

Between Ultra-Essentialism and Post-Essentialism: Kierkegaard as Transitional and Contemporary

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Søren Kierkegaard is an extraordinary figure in the history of philosophy. If one is prepared to use the broadest of brushstrokes, there is much to be said for seeing him as standing on the threshold of, and crucially contributing to, the transition between modern and contemporary European philosophy. In this contributory role of mediating between epochs of thought, it is fitting that he shares much in common with his predecessor and fellow herald of the transcendent God of Christianity—Augustine—in the latter’s standing astride the ancient and the medieval, and in likewise providing key elements for a momentous shift in the dominant philo-theological framework.

Yet Kierkegaard is also something of an enigma; he is much too multi-dimensional in his concerns and subtle in his distinctions to be easily summed up in catch-phrases such as “the father of existentialism,” as justified as such ascriptions may be. Like Augustine, Kierkegaard’s influence in a range of purportedly distinct ‘disciplines’ is extensive, for like the former, he saw no difficulties in—indeed he saw an imperative for—addressing philosophy, theology and psychology together.¹ In this way, Kierkegaard’s influence on twentieth century thought has been immense, from his impact on Jaspers, the early Heidegger, Sartre and the ‘existentialist’ movement generally; to his inspiration of Barth and Tillich and other seminal thinkers in Protestant theology; to his (largely indirect) influence on psychodynamic theory and practice developed by theorists such as May, Fromm and Becker; to the continuing influence of his work on contemporary post-secular and quasi-religious deconstructionist thought.

As a result of these many appropriations of Kierkegaardian thought, there are indeed many Kierkegaards. In this context, it would appear to be a valuable exercise to consider—whilst retaining the ‘broad brush approach’ alluded to earlier—two issues in particular: (a) the nature of Kierkegaard’s contribution to the historical transition between the dominant intellectual environment out of which he wrote, and to which his work was such a strident reaction, and the twentieth century movements to which his thought was a major contributing source; and (b) to do this specifically with a view to providing an understanding of the nature of his legacy to contemporary thought in its eminently post-rationalist condition.

What I am proposing is that these two tasks are closely related: that it is only through understanding Kierkegaard historically as a transitional figure between the

'ultra-essentialism' of early 19th century continental thought (typified by Hegel) on one hand, and the 'anti-essentialism' of 20th century secular existentialist and post-foundationalist thought (typified by Sartre and Derrida respectively) on the other, that the relevance of his work to contemporary philosophical thought can be clearly appreciated. More particularly, it is precisely because Kierkegaard avoided an anti-essentialist approach even in his forthright rejection of Hegelian rationalistic ultra-essentialism, that his thought is of such relevance to the dominant contemporary situation in which 'essence' has all but disappeared from the philosophical radar.

I

Despite his characteristic focus on the latter, I would like to insist that there is an important balance in Kierkegaard's work between human ontology (the horizons of our being; our foundational 'essence') and the task of existence to which we are called. Indeed, it is precisely the nature and context of this delicate balancing act on which this paper will focus.

Of course, it has to be acknowledged at the outset that the whole idea that it is possible and necessary to speak of a Kierkegaardian 'ontology' (particularly one which is said to ground his keynote existential analysis) is controversial in itself. There are indeed good reasons why this is so, for at first glance the suggestion seems to run counter to the orthodoxy of several well-established interpretive traditions in Kierkegaardian scholarship, not the least of which are the desire to take absolutely seriously Kierkegaard's polemic against the western metaphysical tradition, as well as his decidedly anti-systematic authorial style and literary techniques. Obviously, these are two central issues that must be comprehensively taken into account in any interpretation of Kierkegaard's texts. I want to insist, however, that while Kierkegaardian thought is certainly opposed to totalizing essentialist ontologies, his approach certainly does not reject ontology as such. That is, Kierkegaard retained a nuanced set of ideas concerning the basic ontology of the human person; the human way of being; the elemental parameters within which all existing individuals have their being.

