2

Kierkegaard's Use of German Philosophy

Leibniz to Fichte

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2.1 Leibniz: Modality, Freedom, and Faith

Kierkegaard's relation to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) seems to be based mainly on a reading of the *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*.[1] Existing scholarship has pointed out that Kierkegaard typically refers to Leibniz loosely when developing his own points. More specifically, Kierkegaard mentions Leibniz when analyzing *modal* categories in *Philosophical Fragments*, when discussing *freedom* in *The Concept of Anxiety*, and when dealing with *faith* and *reason* in the journals.[2] Although Kierkegaard was influenced to some extent by Leibniz's conceptual apparatus (particularly on the modalities), it nevertheless seems clear that most of the conceptual distinctions and nuances in Leibniz are neglected by Kierkegaard. Thus, it is not clear that Kierkegaard's references to Leibniz are very substantial.

Philosophical Fragments appears to have been influenced by the distinction between necessity and sufficient reason in Leibniz. Whereas necessity involves that something necessarily holds (so that its negation would involve a formal logical contradiction), the principle of sufficient reason means that everything happens for a reason. Kierkegaard (Climacus) uses this distinction to distinguish between the sphere of *essences* (or thought), where things exist *necessarily* and can be known as such by reason, and the sphere of *existence*, where things exist only *contingently*, and the cognition of which is (historical) belief.[3] However, the fact that things only exist contingently does not mean that they are arbitrary for Leibniz, since they still are dependent on the principle of sufficient reason for their being and non-being. Although Kierkegaard (Climacus) is inspired by Leibniz

here, it seems clear that he deviates from Leibniz's rationalism and idealism, including the principle of sufficient reason and theoretical proofs for God's existence (Løkke and Waaler 2009, 60f.). In this context, Kierkegaard (Climacus) mainly uses Leibniz to develop a new understanding of historical belief and contingency where contingent existence is not arbitrary.

In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz argues that we can cognize things that exist only contingently by forming beliefs that are more or less certain (unlike *a priori* knowledge of necessary truths in mathematics and metaphysics). Leibniz uses the term "belief" to describe knowledge that is concluded by judging from effects (Løkke and Waaler 2009, 62). To arrive at a belief we must infer the cause from its effect (e.g., inferring Homer from the *Iliad*). At this point Kierkegaard (Climacus) combines ideas from Leibniz with ideas from Jacobi (and Hume). Following Jacobi, he claims that inferences from effect to cause cannot be drawn by way of proof or explanation, but only by means of belief (*SKS* 4, 283 / *PF*, 84). The "Interlude" of *Philosophical Fragments* (especially § 4) develops this idea further by distinguishing between the uncertainty of (historical) belief and the certitude of immediate sense perception and cognition (*SKS* 4, 281 / *PF*, 82).

Kierkegaard (Climacus) goes beyond Leibniz and Jacobi by stressing the volitional nature of belief, combining the epistemological aspect of historical belief with a practical or an ethical aspect. Kierkegaard's (Climacus') point is that we are morally responsible not only for the actions we perform, but also for the beliefs we form and the interpretations we develop (Rasmussen 2009, 43). He argues that formation of beliefs results from an act of will, presumably an act where we decide to interpret history in one way instead of another. Historical knowledge does not involve a disinterested spectator without presuppositions; on the contrary, it represents the beliefs and interests of historical agents that take part in society.

Section 1 of the "Interlude" introduces the Aristotelian notion of "kinêsis" (movement, change) as the transition from potentiality to actuality in reality (not in logic). Section 2 then uses this notion to interpret history as a process where something (historical) comes into existence by "a relatively freely acting cause" (*SKS* 4, 276 / *PF*, 76), something that probably refers to kinêsis being brought about by human agents (or possibly God). Section 3 argues that the fact that the past cannot be changed does not mean that it is necessary rather than contingent. Rather, necessity pertains only to essences, whereas "To want to predict the future (prophecy) and to want to understand the necessity of the past are altogether identical" (*SKS* 4, 277 / *PF*, 77).

If the past is as uncertain and contingent as the future, then we cannot have knowledge of either. Kierkegaard (Climacus) simply suggests that history, both past and future, involves transitions from possibility to actuality that cannot be predicted or fully comprehended, since it is based on free agency (Løkke and Waaler 2009, 69). The upshot is that we should relate to the past just like we relate to the future, in the sense of forming (historical) beliefs. History is construed by agents freely deciding to form one belief instead of another, selecting one interpretive possibility among a number of others. Belief is just like kinêsis in that it is understood relative to possibilities, one of which is made actual, the others being annihilated. Løkke and Waaler summarize:

> This conception of history makes the apprehension of the past a matter of uncertainty, presum-ably because the future possibilities that at a given time pertain will continue to exist as past possibilities also after some of them have been actualized. To apprehend the past means not just

to report what has happened but rather to explain why some things happened rather than others, and such an explanation can be given only on the basis of beliefs.[4]

