

The Struggle Is Real: An Exploration of 19th-Century Notions of Striving, Dialectic, and General Unrest

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ABSTRACT: 19th-century thinkers Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Søren Kierkegaard each posit struggle as a foundation within their philosophies. Whereas the first two see struggle as a fundamental condition of human consciousness, I argue that Kierkegaard alone offers a way to escape this struggle.

In the works of many 19th-century philosophers, I have noticed a common theme. There seems ever present, in much of the work, a shared notion of struggle. This notion seems mainly to arise within the confines of human consciousness. In fact, the notion of struggle is pervasive in contemporary thought as well and could simply be inherent to human nature. This paper, however, maintains specific focus on the notion of struggle as brought to light by a sampling of works by three relevant 19th-century philosophers, namely, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Søren Kierkegaard. I look into some of the foundational claims made by these thinkers to see what can be discovered about their reasoning and what sense can be made of this seemingly unavoidable aspect of the human condition.

The goal is to see what relations can be made among their ideas and where conflict and contradiction may arise. Once these elucidations have been made, I argue my own stance on the notion of struggle both within the confines of human consciousness and on the outset to explain my arguments in terms of human behavior. I argue that there is one thinker among the three covered who offers a methodology of practical application in a person's life in terms of human nature as opposed to the formulations made by the remaining two, whom I consider to offer only general descriptions of human consciousness.

German idealism was sparked by the work of J. G. Fichte. He introduced the notion of struggle in a manner that was meaningful and influential to his contem-

poraries as well as those who came after him. A notable scholar of German idealism, Wayne Martin, provides much detail about Fichte's conception of struggle in chapter six of his book *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project*. He opens by explaining Fichte's claims in reference to the primacy of practice. Martin's interpretation thereof is that "philosophical theories are reflections of practical interests and moral character" (118). I take this to mean that, in the way an artist's work can be seen as a reflection or insight into her feelings, the work of a philosopher reflects his pragmatic beliefs and code of morals. Martin argues that there is this idea of striving that "lies at the heart of Fichte's conception of the primacy of practice" (119). Details of Fichte's view about striving will come to light in subsequent pages, but before his view is unraveled, I must give a little background information on Fichte's claims.

Martin argues that Fichte is very concerned with elucidating his notion of the *I*, or the *ego*. The *I* is not a thing or an it but a doing. The *I* is un-experienceable and unknowable. The *I* is the thinking of the thinking of the thinking, ad infinitum.

Opposite the *I*, we have *the other*, or the *non-ego*. The *I* is constantly striving, infinitely striving in fact, to break the boundaries of the other, which is the limiting portion of human consciousness. An example of this would be the desire to walk through a wall. This desire, as envisioned by the ego, should be possible. However, the other will always limit the possibility of doing such a thing in nature.

So, think of the I as infinite or absolute, as the thesis. Conversely, think of the other as finite, as limited by the understanding of a physical reality. It is the antithesis. The compelling nature of the I and its constant battle with the other is what Martin calls the *striving doctrine* (119).

So, though we are fundamentally finite creatures, our true nature as driven by the I is to “strive for absolute self-determination” (129). Of self-determination, I take Martin to mean what the person *should* be able to do but cannot, due to limitations enforced by the other. “Our infinity, our autonomy, our absoluteness, is preserved as an account of our inescapable but also unattainable telos” (128–9). Self-determination is the I’s striving to walk through walls, and the other is the limiting factor that makes such a goal impossible. It is important to note that the other is not the wall but our understanding of the wall. We have a dualism, a conflict, and possibly a contradiction. I explore the contradiction shortly, but what is important for now is to ensure that the reader understands this notion of striving.

Martin argues that a large portion of Fichte’s work, possibly the initial spark that set into motion, is a defense of Immanuel Kant’s postulates. Martin reminds us of Fichte’s claim that striving is of the highest order in human beings and without it no object is possible (119). I take “object” in this context to mean specifically the goal of the I to transcend the other. But as we have already seen, it seems that, due to the persistence of the other, the goals of the I are unattainable. But are they?

