

Laval théologique et philosophique



Existence and Possibility

George J. Stack

Volume 28, numéro 2, 1972

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020296ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020296ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Stack, G. J. (1972). Existence and Possibility. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 28(2), 149–170. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020296ar>

EXISTENCE AND POSSIBILITY

George J. STACK

WHILE most existentialists and existential phenomenologists have stressed the centrality of the concept of possibility in their writings, there is no universal agreement about the nature of this possibility and there has been little concern with the origin of the concept of existential possibility. Although such an issue cannot be dealt with fairly in a short analysis, some salient features of existential possibility can be discerned and the basic origination of the concept of existential possibility can be found in Kierkegaard's use of the concept of possibility. Since there have been some serious deviations from early analyses of possibility in the writings of existentialist philosophers (notably, the Italian philosopher Nicola Abbagnano), I will be concerned, *en passant*, with criticizing such interpretations. My basic argument will be that the concept of existential possibility had its origin in Kierkegaard's interpretation of Aristotle's concept of potentiality and that its fundamental meaning can be found in the writings of Kierkegaard as well as in the modified versions of Kierkegaard's views in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. Although historical relationships or influences underlie my intentions, I would also hope that some clarification of the concept of possibility in regard to human existence and action would emerge out of an analysis of the various uses of, and conceptions of, possibility.

In his phenomenology of the ironic standpoint in *The Concept of Irony, with Constant References to Socrates* Kierkegaard was concerned with an impressionistic portrayal of the negativity of existence, doubt, and the sterility of dialectical reflection without resolution. In this work there is a constant, ironical concern with theoretical possibility. Socrates is portrayed as the dialectician *par excellence*, the ironist who refuses every certainty (except, of course, the certainty of ethical self-existence). Kierkegaard's entire work is shot through with a consideration of hypothetical possibility, with what I would describe as the nihilism of reflection. Even in his chapter titles Kierkegaard reveals his concern with the modality of possibility. The chapter entitled "The Conception [of irony] Made Possible" deals with Socrates' being as portrayed by Xenophon, Plato, and

Aristophanes, with the relationship between irony and possibility. In his discussion of Socrates' attitude towards his impending death, reference is made to his playful attitude, his willingness to entertain, in a lighthearted way, the "syllogistic *aut-aut*," the possibility of the infinitely real and infinite nothingness.¹ The ultimate background of Socrates' remark is, as Kierkegaard puts it, "the infinite possibility of death." Throughout the Platonic dialogues Socrates falls back upon the modality of possibility when confronted with a philosophic question. It was Socrates who raised the question of possibility for Kierkegaard; but it was Aristotle who showed him the way out of the impasse of abstract, theoretical possibility. Kierkegaard freely adopted Aristotle's concept of potentiality and applied it exclusively to human existence. This use of the concept of possibility had its origins in Aristotle's analysis of choice and the moral development of the individual. What was daring in Kierkegaard's analysis of possibility was that he managed to synthesize the concepts of potentiality and actuality in the *Metaphysics* with the conceptions of choice, decision, and action in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this, his interpretation of Aristotle was not idiosyncratic, but creative.

The Origin of the Concept of Existential Possibility

As some of his journal entries indicate, Kierkegaard struggled with the Hegelian notion that necessity dominated all empirical existence, that what had come to be had to come to be. Hegel is not alone in prizing necessity as the central category by which all beings can be understood. Most philosophers who embrace logic as central to all philosophy tend to think that whatever is is necessary. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Wittgenstein suggested that if one were able to view the world *sub specie aeterni* one would see the necessity in what is, in what is actual. If there is a logical structure in the world, then everything must be necessary. This was the kind of dilemma Kierkegaard faced when he broke with the influence of Hegel. How is it possible to reinstate possibility? The answer was twofold: to deny that concrete, temporal actuality can be subsumed under purely logical categories and to indicate, from a subjective standpoint, the contingency of human existence. Kierkegaard argued that logic, since it deals with essential relations or abstract relations of essences, is inappropriate to describe concrete, temporal actuality or a realm of contingent particulars. Secondly, he argued that phenomenologically one experiences one's self in relation to (a) possibilities for oneself and (b) the openness of the possibility of the future. In his first objection he relied upon Aristotelian notions of potentiality and even in the second objection he found an ontology of possibility implicit in Aristotle's metaphysics.

Whenever Kierkegaard refers to existential possibility (*i. e.*, what is known to be possible for an individual in terms of his potentiality-for a given mode of

¹ Soren KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Irony*, New York, 1965, p. 117.

existence or a particular action) he uses the Aristotelian expression *kata dunamin*. Thus, for example, in *The Sickness unto Death* he remarks that the self, at every instant of its being, is in a process of becoming, for the self *kata dunamin* or potentially does not actually exist since it can be conceived of only as that which it is to become.² This is central to his conception of the possibility of an ethical mode of existence since he holds that in each individual there is a capability for ethical self-consciousness. He explicitly describes ethical communications (whether Socratic or Christian) as communications of capability (*kunnen*). The notion of subjective possibility is derived from Aristotle's notion of 'rational' potency; that is, the power a rational, self-conscious being has of choosing one of a number of alternative possibilities. Furthermore, it is a notion that is clearly derived from Aristotle's general conception of potentiality even though it is exclusively used to refer to man's potentialities for an ethical mode of being and is not thought to be a characteristic of *any* natural being whatsoever. It is on this point that the Italian philosopher Abbagnano seems to have misunderstood Kierkegaard and to have ignored Kierkegaard's indebtedness to Aristotle for his conception of the dominance of the modality of possibility in human existence.

While correctly seeing that, for existentialism, the basic category for the description and interpretation of existence is the possible, Abbagnano insists that "Aristotle . . . must exclude the category of the possible."³ This is a misunderstanding of Aristotle's concept of possibility as well as a misunderstanding of the intimate relationship which exists between Aristotle's conception of possibility and that of Kierkegaard. Numerous references to Aristotle's thought appear in Kierkegaard's journals and many of his basic existential categories (*e.g.*, movement, possibility and actuality, becoming, and qualitative change) are derived either from Aristotle himself or interpreters of Aristotle such as Trendelenburg. What Kierkegaard tended to do was to extract concepts from Aristotle's writings which had reference to any finite beings (*i.e.*, natural beings) and apply them exclusively to human existence. In this respect Kierkegaard constructed a conception of the becoming of man from what was implicit in many of Aristotle's analyses.

