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A KIERKEGAARDIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SELF AND SOCIETY:
AN EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

by

Chris L. Jakway

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
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Western Michigan University
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A KIERKEGAARDIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SELF AND SOCIETY: AN EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

Chris L. Jakway, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 1998

In examining the history and development of existential sociology, it becomes clear that in its initial phases it was not intended to oppose traditional sociological research, but to complement it. I intend to show that the contemporary chasm between the methodologies can be narrowed with a reconsideration of their common roots in the work of G.H. Mead and the symbolic interactionists. Existential sociologists today offer a practical synthesis that combines that theoretical heritage with philosophic ontology dating back to the writings of Søren Kierkegaard.

My conceptual goal is reveal how the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard, while not irrational or solipsistic, provides a more refined model for understanding the dialectic between society and the alienated self. Contrary to the standard conception, I propose that Kierkegaard was engaged directly in social theory. Moreover, his developmental stages of the individual can be effectually applied to society, with authentic individuality as requisite for a community with genuine equality. Those existential ideas may provide a theoretical setting conducive to the implementation of programs for social change.

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Chris L. Jakway

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

More than thirty years have passed since the publication of Tiryakian's *Existentialism and Sociologism*, the work that is widely acknowledged to be the first to directly synthesize existential and social theories. While existential sociology remains a modest movement in contemporary sociological theory, the contributions it can make to more traditional approaches are increasingly recognized. The 1990s have seen a resurgence of interest in existential theory surrounding the recent publication of new translations of Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) writings.

Kierkegaard produced books and personal papers published posthumously in twenty-six volumes totaling 10,000 pages. The themes expressed in these writings lead many to consider him the father of existential thought, and he is proclaimed by some scholars to be a forerunner to Postmodernism and Deconstructionism. His influence is evident in varied disciplines and continues to grow. Kierkegaard's work, along with more recent theorists such as Sartre, can be examined with Mead's interactionism and influences from continental philosophy to illuminate the history and development of existential sociology.

Historically, sociological theory emerged from philosophical theory, which can be divided into two broad areas: analytic and Continental. The concerns of the two

approaches are entirely distinct. It is often said that they do not simply offer different answers, but that they ask different questions. Briefly, analytic philosophy resolves complex propositions into simpler ones; its epistemology is unconditionally empirical. Continental philosophy (originally named for its European adherents) refers to general positions involving an interest in metaphysical issues. Analytic philosophers claim that the problems of metaphysics cannot be studied, maintaining that only empirical data is meaningful. Continentalists may employ empirical methods, but they are also interested in abstract reality such as subjective states and human agency.

The roots of traditional sociology are traceable to the analytic perspective. Sociology as a term was created by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in a series of lectures given in 1837. Prior to that the subject matter of sociology, like other disciplines, had belonged to philosophy. Ancient literature contains many profound insights concerning group life, social organization, and interpersonal relations. Systematic thought on society dates at least back to Greek philosophers, principally Plato and Aristotle, who identified society with the political order.

The concept of "civil society" as a realm distinct from the state was expressed in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and later political thinkers of the Enlightenment. So it was not until the late 18th century that philosophers began to make a clear distinction between society and its political structure. The main representative of this shift in emphasis was the Jean-Jacques Rousseau in such books as *The Social Contract* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. With the new focus on society as a separate entity, the analytic persuasion of the early social theorists remains

apparent. They were speculative thinkers, but they developed an empirical, quantitative method of reporting social observations.

Though the substructure was set by many figures, Comte is called the father of sociology because he coined the term. He conceived of it as an inclusive social science that, like philosophy, would bring together all knowledge about humanity. It was left to subsequent theorists to define sociology as a field distinct from other social disciplines. Among the most successful in doing this was Émile Durkheim. He believed that sociology should be devoted solely to the study of "social facts." These facts include forms of behavior, thought, and feeling and are to be studied as collective characteristics of a society, not as individual manifestations. That "positivistic" view holds that it is possible to discover laws of human society resembling the laws of nature by applying the scientific methods of empirical investigation. Despite its overseas origins, sociology during the first half of the 20th century became primarily an American activity. American sociology continued to grow heavily empirical, quantitative, and oriented to the study of social problems.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF EXISTENTIAL SOCIAL THEORY

Mead and Symbolic Interactionism

Mead on Society, Self, and Mind

Society

The Chicago School with the work of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was an exception to the trend toward exclusively quantitative analysis. Mead's emphasis on the mind, self, and society gave rise to an approach that was later called "symbolic interactionism" by Herbert Blumer, one of Mead's students who first used the term by in 1937. He states that while early symbolic interactionists cannot identified with a single formulation, "there is a great similarity in the general *way* in which they viewed and studied human group life" (Blumer, 1969, p. 1). Symbolic interactionism should be understood as a broad reference. Blumer explains that is based on three propositions: (1) people behave based on the meanings things have for them, (2) that meaning derives itself from social interaction, and (3) the meanings are examined and adjusted through an interpretive process (Blumer, 1969). Of the three propositions, the third would prove to have the most significance in existential sociology. Many theorists

advanced ideas that contributed to interactionism. However, as Blumer recognizes, it was mainly George Herbert Mead who laid the foundations.

Mead is sometimes referred to as a "social behaviorist." However, unlike former models of behaviorism, Mead's archetype includes the mind and subjective notions in the process of studying behavior; "it is not behavioristic in the sense of ignoring the inner experience of the individual" (Mead, 1962, p. 7). His inclusion of consciousness makes communication more significant in understanding the individual in society. With that emphasis, Mead continues to have profound influence in subjectivist theories of sociology, social psychology, and in existentialism and phenomenology in philosophy. Though he did not compile a systematic treatise of his theories, his conjectures may be pieced together from his writings, most notably from his *Mind, Self and Society*. As the title of his fundamental work indicates, Mead's most important theoretical ideas may be divided into three areas: society, self, and mind. The logical starting point for analysis is Mead's views of society because that more closely follows the order of his thinking; his understanding of society and self lead ultimately to the development and functioning of the mind (Meltzer, 1959).

Mead's theory of society starts with the natural substructure of human sociality: communication. He explains that society derives itself from the shared application and interpretation of gestures. A gesture with an acknowledged, common meaning in social interaction is a "symbol," resulting in the term "symbolic interactionism" (Blumer, 1969, p. 78). An individual's gesture is the component of the intercourse that produces an adjusted response in the other individual(s) in the process (Mead,

1962). Mead differentiates between instinctive and significant gestures. There is no deliberation with an instinctive kind. But with a significant one, the individual considers the possible reaction a future gesture will elicit.

Among the most important of these types of gestures is the vocal variety since the speaker can hear the gesture while it is being made. With a physical gesture the actor cannot see, as the other does, the action being carried out. But with a vocal gesture, the individual has a greater ability to adjust or terminate the gesture during its process, based on the anticipated consequences (Schellenberg, 1978). So for Mead, the imagined responses of the other person direct the individual's behavior. It is that imaginative completion of an act that he calls "meaning;" it characterizes the thinking that transpires through taking the role of the other (Meltzer, 1959). Thus, the acts of role taking and exchanging gestures are the concluding sources of "society." This use of gestures in human interaction leads to his theory of self.

Self

Blumer explains that, for Mead, the self is best portrayed as a process and not as a structure (Blumer, 1969). It develops in a dialectic process with society; later existentialists such as Sartre would recall this theme. The self is created through dialectic activity with society. Socialization occurs gradually, as gestures become symbolic and acquire meaning via interaction. Those symbols necessarily emerge for communication to be possible. Indeed, it is only with symbols that human cognition happens. Here Mead distinguishes between human and animal thought processes. It is

suggested that only humans have the ability to internalize conversation, implying thinking that takes place in the same way that one would dialogue with another person.

This concept of self, with its internal conversation, makes it possible to grasp Mead's idea of the "generalized other." It is created out of the phenomena of the individual naturally assuming the meanings and attitudes of the overall society. Mead distinguishes two primary stages of growth in the ability to organize the attitudes of others, by taking the role of the other. The first is the "play stage." Here the child learns to play the role of a parent, a teacher, etc. The child discovers what it is like to act in the position of another.

With the second phase, the "game stage," the complexity of the process increases. The game analogy is appropriate because "rules" are created and negotiated through interaction. Here the individual learns how to understand the perspective of many actors simultaneously. Learning to interact socially is like learning to play a game. During the game, the "generalized other" evolves with the incorporation of the views of several "others" and the concept of "team." This is the paramount level in the genesis of the self for Mead's hypothesis.

The self is a social operation with two distinct and alternating elements: the "I" (myself as I am) and the "Me" (myself as others view me through interaction). The two phases continually reciprocate. For Mead, both are essential because the I, as the origin of spontaneity, cannot know itself; it can only know the recipient, the Me. The I portrays the actor, speaker, or the subject. The Me stands for the interpreter,

listener, or the object. Consequently, Mead's theory of the self strives for a consideration beyond the subject-object dichotomy, implying that each person is a subject and an object simultaneously. This arrangement may recall the epistemological move made by Kierkegaard, and also played a role in existential sociology.

Mind

Mead's theory of the mind transcends another traditional dichotomy. Having explained that the self is composed of the I and the Me, it is now possible to understand the "mind" in Mead's work. It is the process of the two elements simultaneously perceiving the combination of the active I and the passive Me. In other words, the mind is the self in action. Hence, the mind originates within the context of the socially interacting self; it is produced in association with others in the environment. As mentioned, the dichotomy rendered insignificant here is the ancient one between dualism and materialism. Regarding Mead's theory of mind, Rosenthal and Bourgeois how he opposed reductionism:

Mind is not reducible to behavior, but as an emergent within the context of behavior is functionally related to it. As an emergent within a field of ongoing behavior, mind is not reducible to brain, nor can it be a container for, or confined within, subjective experience. Mead's position thus undercuts the dualism- reductionism controversy and avoids both mechanism and vitalism in that it undercuts the subject-object, mind-matter distinctions in favor of a field of activity... (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 9)

Therefore, a wholly subjective mind would exclude the Me, and a wholly objective mind would exclude the I. Since both parts are necessary, the mind is best understood as a process which manifests itself when an individual's I and Me are interacting

through the use of significant symbols (Meltzer, 1959).

So for the symbolic interactionists the relationships between self and the mind clear: they both emerge from social interaction and operate dialectically with society; they function as dependent and independent variables for each other. However, what are not clear are the causal linkages. For example, Mead fails to answer how society can produce both elements of self, the Me and the I. He explains that social interaction is the locus of causality for the Me, but he does not clarify the origin of the I. Mead makes obscure implications in these areas, but produces no final elucidations. Some of Mead's vagueness may in part be attributable to the fact that he did not use systematic data. The general relevance of data, and how Mead applied it, is clearer when considering the philosophic assumptions he shared with many existentialists.