Upon close inspection, we can see a subtle but important connection between Fichte’s and Kant’s projects. Martin explains that Kant’s work seems to point toward a primacy of practical philosophy. “Kant’s strategy showed how practical philosophy might provide something that theoretical philosophy seeks but fails to attain: a rational justification of claims about experience-transcendent reality” (Martin, 120). For both Kant and Fichte, there is a goal specific mode of primacy. For Kant, it is the practical over theoretical philosophy. For Fichte, it is the I over

the other. Whether either can champion its opponent is unclear, but what is clear is that for both there is a struggle. Furthermore, the struggle itself seems to stem from both practicality and instinct rather than from theoretical philosophy.

So where can the I and the other find common ground? Is there a compromise? The answer seems to be grounded in morality. Martin remarks that “the goal of moral striving, according to Fichte’s obscure claim is a unity of the intelligent I [antithesis] and the self-positing I [thesis]—a unity attained by making the object of intelligence dependent on the I” (123). Though the point is somewhat elusive, I take Martin to mean by this that there exists a *synthesis* between the I and the other. Fichte’s synthesis is shown by Martin ultimately to be belief in God (123). Theistic belief is no longer meant to be seen as a *condition* of moral action but rather to be “*identified* with moral action” (Martin, 123). That one acts morally is indicative of one’s belief in God. Here, we can see intention and behavior clearly aligned with the abilities and objectives of the other, which are influenced by an infinite deity in a cooperative effort that is not seen in the relationship between the I and the other.

Martin spills a considerable amount of ink to illuminate what many of Fichte’s readers, and possibly Fichte himself, might have seen as a contradiction. Referred to specifically is that, if the other does exist “and the striving doctrine would resolve it, it is not clear that this suffices to establish the striving doctrine” (Martin, 129). Martin’s reading of Fichte seems to suggest that taking the striving doctrine for granted, the autonomy of the I is retained even though its goals are unattainable. So why does Fichte grant autonomy to the I in the first place (Martin, 129)? We can gain some insight into this matter when we consider a person’s legacy.

We can see one’s legacy as being something that is autonomous and everlasting. We can say with certainty that George Washington existed from 1732 to 1799. Though his corporeal existence as the antithesis of George Washington van-

ished upon his death, it seems that his thesis remains. We learn about him in school; he is represented on the U.S. quarter-dollar. In this and any other case of a person's legacy, it seems that there is an autonomy and infinite quality to one's otherwise finite existence.

I take Fichte not to be offering the striving doctrine as an attempt by the I to solve the problem of the other but rather that the striving doctrine itself is what amounts to the nature of human consciousness. Fichte does not seem to be saying that one or the other will win but rather that there just *is* a struggle between the two. I argue that if Fichte is right, then the implication is that the striving of the I to overturn the other is not dependent on any sort of resolution. Fichte merely elucidates what is happening within the scope of consciousness and nothing more. Further, it could be a major element of our basic survival. Think of what it means to be finite, to know with certainty that you will die someday. This may be the greatest truism in philosophy or any other discipline for that matter. Taking this into consideration, we can clearly see that each day we continue to exist, simply in virtue of our existence, we struggle against our fundamental finite nature.

There is, however, another supposed contradiction to be addressed. Martin raises a good point when he asks, "What kind of being is capable of counterpositing" (131)? Counterpositing is explained as the very positing that the I does of the other (Martin, 132). It is a deeper dissection of the striving principle. Not only do we have an eternal struggle between the absolute, infinite I and the limited, finite other, but it seems troublesome for the former to posit the latter in the first place. How could the notion of the limited, finite other even manifest itself to the absolute, infinite I? For there to be a struggle between the two in the first place, there must be a recognition of one from the other.