Before going on, it is first important to defend this claim. The space available precludes the option of delving at any depth into the ontology of the existing self that Kierkegaard develops particularly in works such as *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death*, but it will nonetheless be useful to highlight some of the major features of his contentions ahead of the discussion to follow.

Why these two works are of particular interest is that in both cases the 'metaphysics' of the existing individual is explicitly expressed in terms of, (a) a series of classical metaphysical polarities (the elements of which are familiar Kierkegaardian themes), and (b) the synthesis of these polarities in a set of positive third terms. In *Anti-Climacus*'

utterly dialectical view of human ontology, the self is understood within the framework of three dialectical relations—that I will refer to as ‘immediacy’, ‘self-reflexivity’ and the ‘God-relation’—which while involving a teleological orientation towards the third relation, nonetheless involves no inexorable momentum to this effect.

The first relation is the psycho-somatic unity itself. This is the synthesis of two quite finite terms: the factual body and its finite principle of animation, the soul. Anti-Climacus refers to this as a “negative unity”, presumably in that its synthesizing term, “spirit”, plays only a passive role. In *The Concept of Dread*, Haufniensis portrays the individual who has not developed beyond such a simple unity as being in a state of immediacy in which the “spirit is dreaming.”² In such an individual, spirit’s potentiality lies undeveloped; its involvement in the dialectic of immediacy is purely to act as a “path” (as Hannay helpfully puts it³) along which body and soul may relate.

The second relation in Anti-Climacus’ schema is made possible by the “waking” of spirit, and thus the emergence of the self’s reflexive consciousness. This is a ‘positive relation’, for the various synthesizing middle terms involved (self-consciousness, freedom and the concrete self) are all what he calls “positive third terms”; that is, synthesizing terms which actively “supervise” (again, to use Hannay’s word⁴) the dialectically opposed terms of each polarity. There is no sense in which these pivotal Kierkegaardian categories are to be understood simply as mediations between ‘position’ and ‘negation’ as per the Hegelian dialectics of *Aufhebung*; they are not simply sublimations and preservations of the opposed poles of each synthesis, but must rather be understood as qualitatively new realities that are, in fact, the ontological foundations of human existentiality.

A great deal of *The Sickness unto Death* is devoted to fleshing out the dynamics of the polarities that emerge in this second relation, particularly as seen by the failure to successfully synthesize them, a situation which is referred to as the “mis-relation” (or ‘imbalance’) of despair. In terms of the ubiquity of despair, the nub of the problem is to be seen precisely in the shared nature of these several polarities: namely, that one pole is factual in nature (finitude, actuality, necessity) and the other is hyperbolic (infinitude, ideality, possibility). To be human is, therefore, to be a *prima facie* contradiction.

The details of these several reflexive polarities are reasonably well-known. First, the self is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, and despair is associated with an imbalance in either direction. The individual who dwells primarily in finitude lives with limited horizons, in ‘spiritlessness’, for imagination—itsself a function of waking spirit—is inactive. Yet, just as problematic, it is maintained, is the individual who is intoxicated with the infinite: the person cast adrift from reality on the ocean of imagination. This too is despair. Second, the self is a synthesis of necessity and possibility. Accordingly, the individual trapped by necessity lacks access to the infinitude of possible decisions and actions open to it at every moment, while the person who dwells always in possibility fails to make the choices essential to the attainment of genuine selfhood. Again, both extremes are forms of despair. To these two polarities,

one might also add a third (which arises in *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*), one that is absolutely essential for understanding the emergence of self-consciousness, a quality which is for Kierkegaard both intimately connected with the waking of spirit, and which is the ‘first-fruits’ of spirit. Accordingly, the self is understood as a synthesis of the real and ideal selves, a movement which takes place through the agency of reflection, with self-consciousness as the positive third term.

In turning to the last of the three relations comprising Kierkegaard’s ontology—the point at which the relation that relates to itself in turn relates to “that which has established the whole relation”⁵—a much more complex picture emerges. In particular, the notions of balance and synthesis noticeably slip away. In relating to the source of its being, the person of faith sides specifically with the eternal (the faith perspective) rather than the temporal (the worldly perspective), and this is because for Kierkegaard the *telos* of spirit is the eternal.