Another point where Kierkegaard makes use of Leibniz is when criticizing the idea of a fully indifferent will (*liberum arbitrium*) that could just as well choose one thing as another (Løkke and Waaler 2009, 64f.). It should be said here that Kierkegaard, like Kant and Schelling, is concerned not so much with alternative courses of action (e.g., choosing to eat meat or fish) as choosing between good and evil, particularly at the level of one's character or fundamental disposition (cf. *SKS* 4, 414 / *CA*, 112). Kierkegaard agrees with Leibniz about how we should not conceive of freedom. Freedom should not be modeled after Buridan's ass, which could not decide between two equally attractive stacks of hay and hence starved to death. Leibniz invokes Plato and Augustine, saying that the will is never prompted to action except by the representation of the good. Although he is not explicit, Kierkegaard seems to rely on the same Platonic-Christian tradition, maintaining that good and evil are not on the same footing. First, we seem to be moved by representations of good, not by representations of evil (although this is not universally accepted; cf. Kosch 2006a, chs. 5–6). Second, we can only will the good unconditionally and consistently. Willing one thing amounts to willing the good, whereas willing evil involves having two wills that are inconsistent with each other, something that Kierkegaard interprets as despair (cf. *SKS* 8, 139f. / *UD*, 24; Knappe 2004, chs. 3–4). Finally, Kierkegaard's notion of facticity implies that there is no such thing as a neutral starting point where we can choose rationally, since we are finite historical beings who are always situated in specific situations.

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard uses Leibniz to clarify his own view of faith and reason:

> What I usually express by saying that Christianity consists in paradox, philosophy in mediation, Leibniz expresses by distinguishing between what is above reason and what is against reason. Faith is *above* reason. By reason he understands … a linking together of truths, a conclusion from causes. Faith therefore cannot be proved, demonstrated, comprehended, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than it is a paradox … nothing else should be said of the paradox and the unreasonableness of Christianity than that it is the first form [i.e., above reason]. (*SKS* 19, 390f., Not13:23 / *KJN* 3, 388)

Kierkegaard distinguishes between the paradoxical truths of (special or supernatural) revelation and the truths of reason, associating the latter with Hegelian mediation. This passage clearly indicates that the paradox is above reason, not against it, suggesting that Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist (something that is controversial).[5]

Finally, Kierkegaard was interested in Leibniz's attempt in the *Theodicy* to defend God in light of the evil in the world. Although Kierkegaard does not explicitly criticize Leibniz's theoretical approach to theodicy, his general approach nevertheless comes closer to Kant than to Leibniz. Instead of accepting theoretical theodicy, both Kierkegaard and Kant think that the limitations of human rationality give us reasons for not having reasons to defend, justify, or accuse God. The critical project of using reason to determine, and acknowledge, the limits of reason led Kant and Kierkegaard to reject theoretical efforts to defend God in the light of the moral and natural evil in the world, since we cannot know God's relation to good and evil by inferring from the physical world. Both therefore interpret theodicy as a practical rather than a theoretical problem, opposing not only Leibniz's theodicy but also Hegel's theodicy through history (cf. Welz 2008, 14–17, 83–7, 176–8).

2.2 The Pantheism Controversy: Jacobi, Lessing, and the Leap

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) is generally associated with German anti-Enlightenment and religious irrationalism. Jacobi's *On the Doctrine of Spinoza, in the Letters to Moses Mendelssohn* started the Pantheism Controversy, the biggest public controversy of the late German Enlightenment. Because of his central role in this controversy, Jacobi exercised an important influence on the late Enlightenment and idealism. The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* introduces Jacobi and the Pantheism Controversy when developing the much-discussed notion of the leap. (Kierkegaard rarely refers to Jacobi or the Pantheism Controversy elsewhere.)

The controversy started when Jacobi claimed that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), the most prominent German philosopher between Leibniz and Kant, was a Spinozist, something that was seen as tantamount to pantheism and atheism. Jacobi argued influentially that the Enlightenment project, and its rational philosophy, involves not only pantheism but also atheism and nihilism. Against this background, he and his allies presented a choice between rational nihilism and irrational fideism. Whereas the former was associated with the rational and explanatory philosophy (*Alleinphilosophie*) of the Enlightenment, the latter was associated with a philosophy of freedom and becoming (*Unphilosophie*). Jacobi argued that a mortal leap (*salto mortale*) from the former to the latter is necessary, because of the inconsistencies and contradictions implied in any rational and systematic philosophy (Rasmussen 2009). Jacobi maintained that truth cannot be reached by rational thinking alone, but that it must rather be embraced in spite of rational philosophy. He saw faith as a basic human attitude to which even the rationalists must resort in order to choose reason, thereby anticipating the Popperian view that even rationalism presupposes a basic choice or faith (Hannay 2006, 55).