There are countless examples of finite beings positing the existence of an infinite deity, so it makes sense to ask how the reverse could be possible. For example, just step into your local church or synagogue. In these places of worship, you have a vast

number of people who claim without a shadow of a doubt that there exists an eternal, infinite deity, a creator and surveyor of the universe and everything in it. Those with this sort of faith also believe that this eternal infinite being is aware of and has influence on its followers. So, through this instance we can see that, though difficult to prove apodictically, there may be at least one case in which the contingent recognizes the necessary and *vice versa*.

Martin neatly bookends the chapter by returning to the concept he opens with, primacy of practice. To remind the reader, primacy of practice refers to the claim "that philosophical theories are reflections of practical interests and moral character" (Martin, 118). Other scholars no doubt have objected to this argument, but Martin offers an interesting example to illustrate its value.

He calls it the "ontogenetic analogy." This analogy equates to an infant's requirement of food for its survival. Not only does it need food, but it feels discomfort when hungry. In turn, the infant *does something* to get it. When an infant is hungry, "It cries, it struggles, it sucks" (Martin, 139). Martin notes that these behaviors are extremely primitive and instinctual. "They do not depend on an ability to represent the world as other or to act intentionally" (139). Inquire of a baby his stance on the striving doctrine or counterpositing; see how far that gets you. Martin thinks that this demonstrates something of an innate or instinctual practicality, which adds an incredible amount of foundational support to Fichte's claims. "What it [the ontogenetic analogy] shows is that there is a kind of striving that does not itself presuppose theoretical representation" (Martin, 139).

My take on this, and seemingly Martin's as well, is that Fichte's claims about striving are not meant to serve as theories at all; rather, they are meant to explain the nature of human beings. We struggle. We seem to be constantly at odds with what we should be able to do but cannot. But how can we see this as a reflection of a practical interest and moral character?

Consider the all too familiar instance of running late for work and encounter-

ing gridlock traffic on the freeway. You know that the distance from home to office is, say, 25 miles. Driving at 60 miles per hour should get you there in approximately 28 minutes. However, there is something blocking you from achieving this simple goal, namely, a massive collection of slow-moving vehicles inhibiting your path. You may think of taking backroads to bypass the obstacle, but what if many other drivers had the same idea? This course of action would become just as fruitless as the original one. Your thesis tells you it should be possible to get to work on time if only the antithesis were not acting as the limiting factor. This creates frustration and resentment. These emotions are initially directed at others on the road and, if one is honest, eventually towards oneself for not leaving earlier.¹

Though Fichte clearly demonstrates a duality of consciousness, it is another thinker who argues for an absolute dependence upon the I by the other and vice versa. G. W. F. Hegel provides an account of struggle between the I and the other in his famous argument of the master and servant. The section is opened with the notion of recognition of one by the other. "SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS EXISTS IN ITSELF AND FOR ITSELF, IN THAT, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized'" (Hegel, 399). How can something exist in and for itself but only via recognition of some other consciousness? It is my contention that not unlike Fichte, Hegel, too, is alluding to an eternal struggle between the ego and the non-ego. The ego yearns to exist as an infinite, absolute spirit but can only be manifested tangibly in a finite manner as the non-ego. In what Hegel refers to as the *double self-consciousness*, he explains that "it [ego] does not regard the other [non-ego] as essentially real, but sees its own self in the other" (Hegel, 399). So, I take this opening statement to be nothing more than an explication that the ego and the non-ego are interdependent. Ontologically speaking, the survival of one entity requires the survival of the other.

Before direct analysis of the master/servant argument, I would like to highlight what I feel to be the zenith of Hegel's notion of struggle, namely, the obliteration of one at the hand of the other: "Insofar as the other's action, each aims at the destruction and death of the other" (Hegel, 402). So, though it is clear that there exists a struggle between the ego and the non-ego, it is actually one of life and death. It turns out, though, that no matter how strong the desire to do so, one cannot kill the other.

Think of it like a quarter. On one side we have George Washington's acting as the ego, and on the other we have the bald eagle's acting as the non-ego. Both Washington and the eagle want to exist independently but cannot. The survival of one is contingent upon the survival of the other. It is not as if splitting the coin bisectionally would give us two 12.5 cent pieces. There exists either the dualistic nature of the quarter or nothing at all. "In the same way each must aim at the death of the other, as it risks its own life thereby; for that other is to it of no more worth than itself" (Hegel, 403). By killing one's only brother, one loses his own identity as brother.