But what the God-relation also reveals is the impossibility of achieving synthetic balance according to the polarities of the second relation alone. The requirement of “infinitely coming away from oneself in an infinitizing of the self, and in infinitely coming back to oneself in the finitization,”⁶ and to do so in each moment of existence, is shown to be impossible apart from the transformatory effect of the eternal. Under the influence of the eternal, the reflexive hyperbolic poles (the infinite, the possible and the ideal) are ineffably transformed into states that are stable and sustainable, as well as being filled with an intensity appropriate for the fulfillment of spirit. In terminology borrowed from *The Concept of Irony*,⁷ the “external infinity” of imagination (that takes the individual beyond and away from itself), is replaced by the “internal” or “true infinity” of the inwardness of faith. Similarly, the vast but empty spaces of temporal possibility are replaced by the faith that—as Anti-Climacus repeats almost mantra like in sections of *The Sickness unto Death*—“for God, everything is possible.”⁸

In this way, rhapsodic passages such as the extraordinary final chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*—in which infinity, possibility and eternity are used more or less as synonyms—can be understood alongside Anti-Climacus’ polarities. Just as the movement from immediacy to self-reflexivity marks a qualitative ontological change in the individual’s mode of being, so too does the second great leap into the God-relation. And whereas the movement from immediacy to self-reflexivity involved the positing of the hyperbolic aspects of human being, the establishment of the God-relation brings these aspects to fruition, absolutizing or ‘eternalizing’ them.

If the foregoing paragraphs provide some account of Kierkegaard’s ontology of the individual, what follows is a series of reflections on how the balance between ontology and existentiality in Kierkegaardian thought places him between the extremes of ultra-essentialism and post-essentialism.

II

It is, of course, a supreme irony (something for which, famously, Kierkegaard had a keen appreciation) that one who had so much to do with the movement from modern to contemporary thought—that most, at best, agnostic of epochs—was himself a deeply religious thinker. Indeed, his radically theological point of reference—as has been seen, the inseparability of his ontology of the self from its teleological God-relation and its orientation to ideality—contrasts sharply with not only twentieth century thought, but arguably almost as starkly with the major philosophies of the modern era as a whole. Louis Dupré some time ago drew attention to this aspect of Kierkegaardian thought when he wrote:

Kierkegaard is the very first modern philosopher to place man's relationship to God in the very heart of the self. Rather than construct a philosophy of religion, as his idealistic predecessors did, Kierkegaard laid the foundation for a religious philosophy, by making freedom in the very act of self-constitution dependent upon the transcendent.⁹

From this perspective, perhaps the most interesting aspect to Kierkegaardian thought is the unusual combination of positions he uncompromisingly affirmed, and this is best illustrated by understanding Kierkegaard as a transitional figure between the dominant essentialism of his own times, and the dominant anti-essentialism of recent movements (movements which have fed—and continue to feed—on his thought). Crudely put, Kierkegaard was simultaneously an anthropological Heraclitian and a theological Parmenidean, and it is in the not always harmonious 'fit' between these two very different and yet essentially connected dimensions of his thought, that the enigma of Kierkegaard is most clearly evident.

On the one hand, Kierkegaard stands in the absolute vanguard of those post-Hegelian thinkers who stridently rejected the fundamental presuppositions and methodologies of rationalistic philosophy and championed the notion of the radically free individual for whom 'certainty' is a lie. There are at least two principal elements here. First, in terms of anthropology, there is the twin rejection of the metaphysical tradition's overt tendency to privilege substance over becoming, and the universal over the individual. In direct contradiction of Hegel, Kierkegaard insisted on the primacy of the concrete particular individual over any systemization of reality¹⁰ in which the individual is dissolved into generalized totalities and inexorable processes. In this Kierkegaard stands together with Nietzsche in the latter's rejection of the de-historicizing, "mummifying" methodology of the disciples of Parmenides, those "horrible idolaters of concepts" for whom "whatever has being, does not become (and) whatever becomes, does not have being."¹¹

