

Introduction

Main Theses and Ideas Summarized

The present work reexamines the importance of the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). It argues that many of Kierkegaard’s most controversial and influential ideas are more relevant than ever. Specifically, it shows how we can make good sense of ideas such as subjective truth, “the leap” into faith, and “the teleological suspension of the ethical.” When properly understood, none of these ideas are as problematic as commentators have long assumed.

This book shows that Kierkegaard offers a novel account of wholeheartedness that is relevant to discussions of personal identity, truth, ethics, and religion (particularly after Frankfurt, MacIntyre, C. Taylor, and Williams). *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, notably, describes wholeheartedness as subjective truth, and despair as subjective untruth. This account involves an original, adverbial theory of truth in which agents, rather than propositions, are the basic truth bearers (Watts 2018). For Kierkegaard, wholeheartedness requires living truly by having a coherent personal identity (something he also describes as “purity of heart”). Despair, by contrast, involve an incoherent (or double-minded) identity, which fails to be true to itself.

Objective truth is quite different and involves an idealized third-person perspective that is objective by being fully informed yet disinterested, detached, and impartial. As such, it belongs to an idealized spectator, or epistemic agent, who sees an object from all perspectives simultaneously. Kierkegaard’s emphasis on subjective truth underlines a duality in our concept of truth. Truth concerns not only that which agrees with facts or reality but also truthfulness, faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, and veracity. Truthfulness, in particular, involves not only accuracy but also sincerity and authenticity, which is true to itself (Williams 2004). For Kierkegaard, the latter requires wholeheartedness.

This focus on wholeheartedness allows Kierkegaard to develop original critiques of amoralism and eudaimonism that remain relevant to moral psychology. Specifically, he argues in some detail that amoralism is incoherent, since wholeheartedness requires not just full commitment but also morality. Moreover, he radicalizes a Kantian critique of eudaimonism, which claims that eudaimonism involves an objectionable egoism and instrumentalism concerning virtue, by developing a modern account of *alterity*, in which morality is essentially other-regarding. Both here and elsewhere, he offers an interesting synthesis of Kantianism and virtue ethics (while criticizing consequentialism).

However, many scholars and readers of Kierkegaard prefer either his aesthetic or his religious works to the ethicist Judge William (and the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* and the non-Christian ethics in *The Concept of Anxiety*). Both tendencies are problematic, however. The former tends to ignore Kierkegaard's Hegelian critique of Romanticism and to downplay reasons for being moral, by opting for amoralism. The latter, by contrast, downplays the decisive roles played by ethics, rationality, and human effort for religion; despite appearances, Kierkegaard does not claim that human reason is worthless, or that all human volitional efforts are futile due to original sin (cf. Davenport 2017: 171).

Both approaches, by overlooking the ethical, are equally wrong since ethics is the key not only to religion but also to coherent selfhood and a meaningful life for Kierkegaard. Without moral commitment, neither wholeheartedness nor meaning nor faith is possible (which is not to say that morality is all that matters). Against both approaches, this book thus stresses the decisive importance of Judge William and ethics – and religion – that is not specifically Christian. Kierkegaard not only develops non-Christian ethics; he also reintroduces natural religion after Kant in a highly interesting manner by viewing the moral God as essentially hidden. Three examples of such natural religion are immanent religiousness in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the Socratic hypothesis in *Philosophical Fragments*, and the ethical in *Fear and Trembling*.

Kierkegaard's relevance is therefore not limited to Christian ethics and theology. Instead, his contribution concerns non-Christian and Christian approaches to both ethics and religion. Indeed, it concerns the very relation between ethics *and* religion as well as the very relation between philosophy *and* theology.

Kierkegaard posits a close relationship between the ethical and the religious. Despite appearances, the notorious “teleological suspension of the ethical” and Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac do not concern conflict

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between ethics and religion (as such). There is strong textual evidence ruling out such conflict, and Kierkegaard's account does not even provide conceptual room for it, since he *identifies* the good and the divine. Instead, the "teleological suspension" concerns a transition from one interpretation of the ethico-religious to another one. Typically, it involves a leap from natural to supernaturally revealed standards, or a transition from law to grace. It thus concerns how ethics is supported theologically by divine power and intervention. Instead of suspending ethics, Kierkegaard therefore stresses the overriding nature of morality, seeing what we ought to do all-things-considered as a specifically ethico-religious question.