The Influence of Symbolic Interactionism

Philosophic Assumptions

Though Mead seems at times to make use of those strategies of empirical assessment, he is ultimately critical of them, and therefore is critical of positivism. While there are differences, Mead's position is similar to the falsificationism and philosophy of science established by Thomas Kuhn (Joas, 1985). It also parallels Kierkegaard's epistemology, which recognizes the inescapable role of subjectivity. Mead's most general criticism of positivism is that it restrains, or absolutely omits the subject in its analysis. The subject cannot be ignored because it is what, at least in

part, determines meaning in an event. Therefore, a basic presupposition of symbolic interactionism is that individuals cannot be understood apart from the social situations in which they are implicated. Self-awareness is interconnected with societal awareness; this is at the root of Mead's social psychology.

An additional area in which Mead and the later interactionists disagree with the traditional behaviorists is in the response to stimuli. For Mead, individuals respond to the meaning of stimuli and not directly to the stimuli itself. It is also clear that Mead did not use systematic data. However, this does not disqualify him as a modern realist. Mead does, in fact, assume the existence of an external world, and the importance of the individual's interpretation of the world. As a modern realist, Mead presupposes the existence of an examinable, external world, which acquiesces with his pragmatic philosophy. This naturally brings questions about social nominalism and realism. That discord is significant because it is connected to the debate over causality and human agency, which is very paramount to symbolic interactionists. So what is Mead's philosophic assumption in that area? He does not clearly take one side of the debate; he comes across as a social nominalist and a realist.

He is a social realist in his stressing that society is a fundamental unit of investigation since it has an existence independent of its members. However, as a nominalist he also recognizes the same type of existential link observed by Kierkegaard, and affirms that social situations must be analyzed from the subject's viewpoint. Again, the interactionists are concerned with the subjective meaning that actors attribute to their actions (Schellenberg, 1978).

Therefore, a basic presupposition of symbolic interactionism is that individuals cannot be understood apart from the social situations in which they are implicated. Self-awareness is interconnected with societal awareness; this is at the root of Mead's social psychology. While the self's Me provides the realist component, the self's I provides the nominalist component.

Causal Priorities

Mead's twofold approach seems to lead to contradictions in the area of causal priorities. He proposes that the self is created through interaction and it functions dialectically with society, but he fails to demonstrate the causal linkages involved. He does not explain the manner in which society produces both elements of self, the Me and the I. It may be assumed that social interaction is the focal point of causality for the Me, but what is the origin of the I? Is it emergent in terms of genetics? Mead handles these questions ambiguously. Nothing in his work suggests that the origin of the I is external. Rather, he seems to indicate that since it is universal (all people have one), it must some way be biological, the result of human nature. So in the final analysis, it is the continuity between the subjectively (individually) generated I and the objectively (societally) generated Me that creates causality.

Determinism and Human Agency

Mead similarly employs the I-Me continuity to understand the question

between determinism and human agency. Again, the self is a social operation with two distinct and alternating elements the I and the Me. The two phases continually reciprocate. The I is active and portrays the actor, speaker, or the subject. The Me is passive and stands for the interpreter, listener, or the object. Simply put, the I is equated with agency and the Me is the determined factor. Consequently, the Median self is, in a sense, the derivation of causality *and* free agency.

It should be noted that though Mead cannot be unconditionally classified as a determinist, or as an advocate of free will. It appears that his view is more uniquely complex, and arguably more correct than most forms of compatibilism. As stated in the earlier discussion on the mind, Mead's position transcends the subject-object dichotomy in the sense of implying that each person is a subject and an object. That further implies self-awareness as reflected by society, plus a degree of free agency. An example of this may be seen in how people modify their actions in the chosen pursuit of societally approved goals. That proposition plays a key role in all subjectivist approaches to social theory. Self-awareness and mental intentionality are also themes in common with existential sociology. In Mead's outlook, individuals possess autonomy in that there are behavioral options within the overall sphere of the societally caused environment and circumstances. His view is distinct from strict determinism because those circumstances do not refer to the antecedent conditions themselves, but instead are the subjectively interpreted meanings of those conditions. That submits that an individual is not so much determined by past events; what one thinks about an event has the most significance for interactionists. Moreover, one can attribute new

meanings to past events, and in so doing change the ways in which the past events are influential.

Social Change

It is apparent from the inclusion of human agency that symbolic interactionists are interested in subjective states. Mead holds that they are qualitative phenomena, and not quantifiable. The positivists, with their Baconian interpretation of science, believe that subjective states cannot be studied at all. Existential sociologists share Mead's misgivings over positivism; he proposes that introspective conditions (consciousness) are indeed meaningful.

An individual's social consciousness is cultivated through the performances of role taking. That also functions as a phase in the development of self-consciousness, which is where one becomes an object to oneself. That makes conversation between the I and the Me possible. Here again, the existential theorists follow Mead in what seems to critics as a contradictory explanation, but is arguably a strength. The subjective and the objective are stressed simultaneously in consciousness. Thus for Mead, nothing is excluded in the ingredients of subjective states: external, societally induced values become internalized through the "generalized other" and become part of the Me in interaction with the I.

The I-Me interplay also figures in to Mead's analysis of stability and change in society. At that point one may begin to understand the reactions coming from Marxism and Postmodernism to the influence of Mead's ideas in existential sociology.

Mead implies that social change is related to the I, and social stability is related to the "generalized other" and the Me. Social change leads to an increase in specialization and an increase in the degree of integration and dependence of a society's members. Therefore, societal development and personal development occur together. When societal development takes place, it leads to more interactive independence. The reasoning behind the significance of the Median I for theory and praxis is also seen in existential sociology.

It is the creative aspect of the I in the individual that acts to bring about change in society. Some people appear to cultivate that possibility more than others do. That is where the other part of the self comes in; the Me controls and sets boundaries for the I. In order to maintain stability, a society must provide limitations for the activities of its members. This posits the idea of a "social contract." Mead is convinced that humans generally value stability. So while we may endeavor to change society, we are also constituted to preserve the status quo and maintain the stability of our society.

Like Marx, Mead was optimistic that the ideal state is a genuine possibility. But contrary to Marx, he felt the movements in his day were sufficient to introduce the ultimate society. Like the sociologists before him, Mead was greatly influenced by the Enlightenment concept of human progress. That, coupled with his pragmatic outlook, gave him a confidence that revolution was not necessary, rather feeling that people will work toward effective solutions to social problems. Existential sociologists, like Postmodernists, would disdain Mead's Enlightenment influenced, pragmatic

approach, questioning his epistemic warrant for granting science such an elevated role.

Moreover, the Postmodernist in agreement with the existential theorists would not be satisfied with his truth claims based on "value free," empirical observation. Indeed, a renewed interest in existential sociology owes itself to the Postmodern notion that as we realize our world, we realize ourselves. They would also question Mead's confidence that people will come together and labor effectively to solve social problems. Critiques of Mead's theories often converge on his ideological presuppositions. Among suspicion is the manner in which he teleologically privileges his theories by looking solely at the end results. The contradiction is this: if all ideas evolve in a process, then how can the consequences of a theory be definitely predicted?

Despite that faltering, subjectivists are not entirely dissatisfied with Mead's thought, and it may show more parallels with existential sociology than are often acknowledged. In the end, it may be that many contemporary critics would affirm the Median self's I, while questioning the validity of the self's Me. Mead's combination of the Me and the "generalized other" stands for societal causality and objectivity, while his rendering of the I makes conceivable a degree human agency and subjectivity. It is that synthesis of components in Mead's work that has impacted existential theories in contemporary sociology.

Kierkegaardian Epistemology

The Epistemological Foundation

Sociology was no longer limited to analytically based theory with the advent of Meadian interactionism. The idea that reality is to some degree based on an individual's interpretation of circumstances opened the door in sociology to the other broad area of philosophy: Continental thought. This includes existentialism and therefore a look back to Kierkegaard. The attention Mead put on the individual set symbolic interactionism apart from other sociological paradigms. But the emphasis on the individual was not new; Kierkegaard began doing subjectivist social theory in the 1840s.

Contemporary writers provide diverse representations of Kierkegaard's work. That is particularly evident in the area of his epistemology, specifically subjectivity, which is the essential element in existential sociology. Probably no concept is more responsible for misunderstandings of Kierkegaard; it is a main reason why he is considered esoteric. He has been called a non-cognitivist, an anti-intellectualist, a solipsist, and ultimately an irrationalist.

Existential sociologists challenge the long established notion that Kierkegaard is an irrationalist. His arguments against objectivity and his praise of individuality and subjectivity can be distilled from his recently translated *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard, 1992). That is the work that contains his polemical idea that "truth is subjectivity." It is a fundamental issue for

existential sociology because a proper understanding of Kierkegaard's epistemology is the key that illuminates the study of his social theory.

Kierkegaard indicates that all knowledge is either knowledge about something or self-knowledge (Collins, 1983). Kierkegaard's position can be clarified by calling the former "scientific knowledge" and the latter "existential knowledge." Scientific knowledge strives for objectivity. It includes propositions from the natural and social sciences, all those areas of study which aim at objective truth. Existential knowledge is subjective, the knowledge of human existence. Kierkegaard's focus is on the inescapable role of subjectivity in objective knowledge, a key theme in existential sociology. In some ways Kierkegaard's approach may be seen as a forerunner to the philosophy of science articulated by Michael Polanyi, and the Kuhnian construct of paradigm.

At this point Kierkegaard is often misinterpreted as an epistemological skeptic. But Kierkegaard accurately understood the self-stultifying nature of indiscriminate skepticism, the folly in asserting to know that it is impossible to know anything. So he is not arguing to invalidate objective knowledge, but to assert that one's own values cannot be completely transcended in the project. The same issue is debated in today in social theory as value neutrality vs. value commitment. But can the delineation of opposing sides itself be considered a side? Kierkegaard would suggest that the debate properly understood should be framed this way: the possibility of neutrality vs. the impossibility of neutrality.

Kierkegaard would assert that working without assumptions may be pursued as a goal, but it is not a realizable end. Sociology is based the formulation of

hypotheses with empirical research, and since it is inductive, the data collected in any study are necessarily filtered through an interpretive framework. That framework represents the basic operative assumptions of the researcher. Thus, though some suggest that "social science" is oxymoronic, sociology is no less scientific than any other discipline. This does not, however, imply that sociology operates without *a priori* assumptions. In that sense, Kierkegaard would make the point that sociological theory like any scientific theory is ultimately every bit as presuppositional as the loftiest fragment of philosophic speculation.

All scientific researchers, whether or not it is acknowledged, move beyond the physical world and enter the realm of metaphysics in the development of theory (e.g. the presupposition of realism naturalism). That also includes the practitioners of the "hard sciences" such as biologists and physicists (the designation "hard" then seems superficial). Observation and study are the basic criteria of science. So while those theories may have scientific characteristics in terms of forensics, they are not, strictly speaking, wholly "scientific." Nothing is completely the product of empirical science. That is why the "verifiability principle" of the early positivists is self-refuting. Every researcher functions with a presupposed "worldview," whether it is realized and defined or not.