Second, Kierkegaard rejected what he saw as the hubristic totalizing tendencies of

western metaphysics in its claim, most poignantly made in Hegel's system, to have grasped eternal reality through reason. Hegel's own claims in this respect are scarcely hidden: "The fast-bound substance of the universe," he proclaims in the *Phenomenology*, "has no power within it capable of withstanding the courage of man's knowledge: it must give way before him, and lay bare before his eyes and for his enjoyment, its riches and its depths."¹²

This dual aspect of Kierkegaard's thought rightly characterizes him as a modern 'nominalist', a pioneer advocate of the radical philosophical reclamation of individuality, freedom, becoming, imagination (perhaps even, "*la différance*"), and the primacy of subjective volition and decision. In several respects, then, Kierkegaard may with justification be considered the 'father of existentialism'. His pioneering work on the meaning of human anxiety was foundational for the early Heidegger, despite the latter's scant acknowledgement to this effect, and so too (notwithstanding Hegel's earlier rationalist-idealist prefiguring of this hugely significant turn) was his original understanding of the dimensions of human freedom according to which temporality was characterized as the primary human horizon of being. In this respect, assertions such as, "a self, every moment it exists, is in a process of becoming, for the self *κατὰ δύαμιν* is not present actually, it is merely what is to come into existence,"¹³ are striking anticipations of perhaps the central maxim of later existentialist thought. In short, as twentieth century socio-political history has been said to begin with the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, 'twentieth century philosophy' may be said to begin with Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in 1843.

Yet, on the other hand, there is much in Kierkegaard that is anathema to this trend. Most importantly, his rejection of the rationalistic triumphalism of the Hegelian system had a specifically theological basis. Unlike a Kantian or an empiricist critique founded on epistemological reservation or skepticism about the possibility of such a quest per se, or indeed a Nietzschean assault on the very idea of eternal realities behind the flux of experience, Kierkegaard's reasoning was rather founded on his axiological presupposition about the radical transcendence of God, a gulf he saw as unbridgeable by the ambitions of human rationality, and breached only by the ineffable contradiction of Christ.

Herein lies a crucial consequence of his uncompromising emphasis—alluded to above—on the individual as a 'theological being'. It is at this point that the nature of Kierkegaardian thought as falling mid-way between Hegelian ultra-essentialism and twentieth century post-essentialism becomes clear, as does the extent of the truncation of Kierkegaard's thought in its appropriation by the latter.

Kierkegaard rejected western metaphysics not because he was *a priori* disposed towards an anti-supernaturalist or humanist agenda in which human free becoming is affirmed as the ground of all being, in which the human becomes god to itself. Nothing could be further from the case. Indeed, that the human is not God is the very reason why for Kierkegaard the Hegelian project to grasp the essence of the Divine and to discern the implications of such knowledge for ourselves is hubristic in the extreme.

While Kierkegaard clearly differs from the Hegelians in his programmatic assertion that reason is no quasi-divine tool for gaining ultimate knowledge, he just as stridently differs from Nietzsche and dominant forms of both twentieth century secular existentialism and contemporary post-modernism in his fundamental affirmation that there is an eternal and Divine dimension to which all human becoming properly tends and with which the individual is able to conform itself. For Kierkegaard, the eternal is the *telos* of human existence, even though he was intensely aware of the *prima facie* contradiction this establishes by definition.

Thus, for all the revolutionary aspects of Kierkegaard's assault on rationalist metaphysics, at no point does he propose to do away with the established 'two-worlds' outlook of classical metaphysics and traditional theism. In purely, though radically, pushing Hegel's immanent-eternal realm back into a transcendence beyond the grasp of human finite reason, Kierkegaard presupposes the same bi-polarity that is foundational for Christian Platonism and which was scorned by Nietzsche. Indeed, not only is Kierkegaard's ontology of the self totally constituted by this schema, but his conception of what it means to become a self in the fullest sense stretches the boundaries of what was referred to above as his 'anthropological Heraclitianism' to the very limits.