Existing scholarship has argued that the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* reformulates Jacobi's either/or between rational nihilism and irrational fideism as a choice between systematic (and scientific) philosophy and religious faith (Rasmussen 2009, 41). Kierkegaard (Climacus) associates the former with Hegelianism and pantheism (rather than Spinozism), and the latter with authentic religious belief, particularly Christian faith. However, Kierkegaard was drawing not only on Jacobi at this point, but also on the later Schelling's distinction between negative and positive philosophy, where the former is concerned with essences and possibilities and the latter with existence and actuality.[6] Whether the source was Jacobi or Schelling, it nevertheless seems clear that there is one aspect of Jacobi's teaching that clearly prefigured Kierkegaard's project; namely, Jacobi's distinction between disinterested and interested thinking, between being a spectator and being a participator, respectively (Rasmussen 2009, 43f.). Kierkegaard seems to combine, or align, this distinction with the Leibnizian distinction between necessity and historical belief, where the latter represents the interests of historical agents. We will see that Kierkegaard also relates this central distinction to Kant's critical philosophy.

When developing the famous notion of the "leap," the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* references Jacobi's notion of the leap as a "*salto mortale*." However, Kierkegaard (Climacus) immediately distances himself from Jacobi's *salto mortale* and its associated religious irrationalism by presenting two objections to Jacobi (*SKS* 7, 98f. / *CUP1*, 100f.). First, he objects that Jacobi's leap is nothing but a transition from the objectivism of Spinoza's philosophy to subjectivism. This was a well-known objection found in Hegelianism (Rasmussen 2009, 38f.). Second, Kierkegaard (Climacus) sketches an objection to the effect that Jacobi's

attempt to persuade Lessing to make the leap was mistaken, since a true leap cannot be communicated straightforwardly, as it is an "isolating act" that cannot be conveyed directly (Hannay 2006, 60). Thus, it seems that Kierkegaard is generally critical of Jacobi's position (cf. *SKS 7*, 227 / *CUP1*, 250).

In this context, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* also introduces the notion of the leap in Lessing, which is famously described as a transition over the broad and ugly ditch between the contingent truths of history and the necessary truths of reason. Lessing portrays the leap as a transition from historical truths to *a priori* truths, relying on a broadly Leibnizian distinction between contingent and necessary truths (cf. Thompson 2009). However, when Kierkegaard (Climacus), in response to Lessing and Jacobi, develops his own notion of the leap, it refers not to a transition from historical truths to *a priori* truths, but to a transition from natural religion to Christianity. The leap is not from history to eternal truth, but from natural ethico-religious truths to historical Christianity. The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* describes it as a transition from immanent to transcendent religiousness; that is, a transition from presuppositions that we possess naturally by our own means to presuppositions that are supernaturally revealed by God (*SKS 7*, 234–8 / *CUP1*, 258–62; Thompson 2009, 103f.). Thus, Kierkegaard (Climacus) changes the meaning of the term "leap," something of which he also appears to have been aware, speaking of possible theses (rather than actual theses) by Lessing in this context.

Lessing was a leading Enlightenment philosopher who advocated theological naturalism, whereas Kierkegaard is typically seen as reacting against the Enlightenment, and against naturalism and rationalism in matters of religion by insisting on the supernatural and paradoxical nature of divine revelation. However, it seems that Kierkegaard was not only influenced by Lessing's literary style but also appears to have found Lessing useful for acknowledging the limits of reason, for avowing the never-ending quest for truth, for valuing subjectivity, irony, humor, and polemics (Thompson 2009). The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* devotes a section comprising two chapters to Lessing (*SKS 7*, 65–120 / *CUP1*, 61–125): "An Expression of Gratitude to Lessing" and "Possible and Actual Theses by Lessing." The latter indicates that Kierkegaard (Climacus) is not only interested in what Lessing actually said, but also what he could have said. The *Postscript* attributes four theses to Lessing: (1) The subjective existing thinker is aware of the dialectic of communication; (2) The subjective existing thinker relates to truth as a process of becoming; (3) The leap from historical truth to eternal truth; and (4) The preference of never-ending striving for truth over the possession of truth (*SKS 7*, 73, 80, 92, 103 / *CUP1*, 72, 80, 93, 106). Of these four theses, the latter two are more definitely traceable to Lessing than the first two, although the second resembles the fourth (Thompson 2009, 97; cf. Westphal 1996, 59–99). The first thesis indicates that Kierkegaard (Climacus) took Lessing (like Kant) to be a Socratic and maieutic philosopher, associating him with irony and jest. Lessing is taken to say that we only relate to the Deity one at a time, without the mediation of others (*SKS 7*, 67–70 / *CUP1*, 65–67). The second thesis does not deny that there is an eternal truth, but does deny that we possess certain and final knowledge of it. The third point makes creative use of Lessing by developing his notion of the leap (and Jacobi's *salto mortale*) further in order to fit Kierkegaard's (Climacus') own purposes. Finally, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* quotes approvingly a famous remark by Lessing:

> If God held all truth enclosed in his right hand, and in his left hand the one and ever-striving drive for truth, even with the corollary of erring forever and ever, and if he were to say to me:

