. Is it ever possible to maintain we have given enough? Surely "enough" is measured by the need of the other rather than our inclination or capacity for sacrifice. Before and beyond any state from which domination could be imposed there is the face of the other. We are never free to dominate. That realization, however, is not reached from within some independent perspective, itself suggesting a superior starting point. Our involvement is rather disclosed within the movement in which we are already engaged. Existence, in which we are already related through the face of the other, will not leave us alone. The vantage point of theory on which Western metaphysics has been based for more than two millennia is permanently displaced. No higher viewpoint is available than the truth of ethics that, as Aristotle emphasized, takes priority over all general propositions. This is also the culmination of Heidegger's resistance to all forms of the metaphysics of presence. Being as Lévinas conceives it is nothing at all like a presence but is rather what draws us into presence. We do not behold a reality before us but are ourselves brought into a fuller reality than we are. Luminosity does not precede our existence but is its unfolding direction.

The effort to reverse a pattern of thought that assimilates Being to beings or that remains tied to a world of objects is in large measure a struggle against language. Metaphor is the trap that language sets for us. Perhaps no one has devoted more attention to the constrictions of language than Jacques Derrida. In many respects his preoccupation with the limits of semiology can be viewed as a continuation of the critique of a metaphysics of presence on which the conventional conception of language is based. Naming is the preeminent

model from which this misdirection originates, for nothing seems more obvious than that denomination is a way of making present that which is not. It easily misleads us into thinking that the mere practice of naming conjures the reality to which it refers, rather than merely representing what can no longer present itself. The critique of language, especially of the privilege that the spoken word always seems to exercise over the written one, is a continuation of the assault on the objectification of Being. Derrida takes over the indications of Heidegger and Lévinas while giving their existential shift an essentially linguistic application. This is no mere sidetrack but an essential completion of the project of removing the centrality of the all-seeing subject. Without the linguistic instruments of its domination of reality the subject is left forlorn, longing for a presence that it can no longer make real because the very means of its control have betrayed it. Derrida shows that language, far from delivering on its promise of making present what is absent, is itself a response to the problem of absence. Nouns cannot provide the security we seek, for we are adrift in a sea of verbs and adverbs that moves us along. The final chapter for the dislocated subject is surely provided by Derrida's analysis of the incapacity of language to refer to what we thought it refers.

In place of reference he emphasizes *différance*, a neologism that combines the senses of difference and deferral.¹¹ That to which language refers is both different from it and deferred by it at the same time. This failure of intentionality to achieve its object is not, however, a sheer negative, for it also opens up the space for elaboration. Without the gap between signifier and signified there would, according to Derrida, hardly be room for an unfolding of the language relationship within reality. If the project of definition had succeeded, then discussion would cease. Absolute knowledge in the Hegelian sense has the perverse consequence of terminating the search for knowledge, and without the search for knowledge we no longer actually know. Derrida thus emphasizes the penultimate character of language as the indispensable openness that makes the search for knowledge possible. Of course many readers have concluded that he renders all knowledge ultimately inconclusive. His own style of reflection often suggests an interminable digressiveness that has come to typify "post-modern" thought, although this is surely a misimpression. It would be more accurate to say that Derrida's main concern had been with preserving the space for signification even at the cost of devaluing its provisional character. The

11. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

difficulty, as many commentators have noted, is that he had to use language in order to discuss the limits of language. How could he refer to an absence in the language of presence? His project would have been better served if he had distinguished more clearly between the ordinary context of language that refers to the world of objects and the existential context in which that ordinary use occurs. The difficulty is at this point a long-standing one in the history of modern philosophy and is at the heart of the reorientation on which it has been engaged. Derrida's work is one more aspect of the multifaceted shift from intentionality to luminosity.

The central issue may be identified as the absence that makes all movement toward presence possible but which is itself neither an absence nor a presence. In his later work Derrida used the language of religion as the most suitable mode of discourse. He had always alluded to the theological parallels with deconstruction, declaring that it was a form of negative theology, but in the late work he adopted the full-blown language of revelation. Messianic, apocalyptic, and eschatological vocabularies figure prominently in his thought to such an extent that he might be regarded as a religious thinker. This is a strange turn for a thinker who acknowledged that he was not quite a believer, although certainly not a disbeliever. His was a religion without God, an apocalypse without apocalypse that was more than a substitutional piety. It is an attitude that arises when God is no longer believable as a projection of spatio-temporal imagination, yet remains indispensable as the assurance of possibility by virtue of its impossibility.¹² Without the unreachable horizon of transcendence the movement of *différance* could not even begin, but if the divine were reached the movement could no longer continue. Derrida himself remained puzzled by the status of his faith, and we see in this bewilderment the incompletely understood character of the existential turn in philosophy. Even a thinker of his theoretical acuity could not adequately locate his project so long as he remained tied to the understanding of presence as objective. His railing against objective signification did not save him from captivation by the same model.