As a direct result, his position is much more defensible than commonly thought. Indeed, Kierkegaard is explicit that it would have been "an error" on Abraham's part if he were to kill Isaac (SKS 24, 375, NB24:89 / KJN 8, 379). Moreover, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac represents a special case that cannot possibly be imitated by others. Indeed, Kierkegaard rules out religion that conflicts with morality or lays claim to possess privileged insight and truth. *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*, notably, clearly deny that moral obligations can be overridden by any claim to possess a higher truth.

Kierkegaard interprets ethics in religious terms, by ruling out secular ethics. He therefore sees ethics and religion, the good and the divine, as each implying the other. This is missed by secular readings of the ethical in *Either/Or* and later writings. Since the 1990s, scholars have rightly emphasized Kierkegaard's Christian ethics. But the operative assumption is still that only part of religion is moral since religion must have some autonomy from ethics. However, the present book shows that Kierkegaard clearly denies such autonomy, since he *moralizes* religion completely. Despite appearances and long-standing interpretative traditions, it is not Kant but Kierkegaard who reduces religion to ethics, by viewing it as a moral way of life that is supported theologically. Yet Kierkegaard's famous existential interpretation of religion is a development of Kant's moral interpretation of religion. In short, "existential" is a new term for "practical" and "moral," which is exactly why the introduction of the term in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* invokes Socrates, who introduced moral philosophy. Therefore, *Either/Or* identifies the existential choice of oneself with the choice of the ethical.¹

¹ Still, the traditional, Aristotelian, contrast between theoretical and practical concerns may not be exhaustive, insofar as there are questions about how we should feel that concerns *evaluative* reasons that are neither practical nor theoretical. Although existential issues typically concern practical and moral issues for Kierkegaard, it nevertheless seems possible to include such evaluative issues as part of existential issues in a broad sense. For evaluative reasons and concerns, see Skorupski 2012: 36.

Kierkegaard constantly contrasts existential concerns with theoretical speculation. But instead of denying theoretical speculation (which is concerned with thinking), Kierkegaard follows Kant in viewing it as *secondary* to practical concerns (which are concerned with action). Like Kant and William James, he maintains that belief can be justified practically if epistemic evidence is lacking. Kierkegaard is therefore a pragmatist – not an evidentialist – concerning belief.

He is relevant to discussions of the ethics of belief in philosophy of religion and epistemology for two different reasons. First, he sketches a practical argument for belief, according to which nonbelief involves despair, which deserves more attention both historically and systematically. Second, he potentially sheds new light on the debate on pragmatism versus fideism concerning belief (in which pragmatism provides practical reasons for belief, something fideism does not do). Like recent scholarship on fideism, this book indicates that the fideist label is problematic, insofar as it is used pejoratively and anachronistically to criticize views that contrast faith and reason in highly different ways. The dominating fideist reading of Kierkegaard particularly ignores pragmatist elements in his thinking that are decisive for assessing whether religious belief is supported by practical reasons or not.

Although Kierkegaard often contrasts faith and reason, this hardly supports fideism or irrationalism. Faith can be above reason in one sense yet rational in another sense. It can defy complete conceptual understanding yet be rationally defensible. At least, this is what Kierkegaard suggests, developing a nuanced hybrid account, in which faith is partially above conceptual understanding yet supported by practical reasons. Although Christian revelation transcends reason as a natural faculty, faith is only against reason if viewed from the perspective of nonbelievers who take offense at it. Faith cannot be irrational or absurd for believers, as the irrationalist reading indicates. But this fact is often ignored since key texts are still not translated into English or made readily available (cf. Pap. X–6, B68–B82). The widespread irrationalist reading of Kierkegaard is shown to be untenable, unless viewed as a form of normative pluralism that emphasizes leaps between different normative standards.

Although Kierkegaard never speaks of a “leap of faith,” he nevertheless introduces a leap into faith relevant to contemporary normative pluralism and philosophy of religion. This leap involves both general transitions between different normative standards and religious conversions in particular. Even when different standards diverge and conflict, such leaps need not be blind or irrational, if one abandons standards that collapse internally

and the new standards hold up. Therefore, leaps can be rational and justifiable. Here Kierkegaard sketches a weak form of normative pluralism, which avoids blind leaps, whims, or plumbs, while justifying existential leaps that avoid despair or double-mindedness.