Choose! —I would humbly fall down to him at his left hand and say: Father, give! Pure truth is indeed only for you alone! (*SKS* 7, 103 / *CUP1*, 106)

This quotation suggests, in a Socratic manner, that we should strive for truth rather than possess it. This is in line with the approach to Lessing elsewhere in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where he is seen as a Socrates whose jest betrays a sense of the objective uncertainty of all that is important (Hannay 2006, 61; cf. *SKS* 7, 192 / *CUP1*, 210). Elsewhere, Kierkegaard tries to improve on Lessing by saying:

[N]o, if God held salvation in his right hand and also held in his left hand the concern that had become the content of your life, would you not yourself choose the left although you nevertheless became like someone who chose the right? (*SKS* 5, 267 / *EUD*, 272)

This suggests that one is not saved by choosing salvation or happiness as such, but by choosing concern or striving for good and truth for its own sake. In this context, Kierkegaard (Climacus) explicitly breaks with eudaimonism (*SKS* 7, 367, 385–7, 546 / *CUP1*, 403, 423–6, 602), the dominant position among his predecessors in Denmark (cf. Koch 2003), and seems to favor a Kantian approach to morality and prudence.

2.3 Kant's "Honest Way"

Existing scholarship has pointed to considerable overlap between the theories of Kant and Kierkegaard, although it is generally difficult to identify the Kantian influence on Kierkegaard in detail (Fremstedal 2014). Kierkegaard knew Kant from many secondary sources (e.g., Martensen's lectures), but only quotes from three primary sources (*Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," and *Conflict of the Faculties*; Green 1992, ch. 1). The Kantian elements in Kierkegaard can be summarized as follows.

Kierkegaard's notion of finitude comes close to Kant's critical philosophy. Both thinkers hold that human reason fails through its essential finitude to be an absolute (perspective-less) perspective of the world.[7] We cannot see the world from an absolute point of view, nor have any knowledge of the supersensible or supernatural.[8] Kierkegaard seems to follow Kant in dismissing theoretical proofs for the existence of God. He takes Kant's critique of the ontological argument for God's existence to show that being is not a predicate, and that thought and being, ideality and reality, are heterogeneous.[9] Kierkegaard suggests (rightly) that Kant anticipated the later Schelling's anti-idealist distinction between thought and being, between essences and actuality, possibility and existence.[10]

Partially as a result of these theoretical views, both Kant and Kierkegaard hold that we cannot decide objectively or theoretically whether God exists, although we can—and must—decide the matter on subjective and practical grounds. Indeed, Kierkegaard himself repeatedly associates these points with Kant's critical philosophy,[11] contrasting Kant's "honest way" with the dishonesty of post-Kantian philosophy (notably Hegelianism).[12]

Kierkegaard also appears to have been influenced by Kant's account of the dialectics of reason.[13] Whereas Kant argues that reason has a natural and inevitable tendency to transcend the limits of the understanding, Kierkegaard (Climacus) claims that the highest passion of the understanding lies in transcending its limit by becoming faith. Both thus suggest that dialectics lead to the question of God. However, Kierkegaard (Climacus) stresses

that worship of the Absolute does not belong to dialectics (*SKS* 7, 444f. / *CUP1*, 490f.; *SKS* 4, 242–53 / *PF*, 37–47). The role of dialectics lies in providing paradoxes and anomalies that prepare the ground for faith, rather than giving a direct justification of it (more on this later).

Kierkegaard also makes sporadic use of Kant's (related) distinction between regulative and constitutive principles.[14] The most important example is his interpretation of human selfhood in terms of an endless striving tending toward an endpoint of completion that seems to involve a regulative God-idea that is Kantian (cf. Verstrynge 2004; Pattison 1997; Bubbio 2012). And like Kant, Kierkegaard interprets symbols of religion and art as visible representations of transcendent ideas.[15] Both see symbols and images as transitional forms that mediate between transcendent ideas and experience. For both, the invisible must be represented and symbolized by something visible if we are to grasp it. Kierkegaard therefore takes religious language to be symbolic, allegorical, and metaphorical (Pattison 2002, 122–33; Winkel Holm 1998, 135–7, 319f.).