Therefore, Kierkegaard's basic distinction is between two kinds of knowledge variously described as: existential versus scientific, subjective versus objective, and ethical versus abstract thought. These sets of terminological opposites are all used throughout Kierkegaard's work. The distinction between ethical and abstract thinking

is outlined primarily in his *Postscript*, and most accurately portrays his dissatisfaction with Hegelian speculative philosophy (which Kierkegaard held in common with Marx).

The first characteristic of abstract (objective) thought is that it is *sub specie aeterni*; it operates under the appearance of eternity, ignoring the concrete and the temporal (Kierkegaard, 1992). As a result, the abstract thinker tends to withdraw from reality. Kierkegaard says "When reading the biography of such a thinker (for his books may very well be excellent), one sometimes shudders at the thought of what it means to be a human being" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 302). The second characteristic of the abstract thinker is the failure to act on thought in existence. The abstract thinker ignores the past and the future, which are determinants of resolute choices in life.

The abstract enters into a thought world of conceptualizing and theorizing; this is the sociological equivalent of theory without praxis. The delusion of abstract thinking, according to Kierkegaard, is that the individual thinks in regard to existence when one ought simply to be existing. The moment one seeks to objectively analyze, the self detaches; it abstracts from concrete life and loses identity as an existing individual. For Kierkegaard that implies that the analysis itself becomes supremely important. That is the point about abstract thought he makes with this statement: "it is thinking where there is no thinker... existence is not thoughtless, but in existence thought is an alien medium" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 332).

Thus, Kierkegaard is not completely skeptical on the possibility of knowledge, but makes the point that we do not have epistemic certitude. In that sense he recalls the Kantian "Copernican Revolution" in epistemology where knowledge is considered to be based on warranted probability rather than objective certainty (though unlike Kant, Kierkegaard does not impose the Kantian synthetic *a priori* categories on the phenomenon of existence). The goal of pure objectivity provides the thinker with a picture of reality that is wholly unrelated to concrete existence. In Kierkegaard's words, abstract thought is "like having to travel in Denmark with a small map of Europe on which Denmark is no larger than a steel pen-point, indeed, even more impossible" (Kierkegaard, 1992, pp. 310-311). Again, in purely objective thought the thinker is separated from concrete existence when the focus is entirely on the system in construction. Any reflection is from within the confines of the system and not back to existential reality. In other words, thought is incorrectly identified as being, or, as Hegel was known for articulating it, "the real is the rational and the rational is the real."

The Merits of Subjectivity

Kierkegaard's reaction to the methodical thought of Hegel is probably best represented with the enigmatic phrase "Truth is subjectivity." Kierkegaard explains that: "The systematic idea is subject-object, is the unity of thinking and being; existence, on the other hand, is precisely the separation" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 123). Consequently, "Truth is subjectivity" is important to Kierkegaard because it goes right

to the core of the idea that one's own existence is paramount, the very foundation of existential philosophy. Against Hegel, existence itself must be the starting point.

Kierkegaard responds to the Hegelian type of abstract (objective) knowledge with his existential (subjective) knowledge. By referring to his position "ethical existence," he implies that the existing individual is a thinker; it becomes the unification of thought and being. The foundation is knowledge of existence as situated in the process of becoming. Kierkegaard maintains that "Existence without motion is unthinkable, and motion is unthinkable *sub specie aeterni*" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 308). By this he means that existence is temporal and dynamic; it is not static and functioning under the phenomenon of eternity. Kierkegaard explains that the existing subject is always in the process of becoming (a theme that would later be significant in the existential sociology of Sartre).

It is the principle of many existential philosophers that one strives to become what one is not yet. This should not be confused with the "becoming" used by process philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead. Kierkegaard argues that the difference between being and becoming is that in the latter one makes choices. The first characteristic behind those choices for Kierkegaard's epistemology is that passion and interest determine knowledge of existence. It is impossible to really exist without passion; for the existentialists it is essential to genuine life.

The authentic individual does not merely subsist, but is intimately interested in life. This individual affirms existence by executing choices. The "seducer" portrayed in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* lives only from moment to moment, gathering immediate

pleasures, but the seducer does not know true passion (Kierkegaard, 1986). The degree to which one exists authentically corresponds to the degree to which one is interested in that existence. The theme of authenticity also would also be a key in the social theory of Sartre, and for existential sociology in general.

The second characteristic in Kierkegaard's epistemology is that subjective knowledge is "knowledge of" and not "knowledge about." He writes, "all knowledge about actuality is possibility" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 316). Abstract thought translates all thinking into scant possibility. Since, according to Kierkegaard, "the only actuality there is for an existing person is his own ethical actuality; concerning all other actuality he has only knowledge about" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 316). The knowledge of the existing individual is "knowledge of" gained through passion and interest. "Knowledge about" is based on science and inductive enterprises, and therefore is not difficult to ascertain. But the person who genuinely exists has "knowledge of," existential (subjective) knowledge.

Kierkegaard illustrated the difference in objectivity and subjectivity through his familiar attack on the Danish Christian Church. He often asserted that the people of his day claimed to have knowledge about God, but no knowledge of God. In other words, there was no subjective interest, and therefore no compassion and praxis, behind their objective theories. They called themselves "Christians" merely because they were born into "Christendom" (where are citizens were baptized Lutherans). In Kierkegaard's analysis, they had scientific knowledge, but no subjective knowledge. He represents it this way in his journal:

Imagine a country where generally everybody is able to swim--but swimming is understood to mean putting on a life-jacket or tube and then going through the motions of swimming. That is called swimming--and a good deal of attention is paid to who can, as they say, swim the best, make the most beautiful motions, etc. If a [genuine] swimmer came to such a country he would say: You are not swimming at all; this whole business of determining who makes the most beautiful motions is pure nonsense, for not a one of them is swimming (Kierkegaard, 1978, p. 520).

Kierkegaard's notion of existential knowledge breaks with the epistemological tradition that placed a premium on "knowledge about." One example of this kind of thinker is Descartes. His *cogito ergo sum* is an attempt to prove existence by the fact that one is presently thinking. Kierkegaard maintains that the Cartesian dictum resolves itself into pure tautology:

If the I in *cogito* is understood to be an individual human being, then the statement demonstrates nothing: I am thinking ergo I am, but if I am thinking, no wonder, then, that I am; after all, it has already been said, and the first consequently says even more than the last (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 317).

Kierkegaard seeks to methodologically undercut the subject-object dichotomy by positing a way of knowing, which is existence itself. This of course cannot be done in the sense of transcending the logical law of noncontradiction, but represents an attitude aiming at not separating, but preserving the union between the known and the knower. "Existence has joined thinking and existing, inasmuch as an existing person is a thinking person" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 314).

So What does Kierkegaard mean by "truth is subjectivity?" It does not imply that truth is relative, or does it imply that there is no such thing as truth and values. But value derives itself from the process of making decisions. Thus, it is misleading to use the word "value" in the sense of a system of norms or precepts when referring to

Kierkegaard. He is not setting forth a systematic, normative ethic. Instead, value comes out of necessary action because existence demands decisiveness. Equally misunderstood is Kierkegaard's assertion "leap of faith." Some dismiss Kierkegaard with the complaint that he becomes irrational when taking the leap. However, for Kierkegaard, one must have a very certain idea of what one is leaping toward. The leap of faith is his metaphor for emphasizing subjectivity.

Like "truth is subjectivity," the leap represents the foundation for Kierkegaard's dialectic: putting existence and faith together. Because existence demands decisiveness, subjectivity is necessary so that all existence does not dissolve into indifferent matters of fact (objectivity). To avoid subjectivity by trying to decide an issue always on an objective plane is to eliminate much that is important to being human. That is the reason subjectivity is the crucial difference between existential social theory and traditional sociology. Kierkegaard is convinced that most avoid subjective examination by claiming that all problems of existence can be objectively determined.

Hence, Kierkegaard stresses subjectivity; it is a corrective to the inclination to deny the validity of personal experience. It is intended to attack those who think they can reason their way to the truth about life's ultimate concerns. Objective truth is for everybody; subjective truth is for the individual alone. It is important to understand that truth is realized by choice, but this does not mean that truth is predicated on choice. "Truth is subjectivity" then, refers to the relationship between doctrine and human existence; individual choices give meaning to the facts. For Kierkegaard, it is

objectively true that truth is subjectivity. So "truth is subjectivity" is the basic idea of Kierkegaardian existentialism. That theme became influential in the development of existential sociology as "sociologists felt their discipline had hidden itself behind the mask of scientism and had consequently lost touch with the very subject of its inquiries, human beings in their natural everyday setting" (Fontana, 1980, 167).

CHAPTER III

AN APOLOGETIC FOR EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

Sartrean Existentialism

Individual Ontology

While Kierkegaard always sought to consider subjectivity, early sociologists were not interested in subjective states due to their analytic framework. But as a result of the influence of symbolic interactionism, other subjectivist theories were appearing by the middle to late 20th century. Contemporary subjectivists can now trace their roots back through Continental philosophy, just as traditional sociologists do with analytic philosophy. In the case of existential sociology, it has created increased scholarship and renewed interest in existentialists from Kierkegaard to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

The Kierkegaardian focus of subjectivity accentuates choice. Sartre develops this theme and states that those who withdraw from choice are living in "bad faith" (the assumption of determinism). Though existentialism is said to have begun with Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre is the name most closely associated with it today. His thought is popularly known through his novels and plays. Sartre's most important work, *Being and Nothingness*, explicates the foundation for the ontology that drives

his sociology He divides all of being, everything that exists, into two categories: *Etre en soi* (Being-in-itself) and *Etre pour soi* (Being-for-itself). The in-itself is non-conscious being, a non-personal entity. The "for-itself" is conscious existence, human beings. This is Sartre's beginning point, and is his basis for understanding social interaction.

For Sartre, "Being-in-itself" means that an object will always be what it presently is; it will never become something else. Also, an object is what it appears to be; this is the root of Sartre's phenomenology. In Kantian terms, Sartre acknowledges exclusively phenomena, and rejects the possibility of noumena (the notion of things-in-themselves). Being-in-itself implies that an object can never be fully experienced. No object or abstract entity, for Sartre, can be known under all possible conditions.

Being-in-itself," on the other hand, means that the object (human being) will not always be what it presently is. An individual cannot be anything in a final sense--once and for all. Life necessarily involves change; and the process only stops at death. For Sartre and other existentialists, conscious beings are free and possess intentionality against determinism. That does not mean that every act is freely chosen, and it does not imply that human agency is unlimited. There are obvious physical limitations to mental intent. But the point for existentialists is that one becomes what one is, through acts of free choice. And significantly, this freedom is permanent; it cannot be renounced. One cannot choose to not be free.

