Preface

If I were to request an inscription on my grave, I request none other than *that single individual.*¹

If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not.²

The two quotations express two central convictions of Kierkegaard that anchor his whole thought in concrete life. For him, the most important thing in life is to become a single individual—an individual who fully embraces the *thisness* of his existence and bases his identity on nothing other than the undeserved gift of being here. This, Kierkegaard is convinced, is impossible without the passion of possibility—a passion that does not despair in the face of the sufferings and temptations of real life, the limitations of an imperfect reality and the constraints and necessities that we have to put up with because we cannot change them. Instead, it sees everywhere possibilities that arise in life unexpectedly and surprisingly, making it an adventure that cannot be calculated or channeled through the past, but for which every present becomes the starting point of a new future. It is a surprising fact to be here, although this might not have been the case, and to be able to live, because there are always chances and possibilities that are played into one’s life and allow one to shape one’s own life story, although this might not be the case either.

We are all born not as selves or subjects but as human beings, one among many, members of families, groups, societies, nations, states, one case among many similar ones. We have complex identities because we belong to many different layers, structures, and groupings of our biological, social, and cultural life. But all this makes us only members of a herd, a mass, a crowd, and not unique individuals. We are a multitude of generalities, but that alone does not make us a true self.

However, one never is a unique individual and a true self but can only become one. As human beings we are born, but individual selves we must become. Humanity cannot be denied to any human being. Being a self or subject can. We must first become responsible subjects and distinctive individuals. And we will only become this in a permanent process of decentering, of transcending what we are at any given time and of orienting ourselves towards what is possible

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¹ SKS 16, 98 / *PV*, 118f; cf. SKS 20, 280, NB3:77 / *KJN* 4, 280.
² SKS 2, 50 / *EO1*, 41.

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for us here and now. We must move from being to ought, from the present to the future, from actuality to possibility. We must not be content with what we are but strive for what we can and should be. Unique individuals exist only in becoming, they are fragile, and that is their strength. They are not grounded by their own activities, but in an extra se, the flip side of which is a deep passivity that underlies all their activity and allows them to continually leave themselves and move beyond their respective actualities toward the new and the possible.

Not many achieve this goal. And not all who do have a guarantee that they will not lose the goal again. To become a single individual and true self, one must not be content with being a member of a group or a case among others, but rather, beyond all comparative views with others, must relate to and orient oneself to the one without whom no other could be: the actuality of the possible, to which all that is possible and real owes itself and which Christians—and not merely Christians—call ‘God’. Only those who direct their identity in the orientation to this origin, primordial ground and unground, who makes being come out of nothing, good out of evil and life out of death, can become unmistakable, unique, single individuals. Without a passion for the possible and the inalienable reality to which everything possible owes itself, there is no truly single individual. No one can say 'I am' without thereby showing that God is. There is no I (self) without another I (you, he, she, they) from which it differs, and there can be no I nor anything else without God, who differs from everything by giving it the time and the space, the power, and the energy to live as his creation.


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The book was written in connection with my study The Priority of the Possible.³ It should be read in conjunction with the considerations developed there. Taken together, the two books make clear why I think the category of possibility should be central to the exploration of the grandeur and perils, the beauty and the abyss of human existence. Kierkegaard was right when he wrote: “If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not.” For every contingent reality passes away, but possibility remains, because all possibility owes itself to God, the actuality of the possible that never perishes.

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