So, we now come to the master/servant (or lord and bondsman) argument. There are two characters in this short drama. First, we have the master as played by the consciousness that exists for itself, or the ego. Then, there is the servant, that other consciousness that is the manifestation of the latter in thinghood (existence in the world). "The master relates himself to the servant mediately through independent existence, for that is precisely what keeps the servant in bond; it is his chain, from which he could not, in the struggle, get away, and for that reason he proves himself dependent, shows that his independence consists in his being a thing" (Hegel, 405). The master displays his dominance over the servant by being that which infinitely animates the finite other. The very life, and consequently the role of the servant, is contingent upon the existence of the master, but we soon find that this goes both ways.

The master, or ego, is always initially defined by Hegel as existing solely for himself: "he is the negative power without qualification, a power to which the thing [non-ego] is nothing, and his is thus the absolutely essential action in this situation, while the servant's is not so, his is an unessential activity" (Hegel, 406). By "without qualification," I take Hegel to mean "without need of qualification," for the master's existence is necessary. Conversely, the servant is meant only to exist via qualification made by the master. The servant's existence is contingent on the necessary self-positing existence of the master, but it turns out that the very act of serving is his saving grace. "Through work and labor, however, this consciousness of the servant comes to itself" (Hegel, 408). It is actually in virtue of the servant's subordinate role as handed down by the master that the servant comes to have the self-consciousness meant to be denied by the master. So, it is the service of the bondsman that gives legitimacy to the lord. If the servant is to be nothing without the master, what is the master to be without the servant? Seemingly, he is to be nothing. In *A Commentary on Hegel's Logic*, John and Ellis McTaggart had this to say about Hegel's dialectic:

Hegel, has proved, no doubt, that the Outer is now identical with the Inner. And it may perhaps be said that, though this is not the same as the denial of all multiplicity, yet it involves it. For, as against the Outer, the Inner was looked on as emphasising the unity of the content, while the Outer emphasised the multiplicity. [158]

I argue that the implication made by these authors drives the notion of interdependence home in an interesting fashion. They claim that in virtue of the master's need for the servant, the former is actually identical with the latter. Though a seeming contradiction to the notions of necessary versus contingent existence, it gives us something more to consider when attempting to understand Hegel's argument.

Finally we turn to a more subtle notion of struggle as provided by Søren Kierkegaard in his book *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. Kierkegaard brings the notion of struggle to light in a different way but with similar intrinsic tenets. He shows how there exists absolutely a struggle to define what it is that a person should will. The battle here is not between the I and the other but rather a question of willing. Though he alludes to the notion of struggle as the other thinkers did, his version is varied in that it is without question a normative claim about human nature and not what it stems from. Kierkegaard is not telling us what we are; he is telling us what to do. He will ultimately argue that there is only one thing worth striving for, and in so doing, our will can be in perfect alignment with the will of God.

I argue that, though Fichte and Hegel provide us with interesting explanatory facts about human nature, Kierkegaard gives us a way in which we can use personal struggle to guide our application of practical interest and moral character.

In technical scope, *Purity of Heart* is meant to serve as a prerequisite study before making confession of one's sins, but not as we typically recognize, e.g., in a booth with a clergyman. Kierkegaard scholar and professor of law at UCLA, Stephen R. Munzer, writes, "Purity of heart depends on repentance and confession. Kierkegaard does not have in mind a penitent's auricular confession in a booth of his or her sins to a priest who then absolves the penitent. Instead he writes about private, secret confession made prior to communion services on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark" (317).

The message that *Purity of Heart* delivers is more deeply entrenched in the discovery of how to align one's will properly with the good. What follows is an attempt to discover what the good is and how Kierkegaard suggests we do so.