The theme of *Being and Nothingness* is that human beings desperately yearn for the stability of Being-in-itself which is unchanging; humans want to be something,

and stop becoming many things. Yet, this is impossible because humans cannot be something once and for all, while simultaneously retaining the consciousness of Being-for-itself. One may even desire to reduce others to mere objects, but it is not possible. This is the key point in Sartre's esoteric writing; the struggle produces tension, as depicted in *No Exit*, and other works. Existence demands that one deal with what one seeks to avoid, anxiety and despair from the necessity of decision making. Sartre rejects the idea that everyone is born with an "essence," a destiny to be fulfilled. This explains his famous dictum that "existence precedes essence." One first exists, then creates an essence, a life with values of one's own choosing.

The key for existential sociology coming from Sartre is that the in-itself represents society and the for-itself represents the individual, and we cannot accord more reality on society than on the individual. Though the comparison has not been often made, Sartre's ontology may be compared to Mead's analysis of the Self in *Mind, Self, and Society*. Sartre's two types of being function dialectically, and seem to recall the Median I and Me, the acting free agent and the agent being acted upon by society. The concept of the Median I resembles the Sartrean concept of the transcendent for-itself, which is intentionally structured and not causally determined. Hayim explains that "the I reveals itself in the performed acts and defies all prior reflections and judgments about it" (Hayim, 1980, p. 29). The difference however is that Sartre does not seek an amalgamation in the dichotomy between the in-itself and the for-itself, and in fact denies that it is even possible. "But unlike Sartre, Mead attempts to bring about a reconciliation between ontology and sociality" (Hayim, 1980, p. 29).

So while Sartre is not as optimistic as Mead in terms of a synthesis, both acknowledge that the two components impact each other, and agree that there is no possibility of a self independent of social experiences. For Sartre, the individual who seeks only to adhere to the prescriptions of the Me is elevating the in-itself, and therefore living in bad faith. In that case, the self is suppressed and the Me becomes fixed and related only to its past (Hayim, 1980). Such an individual refuses to make choices, and lacks a critical reflection on the future (this also recalls Kierkegaard's ontological aesthete who is only living in the first stage of life).

Parallels With Kierkegaard

Sartre's use and adaptation of Kierkegaard's ideas has contributed greatly to existential sociology. His parallels with Kierkegaard are abundant. Sartre's agreement with Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity is clear: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 1985, p. 15). Indeed, Sartre's "Being-for-itself" echoes Kierkegaard's insistence that we cannot avoid the confusion of autonomy. He states: "The For-itself is not a moment that can be surpassed. As such its nature approaches much nearer to the 'ambiguous' realities of Kierkegaard" (Sartre, 1956, p. 145). Hence, one must choose values. All individuals are, according to Sartre, inexorably "condemned" to be free.

To explain the awareness of one's own freedom, Sartre uses Kierkegaard's notion of anguish. Sartre stated in his well known "Existentialism is a Humanism" lecture that one realizes that one must choose values, and therefore:

cannot help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility. Of course, there are many people who are not anxious; but we claim that they are hiding their anxiety, they are fleeing from it. [It cannot be avoided.] Anguish is evident even when it conceals itself. This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham (Sartre, 1985, pp. 18-19).

The despair from having to choose values is a proposition shared by the two existentialists. Sartre explains in his essay "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal" that subjective truth exists, and that it is not knowledge but it self-determination (Sartre, 1974).

Kierkegaard's impact is also apparent in Sartrean phrase "existence precedes essence." Sartre like Kierkegaard opposes the reductionism of traditional sociology that objectifies human beings by studying them as scientific data. An individual is not born with a prescribed "essence" or meaning in life. For Kierkegaard, one first exists, makes oneself, and then conceptualizes about that existence. Sartre similarly recalls Kierkegaard with his many references to the "existing individual." One who truly exists is one who makes choices and acts with responsibility pertaining to what has been chosen. Sartre says that one not living in this manner has "Bad Faith," irresponsibility in the task of creating one's own moral values. Avoiding decision is a denial of "ethical existence."

Comparisons to Mainstream Social Research

The Critique by Traditional Sociology

The focus on subjectivity is at the core of existential sociology. The act of

emphasizing the individual also explains why Sartre and Kierkegaard both, for example, were against nationalism for the sake of reform. Sartre asks and answers: “Is this any reason to tax [the people] with nationalism as the old guard of mummified Stalinists did? No” (Sartre, 1974, p. 109). Sartre clearly opposed the practice of promoting a national culture as a foundation for praxis, which itself only ended up being a form of pseudo-Marxism. The product “revealed, as it ebbed, that their historical traditions remained intact because they had never been developed and surpassed towards a genuine socialism” (Sartre, 197, p. 109).

Sartre’s Marxism is primarily explained in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The basic distinction between Sartre’s position and most traditional sociologists on Marx begins to show approach of existential sociology in general. Sartre begins with the individual and not with social institutions. However, it is important to understand that in existential sociology the transition from individual to society does reduce the collective reality to the reality of the personal actor. Moreover, the tendency in mainstream social theory to do the opposite is equally unwarranted. “Durkheim’s concept of the *collective conscious* points to a solidarity external to group members, yet collectively guiding their actions. Durkheim’s notion is reviewed by Sartre and criticized” (Hayim, 1980, p. 12). Therefore, for Sartre, both the individual and society be proportionately considered in any social analysis.

It is primarily on that point that Foucault criticized existential theory (particularly toward Sartre). He sought to show that the basic characteristics, which are normally assumed to be static truths about human nature and society, actually change in

the course of history.

Foucault disavowed any similarities between his thought and Sartre's, claiming that existentialism is predicated on an essentialist concept of the self. The idea that individuals make decisions in good faith or bad faith in order to establish an authentic or inauthentic relation with the self presupposes a fixed core of identity against which actions and decisions can be assessed (McNay, 1994, p. 153).

Foucault rejects the idea of an inner identity, but that criticism would seem to apply specifically to Sartre rather than existential sociology in general. It would be an "essentialist," not an existentialist, who would reverse the poles and maintain that essence precedes existence.

Existential sociologists do not suggest that there is any fixed "authenticity" for all people, but simply maintain that subjectivity is the element common to all. In Sartre's view humanity is never a completed work, "but always a project in the making, one which continuously loses and reinvents in terms of social membership and in terms natural systems in the physical world" (Hayim, 1980, p. x). Therefore, it was Sartre's goal, and the aim of existential sociology, to defend the principle of self-determination.

The focus of self-determination is a primary area that draws criticism from traditional sociology. From Kierkegaard and Sartre, existential sociologists stress subjectivity as a corrective to the inclination to deny the validity of personal experience. Traditional approaches sustain the subject-object dichotomy. In his seminal article "Existential Sociology," Peter Manning explains how the traditional deductive method of investigation is problematic by abstracting everyday life and transforming

humans into the passive recipients of social forces. He states that the traditional view distorts everyday meanings by predefining their nature: "it confers meanings on events rather than seeking to discover the uses that meanings are put to by individuals" (Manning, 1973, p. 206).

As mentioned earlier, traditional sociologists are generally not concerned with the individual due to their analytic framework. The inclusion of subjective states is the primary area in which existential sociology is criticized. Fontana explains that:

positivistic sociology would probably deny that existential sociology is in fact a sociology since it is "subjective," "unscientific" and "high-level journalism." This group of critics would say that, given the relativistic approach of existential sociology, no solid truths are possible and we are left with a solipsistic world (Fontana, 1980, pp. 177-78).

The traditionalists maintain that their aim is absolute objectivity, and that an inductive model is required to produce reliable results. But as Kierkegaard questioned, is absolute objectivity a realistic goal? Is it not more practical to admit that both the observed and the observer have a point of view, and then consider both views in the study?

The Strengths of Existential Sociology

From the existential perspective, traditional sociology is guilty of a flagrant reductionism, primarily concerned with stripping human behavior of its fascinating intricacy. The end result is a product that does not represent life as it is lived in the everyday world. The natural sciences seem more and more to take this into consideration, but the social sciences often appear to remain "preoccupied with a Newtonian concern with invariance and formal causes that blinds it to the complexity and

uniqueness of its subject matter: human beings" (Fontana, 1984, p. 3).

Andrea Fontana uses the metaphor of a musical performer to delineate the difference between traditional sociology and an existential approach. In traditional theory the individual actor is thought of like a musician in an orchestra following a rigidly prescribed set of instructions. In existential sociology, the actor is more accurately compared to an improvisational jazz musician. "There is a musical theme to follow, but since there is no score to read and no band leader, there is plenty of room for mood, feelings, and interpretation" (Fontana, 1984, p. 4).

Thus, existential sociologists believe Durkheim was wrong to exclude agency and intentions behind individual actions. However, Durkheim actually can be said to compliment existential sociology through the concern with the existential situation of modern society, specifically its axiological decomposition through pathological erosion of the bonds of solidarity. The traditional focus on society as an integral whole compliments the existential concern with individuals as integral beings. While a precise definition of existential sociology seems evasive, in general it may be stated that nothing is ignored in existential sociological research. Jack Douglas states explains that it is purposely broad and open ended, and "any sociology that seeks to remain faithful to the entire gamut of human experience must narrow, pre-conceived goals, clearly defined boundaries, or absolutist concepts" (Douglas, 1977, p. vii).

Existential sociologists recognize that individuals create a self to give life meaning. As Kierkegaard held, the existential self refers to an individual's unique experiences that are characterized by an ongoing sense becoming. The process of

becoming produces an active participation in social change. Most significantly, the sense of becoming is based on individual interpretations of one's own circumstances. Thus, there is a link between free will and authenticity. For Kierkegaard, "The determinist, the fatalist, is in despair and as one in despair has lost his self because for him everything has become necessity" (1980, p. 40). The act of successfully dealing with change (becoming) is a part of attempting to live authentically. It is a central component of what it means to be human, and is therefore of great interest to existential sociologists.

The existentialist emphasis on free agency has been well documented. Existential sociology seeks to describe and explain the behavior of people within a group on the basis of their interpretation of their own social interaction. Individuals are not merely a sum of the consequences of antecedent conditions. Rather, they make decisions, demonstrate intentionality, and their own understandings impose meanings on events. Existential sociologists believe traditionalists are wrong to exclude agency and intentions behind individual actions. The area of religion provides a vivid example for understand the distinction. The functionalist accounts that faith exists solely for social cohesion is far too simplistic. Cohesion may be the result of religion, but to insist that it is the cause is to commit the fallacy of "affirming the consequent." It can only be said with certainty that social cohesion is generally associated with religious profession.

So existentialists attack the positivistic presuppositions, principally determinism, that forms the foundation of the traditional approaches to social theory. Ian

Craib affirms that intelligibility assumes free agency in terms of praxis. The dilemma for traditional sociology is that “If praxis were determined externally, by the nature of environment or organism, it would be unintelligible, contingent, just ‘like that’ for no particular reason” (Craib, 1976, p. 223). Sartre especially criticized the inclination in sociology to posit categories of determined realities in explaining human behavior; “such hidden realities not only predestine our paths, but also give us an inhuman objectivity” (Hayim, 1980, pp. 137-38).