In this light it can be seen that despite Kierkegaard's unrelenting attack on the Hegelian system, he essentially remained unapologetically committed to Hegel's conception of religion as the "unhappy consciousness." Further, his refusal to allow the possibility of any "overcoming" of this state of affairs through the hubristic eros of reason, leads directly to his notion of anxiety. How so? On the one hand Kierkegaard insists that the finitude of human being means that we cannot have direct access to the eternal. Yet, at the same time, he insists that in nothing less is the human fulfilled, for without the infinitizing effect of the eternal, the individual is by definition in "despair." This 'impossible necessity' is the *prima facie* contradiction referred to above, and in Kierkegaard's analysis it is the root of the ontologically constitutive human phenomenon of anxiety. For to the extent that the individual must always be finite and determined by nature of the human constitution, this is a state that can never be unambiguously overcome; or rather, it needs to be overcome again and again in each moment of existence.

Of course, to impose the term "*prima facie* contradiction" on Kierkegaard's presentation of the relationship between temporal finitude and the transcendent eternal, is to be not particularly faithful to the nuances of his own vocabulary. He would rather describe their relating as "paradox." In the very heart of *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus comes to the crux of this issue: "paradox emerges." he maintains, precisely when "the eternal truth and existing are placed together"; in relating "the eternal, essential truth to the existing person."¹⁴

It is in this context that the profound importance to Kierkegaard's presentation of the Christian gospel of salvation comes to the fore. In a sense, Kierkegaard contends that while the Hegelian ascent to the heavens via rationality (or via Platonism, or any other like schema, including, I would suggest, Socratic "Religiousness A") is a hubristic impossibility, some method of ascent is necessary. Here is the climax of the

Kierkegaardian paradigm: through faith the individual to some extent participates in the eternal, not by erotic self-ascending, but by faithfully allowing oneself to be drawn by the ‘impossible’ action of the God who brings the infinite into the finite, the eternal into the temporal, within—and only within—the existing faithful individual. Here is the paradox of faith in all its counter-rational “offensiveness”: that “(t)he eternal truth has come into existence in time.”¹⁵

What is to be made of this delicate balancing act in Kierkegaard’s thought in terms of twentieth century anti-essentialism? Secular existentialism for its part programmatically refuses the Kierkegaardian movement of faith, and indeed (with a few exceptions such as Process thought) the exclusion of any possible influence from beyond the temporal/finite realm—particularly, any notion of a teleology which conditions all finite particularity—is emblematic of twentieth century philosophy. Sartre, who is perhaps the clearest example of all in this regard, takes on the full force of Kierkegaard’s melancholic conclusion about the inability of reason (or anything else for that matter) to save us from finitude, and proceeds on the basis of the individual’s abandonment. If the human creature has any *telos* at all, it must be a totally self-created one so that it is in this way condemned to the numbing responsibility of its freedom.¹⁶ In Sartre’s hands, Kierkegaard’s notion of the precedence of paradox over rationality (faith as “offensive” to reason) is transformed into the comprehensive absurdity of human being as such in its lack of any in-built transcendent *telos*. This is to accept Kierkegaard’s critique while rejecting his solution; to chide him for lacking courage at the crucial point, for “shrink(ing) back” from the logical consequences of his truest insights (as Heidegger said of Kant¹⁷). It is to affirm his negation, while rejecting his return; to dismiss the possibility of a dialectic of faith as mere wishful thinking.

The case of contemporary post-structuralist responses to Kierkegaard—especially of ‘post-secular’ deconstructionism—is somewhat more subtle. Nevertheless, I would like to maintain the importance of opposing certain trends in contemporary Kierkegaardian scholarship that would claim a closer affinity between Kierkegaard and contemporary post-essentialism than would appear justified. In this sense, Derrida’s recent interest in Kierkegaardian thought (particularly his reading of *Fear and Trembling*¹⁸) is of special interest.