While it is true, as Abbagnano puts it, that Kierkegaard was the first to stress the primacy of possibility, to interpret the existence of man in terms of possibility, he seems to be unaware of the influence of Aristotle's conception of "potentiality" on Kierkegaard's thought. This influence is, in some cases, directly traceable to Kierkegaard's phenomenology of ethical existence. In *Either/Or*

² KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness unto Death*, New York, 1954, p. 163. — Cp. Helmut FAHRENBACH, *Kierkegaards existenzdialektische Ethik*, Frankfurt am Main, 1968, p. 38. In discussing the relationship between *Selbstsein* and *Selbstwerden* it is said that « das Selbstsein ist (*kata dunamin*) gesetzt als ein Werden . . . denn es ist das, was der Mensch nicht schon durch sein Dasein wirklich ist, sondern . . . Es ist ein Sein-können . . . des Menschen, zugleich ein Sein-sollen ist oder wie Kierkegaard präzise formuliert: es ist ein 'Können-sollen.' »

³ Nicola ABBAGNANO, *Critical Existentialism*, trans. N. Langiulli, New York, 1969, p. 107.

the aesthetic sphere of existence is shown as one in which an individual is confronted with a multiplicity of aesthetic or conceptual possibilities which the aesthete either cannot or will not attempt to realize *in concreto*. To entertain an imaginary possibility in a causal, uninvolved way is typical of an aesthetic mode of being. It is correlative to the nihilism of reflection (a kind of negative, critical, dialectical thinking which undermines every holding-for-true) which is examined in *The Concept of Irony*. Both *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or* are concerned with the recapturing of an original ethical capacity-for, the possibility of realizing or attempting to realize a concerned or meaningful possibility. What is sought is a possibility which will transform the individual, which will enable him to escape from the impasse of dialectical reflection or aesthetic nihilism.

The ethical sphere of existence is a possibility which has significance for an individual because only the pursuit of a subjective, ethical *telos* can bring the individual to self-integration, to authentic self-being. An ethical communication (such as Kierkegaard's) is a communication of capability, not a doctrine or teaching. He understood Socrates as committed to the attempt to achieve the moral transformation of the self in and through self-knowledge. Irony was a tool in this critical, self-conscious attempt to attain moral consciousness and a knowledge of the self which would inhibit immorality or injustice. Socrates is portrayed as an individual who is sceptical of all metaphysical truths, who undermines conventional common-sense beliefs, whose critical intellect negates every form of *objective* certainty. However, Socrates did not doubt the ethical possibility, did not doubt that it was possible to endeavor to achieve self-transformation in a moral existence. This interpretation of the meaning of Socrates' existence provided Kierkegaard with the subjective origination of the positing of the ethical possibility. The subjective aspect of existential possibility, then, is derived from Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates as the prototype of the subjective existential thinker (*den subjektive eksisterende Taenker*). Socrates conveyed by indirection the importance of the subjective realization of one's oughtness-capability and manifested the paradigm of what Kierkegaard calls concerned knowledge. When there is a question of relating in consciousness an ideality (ideal conception) and actuality (concrete immediacy) in one's own existence, concern emerges insofar as the individual is *inter-esse* ("to be concerned," "to be between").⁴ This concern indicates that an ideality as possibility is no longer

⁴ KIERKEGAARD, *Johannes Climacus or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, trans. T. H. Croxall, Stanford, 1958, pp. 148-151. Cp. Karl Löwith, *Nature, History, and Existentialism*, Evanston, 1966, p. 102. «For Kierkegaard, existence is the only «interest» of relevant thinking; it is the *inter-esse* between theoretical thought and reality.» While Löwith is basically correct in expressing Kierkegaard's conception of existence in this way, it is somewhat misleading. For, *inter-esse* also refers to man's «to be concerned», his concerned relationship to a consciousness of what it is possible for him to be and the paradoxical relationship between this ideality and what he is in actual immediacy. Furthermore, the 'in-between' of man also refers to man's reflective use of language (which is also an ideality for Kierkegaard) and its asymptotic relationship to actuality. The use of the term reality (*Realität*) is misleading since, for Kierkegaard, the intermediate being of man is the only

merely an object of disinterested speculation, but is one which the individual desires to realize in his existence. It is at this point that Kierkegaard incorporates Aristotle's conception of potentiality as an 'ontological' characteristic of man.

Potentiality and Possibility

Whereas the Homeric use of the term *dunamis* signified physical strength or power, the term gradually became identified with power in the sense of position, property ownership, or wealth. As far as I know, there is only one major reference to *dunamis* in Plato's works which indicates that it is being used, more or less, in the way in which Aristotle will later use it. That is, in the *Sophist* (247e). For, in discussing the nature of real being Plato remarks that anything which has any power (*dunamis*), however slight, of being acted upon or acting is "what is" or is real. That this power is considered to be active and/or passive is significant for an understanding of Aristotle's use of the term.

In one reference to what he calls the category of capacity or potentiality (*dunamis*) Aristotle maintains that "a capacity is always among the things worthy of choice." The capable (*dunaton*) is equated with the productive and is said to be that which informs choice for the sake of something else. It is curious that this use of the term 'capacity' in relation to choice (*aireton*) is not repeated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* despite the fact that, as Kierkegaard's interpretation of Aristotle's concept of potentiality indicates, it is implicit in his analysis of the moral development of the individual. In the *Magna Moralia*, however, Aristotle uses the term *dunameis* in more conventional terms to indicate those capacities bestowed on us by fortune; that is, authority, riches, strength, and beauty. This use of the term indicates that it had not yet become a technical term and shows that Aristotle had not as yet concerned himself with acquired potentialities (e. g., those characteristics acquired by *praxis*). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* none of these potentialities (with the possible exception of that degree of economic independence necessary for the acquisition of intellectual virtues) are necessary or sufficient conditions for the possibility of leading a moral life. The underlying assumption of Aristotle's ethics is that a precondition for becoming a moral being is that an individual be a rational being having the capacity for freedom of choice and voluntary action. It is this which Kierkegaard makes explicit in his analysis of subjective capability and freedom for choice.

true reality, a reality which is *inter-esse*, which is 'in-between' ideality (conceptualization, language, and hypothetical or ideal possibility) and actuality (*Virkelighed*) or the inarticulate immediacy of concrete experience. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard remarks that an ethically existing individual is the only reality (p. 291) insofar as this is the only kind of being to which we can have other than a cognitive relationship.

⁵ ARISTOTLE, *Topica*, trans. E. S. Forster, London, 1966, 126 a 30-40.

In regard to Kierkegaard's concept of possibility it has been said that it is entirely a concept of negative possibility, the nothingness of possibility before which one experienced dread (*Angest*).⁶ This is, indeed, one mode of possibility for Kierkegaard, but it is one which must be distinguished from possibility as an individual's capacity-for self-transformation or self-realization. For the moment, we will designate the former concept of possibility as 'objective possibility.' The latter mode of possibility may be described as subjective possibility. It is this conception of possibility which can be traced to Aristotle's analysis of potentiality.

Whereas it has been argued that the "virtual" is potentiality in Aristotle's sense — that is, a preformation and predetermination of the actual⁷ — this is a misunderstanding of Aristotle's notion of potentiality. Clearly, for Aristotle, it is not the case that the necessity of actualization defines potency. For, a potentiality is either what may or may not be or come to be or a capacity which can be actualized. In regard to rational beings capable of action, a potentiality is a capacity or power which an individual has by nature (or has acquired) to do something. Whereas non-conscious, non-rational beings have their potentialities realized by virtue of the dynamic movement towards maturation or full growth (which process is ultimately caused by the unmoved mover or god as final cause), rational beings can develop themselves (in a non-biological sense) through intentional choice and actions. While man shares with other sentient beings a host of 'passive' potentialities (e.g., a man is potentially able to be infected by disease-breeding viruses, to fall asleep, to be knocked to the ground by a vehicle, etc.), he also is capable of intentionally desiring to realize potentialities which are uniquely his own.