Though he was not an existentialist, Wilhelm Dilthey (soon after Kierkegaard) likewise argued that the process of studying the individual in society must be different than the method of scientific, quantifiable inquiry due the complexity of the human subject. Dilthey’s philosophy of culture is based on *verstehen*, the reflective understanding of experience, and the notion that what it means to be human must be considered in any analysis. Existential sociologists readily agree that the *zeitgeist* can only be explicated through empathic understanding. The researcher’s knowledge of the subject can only be partial without that attention. “What follows for Dilthey, is that one should not rely upon the theory and methodology of the natural sciences, but that life itself should be the starting point of inquiry” (Fontana, 1980, p. 160).

Thus, existential sociology may be viewed as a corrective that is not entirely new, but rather seems to have been placed aside since the days of classical social theory. Tiryakian argues that a convergence exists between existential sociology and classical theorists such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel which supports “a more comprehensive theory of social existence” (Tiryakian, 1965, p. 678). While Weber

was clearly an empiricist and conducted his research scientifically, he did recognize the important notions of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, “intuition” and *Verstehen* as legitimate modes of understanding social phenomena. Indeed, Tiryakian explains that “Weber’s methodology of *Verstehen*, thus, turns out to be upon closer examination an expression of existential phenomenology” (1965, p. 679).

Other classical theorists took subjective meanings into consideration. For example, Simmel’s “Formal Sociology” is based on the distinction between form and content, with the subject of his analysis being the universally recurring forms of social interaction. Thus, while Simmel was unmistakably a functionalist and not an existentialist, there nevertheless is an acknowledgment of subjectivity in how the forms of interaction are disclosed. They are “revealed by an ‘insightful look’ at social life, grasping its essential psychological meanings as wholes” (Tiryakian, 1965, p. 680).

Therefore, contemporary sociological theory that ignores subjectivity not only opposes existential sociology, but has even distanced itself from those classical sociological theorists who maintained that subjectivity is a key ingredient in understanding the human condition. Manning states: “Existentialism, from the first murmurings of Kierkegaard, has asserted the intrinsic and inherent place of emotion in social life” (Manning, 1973, p. 209). That focus on emotion and intention significantly includes free agency. Existential sociology seeks to describe and explain the behavior of people within a group on the basis of their interpretation of their own social interaction. Individuals make decisions, and their understandings provide meanings. In that sense, existential sociology seeks not to overturn traditional methods of social

research, but to widen the lens on the sociological camera.

Existential Phenomenology complements rather than entirely replaces the present typically positivistic approach to research; that is, it validates objective techniques of describing social phenomena, just as highly reliable quantitative propositions may be used to validate phenomenologically derived insights and interpretations of social reality (Tiryakian, 1965, p. 687).

CHAPTER IV

AN EXPOSITION OF KIERKEGAARDIAN SOCIOLOGY

A Kierkegaardian View of Self

The Stages of Life

The idea that introspective states are meaningful caused the look back to Kierkegaard that gradually developed existential sociology. Kierkegaard suggests that the individual progresses through three stages or levels, and those stages may be applied to the development of society. Thus, it is first necessary to examine Kierkegaard's individual ontology in order to advance a Kierkegaardian theory of society. He proposes in his *Stages on Life's Way*, and in other works, that individual being takes place in three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious or spiritual. The existential element is most visible in the latter two stages.

Aesthetic existence does not share the passion and interest for life found in the ethical and religious. For Kierkegaard, the aesthetic individual is only intellectually related to existence. In his epistemology, the aesthetic self merely knows about existence. The aesthete is also often a skeptic, an "agnostic" regarding existential issues, because it is a convenient way of avoiding critical thinking on complex issues. The aesthetic individual often craves a "middle ground" on any controversial

topic as a method of avoiding commitment to anything. The person living in only the aesthetic stage is not even interested in the pursuit of truth, whether it is in metaphysical issues or the reality of horrendous social conditions. That is precisely because it is far more difficult being neutral, if neutrality is even possible, after gaining understanding. Truth requires the individual to act on it, either affirmatively, or negatively by doing nothing at all.

In both ethical and religious existence, reality consists of passion that is absent in the first stage. The aesthetic self is primarily concerned with the cultivation and fulfillment of natural impulses. The aesthetic person can take many forms, and is independent of social class. A person could have high socioeconomic status, and be a "cultured" by social standards, but still lack authenticity. The aesthete may also be very intelligent and able to make profound observations on the human condition, but whether fully conscious of it or not, the individual existing in only the aesthetic stage is in despair over not having realized a self.

The ethical stage for Kierkegaard is the beginning of developing a self since it involves the evolution of passion. Kierkegaard's "ethical existence" again represents subjective knowing which is contrasted with merely knowing abstractly (objectively). It is in this stage that thought and thinker are unified by passion. It is the start of interest and engagement of the self with existence, the start of ethical concerns and a consideration of future plans. In the last part of *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard summarizes the three stages or modes of living. Unlike an individual in the aesthetic stage, the ethical self lives beyond the realm of immediacy, so the second stage

represents requirement, commitment, and responsibility.

It is important to understand that for Kierkegaard the three stages should not be viewed as stages through which every individual progresses. Neither should they be held as separate and exclusive; so it may be that the term "sphere" is more appropriate. In other words, the immediacy of the aesthetic does not automatically evanesce as one becomes an ethical individual. The transformation is in the minimizing of the importance attached to aesthetic immediacy. So it is not that the interests and pleasure of the aesthetic individual are bad and should be abandoned, but they are insufficient to develop and sustain a genuine self.

The character in Kierkegaard's writings known as Judge William is an appropriate example of how the stages are not exclusive. He is a central figure in *Either/Or*, and Kierkegaard's representative for the ethical sphere. The judge no longer lives for immediate gratification; rather, he strives to become a responsible citizen and individual with concern for himself and others. He makes choices resolutely and determines to live out what he selects. However, the move to the ethical stage does not ostracize any consideration of the aesthetic life:

[It is through] the absolute choice the ethical is posited; but it by no means follows from this that the aesthetic is excluded. In the ethical the personality is centralized in itself, thus the aesthetic is absolutely excluded or it is excluded as the absolute, but relatively it constantly remains (Kierkegaard, 1986, p. 182).

The characteristic of the aesthetic sphere is that the person exists for instant pleasure. When the aesthete plans projects they are not related to past choices or to future possibilities. After the moment of gratification has passed, the moment loses its

significance and enters into the objectified past forever. For Kierkegaard, while the aesthetic self is the personification of inauthentic existence, the ethical self makes choices with considered decision and responsibility. That characterizes the ethical sphere, where Kierkegaard believes most of his readers exist. The ethicist's own existence is chosen, which provides unity, continuity, purpose, and meaning in life. Through passionate execution of the will, choice becomes an inward act of freedom, which gives unity to existence.

In order to fully understand the third stage that forms the foundation for a Kierkegaardian sociology, the zones between the major spheres of existence must be considered. Kierkegaard posits two zones between the stages, which he calls these "border territories;" they present another reason why I think the term "sphere" is preferable. The zones represent irony, which constitutes the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical, and humor, the boundary between the ethical and the religious (Kierkegaard, 1992).

Irony appears as an incongruity between inward subjectivity and outward objectivity as they are expressed in an individual's life. Whenever there is a contradiction between inner commitment and outward behavior or conformity to societal expectations, the conditions for irony are present. This irony existentially makes up the transition area between aesthetic immediacy and ethical requirement. The perfect model of irony for Kierkegaard seems to be Socrates, who pretended to be ignorant while actually having mastered the inquiry and rejoinder dialectic. The goal of Socrates as a teacher was to compel the listening students to think for themselves and

ultimately become independent. Kierkegaard was impressed with the way Socrates refused to give systematic instruction but preferred to be a catalyst; his pupils did their own searching for truth. Kierkegaard's M.A. thesis, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, is a reaction and commentary to the Socratic notion of irony.

Kierkegaard explains that irony is not simply a manner of speech or mere sarcasm; it is itself a mode of existence. Irony characterizes the individual who has exhausted the pleasures of the aesthetic life; one who has lived through the aesthetic sphere to its inevitable end, and is standing on the borderline where a move into the ethical sphere is possible. Irony may be a disguise for ethical concern. The importance of irony for Kierkegaard can be summed up with this passage from *The Concept of Irony*:

What doubt is to science, irony is to personal life. Just as scientists maintain that there is no true science without doubt, so it may be maintained with the same right that no genuinely human life is possible without irony. Irony limits, finitizes... and thereby yields balance and consistency. Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know, but loved by those who do (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 326).

For the second zone, just as there is a contradiction between the aesthetic and the ethical, Kierkegaard suggests there is incongruity between ethical requirement and religious life. This zone appears as the form of humor. To qualify as a humorist one must have moved through the ethical sphere and resolved that a relationship to something higher is necessary, but has not yet been chosen as a mode of life. When an individual is at this point the choice for spirituality may be made. The self ceases to be a

humorist when this occurs, although humor may be retained. The spiritual individual may laugh if the ethicist takes pride in good conduct for its own sake, because from the point of view of the third stage this has little existential significance. The final stage is the formation of an authentic self, which lays the foundation for genuine community.

The Authentic Individual

With an examination of the third stage of the self, Kierkegaard's social theory becomes clearer. It is at this point that his concerns move beyond individuality and toward the development of authentic individuality as the basis of a genuine community.

...to will to be an individual existing human being (which one unquestionably is) in the same sense as everyone else is capable of being - that is the ethical victory over life and every mirage, the victory that is perhaps most difficult of all (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 356).

Kierkegaard takes up that challenge in the final stage of existence, the religious, which lies very close to the ethical. Indeed, he often speaks of them together as the "ethico-religious" because the characteristics of the ethical are retained in the religious.

However, while the ethicist can recognize the good in life, the religious person seeks to recognize the highest good. In the religious stage life is a test before a divine examiner (Kierkegaard, 1992). The individual in this mode has an absolute respect for God. Kierkegaard was writing from within the culture of the Danish Lutheran church, but the religious stage does not necessarily refer to a specific religion (though he later

divides it into “Religiousness A” and “Religiousness B” where Christianity is contrasted with other views). As scandalous as it would be to most of his Danish readers, Kierkegaard would have more respect for a committed Buddhist than for someone who claimed to be a Christian while actually having no idea what it meant. That was the basis of Kierkegaard’s fierce attack on the organized Christian church.

To understand Kierkegaard’s critique of the Christian church, or what he called “Christendom” to set it apart from what he considered true Christian faith and praxis, it is important to consider the time in which he lived in Denmark. The church following the Reformation was assimilated into the government, and every Danish citizen was a baptized Lutheran. Kierkegaard strongly opposed the linking of the church and the state, and maintained that most of the people in the Danish church had no passion or commitment, but were simply following the “crowd.” Kierkegaard referred to them as the “philistine-bourgeois,” and claimed that they changed the original ideal of Christianity into something easy and trivial. He ridiculed them for pretending piety while actually lacking any spiritual awareness.