Kierkegaard is motivated by traditional Christian faith that was endangered by “contemporary culture, philosophy and theology”; but “in trying to reassert” Christianity, he “developed a language that was later to be used, contrary to anything he would have ever imagined, to undermine them instead.”² Rather than championing radical choice, decisionism, or irrationalism, Kierkegaard is a Christian Platonist who argues that moral goodness is divine and inescapable. However, the widespread reading of Kierkegaard as the father of existentialism tends to neglect this fact. Still, the case of Kierkegaard shows strong continuity between existentialism and the history of philosophy. Specifically, his attempt to reassert Christianity in modernity is interesting because it makes creative and constructive use of Enlightenment philosophy, German Romanticism, and idealism as well as liberal theology. Kierkegaard is not so much dismissive toward classical German philosophy as a selective reader who uses ideas for his own purposes. Lore Hühn and Philip Schwab comment:

There is no doubt that, philosophically, German Idealism constitutes the background and point of departure for Kierkegaard’s thinking. Essential concepts, ideas, and moves in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre are indebted to impulses from Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel and are, in the first instance, to be understood by reference back to classical German philosophy. (2013: 62)

This is a valid point which holds more generally for classical German philosophy from Leibniz to Hegelianism. Indeed, Paul Ricoeur (1998: 16) suggests that “in a sense, Kierkegaard can be regarded as part of the move in philosophy after 1840 generally known [as] a ‘return to Kant.’” Alison Assiter comments:

[I]n a sense the whole of Kierkegaard’s thought could be seen to be a response to Kant. No doubt it is also a reaction to Schelling and others, but the response to Kant seems to me to be particularly important. Kierkegaard’s response to Kant is a criticism of his ethics. (2009: 71)

This book shows the relevance of Kant and idealism for Kierkegaard studies. But the focus on Kierkegaard’s polemics against Hegelianism in earlier scholarship risks obscuring Kierkegaard’s constructive and creative

² Di Giovanni and Livieri (2018: Part v). The formulation of this point is heavily indebted to Giovanni and Livieri, who make essentially the same point in very similar terms about Jacobi.

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use of German philosophy from Leibniz to idealism. The importance of Leibniz, Lessing, Kant, Hamann, Jacobi, Fichte, and Schelling are still somewhat underappreciated in the Kierkegaard literature, although it is decisive for understanding his accounts of selfhood, ethics, and religion.³

The present work particularly sheds light on Kierkegaard's relations to Kant and – to a lesser extent – Fichte, both historically and conceptually. Specifically, it is shown that Kierkegaard's influential account of despair, selfhood, ethics, and religion belongs to a larger intellectual context in which Kant and Fichte played crucial roles. Historically, this book therefore shows the importance and relevance of classic German philosophy for Kierkegaard studies. German philosophy is decisive not only for Kierkegaard's intellectual development but for our understanding of him and his relevance to philosophy and theology – both past and present.

Still, Kierkegaard goes beyond his predecessors by moralizing both religion and selfhood. Without moral commitment, neither faith nor wholeheartedness is possible since moral normativity is constitutive of coherent selfhood and authentic religion. But Kierkegaard is not a Stoic who thinks that only morality matters. Instead, he is a noneudaimonist and normative pluralist who thinks that morality requires personal sacrifice, since morality and prudence conflict. Still, our final end – the highest good – synthesizes both by conditioning prudence on morality. The latter is not only an eschatological idea but also a regulative idea that we should strive toward in this life.

Chapter Outlines

Part I of the present monograph deals with selfhood, despair, and wholeheartedness. Chapter 1 deals with Kierkegaard's influential account of selfhood and anthropology. This account is decisive for understanding his importance for theories of personal identity and human nature as well as action theory. In addition, it provides the necessary conceptual and historical background for understanding his contribution to truth theory, ethics, and religion on the one hand and existentialism and continental philosophy on the other. Finally, it sheds light on the relation between philosophical and theological anthropology.

³ Note that Kierkegaard only seems to have studied Hegel's texts thoroughly in the 1841–43 period, although there is no evidence that he studied Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. See Stewart 2003: 598–605.