In general, as Aristotle puts it, "a being is capable of doing something if there is nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the potentiality."⁸ It is clear that in at least two senses of potentiality (as Aristotle uses the term) Abbagnano is clearly wrong in attributing to him the view that the potential is a predetermination of the actual. For, to say of a given individual that he was a potential being means that given the existence of his 'parents' and the possibility of conception such a being was a potential being. That is, his actual coming-to-be was possible, but not necessary. As a perishable being, this individual now has the potentiality not to be. This, in Heidegger's terms, is the inescapable potentiality or possibility for *Dasein*. Between birth and death, then, an individual has a variety of potentialities which he may or may not realize or actualize. What is decisive for Aristotle is that a being who has "rational potency" (i.e., man) is capable of endeavoring to realize some potencies insofar as he is capable of desire (*orexis*) or conscious choice (*proaire-*

⁶ ABBAGNANO, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, trans. H. Tredennick, London, 1961, IX,iii, 8. Throughout this passage Aristotle refers to simple human actions.

sis).⁹ Although Aristotle does not make it explicit in the *Metaphysics*, he states quite clearly (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) that only a rational, mature human being has a capacity for choice (*airesis*). That is, only man has potencies which he can deliberately choose to bring to actualization. Whereas reason may be, for Aristotle, the distinctive function of man, it is deliberate choice which enables him to strive to become what he ought to be.

Neither from a logical nor an ontological point of view is Abbagnano's interpretation of Aristotle's notion of potentiality correct. For, it is not the case that the actual and the potential "are determinations of the necessary."¹⁰ An actual, individual, finite being can, at any stage of its becoming, not be. Its potential future existence is non-necessary. Even in some of his discussions of the logical meaning of possibility Aristotle emphasizes the distinction between necessary and possible, and stresses the relationship between the contingent (or possible) and the perishable. Whereas the logical notion of possibility (which Aristotle defines in *Prior Analytics* as "that which is not necessary but, being assumed, results in nothing impossible") is more extensive than the notion of potentiality, it is clear that the concept of potentiality is logically compatible with the concept of "to be possible" (*endechesthai*).¹¹ Thus, for example, to say of an individual that it is possible for him to become a doctor means also that he has the potentiality to become a doctor. To say of a seated person that it is possible for him to walk can also mean that he has the potentiality (capability, capacity, etc.) to walk. To be sure, possibility and potentiality cannot be considered as logically equivalent. Rather, potentiality should be subsumed under the modal category of possibility. For the intentional action of man, at any rate, it is the movement from potentiality (possibility) to actuality which is the underlying basis of Aristotle's (and Kierkegaard's) conception of the ethical development of character. The moral development of individuals is by no means the necessary realization of potentialities. Rather, it is a contingent process in which a contingent individual participates in the realization of the self.

It is certainly correct that "Kierkegaard appropriates for himself the Aristotelian distinction between actual and potential being, with the added precision that the ultimate act of a concrete nature is the act of existing itself."¹² But the extent of the influence of Aristotle on Kierkegaard is far greater than this. For, Kierkegaard appropriated a number of Aristotle's basic notions and even paraphrased many of his specific assertions. Thus, for example, when Aristotle remarks that "the unjust and profligate might at the outset have avoided becoming so, and therefore they are so voluntarily, although when they have become

⁹ *Ibid.*, IX, iv, 3. Although Aristotle appears to be referring to any beings having rational potencies or being rational potencies, it is clear from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that there is only one class of such beings — that is, rational, adult human beings. For, he explicitly points out that neither children nor irrational animals have choice (*proairesis*). Vide: III, ii, 2.

¹⁰ ABBAGNANO, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹¹ Cf. K. J. J. HINTIKKA, «Aristotle's Different Possibilities», *Inquiry*, III (1960), 18–28.

¹² James COLLINS, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, Chicago, 1953, pp. 249–250.

unjust and profligate it is no longer open to them not to be so,"¹³ Kierkegaard makes reference to this with approval since it is the basis of his conception of "original" possibility. The notion that there is an "original" existential possibility for ethical existence is central to his conception of the possibilities for man and has its echo in Heidegger's remark that *Die Wiederholung ist die ausdrückliche Überlieferung, das heisst, der Rückgang in Möglichkeiten des dagewesenen Daseins*.¹⁴ This general notion of the retrieval of possibilities is clearly related to Kierkegaard's interpretation of Aristotle's conception of "original" possibilities which are possessed by man. Such possibilities are based upon Aristotle's general conception of the moral indeterminism of the individual. This is what underlies Kierkegaard's impassioned remark in *Either/Or* that the important thing is to have a 'real' possibility, to be able to attempt to realize one's own existential possibility.

Although man shares with other beings a vast number of potentialities, his capacity to acquire numerous potentialities increases the possible range of his action. The conceptual and imagined possibilities man can project creates a vast field of possibilities. Conceptualized or imagined possibilities are practically unlimited. But such possibilities, even though they are the condition for the possibility of rational choice and action, are, in themselves, insufficient for deliberate choice and action. On this point Kierkegaard is completely in agreement with Aristotle in insisting that reflective deliberation is unending unless *pathos* or desire generates choice. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard's aesthete is unable to move in the sense that he is incapable of resolute choice even though he is caught up in a whirlpool of reflection upon imagined or conceptual possibilities. Although the movement of reflective thought is actual, it is in a sense impotent insofar as it does not affect the individual himself, does not enable him to change his mode of being, to endeavor to become a self. In this regard, Kierkegaard is surely echoing Aristotle's remark in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "thought by itself moves nothing" (*dianoia d'aute outhen kinei*).¹⁵ To know what one's possibilities are, or to know what one's potentiality for action is, is insufficient to bring about choice since choice, as Aristotle puts it, is thought related to desire or desire related to thought. Man, as the originator of choice is a synthesis of

¹³ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, London, 1962, III, v, 14. One may say that man's fundamental potentiality is a potentiality for voluntary action since the origin of such action is within ourselves. Aristotle holds that this potentiality for voluntary choice — the most significant moral choice being, for Aristotle as well as Kierkegaard, the choice of good or evil — ultimately is a natural capacity. Thus, in the *Ethics* (II, 3-4) he notes that « The Virtues (*aretai*) therefore are engendered in us neither by nature nor yet in violation of nature; nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit. Moreover, the faculties given us by nature are bestowed on us first in potential form; we exhibit their actual exercise afterwards. » What is odd about Aristotle's analysis of man's moral development is that he does not apply the notions of potentiality (or possibility) and actuality to man's movement towards a *telos*. This is precisely what Kierkegaard did in his adaptation of Aristotelian categories.