Derrida had difficulty conceiving of a pleromatic mode of presence, that is, of a presence that is so complete that it draws all else into presence and cannot therefore be one of the things that become present. We cannot know about it as an object out there. Rather we are already constituted by its pull before we even begin to search for it. We are the ones who are differed and deferred until

12. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002); *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For a good overview of this phase of Derrida's prolific development see John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

we have begun to attune our existence toward its luminosity. It is not absent; we are. This is the meditative unfolding articulated by the first existentialist, Saint Augustine. His development of the language of interiority was in response to the discovery that he had found himself only when he found himself in God. The process did not consist of the subject turning his light inward, although it provided the language of introspection, but of realizing that the interiority in which he was contained was not his own. "Where else, then, did I find you, to learn of you, unless it was in yourself, above me?"¹³ The absence to which Derrida and Heidegger refer is not an absence as such but our inability to ever catch up with that which is so fully present we can never outrun it. This better explains how that which is absent can exert such a powerful pull toward presence, for if it were a sheer absence it could never exercise an endless fascination. Only that which is somehow more present than the things that are present can do this, as Heidegger's lifelong occupation with the mystery of Being attests. So while the transcendent cannot be present in the mode of a thing, or else reality would shrink into a black hole without movement or light, it cannot be so transcendent that it fails to draw all things toward itself. The only way to conceive of God is, not as lying outside of us, but as that outside of which we lie. God is not the problem; we are.

The theoretical dead-end into which deconstruction seems to lead modern philosophy arises from the search for a theoretical resolution. Once we realize that practice resolves what in theory remains impenetrable, the impasse is removed. This does not mean that practice has become an instrument for a theoretical goal, but rather the reverse, that in abandoning the insistence on achieving a theoretical solution we have opened the way for the luminosity of life itself. A profound revision of the prevailing primacy of theory is contained in such a move. We seem to be turning our backs on the contemplative life as it was exalted by the classics, in which *theoria* is alone pursued for its own sake, but the shift can also be regarded as a more profound appropriation of philosophy. In contrast to the conventional conception of philosophy as a result we begin to see that there is no philosophy apart from the appropriation of it. This is the direction of the modern existential revolution, to catch philosophy in living life, only now with the realization that this brings us back to the beginning. It is not, as Derrida suggests, that we expect to arrive at a beginning before philosophy, only that we recognize that philosophy has no beginning before itself. The theoretical enterprise that extends its reach to include the birth of philosophy itself is already a misstep. Philosophy is in act, not in theory. Plato

13. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), x, 26.

and Aristotle both struggle in different ways to maintain the truth of action rather than the discursive movement away from doing. The life of virtue lies in activity rather than in discussion, which thus makes philosophy a mode of discussion that must constantly move beyond itself. Paradox is the structure of philosophy, not a modern discovery about it. The derailment into the supplementarity of theorizing is not an accidental development within the history of philosophy but the central danger against which the discourse must perpetually struggle if it is not to lose the existential direction it seeks to articulate.

The modern revolution in philosophy does not so much introduce something new as bring us back, in the manner of revolutions, to the point from which it began. Return is in this sense never simply a return to the beginning. It is a new beginning, a reappropriation, made all the more necessary by the defectiveness of the first beginning. A re-initiation of philosophy is a genuinely philosophical act. Derrida's famous remark, "nothing outside the text," leaves itself open to a number of possible interpretations. Among the most compelling is the existential one that insists there is no point of reference that would relieve us of responsibility or permit us to dominate the meaning it provides. We cannot abandon our existence to a totality that would enclose it, not without ceasing to exist entirely. It is not that we are, in the cruder formulation of Sartre, "condemned to be free," but that we are condemned to exist in openness because that is the mode of human existence. Not only is there nothing outside the text, we are not even outside of it. The text is our existence. We can only get outside of it by existing, that is, by extending the text of our lives. A resting point, a security nook, could only be a falling away from the task. Sleep interrupts our consciousness, but we can hardly regard it as anything more than a necessary and inevitable break in the endeavor of freely and humanly becoming who we are. There is no point before the beginning that would make the beginning happen and relieve us of the burden of beginning ourselves, just as there is no end point that will allow us to rest in the easy release from all effort by having become all that is possible. Human existence is a mystery or, rather, since it is not a thing, human existence is caught within a mystery that can be neither fathomed nor exhausted. For this reason there is nothing outside the text, since the text encompasses the unreachable whole. If it did not, then we would be constantly tempted, as indeed we are, to settle down in the satisfaction of achieving our goal. All that saves us from spiritual suicide is the impossibility of finding a definitive point of reference outside the text.