Certainly, Derrida and like-minded thinkers such as John D. Caputo are right to point out the important lines of kinship between Kierkegaard’s anti-essentialist metaphysics—his favouring of the individual over the general—and the tendencies and presuppositions of their own approaches. The reasons for this have already been spelt out, and Caputo himself is not far off the mark in his comment: “Kierkegaard and Derrida have a common nemesis—the infinite appetite of Hegel’s totalizing dialectic—and a common affection for everything fragment-like.”¹⁹ However, I would venture to add—again to follow the argument pursued above—that there are important limits to how closely Kierkegaardian thought can be legitimately rounded into the deconstructionist camp. While Kierkegaard and Derrida share the “common nemesis” of Hegelianism, and while their solutions share a definite kinship, the imperatives

of their respective bodies of thought that give rise to such an overlap of interest are very different.

The central problem is this: unlike Derrida, Kierkegaard's opposition to Hegelianism and his consequent "affection" for concrete particularity has a specifically teleological orientation, and what is more, one based on a definite ontology of human being in which this teleology is rooted. The crux of this difference is perhaps clearest with reference to the third relation of Kierkegaard's ontology—the God-relation—which is, after all, the context out of which Kierkegaard presents the story of Abraham's teleological suspension of the ethical. While it is true that for Kierkegaard the God-relation represents a rupture of the articulatable structure of human being (such as the emphasis on synthesis and balance), as has been seen, the same is true of the movement from immediacy to self-reflexivity: all three relations are qualitatively different modes of being. In other words, for Kierkegaard, the God-relation is no discontinuity in which all hitherto certainties come crashing down; on the contrary, it is the most certain aspect of human ontology of all, a constituent reality that is rooted in the very essence of human being; that towards which all concrete individual existence properly tends.

Further, if for Derrida the gift of Godself as saviour can only be understood in the sense of infinite deferral in which the gift never appears as such,²⁰ it seems clear that on the contrary for Kierkegaard, faith is a gift that can be and must be actually received; even if it requires on the part of the recipient the utmost courage in the face of anxiety. If pushed, one might even suggest that Kierkegaard is in this sense a model of 'undeconstructed' essentialism! He retains the temerity to present the individual as an entity teleologically driven by the impulse of spirit towards its final realization in the consummation of the eternal. If, on the other hand, Kierkegaard is truly to be considered a quasi-deconstructionist, one must be prepared to read key Kierkegaardian texts radically against their deepest expressed intentions. Consider such a scenario: eternal truth never actually comes into existence in time; the Anti-Climacian dialectic never actually arrives at synthesis, with consciousness, selfhood and freedom being continually deferred; the "Knighthood of Infinite Resignation" never actually passes over into the "The Knighthood of Faith," and so on. At best, one might consider such essentialist ideas to be merely creative spurs to activity, not as realizable in themselves, but this would be an utterly unKierkegaardian reading of Kierkegaard.

There is nothing glib or complacent about Kierkegaard's dialectic of faith, nor indeed of his conceptions of consciousness, freedom, selfhood, spirit and so on. After all, here is the crux of the motif of repetition, for Kierkegaard's dynamic view of existence precludes any notion of a final grasping of any essential state, including any given and settled 'state' of salvation. Yet on the other hand, there would appear to be serious problems with a thoroughly aporetic reading of the Kierkegaardian *corpus* as a whole, problems which make a consistently post-essentialist reading of Kierkegaard eventually untenable.

In the final analysis, Kierkegaard has arguably as many differences from twentieth

century post-essentialism as he has from the German rationalistic tradition that he so violently rejected; or conversely, he has perhaps almost as much in common with German rationalism as he has with later approaches that build on his own critique of Hegel. Like Hegel and unlike post-essentialism, the centrality of the Divine as the ontologically-rooted *telos* of human being is asserted. But like post-essentialism and unlike Hegel, any notion of immanent access to the realm beyond the finite/temporal (especially of any notion of the inexorable unfolding of *Geist* in this reality), and any essentialist relativization of the individual's task of existence, is rejected. And here precisely is the importance to Kierkegaardian scholarship of thoroughly reclaiming the ontological perspective provided by his 'psychological' works: for it is in this way that a truncated 'post-essentialist' Kierkegaard can be avoided, and a more balanced interpretation of the whole authorship be attained.