¹⁴ Martin HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, 1963, p. 385.

¹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, ii. 5.

desire and intellect. Now, knowing what it is possible for me to do means, in one sense, knowing what I am capable of doing. What is lacking in Aristotle's ethics is an appeal to categories by which he could describe the moral development of the individual in terms of the movement from potentiality to actuality in time. This, in fact, is a lacuna which Kierkegaard attempts to fill by superimposing the concepts of potentiality and actuality (from the *Metaphysics*) over his own conception of ethical existence, a conception which is a synthesis of Socratic subjectivity and Aristotle's conceptions of deliberation, choice, repetition (*i. e.*, the acquisition of moral virtues through repeated *eupraxia*), and conative teleology. In effect, he discerned the conception of, or the blueprint for, existential possibility in Aristotle's conception of potentiality.

That this interpretation is not idiosyncratic can be seen by indicating a number of references in Aristotle's writings which are clearly the inspiration for Kierkegaard's conception of subjective possibility (*e. g.*, an individual's non-theoretical sense of his potentiality-for ethical being, for self-transformation). In the *Metaphysics* there are a number of specific assertions which are clearly related to Kierkegaard's understanding of the existential meaning of possibility. Thus, for example, when referring to qualitative change (*alloiosis*) he avers that "everything that changes from what is potentially (*en dunamei*) to what is actually (*en energeia*)."¹⁶ When this is applied to the self-conscious, intentional activity of an individual, it means that an individual's existence is characterized by numerous transitions from potentiality to actuality by virtue of a volitional self-projection of the individual towards an imagined or conceived possibility. When we deliberate it is not any possibility with which we are concerned; that is, we are not only concerned with a hypothetical projection of logical possibilities. Too often in analytical philosophy the openness of logical possibility has functioned as a wastebasket category insofar as many arguments are based upon an appeal to what does not involve contradiction. But this is absurd when applied to human choice and action since no rational individual would be guided in his choices and proposed actions in terms of what is merely logically possible. To be sure, whatever it is possible for an individual to do (what he has a potentiality-for) is, *a fortiori*, logically possible. But it is surely the case, as Aristotle put it, that "we deliberate about things that are in our control and are attainable by action." That is, we deliberate about what we know or believe it is possible for us to do or what we know or believe we have a potentiality for. Explicitly, Aristotle avers that the possible is what is able to be performed by our agency.¹⁷ This is precisely what Kierkegaard means by the possible insofar as it refers to what is within the power or capacity of the individual.

Another, more general, characterization of possibility which Aristotle formulated is directly related to Kierkegaard's analysis of what I have called subjective possibility. In the *Metaphysics*, again, Aristotle attempts to formulate an

¹⁶ *Metaphysics*, XII, 1069 b 16.

¹⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, iii, 13.

ontological conception of possibility in the following way: becoming (*genesis*) is between being and non-being since "what is coming to be is always intermediate between what is and what is not."¹⁸ This general conception of becoming or *genesis* pervades Kierkegaard's analysis of the movement of the individual, the persistent striving (*Straeben*) of the existing individual, and is traceable to Heidegger's and Sartre's conception of man as being not what he is (in facticity) but what he is not (*i. e.*, what it is possible for him to be or his possibilities). The ambiguous ontological status of possibility is a notion which Kierkegaard derived from Aristotle and which was later adopted by Heidegger and Sartre. What is interesting about Sartre is that he derives the notion of possibility from imagined possibility exclusively. Heidegger, on the other hand, relates possibility for *Dasein* to understanding (*Verstehen*). In this sense, I believe that Heidegger is closer to Aristotle's conception of possibility insofar as it is related to an individual capable of rational choice. The appropriation of Aristotle's ontological formulation of possibility by Kierkegaard is apparent in a reference in his *Papirer*. In his ontological formulation of the meaning of possibility he argues that:

This change [*i. e.*, coming into existence in the sense that a plan or project is being realized] is from non-being to being [*ikke at vaere til at vaere*]. But this non-being from which it is changed must also be a kind of being [*en Art af Vaeren*], because otherwise we could not say that the subject of coming into existence remains unchanged in coming into existence. But such a being which is nevertheless a non-being we certainly could call possibility, and the being into which the subject of coming into existence goes by coming into existence is actuality [*Virkeligheden*].¹⁹

Since the possible, for man, is the not-yet and since the possible must presumably have a mode of being, it is, as Aristotle said, between non-being and being. Although this formulation requires a great deal of analysis (*i. e.*, the problem of whether it is necessary to determine the ontological status of possibility at all), it is clear that it is merely a gloss on Aristotle's assertion in the *Metaphysics*. While Aristotle did provide a reasonably thorough analysis of the logical aspects of possibility, it is not clear that he ever provided a careful analysis of the ontological nature of possibility. Indeed, as some recent works in American and English philosophy indicate, there is no clear agreement about the ontological dimensions of possibility at all. The question I am concerned with, however, is, how does this ontological formulation of possibility relate to the conception of existential possibility?

Existential Possibility

Kierkegaard argues that man has freedom for possibilities insofar as he exists in relation to the openness of the future, to a field of possibilities. That is,

¹⁸ *Metaphysics*, II, 2, 994 a 26.

¹⁹ *Kierkegaard's Journal and Papers*, H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, eds. and trans., London, 1967, I, p. 111.

an individual is free insofar as he lives in a 'realm' of possibility, insofar as his being, his choices, and actions are possible or contingent, but not necessary. If everything an individual does is necessary, then there is no moral responsibility, there is no choice, and human existence is thoroughly meaningless. In fact, if all phenomena (including human action) are necessary, man cannot (in Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's sense of the word) *exist* at all. In order for man to exist — with all that this means for Kierkegaard and Heidegger — there must be some things which are within man's power to attain; that is, he must have a potentiality-for which he himself can bring to fruition.

Now, we must distinguish between an individual faced with a multiplicity of possibilities or what Kierkegaard called the "nothingness of possibility" and an individual's recognition of his own possibility for some choice, decision, or action. For, it is clear that many of the possibilities which are conceivable or imaginable are outside the individual's control. Thus, to take a much favored possibility raised by astronomers or physical theorists, we may believe that it is both logically and empirically possible that at some remote time in the future the universe will attain a state of thermonuclear equilibrium (entropy) which will make human life impossible and the human race will perish. Now, this kind of possibility may be conceived of by an individual and may be reacted to in a number of ways, but it cannot be a subjective possibility for him. It cannot be an existential possibility since it is not something which is within his power to prevent or cause. Kierkegaard sometimes (especially in *The Concept of Dread*) does seem to have in mind such theoretical possibilities. One may be anxious in the face of what one believes can happen; but one's primary concern is with what one can do or become. Kierkegaard realized that possibility reveals "the dreadful as well as the smiling." That is, one encounters one's potentiality for good as well as evil and one experiences, or may experience, anxiety in the face of both. This is precisely what makes rational choice so important.