We are the text, as Kierkegaard insisted, and the effort to stand outside of it is the refusal of existence. He may not have explicated the full extent of the revolution in philosophy that this recognition implied, but he is probably the one who carried it out most completely in his own life. It may be that it was

Kierkegaard's willingness to think through the issues within Christian categories that saved him from the tentativeness that characterizes most of his successors, just as it is the same openly "religious" character of his thought that remains the principal obstacle to the appreciation of his philosophic achievement. But if Derrida, Lévinas, and Heidegger are correct in seeing philosophy as implicated in the drama of revelation, then Kierkegaard may be one of the most underappreciated contributors to the discussion. For Kierkegaard it was no scandal that revelation had occurred. This was what enabled him to surmount the obstacle that loomed so large for many others. A historical revelation seemed so absurd because it could not be assimilated within any conceptual scheme. Kierkegaard even embraced the category of the absurd to talk about revelation, although he thereby also left himself open to the longstanding misimpression that he regarded revelation as irrational. What he really meant was that revelation escaped the categories of human reason. It definitively demoted reason from its central theoretical role and made reason itself dependent on the opening toward what is beyond it. By acknowledging revelation, reason was saved from itself. In place of the illusion of a control that could be imaginatively projected over the whole of reality, reason now had regained the rationality of its ever incomplete capacity to comprehend reality. The key is the existential submission of reason itself. Only by abandoning the impulse to dominate could reason avoid its own distortions and obtain the only access to reality available to it.¹⁴

By accepting the participatory requirement of knowledge Kierkegaard overcame the obstacles that still stood in the way so long as thinkers held on to the model of theoretic intentionality. In the process he introduced a far-reaching revision in the language of philosophy that has still not been absorbed. It has proved more convenient to classify him as an "irrationalist," a "decisionist," or an "existentialist," rather than grapple with the profound changes he introduced. We still have not understood his insistence that we do not really live in time but that, for the most important relationships, our context is already eternity. While we conventionally imagine eternity as something other than time, Kierkegaard is already showing us that time is itself a derivative of eternity. A human being is not really a creature of time and its effects. In every important respect we are transacting an eternal reality, of which the temporal passage is just a series of attenuations. This is why Kierkegaard can assert that

14. Along with *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, see *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), and *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

there is no beginning before the beginning of decision itself, which often makes him sound like an advocate of arbitrary leaps. In reality what he is saying is that the leap has already taken place. The commitment to marriage, which seems so improbable from the perspective of creatures that are the contingent playthings of time, makes perfect sense when we see that the decision was never actually made in time. How can you make a commitment at a particular point in time to remain steadfast to what also dissolves with time? The task seems nonsensical and futile, as we daily acknowledge in facilitating “no fault” divorce. Yet we also insist on retaining the fig leaf of marriage as a lifelong commitment. The reason, Kierkegaard explains, is that we know that nothing that is done in time can be serious. It is only if we invest the resolution with eternity that it can encompass all that we are. We know that we live, in every dimension that matters, in eternity rather than in time. It is eternity that makes every present possible.¹⁵

Contingency is not itself contingent. Once we realize that what characterizes the flow of things does not necessarily, and cannot necessarily, be extended to the whole itself, we are no longer so lost in the cosmos. Kierkegaard, who was a great student of irony, would surely have delighted in the irony of the limits of irony.¹⁶ There has always been an element of this recognition in the objection that skepticism depends on not extending to itself, but there is more to it than mere cleverness. A philosophical revolution of the kind that has been two millennia in the making does not result from a brilliant turn of logic. A far deeper meditation is involved in which we lay hold of the utterly non-contingent reality of our lives. When we acknowledge that the value of a human being outweighs all the progress of history we are not simply voicing an aspiration. We are giving expression to a reality that makes possible the whole of history in the inexhaustibility of each human being. Human beings have history because they are not historical. They are never captured by the finitude of history because they exist in relation to the eternal. However much they may forget that participation in the eternal, falling into the inauthentic amnesia of time, they cannot sever the remembrance of the pull that makes this awareness possible. Kierkegaard was the one who definitively eliminated the imaginary space and time that attached to the discussion of souls and their afterlife. He made it clear that the language of Christian spirituality had its source in the existential now. We could conceive of an afterlife only because we already live

15. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, parts 1, 2, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), and *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

16. His dissertation was *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

in relation to eternity. Human life, every human life, is crucial because it is the arena in which good and evil are irrevocably chosen. Reading Kierkegaard we experience a shudder of the numinous which, while it may have been reinforced by his personal sensitivities, finds a resonance in us because it is an inescapable dimension of every human existence. We know that what we do matters more than life.