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Chapters 2 and 3 both discuss the relation between selfhood, agency, and ethics. Specifically, both examine Kierkegaard's claim that wholehearted or coherent selfhood and agency requires full moral commitment. Both argue that *Either/Or* develops an original critique of amoralism and practical moral skepticism that escapes a difficult dilemma associated with justifications of morality. According to this dilemma, any such justification must either offer moral or nonmoral (prudential) reasons for being moral. But the former seems circular and question-begging, whereas the latter seems like the wrong kind of reasons, which could only support legality and rational egoism rather than morality and altruism. However, Kierkegaard develops three different argumentative strategies that all escape this dilemma, offering a powerful response to amoralism that is relevant to contemporary concerns, while being rooted in historical discussions of Kantianism, German Romanticism, and idealism.

Part II deals with the relation between morality, prudence, and religion. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss systematically Kierkegaard's elusive critique of ethical eudaimonism. It is shown that Kierkegaard develops and radicalizes an influential Kantian critique of eudaimonism, according to which ethical eudaimonism entails egoism and instrumentalism concerning virtue that make morality second to self-interest. In the late twentieth century, discussions of this familiar critique have been renewed by the reemergence of virtue ethics and eudaimonism. However, many still share the concern that eudaimonism involves an objectionable egoism and instrumentalism concerning virtue. Chapters 4 and 5 both show Kierkegaard's relevance to this ongoing discussion, emphasizing how he develops and radicalizes a Kantian critique of ethical eudaimonism by combining a modern account of alterity, in which morality is essentially other-regarding, with the idea that morality is Christocentric, since it concerns imitating Christ *and* serving the neighbor.

Although controversial and more successful against hedonistic eudaimonism (Epicureanism) than Stoicism or Aristotelianism, Kierkegaard's critique of eudaimonism is still largely defensible. At least, reconstructions indicate that genuine (noninstrumental) other-regard is incompatible with eudaimonism's focus on personal happiness as the highest good. Still, Chapter 5 shows that Kierkegaard is not an anti-eudaimonist, who dismisses legitimate self-interest, personal happiness, or salvation. Instead, he develops a noneudaimonistic ethics and theology, in which morality overrides prudence in cases of conflict. Yet, the "highest good" nevertheless involves a synthesis of morality and prudence, in which happiness is conditioned on moral virtue.

Chapters 6 and 7 both examine the relation between ethics and religion by discussing “the teleological suspension of the ethical” and Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. It is shown that – despite appearances – religion cannot possibly conflict with ethics. Apart from strong textual evidence precluding such conflict, more principled reasons show that there is no conceptual room for any such conflict within Kierkegaard’s Platonico-Christian framework. The implication is that for Kierkegaard ethics entails religion and *vice versa*, although we must distinguish between Christian and non-Christian ethics *and* religion. I argue that the non-Christian ethics has (temporal and conceptual) priority over Christian ethics. Specifically, it represents “the first ethics” that provide the default position that Christian ethics must presuppose. Still, Kierkegaard suggests that Christian ethics overrides non-Christian ethics to some extent, although there is no break with ethics (as such). Instead of suspending ethics, Kierkegaard stresses its overridingness, seeing what we ought to do all-things-considered as a specifically ethico-religious question.

Part III discusses the relation between subjectivity, inwardness, and truth. Chapter 8 reconstructs Kierkegaard’s concept of inwardness and his ignored critique of consequentialism in ethics. It is argued that both morality and religion require not only good intentions but also a good character. However, since moral character itself is not directly accessible, but only shown indirectly by words and deeds, Kierkegaard describes it as “hidden inwardness,” which is only seen by God. Pace Mulder (2000: 317), such inwardness neither entails a hidden, private domain nor “negative outwardness,” which “confines itself (in order not to be seen for what it is).” Nor does it entail enclosing reserve or uncommunicativeness (*Indesluttethed*), which is inwardness in deadlock. Rather, it represents an inwardness that strives to express itself in words and deeds.

Chapter 9 examines different readings of the notorious thesis that “subjectivity, inwardness, is truth” in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. It is argued that, instead of involving (objectionable) subjectivism, subjective truth involves an original, adverbial theory of truth that is relatively unexplored. Specifically, subjective truth concerns living truly by being wholehearted (as argued by Watts [2018]). In addition, it is closely associated with subjective, practical justifications of religious belief found in pragmatism concerning religious belief; these justifications of belief need not involve subjectivism or fideism, since faith could be supported by practical reasons that are objective.