Thus, in Kierkegaard’s view the typical Danish churchgoer was self-deceived with the help of the clergy. Sociologist Anthony Campolo appropriately describes Kierkegaard’s view this way:

The rational theologians who occupied the bourgeois pulpits had reduced the demands of Jesus, as set forth in the Bible, to a set of rules there were relatively easy for any socially proper person to uphold. The radical requisites of the gospel had been reduced, by the clergy, into a reasonable set of socially acceptable regulations, which could be kept without too much trouble. Thus by obeying this watered-down version of Christian morality, the self-righteous middle-class church members could delude themselves into thinking that they

were true Christians (Campolo, 1985, p. 93).

For Kierkegaard, apathy and mediocrity are the most dangerous when they are dressed up with sincerity. The problem is that sincerity is no replacement for true passion. In Kierkegaard's critique, the problem with the organized church is that it lacked "suffering," which is the main difference between the ethical and the religious: with its focus on spirituality, the religious sphere expresses the highest intensification of subjectivity and inwardness. For Kierkegaard, it is in this final stage of life that the creation of an "authentic self" is possible.

After the individual discovers that the first and second stages will not produce a lasting happiness, an authentic self is possible due to the existential element of suffering. The many references to suffering in his writings are one reason why Kierkegaard is sometimes considered to be pessimistic. However, he repeatedly maintains that the life of spirituality is a joyful one that overcomes despair. Kierkegaard explains how the suffering of the religious sphere is inwardness. "We are all sufferers, but joyful in our suffering" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 438). Kierkegaard's employment of suffering is often misinterpreted due to the natural problem of translation. To properly understand Kierkegaard's use of the term, the exegete must realize that the Danish language has three words that have as their equivalent the English word "suffering." The first is *ulykke*, which is identified as suffering that comes from misfortune, representing an aesthetic form of suffering (Evans, 1983). The Hong translations of *Postscript* and the other writings recognize that the term *lidende*, which Kierkegaard uses to represent suffering in the religious sphere, is not the usual Danish

word for painful suffering. Rather, *lidende* is taken from the verb *at lide*; it means to undergo or experience something (The English verb "to suffer" originally expressed both meanings).

Religious suffering cannot therefore be straightforwardly identified as illness, pain, poverty and the like. Even the most outwardly fortunate individual can be a religious sufferer in the most decisive sense.

What is this religious suffering if it is not suffering in the ordinary sense? It is precisely the process of "dying away from immediacy" which is necessitated by the individual's absolute commitment (Evans, 1983, pp. 169-70).

Suffering indicates that this choices and commitments have been made, and to avoid it is to evade personal decisiveness. Thus, Kierkegaardian suffering is essential to subjectivity, and is not understood to be pain. Kierkegaard defines it most clearly when he says: "suffering is precisely inwardness" (1992, p. 228). Religious life is an existential, an inner process. "Existing essentially is inwardness, and the action of inwardness is suffering" (1992, p. 433). Kierkegaard wants the reader to realize that life in this stage is not carefree and simple. So suffering is not irrational self-punishment; it represents the process of people individually developing authentic selves that become the foundation of a genuine social community.

A Kierkegaardian View of Society

Kierkegaard and Marxism

The Stages of Life Applied to Society

Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of suffering to emphasize complete passion and commitment in the final of life's stages where authenticity begins for the self. For an existential sociology, an authentic social community is not possible until there are first authentic individuals. The problem as Kierkegaard sees it is that the individual is smothered and surrounded by the crowd, and absorbed in all sorts of matters. Therefore, the individual "finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man" (1980, pp. 33-34). That form of despair often goes unrecognized, so the individual (essentially without a self) is deceived into thinking the pursuit of profit will bring happiness. Kierkegaard states: "Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world" (1980, pp. 33-34).

For a Kierkegaardian sociology, society ideally progresses through three levels of development. This theory of society may be derived from Kierkegaard's theory of individual ontology. The personal creation of genuine selves is the basis of Kierkegaard's social theory; understanding individuals is necessarily prior to understanding society. He calls for authentic individuality in order to develop a genuine

community of individuals. Despite the claims of some scholars that he is solipsistic (a frequent criticism of existentialism in general), his concerns clearly extend outside the individual. Like Mead later suggested, Kierkegaard posits a dialectic between self and society. Social phenomena are understood as deriving itself from the agency and ongoing interaction between individuals.

Just as Kierkegaard suggests that the individual develop in three "stages of life," society can also be seen as developing in three stages (or "ages"). Kierkegaard's social theory is dispersed throughout his writings, but is most explicit in *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review*. Like in the aesthetic stage of life, in the first level of society (the "Age of Revolution") values are determined by influential individuals. In the second level of society (the "Present Age") values are determined by the public, by social conformity.

However, social conformists in the second level of society are in despair. That is the problem with the "philistine-bourgeois" mentality, which was Kierkegaard's term for the elitist, urban middle class that has no concept of self. In Kierkegaard's words, the issue is that bourgeoisie subsists in "triviality, which also essentially lacks possibility. The philistine-bourgeois mentality is spiritlessness; determinism and fatalism are despair of spirit" (1980, p. 41). Kierkegaard's goal is to take away the bourgeois pride and false confidence in the ability to explain everything objectively and "scientifically," again, to stress the importance of subjectivity.

Marx himself can certainly be read as stressing the individual. In his early "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Marx states: "To be avoided above all is

establishing 'society' once again as an abstraction over against the individual" (1994, p. 73). The individual represents social ontology, and is the very expression of life, "even if it does not appear immediately in the form of a communal expression carried out together with others" (Marx, 1994, p. 73). Despite the lack of subjectivity, the ethical level represents the initial development of selves in the society; it is the beginning of the individual relating to a common idea. That may include passionate relationship to an idea such as patriotism, even a patriotism that has denigrated into nationalism. In that case ethnocentrism can be the result. Kierkegaard states: "if individuals relate to an idea *en masse* (consequently without the individual separation of inwardness), we get violence, anarchy, riotousness" (1978, p. 63).

The ethical is the sphere of responsibility and the beginning of making choices, and ethics is a primary criterion of selfhood. In a Kierkegaardian analysis, some social theories try to give life meaning through the ethical consideration of economic equality, and while justifiable, such approaches can still leave an existential void. However, when individuals "are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative. Individually the relation separates them (each one has himself for himself), and ideally it unites them" (1978, p. 62). So the final stage is the beginning of an authentic self to fill that existential void. Matching the final stage of life for the individual, the authentic (spiritual) stage, the third level of society represents the genuine community. It consists of authentically existing individuals.

The final level allows for absolute and "true" equality (and morality), not an artificially constructed equality. Many socialistic solutions have presupposed a level

of individuality, which does not necessarily exist in the public/class mentality. Kierkegaard maintains that egalitarianism is usually promoted on the basis of self-interest, not on a commitment to justice. That is because its members are not unified in relation to an idea. Robert Nisbet summarizes: "There can be no genuine community without an internal authority, one that binds the individual to himself and that provides him sanctuary from the alienation and atomization of an age of crisis" (1982, p. 142).

Thus, a common link is required, and in the third level of society it is spirituality. The problem is that the bourgeoisie suffers from spiritual apathy and the lack of compassion. For Kierkegaard, both are necessary to restore solidarity and a sense of community. Authenticity and change must begin with the individual. Only then is genuine equality possible. Sociologist James Marsh accurately summarizes Kierkegaard's position: "Religious faith without social praxis is empty and escapist; praxis without faith is technocratic and enslaving" (1984, p. 174).

There is no denying that organized religion has exercised power to control and oppress, and that it has often ignored social injustice throughout history. However, it commits a fallacy of composition to negatively evaluate any notion of spirituality on that basis. Furthermore, Marx himself states in the *Communist Manifesto* that such a synthesis is possible:

Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the State? Has it not preached in the place of these, charity and poverty... Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat (Marx, 1994, p. 178).

In *Marxism 1844-1990*, Roger Gottlieb presents a chapter titled “Marxism and Spirituality” in which he makes the point that we cannot “fully understand spirituality if we focus on its lowest manifestations.” Neither can we fairly evaluate Marxism if we only observe the model advanced by Stalin. Gottlieb states: “The model of spirituality I am developing must be understood as distinct from dogmatic religious attachments to particular rituals, creeds, or organizations” (1992, pp. 202-203). Organized religion, to use Marx’s phrase, can function and often does function as an opiate of the masses. But it does not necessarily have to work that way, and such an observation amounts to a sweeping generalization.

In *Jesus and Marx*, Jacques Ellul makes the point that Marx and his followers “erred in believing they had come face to face with Christianity itself, whereas they had found only its bourgeois transformation” (1988, p. 161). Marx is correct in asserting that faith apart from communal action will not overcome alienation. But it is just as true that “there is no community and no satisfactory overcoming of alienation without the subjective, psychological domain that some twentieth century Marxists have rediscovered” (Marsh, 1984, p. 173). So even if only in a pragmatic sense, Marxism must be more flexible if it is to be truly useful.

In a world where the vast majority of people are interested in some type of spirituality, Marxists should not be surprised that more people do not welcome a theory of social change that must presuppose a philosophy of atheism. In order to warrant an *a priori* dismissal of spirituality, Kierkegaard states that “Some stronger evidence is needed than socialism’s belief that God is the evil” (1978, vol. VI, p. 61).

The plain fact is that most people seek some type of spirituality, and from a sociological standpoint it has the effect of averting the development of alienation between the self and social institutions. An individual's religion can play a positive role. "In its own fundamental core it is prophetic and critical" (Marsh, 1995, p. 199). The spirituality to which Gottlieb refers does not call for a particular school of theology, but rather the general notion required for existential authenticity. The authentic individual cannot ignore social suffering, and that is the point for praxis in a Kierkegaardian view of society.

Leveling and Alienation

Kierkegaard lived during a period of radical social change, much of which was brought about by the Industrial Revolution. It is interesting that Kierkegaard regarded 1848 as his most productive year as an author; that same year saw revolution Western Europe, and was also very significant for Karl Marx and the publication of his *Communist Manifesto*. In a Kierkegaardian analysis, Marxism represents the second stage. It indeed calls for equality, but it is merely a mathematical equality, which is based on "leveling." That does not mean that Kierkegaard opposed its motivation; He openly criticized "the smug, culture-conscious conservatism of the upper bourgeoisie" (Kirmmse, 1990, p. 279).

Kierkegaard's political views were formed by a composite of ideas, he could not be called a democrat or a republican as the terms are used today. However, Bruce Kirmmse explains that "it can be seen how dependent upon liberalism in its origins and

how egalitarian and anti-elitist in its expression" (1990, p. 278). Kierkegaard's target was the established bourgeoisie, which tried to support itself with a denigrated form of religion to promote itself beyond the interests of each individual. "The established order, however, at that time insisted and always insists on being the objective, higher than each and every individual, than subjectivity" (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 86).