These possibilities *are* in relation to the rational, reflective self-consciousness of an individual. That is, such possibilities for certain actions are directly accessible to an individual in a non-theoretical way. The individual is acquainted with his potentialities or possibilities by virtue of reflective self-consciousness. The ontological status of possibilities is determined by their relation to the subjective reflection of an individual. Heidegger echoes Kierkegaard's stress upon the importance of possibility when he asserts that *Die Möglichkeit als Existenzial dagegen ist die ursprünglichste und letzte positive ontologische Bestimmtheit des Daseins*.²⁰

Man's being-possible is not, for Kierkegaard, entirely transparent, but it is something which can be known (not objectively, but subjectively) by virtue of self-knowledge. In regard to the possibility for ethical existence, this means that one can know that it is possible to be what, from a moral point of view, I ought to be insofar as I know that I can realize this possibility. Furthermore, Kierke-

²⁰ HEIDEGGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144.

gaard identifies ethical self-consciousness with authentic existence and thereby implies that once an individual has raised the ethical question about himself he cannot escape (except through inauthenticity) the realization that it was possible for him to become a person, to exist authentically. To be sure, the project to realize one's own unique possibilities is a risk; but it is in this endeavour that the individual is able to develop his character, to become what he knows he ought to be. Existential possibility is not a universal category into which *all* possibilities fit since it is not at all relevant to *adiaphoric* or morally neutral choices (*e. g.*, should I choose to become a novelist or a philosopher, should I walk home on this road or that, should I have this to eat for lunch or that, etc.). Kierkegaard reserves the term *choice* for significant, decisive commitments which will condition future choices. Unlike many contemporary English ethical writers, Kierkegaard does not trivialize choice, does not describe most ordinary expressions of preference as choices, and does not take them as paradigms of choice in general.

Some choices clearly have an intrinsic significance which cannot be ignored and which we thoroughly realize at the time at which we make them. To take Sartre's dramatic illustration, we may hold that a choice to continue to live rather than to commit suicide is, indeed, a significant choice. All of our choices are not equally significant and there are times when we may make contingently 'important' choices casually without fully realizing the possible consequences to follow. But this is to use the term "important" ambiguously. For, it is simply the case that we cannot know with certainty what consequences will follow from any apparently unimportant choices. These are not the kind of choices we ought to be concerned with, however, since they are not related to potentialities we know or believe we have at any given time in our lives. Thus, it is obvious that we do not hold an individual responsible for a choice which resulted, *per accidens*, in catastrophe for himself or others insofar as such catastrophies were not predictable by the individual or any other independent observer. I am responsible only for those choices which are related to the realization of potentialities I know or believe I have, those choices for good or evil which are within my power. The potentialities which are most meaningful for an individual are those which can be realized or actualized intentionally by that individual.

For Kierkegaard, the fundamental category for both the interpretation and description of human existence is that of possibility. My own potentialities for action are not objects of theoretical knowledge and are not inferred phenomena. In a sense, I am directly acquainted with at least some of my potentialities or possibilities. What is possible for an individual is what can not-be, what is not destined to be realized. Only the possible can be realized. However, the subjective apprehension of potentiality or possibility is not only a negative process.

In his analysis of modal terms, Gilbert Ryle suggests that possibility is a kind of negative concept insofar as he avers that "to say that something can be the case does not entail that it is the case, or that it is not the case, or, of course, that it is in suspense between being and not being the case, but only there is no

license to infer from something else, specified or unspecified, to its not being the case."²¹ One wonders how this analysis of possibility would apply to one's immediate knowledge that it is possible for one to do this or that. For, it is surely not the case that my own subjective sense of possibility means only that I have no license to infer from something else that it could not be the case. To say, for example, that I have the potentiality to become a doctor of medicine does not mean only that there is no logical or empirical condition barring me from doing so. For, it means, in one sense, that I have the power, capacity, ability, or potentiality to do so.

My potentialities are present to me in self-reflective, self-conscious understanding. To be sure, when I formulate possibilities for myself they are either imagined possibilities or hypothetical (theoretical) possibilities. But in order to attempt to realize a significant possibility, I must already have possibilities or potentialities-for. In one sense, subjective potentialities are, as Heidegger will emphasize in *Sein und Zeit*, ontological characteristics of man; in another sense, they are sometimes empirical possibilities. The question Kierkegaard was concerned with was the possibility of subjectively realizing that there are significant existential possibilities (especially the possibility of becoming a person or an individuated, ethically self-conscious being) which are *concernful* possibilities.

The key to understanding Kierkegaard's optimism concerning the return to possibilities in his Socratic assumption that the active, passionate search for self-knowledge is the means by which we can discover our own fundamental duty towards ourselves or our "oughtness capability." The first step towards the recognition of existential possibilities is the acceptance of the self one has been and the appropriation of what Kierkegaard calls the necessity in our being. In *Either/Or* he counsels the individual to accept himself in his contingency and particularity, to accept those causal factors which have determined what we have been in order to be free for possibilities which are our own. As Kierkegaard expresses it,

the individual . . . becomes conscious of himself as this definite individual, with these talents, these dispositions, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite environment. But being conscious of himself in this way, he assumes responsibility for all this.²²

This is what he means by the oft-repeated statement that man is a synthesis of necessity and possibility. In Spinoza's terms, an individual can attain freedom for possibilities which are uniquely his own if he recognizes the necessity in his being. Translated into Socratic terms this means that self-understanding is a condition for the possibility of self-mastery and self-realization. In this regard, I believe that Kierkegaard's analysis of what he calls "choosing one's self" fills a lacuna in Aristotle's implied analysis of potentiality in man's being. For,

²¹ Gilbert RYLE, *The Concept of Mind*, London, 1949, p. 127.

²² KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or*, trans., D. F. Swenson, New York, 1959, II, p. 255.

Aristotle does not concern himself with those potentialities which an individual has inherited or those which he has without having sought to attain them. Like the Freudian psychoanalyst, Kierkegaard seems to suggest that we must first attempt to understand the 'forces' that have conditioned what we have been in order to transcend them in self-realization. The means by which we can do this is to endeavor to understand the causal factors which have already affected our being and, through resolute, self-conscious choice to strive to become what we know we ought to be.

As Sartre will later say, we have already acted before we become self-consciously aware of our possibles.²³ As we emerge in self-consciousness we have already been (and we continue to be) involved in situations in a world which has already been constituted by the behavior of others and by natural phenomena. The necessity in man's being, for Kierkegaard, can never be entirely transcended. Hence, an individual is a complex synthesis of necessity and possibility who exists in actuality. However, by virtue of his potentiality for becoming an authentic individual, a person can create for himself a history, a continuity, an integrity which is uniquely his own. The condition for the possibility of acquiring potentialities (*e.g.*, habits, dispositions, tendencies, etc.) is that there be discovered or realized an original potentiality-for, an original possibility of becoming a self. The persistent endeavor to become an individuated, morally self-conscious person, a repetitious resoluteness to pursue the subjectively posited ethical *telos*, is central to Kierkegaard's conception of authentic existence.