As is often taught in both ancient and contemporary divinity, the proper use of the will is grounded in its alignment with that of God, or as Kierkegaard puts it, "the Eternal." A seeming instantiation of

this notion can be found in the introduction of the book. Kierkegaard begins the study with what I take to be a prayer, or a petition to God if you like. The first established concept is that humanity's knowledge is essentially nothing without God. "What is all he knows, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if he does not know Thee!" (Kierkegaard 31). With this notion in place, he begins his request: "So may Thou give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing" (31). Here we are introduced to Kierkegaard's one thing.

Kierkegaard's object of willing is twofold in that it is both a request made of God and requires constant attention and perseverance in its acquisition. Otherwise, its necessity is easily forgotten. It is alluded to that in the passage of a human's day, the request for such may be made at dawn, but by dusk the *intention* may easily escape. One must keep the willing of one thing ever present in one's understanding. Before giving a detailed description of this one thing, I must first explain what Kierkegaard sees as barriers to its willing.

Though seemingly obvious, Kierkegaard makes it clear that a variety of goals is not one goal. In the search for one goal that leads to the good, we might explore the vast number of goals that could do so. Is it precise focus on work, family, community, or oneself that constitutes the willing of one thing? In selecting one of them, and giving it all of our attention, we may be disregarding the others, and this will quickly be recognized as a contradiction to the pursuit of the good, which is what this one thing seems to be alluding to in the first place. "And not only this; since each of these considerations readily becomes too abstract in character, is he not obliged as the next step to attempt to will, one after the other, each of these goals in order to find out what is the single thing he is to will, if it is a matter of willing only one thing?" (Kierkegaard, 54). It is made clear that this would be a pursuit of an endless nature and would not lend itself to the one thing we should be willing.

Accordingly, there is a consideration that Kierkegaard makes explicit. Any one of myriad goals, though established with the best of intentions, which humanity may wish to centralize could only be of an earthly, not heavenly, nature and thus not permissible. "This is indeed a lamentable fact; but there is a wisdom which is not from above, but is earthly and fleshly and devilish" (Kierkegaard, 62). So it seems that whether we establish one or many goals as the object of desire in terms of the one thing we should be willing, they all fail the acid test in terms of purity of heart for Kierkegaard. His resolution on this matter is both clever and precise. He inspires his reader by demonstrating the fallacy of selecting one or many candidates that the finite human mind could contemplate in the first place.

So, what are we to do? How are we to discover this one thing and what is its specific nature? Though not made clear by Kierkegaard, we can say that it is the good. The good cannot be any finite goal, and it cannot be a combination of several such goals. It, in fact, cannot be any of these things, as it has been established that they are all of only an earthly virtue. It is my contention that the one thing to be willed can be summed up by a single word, "intention."

When one forms an intention, one centralizes her thoughts upon not only a given goal but upon how the goal is to be obtained. We can always, in a manner given to us by the Eternal, yet in a finite way, utilize the good in intention. Intention serves as a way to follow one's conscience, which I argue that Kierkegaard would decree as being God given. If I align my will with that of approaching all of my affairs with the intention of good, then I am accurately following my conscience. The work being done here is constant and strenuous. I must always be grounded in self-examination.

We are shown that, ultimately, the path to having such an intention is to be oneself, or in Kierkegaard's words, to live as an individual. It must be recognized, though, that what is being asked by his study is not about one specific individual such as

you or I. "No, it is the serious question, of what each man really is according to his eternal vocation, so that he himself shall be conscious that he is following it; and what is even more serious, to ask it as if he were considering his life before God" (Kierkegaard, 184).

To will one thing is not, as many devout followers may claim, to align one's will with God's. Nor is it to make a specific request that God somehow inject the divine will into our understanding. To will one thing is to live properly and attentively as an individual and, through the process of self-examination in all our affairs, to rely upon our pure conscience. For though our conscience may be seen as God given, we, however, are the ones at the helm. This effectively clears the path for humans to have free will while still making room for the deterministic assumption that that which gives us free will is granted by God.