III

I conclude with some meta-philosophical thoughts that for me spring from the matters discussed here. Many of the most fundamental differences just discussed involving Kierkegaard, Hegelianism, secular existentialism and deconstruction, can be traced back to fundamental metaphysical presuppositions that are inevitably among the least examined aspects of each approach.

Hegel sets forth on his monumental *Phenomenology* on the back of his "mistrust" of his predecessors' "mistrust" of the potential veracity of empirical science and with it the even more primordial presupposition "that the Absolute stands on one side and cognition on the other, independent and separated."²¹ His approach assumes the contrary presupposition. For his part, Kierkegaard simply assumes the existence of the strongly transcendent God of his faith as a brute fact to be believed; in the fervour of his own thought, he is quite unable to conceive of things in any other way. He simply asserts: "Every human life is religiously designed. To want to deny this confuses everything."²²

It is at this point that we are brought face to face with an unavoidable and humbling reality about any philosophical project: that many of its deepest issues—such as those between theism and atheism, and the Absolute as immanent or transcendent²³—are essentially differences of vision and as such generally 'unsolvable' in any final way. Yet these are the very issues that silently lurk in the background of every confrontation between and among figures such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Derrida, for these differing assumptions comprise the very foundations of their rival edifices of thought. They are issues about which one can at best say, "well this is how I see it... can you not see that I am correct?"

Such matters are well beyond the ken of knock-down proof or rebuttal, and perhaps this is precisely the reason for Kierkegaard's frequent 'attacks' on Hegelianism

and all that it stands for. The “fideistic shrillness” that William Desmond detects in Kierkegaard’s authorial ‘voice’ with regard to Hegel²⁴ is perhaps redolent of a desperation born of this realization. It is simply not possible to refute a logically and evidentially consistent worldview, however much it radically differs from your own. Yet this is something of a scandal for Kierkegaard, because he sees it as costing people their very possibility of selfhood; of shutting them off from an understanding of the unmitigable task of existence and thereby condemning them to an ontological state devoid of the higher relations of selfhood. In the final analysis, he seems resigned to the necessity of simply imitating Christ: of calling, with as much eloquence as possible, to ‘those who have ears to hear’.

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Notes

1. Kierkegaard had what in our day is viewed as temerity: to presume to address philosophy, psychology and theology, and to build his arguments in all these areas into a single set of claims. In the name of academic specialization, as well as perhaps a post-Nietzschean skepticism about the possibility of “grand-narratives”, such quests have (in some ways regrettably) all but gone the way of the illuminated manuscript.
2. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1980) 41.
3. See translator’s notes: Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989) 168.
4. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* 168.
5. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* 43.
6. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* 60.
7. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992) 313.
8. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* 68ff.
9. Louis Dupré, “The Constitution of the Self in Kierkegaard’s Philosophy,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963): 525.
10. There are, of course, those scholars who consider Kierkegaard’s repulsion towards philosophical ‘systems’ as somewhat disingenuous. Howard Kainz is perhaps intimating in this direction with his somewhat ironic comment that Kierkegaard “could never have been

- an effective antagonist to Hegel without his own countersystem.” Howard Kainz, *G.W.F. Hegel*, (Ohio: Ohio UP, 1996) 151.
11. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954) 35.
 12. G.F.W Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 40.
 13. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* 60.
 14. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992) 208-209.
 15. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 209.
 16. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958) 553ff and *passim*.
 17. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) 45.
 18. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).
 19. John D. Caputo, “Instants, Secrets and Singularities: Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida,” *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin Matušík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995) 216.
 20. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992). See also “On the Gift: A Discussion Between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion,” *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1999) 54-78.
 21. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 47.
 22. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* 105
 23. This is not to mention other classical presuppositional confrontations such as those between idealism and realism, and empiricism and rationalism.
 24. William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic: Speculation, Cult and Comedy* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1992) 159-160.

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