That absent but essential element of subjectivity is the result of the "when commensurability and congruity are accomplished and the established order has been deified" (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 90). That is because society becomes "God" in the sense that it alone is responsible for creating the mathematical congruity. Moreover, it creates a problem of existential dependence. Kierkegaard states: "To live in such an established order, particularly to be something in it, is a continuation of being tied to mother's apron strings" (1991, p. 90). In such a society existential authenticity is difficult because few, if any, decisions must be made by the individual. Society makes it entirely possible for each individual to: "spinelessly exempt oneself from the least little decision of the kind in which 'the single individual' has pain" (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 90).

Thus, leveling (as was, for example, practiced in the Soviet model) may overcome economic alienation. But it may also have the negative effect of creating an existential alienation of self. Sartre ultimately agreed with Kierkegaard that leveling can still leaves an existential void:

I don't know what will become of the Russian revolution... I can't swear that this will inevitably lead to a triumph of the proletariat. I've got to limit myself to what I see. Given that men are free, and that tomorrow they will freely

decide what man will be... Tomorrow, after my death some men may decide to set up Facism, and the others may be cowardly and muddled enough to let them do it. Facism will then be the human reality, so much the worse for us (Sartre, 1985, pp. 30-31).

Existential alienation means that one's consciousness as a volitional, intelligent being can be misanthropic and alienated. Kierkegaard's point on the relationship between the self and society is that in the final stage all individuals share the pursuit of spirituality, and are therefore related to each other by through a shared communal idea. Kirmmse expresses the view this way: "we are all equal before the eternal claims of the Good, before God. Our individuality before God is what separates us from one another, but it is also the source of our common humanity, which unites us" (1990, p. 290). For a Kierkegaardian sociology, the developing a corrective to the problems of injustice must begin with the individual.

For Marx, poverty, suffering, and injustice will only end with the revolutionary overthrow of those controlling the wealth. Class differences begin when one group of people claims as their private property resources that do not have to be consumed for immediate survival (surplus). That is the reason classes are defined in terms of ownership and nonownership regarding the means of production. In existential sociology such a grouping is significant due to its exploitative nature (this also creates a link with critical theory). One class, because it takes the surplus produced by another class, oppresses that producing class. Hence, class conflict is an inevitable feature of modern society.

The class conflict that exists today is of course nothing new. In Marxist terms

the oppressors were once slave owners, were once feudal lords. In contemporary times the oppressors are the owners of production, and political exploitation continues to take place all over the world. Kierkegaard disdains any attempt, including religious efforts, at justification of that separation of wealth and power. He severely criticized the apologetically oriented arguments for capitalism that derive themselves from religious ideology, which is also the reason the issue of concern to critical theorists and the critical political theologian.

Kierkegaard and Critical Theory

Habermas and Communicative Action

Critical theory compliments Kierkegaard's ideas by providing an analysis for understanding society. Kierkegaard can be seen as a forerunner to many themes of the Frankfurt School, and in fact appears in places to be doing critical social theory in some places (he influenced the Frankfurt School through Theodor Adorno). Like the critical theorists, Kierkegaard today would ask regarding Marxism whether the most basic problem in modernity is a purely economic one due to capitalism, or in inclination of society to deify itself and therefore become immune of any critique. Merold Westphal recognizes the parallels between Kierkegaard's sociology and critical theory, and suggests that "the strongest affinity between the two lies in the centrality for both of what the contemporary project calls *Ideologiekritik*' (1987).

The goal is to reveal and correct the false consciousness that emerges as

modernity attempts to legitimate itself. Kierkegaard is clearly doing that type of ideology critique in *Philosophical Fragments*. It can even be interpreted as his effort to elaborate on the epistemic ramifications of the critical theory he presents in other texts. The critical social aspect of writings of Kierkegaard has drawn more attention in recent years. Jurgen Habermas explained his at the World Congress of Philosophy in Brighton, England in 1988 that he had a renewed interest Kierkegaard. Habermas discussed the connecting of critical social theory and existential philosophy, and presented a paper that proposed the importance of intersubjectivity in community. "Habermas's appeals to Kierkegaard as his ally against positive theological appropriation of the communication model" (Matustik, 1993, p. xv).

Communication action is discursive, and therefore is not dominating like instrumental action, which objectifies everything. Instrumental reasoning seeks to turn everything into profit; it subjects everything to the pragmatic tests of utility. Communicative action is based on subject-subject relationships, while instrumental action is precisely the opposite, and is based on the subject-object dichotomy in which the self is alienated. Technical rationality has been the justification for the excesses of capitalism. In instrumental action there is no totality or sense of genuine community; it represents a teleological means-ends "power" philosophy where individuals are of no concern or value.

In contrast, communicative action refers to dialogue regarding a community's value of its actions. It is where individuals are not simply oriented to one's own success. Rather, they pursue goals under conditions where they can harmonize their

plans of action on the basis of common parameters. The paramount objective is the members of society working in cooperation toward communicative understanding. In communicative action, communication takes place between people in which context must be considered. Members of society working toward communicative understanding is an outgrowth of praxis based on the "Golden Rule," the foundation of the Kantian categorical imperative" and Habermasian "Communicative Ethics."

The human potential in which communicative action is rooted is language. As explained by Habermas, communicative action represents an effort made around understanding the nature of speech acts oriented toward comprehension. It also follows that the opposite of communicative action (instrumental action) is rooted in the evolutionary universal of work and tool. Critical theorists rightly begin ethical philosophy by positing a five world model: (1) the natural world, (2) the human inner world, (3) the social world, (4) the cultural world, and (5) the language world. Each world is connected to the five validity claims: (1) truth, (2) honesty, (3) rightfulness, (4) tastefulness, and (5) understandability. All five come together to comprise a discourse ethics that lays the foundation for praxis.

Critical theory can provide a renewed way of understanding, as a totality, the connections between individuals and society. It can serve as the foundation for creating individual self-awareness for the transformation of society. It all derives itself from the desire to reveal false consciousness, and on that basis it can be amalgamated with the same element in a Kierkegaardian sociology.

Ellul and the Critique of Technology

Kierkegaard is also associated with critical theory through his critique of the alienating power of technology. The critical theorists also question the mechanical, economic determinism of Marxism. They are critical of positivism because it, as Habermas maintains, loses sight of the actor. They rightly criticize the components of modern society such as the formal rationality of technology. That is a proper focus since technology is not "neutral;" it dominates people and therefore diminishes their subjectivity. The addition of subjectivity in an existential sense to Marxist theory may produce a more pragmatic Neo-Marxism.

Unlike traditional Marxists, but alongside existential sociologists, the critical theorists are concerned with actors and their consciousness. That approach is evident in Habermas's use of "lifeworld" (recalling phenomenology). The lifeworld represents an internal, subjective view. Alienation due to technology causes communication breakdown, which threatens the individuality of each person's lifeworld. Technological advancements continue to suppress subjective communication; technology objectifies humanity by turning people into things (which is the approach of the natural sciences).

Like the critical theorists, existential sociologists do not fail to recognize the benefits of technology, nor do they wish take away all technology. However, seeks to address the alienating characteristic of technological graduation. Jacques Ellul has contributed substantially to critical theory in that regard. Critical theorists have

reinforced his evaluations of the effects of technique on mass society, and of the domination of the Third World. Ellul's positions on technology and totalitarianism are acceptable to most critical theorists. Over the last few decades technology has dehumanized the individual by forcing people to put greater emphasis on rational decision and the endless pursuit of information.

The greatest threat of technology therefore is to objectify the self, to make the individual just another thing among many things. In Ellul's analysis, television and computers are primary examples. They represent "mass man" for Kierkegaard, and the problem is that they become increasingly necessary. "The preoccupations with entertainment, technique and media, of which Kierkegaard is so critical, have now become essential for capitalism" (Marsh, 1984, p. 171). To Ellul, the growing dependence on computers and other forms of technology indeed make some tasks quicker and easier, but they have the effect of creating increased fragility and vulnerability in society as a whole. Ellul states that: "The microcomputer is not going to lead to freedom but to conformity within the technical system and to smoother acceptance of the system" (1990, p. 111).

The frenzied pursuit of technology can also result in a waste of resources, and the excess of information threatens to create the consequence of misinformation. The problem here again is that the more it grows, the more dependent society becomes. We now rely on technology to the point that it is absolutely necessary. As Ellul describes the situation:

If the self thinks only in terms of necessity, considering that everything is

foreordained and ineluctably necessary, there is again despair, real despair. Kierkegaard uses a very simple comparison to show the link. The lack of possibility is like the babbling of an infant. Only the sounds are there. Necessity gives us the sounds, but only possibility gives us the words (Ellul, 1990, p. 217).

Thus, Ellul also recalls Kierkegaard's critical analysis in terms of the despair created by technology. It destroys the bonds of solidarity in a society by making personal communication play a far less significant role in daily life. The language of technology is algebraic, not interpersonal, so intersubjectivity is diminished. Technology is not at all concerned with existential issues. The critical social approach scrutinizes the anomic life of money and technology, and concludes that the pursuit of profit becomes increasingly more important than a consideration of meaning in life as technology grows. "It rejects any relation to values. It cannot give meaning to life nor give insight into new values" (Ellul, 1990, p. 148).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Sociology and Ethical Obligation

Any consideration of praxis presupposes a theoretical foundation that identifies normative values. For a Kierkegaardian analysis, in the first level of society (the “Age of Revolution”) influential individuals determine values; it corresponds to the aesthetic stage of the individual in which the I is absolute. The axiological problem in that case is clear; the prescribed values are only as exemplary as the theorists who posit them are. So can sociology be based on a deontological approach to values, is praxis purely a matter of relativism?

Sociologist Alan Wolfe sides with deontology in his book *Whose Keeper: Social Science and Moral Obligation*. His goal is to demonstrate that modern liberal democracies have eroded “civil society” as the result of relying on economic and political guidance, rather than traditional roots, to determine moral obligation. The traditional sources of morality (faith, spirituality, and virtue ethics) have been replaced with emphases on market economy and governmental bureaucracy. Wolfe’s thesis fits well with a Kierkegaardian sociology, since the great paradox of modernity is that markets and states cannot be accepted or rejected completely: we must depend on both, while at the same time recognize the necessity of moral agency (1989).

Wolfe has three paramount points that parallel an existential approach to praxis. The first is that "neither the state nor the market was ever expected to operate without the moral ties found in civil society" (1989, p. 19). The second point is that the more a society relies on the state or market to organize moral codes, the more "living with the paradoxes of modernity will become increasingly difficult" (1989, p. 20). The last point is that sociology ought to recover the tradition that was at the heart of the Enlightenment. He concludes that though social scientists may be uncomfortable in accepting it, their work has calculable consequences in society because each researcher is a "moral philosopher in disguise" (1989, p. 23).

Even those sociologists who pride themselves on "value neutrality," insisting that they are merely making descriptivist statements, are nonetheless generating prescriptivist propositions that set an agenda for how members of society ought to act toward one another. That normative aspect of sociology should be acknowledged with an admitted responsibility. Wolfe supports that main proposition with a comparison of available data between the practical consequences of the moral sovereignty of the market (as observed in the United States) and the moral sovereignty of the state (as observed in Scandinavia, principally in Kierkegaard's native country of Denmark).