While it has been denied that Heidegger's conception of Dasein's potentiality-for-Being-one's-self (*Selbstseinkönnens*) or his potentiality-for-Being is to be understood in the Aristotelian sense of potentiality,²⁴ I believe that this is funda-

²³ Jean-Paul SARTRE, *L'Être et le Néant*, Paris, 1943, p. 75. It may be noted, *en passant*, that in Sartre the remnants of Aristotle's concept of potentiality in the concept of possibility are no longer present. One reason for this is his Cartesian notion that the self is fundamentally *pour-soi* or consciousness. There is, to be sure, the notion that possibles can be realized or can come about, the anxiety in relation to possibility, and the view that the *pour-soi* moves towards what it is not yet but may become. Because of the purely negative character of the *pour-soi* in Sartre's writings, it is difficult to know how what "is not" could have possibilities. But Sartre's analysis of the relationship between consciousness and imagined possibility is profound.

²⁴ Michael GELVEN, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, New York, 1970, p. 84. While part of the burden of this paper has been to indicate the influence of Aristotle's conception on Heidegger's conception of potentiality-for (by virtue of Kierkegaard's adaptation of Aristotle's categories), I think this notion is clear in terms of the uses Heidegger made of many of Kierkegaard's insights. Heidegger's notion of Dasein's *können* is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's conception of man's primal potentiality for an ethical existence, his *kunnen* or capability-for. And Kierkegaard derived this notion from Aristotle's *Ethics*. The rational potency of man, for Aristotle, is that capacity to *understand* what it is possible for an individual to do and is the basis of choice and decisiveness. Dasein's understanding of himself as a knowledge of what he is capable of is not far removed from Aristotle's implicit concept of a rational being's reflective potentiality. A full treatment of the precise relationship between Aristotle's conception of the potentialities of rational beings and Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of Dasein's potentiality-for has yet to be undertaken.

mentally false. For, the conception of man's potentiality-for is foreshadowed by Kierkegaard's conception of each man's potentiality-for an ethical mode of existence. To be sure, Heidegger's analysis of the fundamental *existentialia* of *Dasein* is not motivated by any ethical concern even though he transformed Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the centrality of ethical self-being as the paradigm of authentic existence, transforming it into an ontological analysis of the authentic mode of being possible for *Dasein*. There is nothing in Heidegger's account of *Dasein*'s potentiality-for authentic self-being which deviates from Aristotle's formulation of potentiality as it is interpreted by Kierkegaard. For, one of Kierkegaard's uses of possibility clearly refers to an individual's immediate awareness of his subjective potentialities for becoming an authentic individual. This is a spiritual capacity which, even for Kierkegaard, is present in the being of man.

To be sure, Kierkegaard more often refers to an individual's understanding of possibilities which he has. That is, possibilities which are posited (conceptually or in imagination) by the individual and which he attempts to actualize. In numerous journal entries he insists that the ethical (possibility) can be drawn out of the individual because it is already there potentially, that virtue cannot be taught since it is not a doctrine, but a "being-able, an exercising, an existing, an existential transformation."²⁵ Again, ethical self-consciousness requires that an individual be continuously aware of the disparity between the ideal being (*ideel Vaeren*) which it is possible for one to be and the actual being (*faktisk Vaeren*) one is. As far as I can see, Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*'s potentiality-for-being-one's-self is directly related to Kierkegaard's ethical prescription, "become oneself," and is also indirectly traceable to Aristotle's concept of potentiality as interpreted by Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard had implicitly held that, as Heidegger puts it, "in terms of its possibility, *Dasein* is already a potentiality-for-Being-its-Self." In addition, he seemed to assume that "to any state-of-mind or mood, understanding belongs equiprimordially. In this way *Dasein* 'knows' what it is itself capable of."²⁶ In Aristotle's terms, as a being possessing rational potency, as capable of choice and action, man has direct access to his potentialities or what is within his power. By virtue of his unique capacity to actualize potentialities which he has (or has acquired) and which he knows that he has, Aristotle maintains (in *Magna Moralia*) that it is man, and man alone, who has the power of acting or originating actions.²⁷ This general notion is implicitly assumed by Kierkegaard insofar as he assumes that only man is capable of action, is capable of intentionally moving from potentiality to actuality. This is also implied in Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*'s exclusive capacity for becoming a self, for becoming an authentic, self-existent individual. Man's possibilities are known neither by a direct experience of them nor by an objective knowledge of them; they are present to man in his

²⁵ Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, p. 463.

²⁶ HEIDEGGER, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

²⁷ *Magna Moralia*, trans. G. C. Armstrong, London, 1962, I, xi, 1.

existence-structure, in his being. The ontological characteristic of a potentiality-for-being-one's-self is a characteristic of *Dasein* even in his condition of being immersed in the world of *das Man*. It is anxiety which calls man back to his original, primordial possibilities. As Heidegger puts it, "anxiety brings one back to one's thrownness as something *possible* which can be repeated . . . it also reveals the possibility of an authentic potentiality-for-Being (. . . *die Möglichkeit eines eigentlichen Seinkönnens*)."²⁸ This is clearly related to Kierkegaard's conception of an original potentiality-for ethical self-existence and, ultimately, to Aristotle's implication that there was an original state of being in which man had a potentiality for goodness, a potentiality which Aristotle believed could be lost entirely through repeated acts of immorality, but which Kierkegaard suggested could be recaptured.

The Concept of Possibility and Existence

A number of questions have already been raised concerning the nature and meaning of existential possibility, the ontological status of possibility, and the relationship between ontological and empirical possibility. I will now attempt to deal with at least some aspects of these questions in relation to the general notion of existential possibility. In the first place, it is clear that, for Kierkegaard, possibility means the capacity for alternative choices, decisions, and actions as well as the openness of the future in relation to conceptual or imagined possibility. The first mode of possibility (what I have called subjective possibility) is the individual's understanding of those potentialities which are, to some extent, accessible to him in self-reflection. While it is the case that what it is possible for an individual to do is limited by empirical possibilities within the range of his physical capacity, Kierkegaard is not primarily concerned with the question of what is physically possible for an individual. Rather, he is concerned with how an individual can recognize spiritual or subjective possibilities in himself and how he can seek to realize these possibilities. In the case of an ethical existence it is maintained that a self-conscious, reflective individual who is capable of understanding can become aware of his own potentialities-for moral self-consciousness. We ought to strive, as he puts it in *Either/Or*, to seek to realize our "ideal self". The ethical aim of existence is to strive to realize one's highest ethical possibility because only then is one endeavoring to become a person.