Commentators have also pointed to Kantian elements in Kierkegaard's ethics (cf. Knappe 2004, chs. 3–4; Hannay 1993, 225–7), although Kierkegaard criticizes Kantian autonomy for emptiness and arbitrariness (*SKS* 23, 45, NB15:66 / *KJN* 7, 42f.; Stern 2012; Fremstedal 2014). Whereas Kant takes immoral acts to involve contradictions or inconsistency when universalized, Kierkegaard takes immorality to involve double-mindedness or despair in the sense of having two wills that are inconsistent with each other. It is only by willing the good unconditionally that we can achieve consistency, according to "Purity of Heart" (*SKS* 8, 139f. / *UD*, 24). Kierkegaard and Kant both see the ethical requirement as being unconditional (categorical) and as being sharply distinguished from prudential (hypothetical) imperatives (Knappe 2004, chs. 3–4). Both Kant and Kierkegaard combine the idea of doing good for its own sake with a criticism of eudaimonism that separates them from classic virtue ethics. Kant famously interprets the moral law as separate from happiness, and Kierkegaard appears to rely on a Kantian critique of eudaimonism that was (and is) quite controversial.[16]

However, this does not mean that happiness or prudence is renounced altogether; it only means that happiness should not be pursued unconditionally, or without moral constraints. In this context, Kierkegaard, unlike many of his contemporaries, makes extensive use of the concept of the highest good, identifying it with *Evig Salighed* (eternal happiness or salvation). In Danish philosophy, as in German philosophy, the concept of the highest good played an important and highly controversial role in this period.[17] Kierkegaard's use of the term belongs to the Augustinian tradition, insofar as he takes it to involve not only moral virtue and happiness, but also the kingdom of God and personal immortality. Yet Kierkegaard goes beyond this tradition by introducing Kantian criticisms of eudaimonism and theistic arguments.

Kierkegaard seems to be influenced not only by Kant's critique of theoretical proofs for God's existence, but also by Kant's controversial moral argument for the existence of God and immortality. More specifically, the postulation of God in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the criticism of purposivelessness in *Fear and Trembling*, and the "new argument" for immortality in *Christian Discourses* seem to overlap significantly with Kant's moral argument.[18] Both Kant and Kierkegaard justify religious faith on subjective and practical rather than objective and theoretical grounds. Both rely on a *reductio* argument in which non-belief involves despair, and the absurdity that the highest good is simultaneously necessary and impossible. For both, God makes the highest good

possible, despite its apparent impossibility. Although Kierkegaard seems to have been influenced by Kant's moral argument, he nevertheless dismisses Kant's moral (rational) faith, favoring supernatural revelation over Enlightenment theology. Whereas Kant uses the moral argument to postulate the existence of God and immortality, Kierkegaard uses it mainly as a *reductio* of secular thinking. He interprets the moral argument, and natural theology, only as a preliminary step toward Christian faith. He uses Kantian ideas to reinforce—and partially reinterpret—his own Christian convictions, combining the moral argument with Lutheran ideas about revelation and sin that go beyond Kant's critical philosophy.

Kierkegaard is generally thought to be sympathetic to a Lutheran notion of sin. However, in his journals, he speaks approvingly of Kant's doctrine of radical evil (*SKS* 20, 88f., NB:125 / *KJN* 4, 88), a controversial doctrine that reinterprets original sin (while dismissing hereditary sin). Although we do not know for certain that Kierkegaard read *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he nevertheless seems to agree with Kant on the following points. First, we cannot be morally indifferent, or will the good to some extent only, since morality requires unconditional and universal compliance (i.e., rigorism). Second, following inclinations involves freely incorporating these into our dispositions instead of other incentives. Evil (or sin) involves an active prioritization of sensuousness over moral freedom, rather than mere ignorance or weakness. Evil results from a free choice that is always already performed and that cannot be explained causally.[19] However, this choice is preceded by anxiety, since the possibility of freedom leads to anxiety. Kant's "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History" compares this anxiety with the experience of standing on the brink of an abyss, suggesting that moral freedom leads to an anxiety about falling (or jumping) that involves an experience of dizziness. In *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, Schelling goes a step further by portraying the will as seized by dizziness and as hearing a hidden voice telling it to fall. This seems to be the textual background for the famous description of anxiety as the dizziness of freedom in *The Concept of Anxiety*, which thus belongs to a post-Kantian context where discussions of moral freedom and evil were central.[20] Kierkegaard uses Kant and Schelling to reinforce and reinterpret the doctrine of original sin, without accepting hereditary sin. By doing this, he sketches a defense against Enlightenment criticism of Christian dogma, without accepting Enlightenment theology.

Although Kierkegaard and Kant deny that evil or sin can be inherited biologically or sexually, they nevertheless maintain that it is contingently true that all humans are evil or sinful. Indeed, both argue that evil involves a corrupted character and that it cannot be extirpated through human powers. However, Kierkegaard faults Kant for lacking the category of the paradox, suggesting that he confuses guilt with sin (*SKS* 20, 88f., NB:125 / *KJN* 4, 88). The point seems to be that Kant does not realize just how radical a failure radical evil is, because he does not have a proper understanding of sin (or divine revelation), appealing to willpower (and a toned-down version of divine grace) so as to overcome sin. In order to transcend Kant, Kierkegaard does not merely rely on a Lutheran notion of sin and grace, he also develops a novel psychological approach to moral freedom that goes beyond Kant (and the idealists) by involving a *via negativa* mode in which human agency and selfhood are understood through their failure, through despair or sin (Grøn 1997). However, Kierkegaard's interpretation of the phenomenon of desperately wanting to be oneself, defiance, is reminiscent of Schelling's interpretation of evil as defiance (Hühn and Schwab 2013, 83).