What was an antinomy for Kant had become transparent for Kierkegaard. Kant struggled with the impenetrability of the opposition between human freedom and spatio-temporal causality. If human action was subject to the causal exigencies of everything within this world then it could not be free; yet the essence of human action is autonomous self-determination, which can never be subject to extraneous factors. He resolved it by maintaining that human freedom does not occur in space and time but has its locus in eternity. The decision to act in a certain way could not be subject to causal necessities because it had already occurred before or outside of that realm. Kant's problem, as most of his readers recognized, was that he had made the spatio-temporal realm so real that anything beyond it seemed peculiarly attenuated. Kierkegaard had reversed this emphasis by contemplating the relativity of the space-time continuum. By beginning from the perspective of eternity he had been able to see the conditionality of time. Without the overarching-never-moving context of eternity there would not even be time. Heidegger would later make a great deal of temporality as what can be grasped as such only from the perspective of nontemporality, but Kierkegaard had exemplified this understanding through his existence. In this sense Kierkegaard had leapt over the temptation, still present in Heidegger, to turn this conditionality of time into a new mode of presence. Without really explaining that this would be to make eternity another mode of time, Kierkegaard ignored the suggestion by virtue of his existential struggle to live out the meaning of eternity. Once we take seriously the revolutionary insight that there is no way of stepping outside of ourselves to view the whole in which we are, then we recognize that the only perspective available is through our participation in existence. Kierkegaard resolutely insists that that participation requires our all.

There can be no holding back, as if we might yet be able to secure a corner of detachment from which our contemplative domination could expand. We must not yield to the final temptation of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. Ever since Hegel the philosophic revolution has wavered around the possibility of turning the existential movement into a mode of absolute knowledge. It is no accident that Kierkegaard took Hegel as the great other of his struggle and consequently managed to extricate himself from the fascination more successfully than most who have tried. He acknowledged his debt to

Hegel by refusing to become a Hegelian. Absolute knowledge must remain absolute, even while it provides the possibility of all other knowledge. What makes possible the whole movement of existence cannot become an object of attention without ceasing to be the source of all. This is the key challenge within the modern philosophic shift away from the model of intentionality. Fidelity to the basic insight that the process cannot be apprehended from within it except through the movement itself requires a resolute avoidance of the attempt surreptitiously to reintroduce its objectification. Hegel had seen that what provides the possibility must be beyond the possible, but he persisted in dreaming that he nevertheless could comprehend it. It was because Kierkegaard's resolve was more wholehearted, informed less by the contemplative quest than by the need for existence, that he could prove the more exemplary figure of the modern philosophic revolution. By being less of a philosopher he became more of one. The existential shift means that philosophy itself must become something of an aftereffect. Kierkegaard shows that it is only by becoming a man that one can become a philosopher.

Of course it is possible that he also shows that the demand is too great. It may well be that the modern shift of primacy toward existence will therefore mean that the revolution will always remain incomplete. That would not be a surprising outcome, especially given that philosophy itself is peculiarly implicated in the eternal. We should perhaps be more cautious about attributing so temporal a metaphor to its movements and, as a consequence, entertain some second thoughts concerning the present sketch. The burden of demonstrating that there has been a revolution accomplished by modern philosophy is not the essential point. It is rather that philosophy in the modern era has set itself the task of revolutionizing itself. By shifting the burden to philosophy the task of scholarship is lightened. But this is in no way to insure the project against failure. Scholarship about philosophy cannot ultimately shrink from the challenge of philosophy and philosophy, as Kierkegaard and his collaborators have taught us, cannot absolve us of the obligation of being human. The revolution in philosophy is truly revolutionary, touching all aspects of the discipline. Even the account of the change cannot ignore the logic of what it contains. Once we have eliminated the possibility of contemplation furnishing the meaning in which we live, we undertake the task of living first in the meaning from which contemplation can follow. By acknowledging the primacy of existence we have accepted the impossibility of reflection apprehending it in advance. Philosophy can now only be a matter of catching reality on the wing. Participation means there is nothing living beforehand and nothing living afterward. We may be released from the millennial illusion that we could contemplate the whole from the perspective of God. But we now must move toward God as the

only mode in which the whole is at all apprehensible. The security of meaning is traded for a meaning that seeks security. We may be animated by the bonds of faith and trust that support us, but we cannot reach any surety without giving ourselves to them. To the extent that the nature of philosophy has now coincided with the nature of human existence we may be sure only of one thing: the goal of each cannot be reached in time. This makes them both impossible and possible.