Part IV systematically discusses the relation between Christian faith and reason. Chapter 10 deals with the category of the leap, which concerns both

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Christian conversions and more general transitions between different paradigms or normative domains. It is shown that – by responding to Kant, Jacobi, and Lessing – Kierkegaard develops an original account of the leap, which is relevant both to philosophy of religion and more general debates concerning rationality, incommensurability, and noncommensurability in value theory and theories of rationality. Finally, Kierkegaard uses Leibniz, Jacobi, Kant, and Schelling to develop the famous distinction between thought and being and he sketches a *reductio ad absurdum* argument for faith that seems Kantian.

By examining little-known primary sources that are largely untranslated, Chapter 11 shows that Kierkegaard clearly denies that Christian (and Jewish) faith is absurd or irrational. Still, faith does seem absurd to nonbelievers since it provokes and scandalizes our understanding. However, faith overcomes this absurdity since it is not offended by divine revelation. Chapter 12 then shows that Kierkegaard is a suprarationalist, who takes faith to be above reason, not against it. Still, his nonreligious pseudonyms contrast faith and reason in order to counteract theological views which are overly rationalistic and scientific. Indeed, Kierkegaard criticizes the Augustinian idea of faith seeking understanding. Although not promoting blind faith, he attacks intellectualist and rationalist accounts of faith that do not do justice to the mysteries of divine revelation and the incarnation. Faith cannot be reduced to conceptual understanding, but it must nevertheless both involve and seek practical understanding.

The final chapter shows that Kierkegaard discusses the ethics of belief, that is the normativity that governs the formation, maintenance, and relinquishment of beliefs. Kierkegaard is a clear nonevidentialist concerning religious belief, since he denies that justified religious belief requires sufficient epistemic evidence (indeed, such evidence is impossible to obtain due to human finitude). However, the widespread fideist reading of Kierkegaard, which takes belief to involve a self-constituting leap of faith, is challenged by a pragmatist reading, which takes belief to be justified by normative practical reasons instead. By examining different interpretations and different primary sources, the chapter concludes that the pragmatist reading is highly promising both textually and philosophically. Despite appearances, Kierkegaard offers justificatory practical reasons for religious belief. Still, his account of divine revelation involves an element of fideist self-constitution, although it does not amount to any blind leap of faith.

The reason for ordering the topics in this manner are roughly the following: I believe that it is best to start (in Chapter 1) with

Kierkegaard's account of *wholehearted* agency and selfhood, since this account provides the conceptual basis for his interrelated accounts of ethics, religion, and truth. Specifically, Chapters 2 to 4 argue that wholeheartedness requires noneudaimonistic *ethics*. Moreover, Chapters 4 and 5 indicate that ethics involves *theological commitments*, while Chapters 6 and 7 argue that religion support ethics instead of contradicting it. Chapters 6 and 7 particularly build on the concept of eternal happiness (highest good) introduced in Chapters 4 and 5. In light of this ethico-religious background, Chapters 8 and 9 then discuss the thesis "subjectivity, inwardness, is truth," denying that it entails either subjectivism or a hidden, private domain. This discussion of subjective truth then prepares the ground for the examination of faith and reason in Chapters 10 to 13.

Methodology and Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms

The different chapters of this monograph combine historical and systematical considerations. On the one hand, the book indicates Kierkegaard's relevancy to contemporary discussions of selfhood, ethics, and religion. On the other, it sheds new light on Kierkegaard historically, by emphasizing his creative use of German philosophy. It thus combines historical and systematical approaches by using historical texts in contemporary discussions. My methodology here corresponds largely to what Gary Hatfield describes as being

aware of the need for historical context to gain better access to past texts while still wanting to use those texts primarily as a source of raw material for solutions or answers to present philosophical problems. This would be historically sensitive reading in the service of fixed-upper ends. (2005: 91)

This book therefore focuses on some of Kierkegaard's ideas that are still relevant to contemporary debates. It does not deny that some ideas are problematic or objectionable. But it maintains that Kierkegaard remains relevant to ongoing debates on selfhood, ethics, and religion. As a result of this methodology, I thus seek to use contemporary terminology rather than working with Kierkegaard's Danish and the Golden Age Denmark context.

But to make sense of Kierkegaard's contribution I nevertheless include historical background that helps us to understand his theory, particularly with regard to points that are still relevant and that can enrich contemporary discussions. This book therefore brings Kierkegaard's ideas, and contemporary versions of them, into contact with modern thinkers such as