Kant's general influence on Kierkegaard has been said to find its expression in Kierkegaard's repeated affirmation of the ideality of ethics and the connection between ethics and the awareness of sin.[21] Even if there is not much hard evidence for this claim, it seems largely plausible. In Denmark, Kant was known for his strict and rigorous ethics, a type of ethics to which Kierkegaard seems somewhat sympathetic (even though he criticized Kantian constructivism in metaethics). Kierkegaard's understanding of ethics seems Kantian insofar as it is deontological, anti-eudaimonistic, rigoristic, egalitarian, and highly demanding (in a way that Aristotelian and Hegelian ethics are not; cf. Stern 2012, 204, 244–52; Fremstedal 2014). Kierkegaard went beyond traditional Augustinian and Lutheran views by replacing hereditary sin with original sin and radical evil, by developing a post-Kantian approach to human agency, psychology, selfhood, and theodicy, by criticizing eudaimonism, and by reinterpreting the highest good and the moral argument. It seems clear, therefore, that his views on ethics and religion belong to a post-Kantian context in which Kant's ethics and philosophy of religion played important roles.

Kierkegaard generally viewed Kant as a prominent or exemplary Socratic philosopher who stressed human finitude and ignorance. However, this also indicates Kant's limit for Kierkegaard. Kant identifies the antinomy of practical reason (i.e., the necessity *and* impossibility of the highest good) and moral despair, but he does not make room for anything uniquely Christian in his rational theology. This is also related to the fact that Kant is associated with Enlightenment theology, theological rationalism, and liberal theology, whereas Kierkegaard is seen as a critic of exactly these movements.

2.4 J.G. Fichte: Subjectivity, Imagination, and Ethics

Kierkegaard's relation to Fichte is generally ambiguous, involving both admiration and critique. Fichte was one of the most referenced and discussed philosophers of the early nineteenth century. He was known not only for the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but also for his reworking of Kantian ethics in *The System of Ethics* and for popular writings such as *The Vocation of Man* and *The Way towards the Blessed Life*.[22] Although Kierkegaard owned several of his works and many secondary sources that discuss Fichte, he rarely refers to Fichte's texts (except a few references to *The Vocation of Man*, *The Way towards the Blessed Life*, and Hegelian criticisms of Fichte; Kangas 2007; Hühn and Schwab 2013).

Existing scholarship has pointed to structural similarities between Fichte's and Kierkegaard's accounts of selfhood. For Kierkegaard, the main structural features of the self are: (1) The self is a synthesis of finitude and infinitude, necessity and freedom, which is (2) self-relating, and (3) in relating to itself, relates to the power that posited it. The first two structural features are shared with Fichte (and Schelling), whereas the third is a negation of the Fichtean account of self-positing (Kosch 2006a, 200). Fichte stresses the act of self-creation, suggesting that the subject grounds itself, whereas Kierkegaard portrays the self as posited by the Other. However, the latter does not amount to grounding in the Fichtean or idealist sense; rather, it means that the Kierkegaardian self is ungrounded, or that it grounds itself on an abyss.[23] This is related to the fact that Kierkegaard is more concerned than Fichte with passivity and negativity, focusing on despair, anxiety, and suffering (cf. Grøn 1997).

Kierkegaard is generally critical of Fichte's idealism, complaining about how abstract and contentless the Fichtean ego is. Still, it seems that Fichte's idealism helped Kierkegaard break with an ontological description of the subject by focusing on subjectivity, including

self-consciousness, reflection, act, will, and freedom. Kierkegaard went beyond Fichte by developing the category of existence and by stressing the situatedness and finitude of the existing subject. In this connection, he relies on the concept of facticity, a concept that was coined by Fichte (in his middle phase around 1800) and developed further by Kierkegaard and Heidegger, eventually becoming one of the most important terms in twentieth-century continental philosophy. While Fichte suggests that the subject "throws" or projects the world, Kierkegaard anticipates the Heideggerian idea that the subject itself is thrown (cf. Raffoul and Nelson 2008). Fichte stresses spontaneous freedom, whereas Kierkegaard emphasizes how facticity not only limits freedom but also makes it possible. In both his pseudonymous and signed writings, Kierkegaard emphasizes that one receives oneself as a particular self that is always already situated in a particular historical and social context.[24] The attempt to create oneself is bound to fail, because one is a finite, historical, and social being who has to relate to, and appropriate, something that is always already given (i.e., facticity).