There is always a dilemma in going past the individual with the attempt to legislate morality. Increased governmental influence over values leads to enlarged bureaucracy, which has a tendency to limit personal altruism and moral unity (Wolfe, 1989). To support the idea that traditional values are diminishing, Wolfe refers to Census data indicating that corporate charitable contributions have steadily declined.

That reflects the notion that the state has taken over tasks, such as charity, that were once associated with individuality in cultural solidarity.

Wolfe concludes that though voluntarism is still praised and sought as a virtuous activity, coming trends of benevolence may not be positive (1989). He realizes that such a prediction based on the data is to some extent dubious. But even with the admitted methodological limitations, Wolfe capably defends his thesis and calls for a "Revival of a sociological approach to moral obligation" (1989, p. 19). The question is a legitimate one: does social science have an obsessive preoccupation with government and the economy? Sociology seems frequently to function as "political economy in disguise" (1989, p. 206). Such activity focused on the market and state leave citizens in a moral vacuum (relativism). Wolfe echoes Kierkegaard in his view that sociology exacerbates the dilemma with its functionalistic emphasis on cultural relativism. Taken to its logical outgrowth, cultural relativism may lead to absurd conclusions; it cannot even objectively maintain that Adolph Hitler was immoral (Wolfe, 1989).

Furthermore, beyond the difficulty in defining "culture" in terms of parameters that would prescribe values for all people, it is absurd to suggest that there is such a thing as an "American" culture to which all people belong. How can multicultural societies, with each member belonging to multiple subcultures possibly base uniform social values on culture? In addition, cultural relativism as a basis for praxis would mean that there can never be social progress or social reform because the first people in any movement will be going against the dominant culture. In a Kierkegaardian analysis, cultural relativism insists that truth is always with the crowd, an individual

can never be correct if he or she disagrees with the crowd. Thus, civil disobedience should never take place, even in cases of horrendous social injustice.

That is the problem in the second level of society (the "Present Age") where values are determined by the society. It corresponds to the ethical stage of the individual in which the Me is absolute. While that indeed implies a move beyond the emotivism and egoism of values in the first level, cultural relativism is still a form of relativism. Can society always be counted on the articulate right values? Paul Tillich raises this question in his controversial text *Socialist Decision*: "Who is to be responsible for the structuring of society, and what guarantee is there that it will be done rationally?" (Tillich, 1977, p. 49).

Thus, it seems that a wholly relativistic, teleological ethic is inadequate to make praxis normative. Wolfe calls for a deontological-Kantian ("respect for persons") approach is the foundation for sociological moral theory (1989, p. 245). A duty based ethic cannot work with state enforced norms taking the place of the Kierkegaardian autonomous individual acting in accordance with his own moral will. The key is positively influencing individuals, not an imposed morality that functions as a surrogate for genuine individuality. The state may be able to provide material commodities and eventually orchestrate greater equality in society, but it is inadequate to instruct in cases of moral dilemma.

While the state ought to acknowledge that we have binding moral obligations to one another, it should not institute practices that only serve to weaken the moral connections of family and community. As social bonds weaken, individuals become

more alienated. In Wolfe's analysis, as the government expands, the civil society condenses. For that reason Wolfe also disdains a market economy, believing that bureaucratic instructions may not always be the ideal method to make citizens more morally enlightened. We must also not be naive about market capitalism, and recognizes the weaknesses of the effects of a system driven by self-interest. An existential approach to ethics seeks to redirect the fundamentals of sociology by emphasizing human agency.

Summary and Implications for Praxis

Kierkegaardian social theory looks theoretically back to Mead and symbolic interactionism, which initiated the change that created other subjectivist theories. The work of Kierkegaard and Sartre were primary influences in the development of existential social theory. Kierkegaard's starting point is the idea that all knowledge is either scientific or existential. Scientific knowledge is understood to be objective, detached, and disinterested in existence. It aims at objective truth. The dialectical opposite to this is existential knowledge, which directs itself at subjective truth; it is engaged and passionately interested in life. Kierkegaardian subjectivity is based on human life, as it is lived in the three stages.

A Kierkegaardian sociology also starts from that point; it views the existing individual as the irreducible being who is simultaneously knower and known, thinker and thought. The position emerges out of Kierkegaard's basic posture that one creates meaning through the exercise of intentionality. Thus, existential sociology takes

as its subject human experience in the world. In applying the stages of the individual to the development of society, it is concluded that the subjectivity of the individual in the third stage is necessary to develop a genuine community of individuals. In Kierkegaardian terms, modernity makes people overly reflective, and therefore incapable of genuine social action. Kierkegaard was critical of Hegel on that standpoint, and “found fault with any social philosophy - whether a dialectic of spirit or one of matter - which does not take issue with Hegel on this crucial point” (Collins, 1983, p. 182). Kierkegaard would agree with Marx “that Feuerbach is too exclusively theoretical, but Kierkegaard’s own attitude toward action was much more than a ‘putting of theory into practice’ (Collins, 1983, p. 182). So he calls for spirituality to revive solidarity, and to create the compassion to overcome the bourgeois apathy regarding social conditions, and compassion of that kind demands action.

For a Kierkegaardian sociology social reform must not be based on racial, nationalistic agendas. Kierkegaard writes in his journal on March 27, 1848 that nationalism is growing, and that it produces many dangers. He states: “Outside everything is in movement, nationalism surges high in all, everyone talks of sacrificing life and blood, is perhaps also ready to do it, but supported by the omnipotence of public opinion. (1978, vol. V, p. 441). Kierkegaard did not support the “national cause.” He is a postnationalist in the sense in the final level of society patriotism and allegiance to one’s own country is not the priority that it may be in the second stage (of which Marxism is an example).

For Kierkegaard the allegiance to one's own culture can never become an absolute value. His egalitarianism challenged the thinking of his day. He depicts the present age the way America might be described today: "as a passionless, flag-waving, indolent swamp with sparks of sentimentally nationalist or pseudoreligious enthusiasm" (Matustik, 1993, p. 238). Kierkegaard calls nationalism nonsense, and states that it is the result of "paganism's deification of nationalities" (1978, vol. IV, p. 144). He maintains that it is a form of "mental disintegration" that will be Denmark's downfall. "It is we ourselves who are internally disintegrating. Public life is carried on in a lurching between envy and pity, but no pathos, no enthusiasm" (1978, vol. IV, p. 168).

That lack of subjectivity is the reason nationalism is able to recruit anomic, fragmented individuals who have become "susceptible to manipulative misuse by political elites" (Matustik, 1993, p. 21). A Kierkegaardian view of self identifies that the "philistine-bourgeois" sought to be elitist because they have no concept of self. Having to think of oneself as superior to all others is a clear sign of despair; it is a pathological way of creating a self-identity. The upper class person whose identity is linked entirely to wealth, or the racist, whose identity is linked to skin pigmentation, is an example of one in need of an authentic self, and without unified authentic selves there can be no genuine community for reform.

That is why interest in subjectivist theories of human experience are increasing as present day manifestations of existential ideas continue to appear in psychology, sociology and related disciplines. As Kotarba explains, new social forms are: "reflections of new ways of which members of our society are coming to think and feel about

themselves" (Kotarba, 1984, p. 225). As a result, the general understanding of a Kierkegaardian sociology may offer valuable insights toward the solutions of future social questions.

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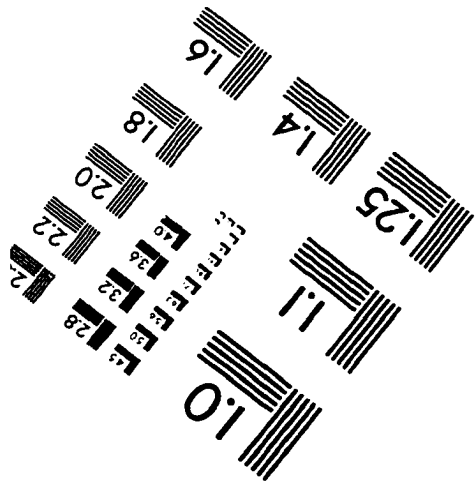
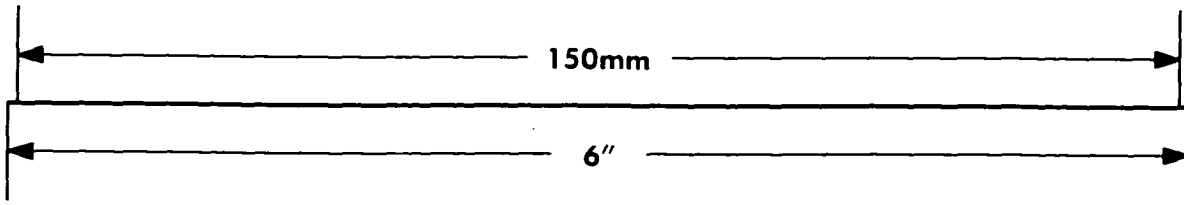
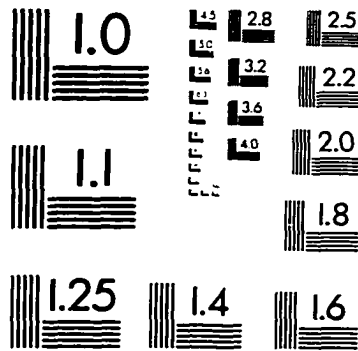
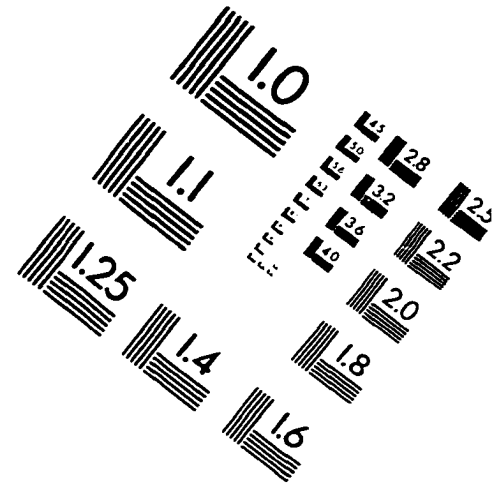
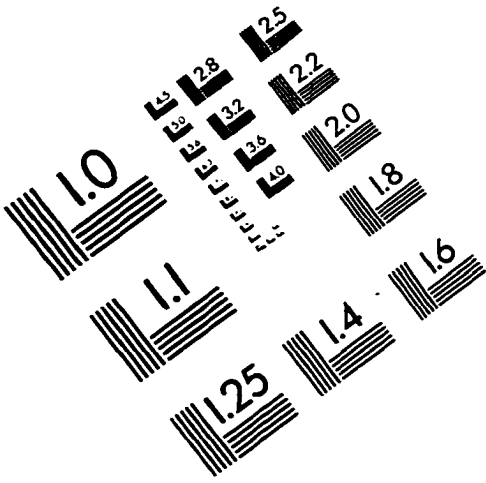
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