What Kierkegaard is saying is similar to Kant's discussion of our duties towards ourselves in his *Lectures on Ethics*. For, Kant remarks that our "duties towards ourselves constitute the supreme condition and the principle of all morality."²⁹ The ultimate moral worth, the ultimate intrinsic good, is a moral human being. It is this sentiment that Kierkegaard is propounding in his phe-

²⁸ HEIDEGGER, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

²⁹ KANT, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. L. Infield, New York, 1963, p. 121.

nomenology of ethical existence. The highest moral worth is manifested in the being of a morally self-conscious person. Kierkegaard's implied categorical imperative is : become a person. This, again, is related to Kant's view, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, that rational beings are described as *persons* because their very nature or being shows them to be ends in themselves, beings whose existence is an end in itself.³⁰ Kant holds that nothing would possess absolute moral worth unless we begin with the absolute worth of an individual who treats himself and all other similarly constituted individuals as ends in themselves. This underlies Kierkegaard's statements that the true subject is not a cognitive, knowing subject, but the ethically existing individual³¹ and that the ethical task for an individual is to become a person. For one who chooses to live ethically his task is to work up together the accidental and the universal — that is, to inter-relate the subjective contingency of the self and the universal ethical requirements. This is not, of course, a permanent state that one attains, but it is an activity which requires repeated resoluteness and a persistent striving to become what one ought to be. An ethical existence entails the attempt to realize subjectively apprehended spiritual possibilities.

When Heidegger holds that *Dasein* "is" its possibilities, he is putting forward a highly questionable assertion. For, how can possibilities as such be at all? That is, we must assume that there is a being who *has* possibilities, an actual entity which has a potentiality-for-Being-one's-Self. For, it is surely a particular, actual *Dasein* which has that kind of being towards which it can comport itself which is designated *Existenz*. In one sense, any particular *Dasein* is fundamentally its possibilities ; but it is also what, in fact, it actually is at any moment in its being. The imperfect actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) of *Dasein* is the basic ontological condition for the possibility of its having possibilities. Kierkegaard, unlike Heidegger, seems to hold that man has possibilities and, for the most part, lives in relation to such possibilities as projected or posited. But he also referred to the imperfect actuality of the particular individual who is a synthesis of necessity and possibility. One may say that implicit in Kierkegaard's view of the individual is the notion that he is a dynamic synthesis of necessity *and* possibility. In a literal sense, it is absurd to say that an entity *is* its possibilities. In one sense, of course, insofar as a man has potentialities, they are significant aspects of the self. The primal possibility of *Dasein* (as for Kierkegaard's individual) is the possibility to be itself or not itself (*Das Dasein versteht sich selbst immer aus seiner Existenz, einer Möglichkeit seiner selbst, es selbst oder nicht es selbst zu sein*).³² If an individual is to become himself, he must attempt to realize those subjectively apprehended possibilities which are accessible to self-reflective under-

³⁰ KANT, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. T. K. Abbott, Chicago, 1949, p. 52.

³¹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie, Princeton, 1941, p. 281.

³² HEIDEGGER, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

standing. Clearly, this is an ontological version of Aristotle's conception of the ethical goal of the individual as the attempt to realize his highest moral and intellectual potentialities. With the important distinction that, for Kierkegaard and perhaps for Heidegger as well, this entails the realization of what is unique to each self or each *Dasein*, but which, at the same time, is the realization of the essence of man and/or *Dasein*.

Aside from the uncovering of subjective possibilities, Kierkegaard discussed the alternative possibilities which we can conjure up in imagination or hypothetical reasoning. In regard to attaining a *telos* which requires overt action, an individual must first posit alternative possibilities, then deliberate about them and, finally, choose one possibility. The primary basis for such positing is imagination since imagination is that mental activity which is most closely related to particularity. To take a non-moral instance, we may say that a driver who intends to act upon the possibility of turning onto a particular road does not ordinarily conceive of this possibility in an abstract way; rather, he imagines what he will do and how the car will move. When it is a question of comportment towards others, it is also imagination which posits alternative possible ways of acting towards another. To be sure, the more remote a possibility is, the more it approximates the model of speculation about logical or empirical possibility.

Conceptual possibility is characterized by its detached form. Thus, for example, I may think that it is possible that it may rain next Friday without relating this possibility to myself at all. Although some imagined possibilities may, indeed, be equally as speculative or remote from what concerns me, those possibilities of action which I reflect upon are still primarily imagined possibilities and not conceptual possibilities. Those "idealities" (as Kierkegaard calls theoretical possibilities) which are intimately related to our own existence are, for the most part, imagined possibilities. This, incidentally, is a radical difference between Kierkegaard and Sartre on the one hand, and Heidegger on the other. For the former the basic form of the possible for man is imagined possibility; for the latter, however, possibility is only related to understanding (*Verstehen*). To my mind, a serious lacuna in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is the absence of any phenomenology of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) or any analysis of imagined possibility. This is especially glaring in a work which has so much to say about the relationship between *Dasein* and the future. For, in regard to human action, the future is, for the most part, a field of imagined possibilities.

Remarks on the Problem of Possibility

The question of the ontological status of possibility is a complex one and one for which there is no facile solution. What is immediately apparent is that both Aristotle and later Kierkegaard attempted to formulate the ontological nature of possibility by describing it as between non-being and being. This is also a characterization which appears in Hegel's writings. In one sense, it is

tempting to talk about a 'world' of possibility or a 'realm' of possibility. The future, more often than not, is considered the realm of possibilities.

Now, while there are those who are satisfied with a purely formal conception of possibility, identifying it with that in "any world for whose description a certain grammar or logic is adequate is determined by this grammar in the sense that every synthetic statement expresses a possible state of affairs,"³³ it is clear that this does not settle the ontological question. Rather, it *stipulates* that to which the meaning construct (possibility) is to refer in logical or grammatical terms. But possibility is not only a logical or grammatical problem; it has existential dimensions as well. A possible world, if we may speak this way, is not at all *determined* by any grammar whatsoever. Rather, any empirically actual world can be described in terms of a natural language which can express possible states of affairs. The immediate, concrete state of affairs that is, in fact, realized is already there before it can be or is described as such. When one talks about the logical notion of possibility one is exclusively committed to describing the range of logical possibility (*i. e.*, whatever does not involve contradiction). Empirical possibility is another issue.

The concept of empirical possibility is based upon the assumption (the well-grounded assumption) that there are phenomena which are subject to laws of nature. In both the case of logical and empirical possibility we are concerned with the relationship between conceptual possibilities and an individual or group of individuals who entertain such possibilities. That is, the notion of logical possibility is related to the conceptual structure of human reason. The notion of empirical possibility is related to human reason, perception, and imagination. In effect, then, there is no problem of the ontological status of logical or empirical possibility since both *are* only in relation to a reasoning being. They exist only in relation to the thought or consciousness of some human being. Logical possibilities are clearly only *entia rationis*. And empirical possibilities are also primarily *entia rationis*. The latter *are* in relation to the thought process of an individual. To talk about an empirical event as possible and to assume that such an event must at this time have some independent or objective ontological status is absurd. A possible state of affairs or a possible event *is* purely in relation to an individual who reflects upon this possibility or who predicts it on the basis of a knowledge of a number of relevant factors and a knowledge of laws of nature. If I describe a possible event in terms of subjunctive conditionals, I am not referring to any 'actual event' (obviously) nor am I referring to anything which has a present existence (that is, except my inscription or utterance of such subjunctive conditional assertions or the reflection upon such statements.) Furthermore, the very notion of empirical possibility is a historical phenomenon since it depends upon the generally accepted known laws of nature which the scientific community has formulated. The conception of the limitations of empirical possibility (*i. e.*, what is ruled out) is ultimately a historically conditioned notion.