In looking at these three thinkers, there seems to be more in common between Fichte and Hegel than either has with Kierkegaard. There is, however, at least one author who went to considerable lengths to elucidate a connection between Kierkegaard and Hegel. In the introduction to his book, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel, Reconsidered*, John Stewart writes:

While many scholars would agree that much of Kierkegaard's rich and diverse thought is best understood as being in a sort of dialogue with Hegel's philosophy, few have done much to establish the concrete points of contact in a historical fashion. Thus, for anyone even mildly familiar with Kierkegaard, the value of an investigation of his relation to Hegel and German idealism should be obvious and in no need of justification. There are any number of reasons why this issue, so central to understanding Kierkegaard, has not been treated more often or more rigorously than it has. First, in a number of his books, there are several passages in which Kierkegaard assumes a tone of animosity towards Hegelian philosophy. [1]

My reasoning for including this passage is to show that I am not the only one who finds merit in the grouping of Kierkegaard with Hegel to explain a unified concept. And though Stewart's comparative analysis of the two goes into more detail, I argue that the specific comparison of the two in terms of this notion of struggle is justified. Furthermore, since Hegel's philosophy (especially in dialectical formulation) seems to ride the coattails of Fichte, I argue for a justification of grouping these three thinkers.

The reader may be asking, though, what does Kierkegaard's project have to do with Fichte's or Hegel's? Here I return to the original point of the essay, which is to elucidate the notion of "struggle" and its implications for human nature. In their dialectic analysis of consciousness, Fichte and Hegel attempt to explain what makes us human. Kierkegaard, however, tells us what to do with the struggle, how to apply it in our lives. Though I argue that following German idealistic methodology in the confines of the dialectic can shed some light on why we behave the way we do, I would like to offer two final examples to expand on the notion of struggle and human nature.

Imagine you are in love. I do not mean that you have strong feelings for or feel you would be paired well with someone. I mean that you are deeply and inescapably in love with someone. This is a story as old as humankind. Now, imagine that love is unrequited. The object of your desire does not share your conviction. The ego outright demands that he be with you, but the non-ego will not permit it. How would you behave in this scenario? In an active approach, you might continually pester the person to meet your demands to the point of annoyance escalating to the level of restraining orders. Or, you may choose simply to internalize your despair, becoming more and more depressed in light of the non-ego's limitation of the ego's desires.

In this scenario, we can see both Fichte and Hegel shaking their heads saying, "I told you so." Thus, the matter reaches a dead end. They do not tell us how to deal with this situation but rather just revel in

their understanding of the inherently painful nature of the human condition. Here, Kierkegaard offers us a way out. Following his line of reasoning, we can say that we should follow our conscience. If we listen to it carefully and realize our subjective truth, we are better equipped to deal with the struggle: move on.

In a similar scenario, a heroin addict strongly desires to feel the same high as was offered upon the first injection but can never quite get to that point. Extreme tolerance and eminent addiction will always be the limiting factor. There is perhaps no greater a display of behavioral changes made than in this instance. So, the dialectic again does a nice job of explaining the struggle and its origin in light of human nature, but it is Kierkegaard's purity of heart, the willing of one thing, that offers another type of behavioral modification.

In recognizing perhaps the strongest human instinct there is, namely, survival, it might turn out that in following the addict's conscience, she decides to seek help and to get clean. Though this process is both painful and difficult, it may turn out to be the most gratifying and fruitful endeavor of her life. This willing of one thing could lead to her ability to regain her position in society and to be of use to others who suffer in the way she did.

It is my contention that our behavior can only stem from our consciousness. I argue that the dialectic gives strong evidence for this as I have shown in many instances throughout this paper, and my ultimate claim is that Kierkegaard's methodology is one that can offer a practical application necessary for true happiness. Fichte and Hegel show us why we are what we are, whereas Kierkegaard shows us how to become what we are meant to be.

Note

¹It is here that we might see the duality of consciousness manifesting in behavioral and perceptual alterations. I explore this notion more in the conclusion.

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