One of the few instances where Kierkegaard references Fichte is in a discussion of imagination as the capacity *instar omnium* (*SKS* 11, 148 / *SUD*, 31). Kierkegaard suggests that imagination is not one capacity among other capacities that the self uses, but rather the capacity through which there is a self at all, the capacity of capacity. The idea is that productive imagination makes it possible to separate oneself from one's givenness or facticity, by projecting different possibilities (Kangas 2007, 75–7). Imagination makes it possible to move away from oneself infinitely, something that may be taken to mean that one continually or endlessly transcends one's given self or identity by being free and by imagining possibilities and ideals (*SKS* 11, 146 / *SUD*, 29f.; cf. *SKS* 7, 180f. / *CUP1*, 197). However, the existential task of becoming oneself also requires that one continually use freedom and imagination to return to finitude. Presumably, one does this by trying to express or actualize ethical ideals in reality.[25] Although scholars disagree whether this use of imagination represents a substantive engagement with Fichte (Kangas 2007, referencing Schmidinger), this seems quite possible, since both Fichte and Kierkegaard interpret the self in relational and reflexive terms rather than in terms of being (Kangas 2007, 75–7). Instead of being a thing, substance, or being, the self is a relation to itself that projects itself by making use of imagination.

Finally, it seems that Fichte is quite possibly the historical model for Kierkegaard's ethical standpoint, the ethical stage exemplified by Judge William in *Either/Or*, Part Two. Fichte and the ethicist share the following features (Kosch 2006b, 270–73):

(1)   The general idea that marriage is a step on the path to becoming an ethically developed person and that the love relation is nature's way of overcoming itself and pushing us toward becoming ethical beings. Marriage is therefore considered a duty (something Kant denies).

(2)   Individual conscience, or subjective conviction, is taken to have ultimate normative authority and to be the final arbiter of truth.

(3)   Conscience is seen as beginning from concrete circumstances rather than general principles like the categorical imperative. Conscience is therefore seen as exercising reflecting rather than determining judgment.

(4)   Moral failure is interpreted in terms of laziness, inertia, and a lack of energy; it is not seen as a result of radical evil or original sin. Although willing with utmost energy does not directly guarantee that we make the right choice, it nevertheless guarantees apprehension of the correct thing to do, and that guarantees the right choice.

Kierkegaard's religious writings break not only with the last point but probably also the first. This means that even if Kierkegaard used Fichte as a model for the ethicist, Kierkegaard's religious position breaks with Fichte's views on evil and marriage.

2.5 Conclusion

Kierkegaard's use and appropriation of these German philosophers belong for the most part to the period between 1841 and 1846 (although the reading of Kant and Fichte can be extended to cover 1835–50). However, Kierkegaard's use of these thinkers is ambivalent, selective, eclectic, and assimilated to his own ends. He generally employed his German predecessors to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic religiousness, particularly criticizing naturalist, rationalist, and idealist interpretations of Christianity and attempts to synthetize Christianity with philosophy and culture. However, Kierkegaard's interpretation of religion in general and Christianity in particular is nevertheless influenced by his German predecessors. His interpretation of original sin and anxiety seems to be indebted to Kant and Schelling (as well as Baader, Schleiermacher, and Julius Müller), and his interpretation of the highest good and the moral argument for the existence of God and immortality may be influenced by Kant and Fichte (as well as I.H. Fichte and Poul Martin Møller). The notion of the leap is inspired by the Pantheism Controversy, and the distinction between thought and being is influenced by Leibniz, Jacobi, Kant, and Schelling.

When interpreting his German predecessors, Kierkegaard often relied on his Danish and German contemporaries and then current secondary sources. His criticism of Kantian autonomy, for instance, appears to be influenced by idealists and romantics who took autonomy to involve moral constructivism and anti-realism (Fremstedal 2014). Although recent scholarship has given us a better insight into Kierkegaard's sources, there is still need for research, especially on minor figures and works that were important in his day, but are largely forgotten today.

Cross-references

See also CHAPTER 3, "KIERKEGAARD'S VIEW OF HEGEL, HIS FOLLOWERS AND CRITICS"; CHAPTER 4, "KIERKEGAARD'S RELATIONS TO DANISH PHILOSOPHY OF THE GOLDEN AGE"; CHAPTER 7, "KIERKEGAARD'S VIEWS ON NORMATIVE ETHICS, MORAL AGENCY, AND METAETHICS."

Notes

1 The reading was mostly confined to the 1842–43 period. Cf. *SKS* 19, 390–94, Not13:23 / *KJN* 3, 388–91; Løkke and Waaler 2009.

2 Løkke and Waaler 2009. Note that the Danish term "*Tro*" (like the German "*Glaube*") covers both faith and belief.

3 Løkke and Waaler 2009, 60; Nason 2012. See also the comments on Lessing below.

4 Løkke and Waaler 2009, 67. Kierkegaard suggests that Leibniz was the only recent philosopher who had vaguely seen that all life is repetition (*SKS* 4, 9 / *R*, 131). Unfortunately, it is not clear what Leibniz saw, according to Kierkegaard. The main interpretive difficulty here lies in clarifying

what gets repeated. Kierkegaard's concept of repetition typically denotes that "ideality" is realized (repeated or doubled) in reality. The idea seems to be that universal (ethical) principles, concepts, or ideas, are realized in actuality (cf. Stewart 2003, 274, 285, 296). However, repetition takes on a range of meanings, covering both human and divine agency. It can refer to the mere realization of an idea through action as well as the full realization of ethico-religious ideals in reality. Løkke and Waaler (2009, 69–71) suggest that Kierkegaard associates ideality with Leibniz's notion of essences, so that a repetition involves an instantiation of essences by an agent.