³³ Gustav BERGMANN, *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism*, London, 1967, p. 240.

In this sense, also, empirical possibility is a notion intimately related to the limits of human knowledge and, hence, to the limitations of the empirical concepts of particular individuals. Future, possible events do not exist in "a realm" of possibility, but have only relational being in relation to human thought and experience.

The possible, as Nelson Goodman has recently said,³⁴ is solely rooted in the actual. Only of actual entities can we say (from an empirical point of view) that this or that is possible. What is meant by this, of course, is that by virtue of man's present knowledge of the properties of certain entities and of laws of nature, it is possible to predict (with varying degrees of probability) what possibly might happen to such entities. These possibilities, again, refer us back to a knowledge of certain properties of something which enables us to apply dispositional predicates to such entities (or to similar entities). The possible event or series of events (a piece of glass breaking, for example) do not now exist independent of the individual who expects such an event or series of events to occur. Such events are imagined by an individual or are conceptually entertained as hypothetical possibilities.

Strictly speaking, there is no reason to suppose that non-conscious beings either *have* possibilities or *are* possibilities. Only a being capable of intentionally realizing a state of affairs or a state of being in and through choice has possibilities. The projective movement towards the realization of a possibility is characteristic of man and, perhaps, of man alone. While the notion of logical possibility has little or no significance for an individual's actions or decisions, it is obvious that the range of empirical possibility is significant for human action.

When Heidegger refers to Dasein's ontological possibilities, to those possibilities which are distinctive for *Dasein*, he does not concern himself with what he calls the "empty" notion of logical possibility. Being-possible is the primordial characteristic of *Dasein*. But this being-possible is Dasein's potentiality-for-Being, its potentiality-for-being-one's-self. In its very being *Dasein* is ontological. This may mean that ontological possibilities are rooted in the ontic or factual being of *Dasein*. Heidegger himself raises precisely this question when he asks whether

it is not the case that underlying our interpretation of the authenticity . . . of Dasein, there is an ontical way of taking existence which may be possible but need not be binding for everyone? . . . If the Being of Dasein is essentially potentiality-for-Being, if it is Being-free for its own most possibilities, and if, in every case, it exists only in freedom for these possibilities . . . can

³⁴ Nelson GOODMAN, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Indianapolis, 1965, p. 57. "All possible worlds lie within the actual one." In regard to the problem of attributing 'existence' to future possible events or states of affairs (what may be called the myth of objective possibility) what Goodman has to say is instructive. Thus, in dealing with the question of the fabric of the possibles, it must be borne in mind that (for example) "although there is no such *place-time* as *p-at-t*, there is the actual entity comprise of *p* and *t* . . . To speak of the "fictive" or "possible" *place-time*, *p + t*, is not to speak of a new non-actual entity but to say something new about . . . the old actual entity *p + t*." (p. 51)

ontological interpretation do anything else than base itself on ontical possibilities (*ontische Möglichkeiten*) — ways of potentiality-for-Being — and project these possibilities upon their *ontological possibility*?³⁵

This is, to my mind, the closing of the circle of Heidegger's existential phenomenology insofar as ontological possibility is rooted in ontic being and the possibilities of *Dasein* which are, in turn, rooted in an ontological possibility which, as the later Heidegger has indicated, is grounded in *das Sein* or Being. While Heidegger has attempted to penetrate the mystery of Being itself, Kierkegaard began and ended with the ontological possibilities in the being of existing individuals. Ontological possibility, as the transcendental (but not atemporal) basis of possibilities is to my mind the irreducible posit of existential phenomenology. It cannot be further analyzed by human understanding. It is the ultimate condition for the possibility of human existence. One wonders whether it is possible ever to understand the "origin" of ontological possibility unless one makes the leap of faith or engages in a *Seinsmystik*. To my mind, ontological possibilities cannot be reduced to empirical possibilities (as some empiricist critics of Heidegger might argue) since they are the condition for the possibility of man's being-possible or his having possibilities.

Moving away from Heidegger's terminology, I would hold that possibility is rooted in the finite freedom of man to do that which he has a potentiality-for. It is fundamental to his being insofar as it is what I would call spiritual possibility. Only a being capable of reflective self-consciousness, intentional action, choice, and ethical self-existence has possibilities. Spiritual possibilities are no doubt compatible with that emptiest of all possibilities, logical possibility. But they are not reducible to empirical possibilities. For, something is empirically possible if it does not violate known laws of nature. Hence, empirical possibility refers almost exclusively to what it is deemed possible for a man to do in terms of *physical* action.

There are no firmly established psychological laws which as yet enable us to determine the limit of spiritual possibility. How an individual comports himself to the world or to others is not a purely psychological question since it is rooted in a subjective apprehension of possible modes of comportment which is primarily a spiritual process. The spiritual basis of choice is not yet subject to any known psychological law either. All in all, existential possibility refers, for the most part, to an individual's spiritual possibilities which, even though they

³⁵ HEIDEGGER, *op. cit.*, p. 312. In this respect, I believe that when Heidegger asserted that ontological existentialia are rooted in facticity this entailed the view that ontological possibilities are also rooted in the facticity of individual *Dasein*. If this had been Heidegger's earlier position, then the philosophical distance between Heidegger and Kierkegaard is not as great as it may seem. However, it would seem that the later writings of Heidegger do indicate a *Kehre* insofar as he seems to have reversed his earlier view; that is, he no longer seems to hold that "There is Being only insofar as *Dasein* is," but rather his *soi-disant* ontotheology suggests that there is *Dasein* only insofar as there is Being (*das Sein*). In this respect he has moved far beyond the existentialism which pervaded his earlier, more pathos-filled work, *Sein und Zeit*.

may have their cultural genesis, are uniquely related to the inner world of each individual. It is the dynamic source of potentiality and possibility in relation to what one is becoming. In each individual's potential for moral goodness there is a spiritual possibility which transcends every other possibility. How each individual responds to this possibility will determine whether he will become a self in a finite period of time or lose his self.

Logical possibility reveals the limits of human reason ; empirical possibility reveals the limits of man's knowledge of physical actuality ; but spiritual or existential possibility reveals the extent of human possibility. The subjective sense of lived spiritual possibility is the pre-philosophical ground of the concept of possibility. If it is reason which enables us to understand the necessary, it is experience which enables us to understand the probable. But it is the endeavor to exist authentically which enables us to understand possibility. The transcendental basis for the possibility of possibility is not *das Sein*, but the particular, contingent existence of actual human beings. In the subjective teleology of man is manifested the paradigmatic mode of possibility, spiritual possibility. The finitude of spiritual possibility does not mitigate its significance for each individual, for the subjective teleology which can give direction, meaning and purpose to one's life.