5   Løkke and Waaler 2009, 55–9; Jackson 1987, 78–82. Cf. Knappe 2004, 118–20, 80f.; Westphal 1996, 21, 27, 90, 125.

6   See Chapter 3. See also Hühn and Schwab 2013, 69.

7   Westphal 1991, 89 argues that if the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds is that between the way in which one world appears to God and to us, then the Kantian dualism is fundamental to Kierkegaard's epistemology too. Cf. Green 1992, 121–46.

8   Still Kierkegaard does not seem to accept Kant's transcendental idealism. In this respect, Kierkegaard comes closer to the pre-critical philosophy of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* than to Kant's critical philosophy.

9   *SKS* 22, 215, NB12:121 / *KJN* 6, 217; *SKS* 22, 435, NB14:150 / *KJN* 6, 440; *SKS* 19, 139f., Not4:11 / *KJN* 3, 139; *SKS* 4, 319 / *CA*, 11.

10   Cf. Pinkard 2010, 320–29. Hühn and Schwab 2013, 70 argue that Kierkegaard reserves actuality in a pre-eminent sense for the individual human existence in its concretion, defining existence in terms of singularity and interest. As a result, the hiatus between actual and possible posited by Schelling is deepened so that existing entities are outside any logical system.

11   *SKS* 1, 194 / *CI*, 144; *SKS* 4, 319 / *CA*, 11; *SKS* 7, 502 / *CUP1*, 552f.; *SKS* 19, 139f., Not4:11 / *KJN* 3, 139; *SKS* 19, 331, Not11:20 / *KJN* 3, 329; *SKS* 22, 435, NB14:150 / *KJN* 6, 440.

12   *SKS* 6, 142 / *SLW*, 152; *SKS* 19, 170, Not4:46 / *KJN* 3, 167; *SKS* 20, 229, NB2:235 / *KJN* 4, 229; *SKS* 22, 215, NB12:121 / *KJN* 6, 216–17; *SKS* 27, 390, 415, Papir 365:2, 369 / *JP* 1, 649, 654.

13   Westphal 1991, 113; Green 1992, 77f.; Tjønneland 2004, 88–95; Pinkard 2010, 348; Fremstedal 2014.

14   *SKS* 17, 270, DD:176 / *KJN* 1, 261; *SKS* 1, 311 / *CI*, 275; *SKS* 4, 86 / *R*, 219; *SKS* 11, 226 / *SUD*, 115.

15   Kant develops this in the third *Critique* and in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Cf. Tjønneland 2004, 84–96; Bubbio 2012; Fremstedal 2014.

16   Fremstedal 2014; Irwin 2011, vol. 3, 304–9, 315f.

17   Many different Danish philosophers and theologians of the era discussed the highest good and eudaimonism, drawing on Kant, rationalism, and empiricism. Many refused to accept Kant's critique of eudaimonism, the dominating position before Kant entered the philosophical scene. Koch 2003, 96–9, 123–31, 279–324.

18   *SKS* 7, 183 / *CUP1*, 200; *SKS* 4, 112 / *FT*, 15; *SKS* 10, 214–21 / *CD*, 205–13; *SKS* 20, 289, NB4:5 / *KJN* 4, 288–9; Fremstedal 2014, ch. 6; Green 1992, 139.

19   This topic is also dealt with in Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. However, Kierkegaard criticizes Schelling for going too far in explaining evil, as Kosch (2006a, 214) shows.

20   Kosch 2006a, 124, 169, 210; Fremstedal 2014, ch. 2. Aagaard Olesen (2007) finds no clear evidence that Kierkegaard read Schelling's original works, although he did read secondary sources.

21   Green 2007, 189f. prefers to speak of the ideality of ethics instead of ethical rigorism.

22   Kosch (forthcoming) argues that there was a quite general consensus among Kierkegaard's contemporaries that Fichte's ethics was Kantian ethics in its most perfect form, or even that it was the best example of philosophical normative ethics available. Although Fichte's ethics is obscure today, *The System of Ethics* nevertheless represented a central ethical work in Kierkegaard's historical context.

23 Kangas 2007. Hühn and Schwab (2013, 88) argue that Kierkegaard takes over the later Fichte's self-criticism.
24 *SKS* 3, 207, 172 / *EO2*, 215f., 176; *SKS* 5, 167 / *EUD*, 168; *SKS* 8, 49 / *TA*, 49f.
25 Kierkegaard's ethical vocabulary also resembles Fichte's use of the term seriousness or earnestness (German, *Ernst*; Danish, *Alvor*). Hühn and Schwab 2013, 89.

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