Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: Despair and Nihilism Converge

Roe Fremstedal

This article investigates the convergence between Kierkegaard's concept of despair and Nietzsche's concept of nihilism. The piece argues that (1) both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rely on an internal critique of ways of life which collapse on their own terms; (2) both despair and nihilism involve a radical, existential *aporia* and double-mindedness which can be (3) either conscious or non-conscious; (4) there is some overlap between the main types of nihilism and the different types of inauthentic (non-conscious) despair; (5) finally, a comparison with Nietzsche makes it possible to make sense of inauthentic despair without resorting to theological presuppositions or a twentieth century depth psychology notion of the unconscious.

Preliminary remarks

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are often compared because they are seen as the twin fathers, or forefathers, of existentialism.[1] Many commentators have indicated convergence between these thinkers, which may be surprising given that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche belong to different contexts and have different agendas and convictions, particularly on ethics and religion. Most

---

[1] Miles (2011, 263). See pp. 288-298 for an extensive bibliography on the literature on Nietzsche's relation to Kierkegaard.

commentators assume that Nietzsche had almost no knowledge of Kierkegaard. However, Brobjer (2003) shows that Nietzsche knew Kierkegaard from secondary sources authored by Hans L. Martensen, Georg Brandes, and Harald Høffding. As a result, it is now established "beyond doubt that Nietzsche knew something of Kierkegaard", although it still "remains unclear exactly what information Nietzsche retained from" these secondary sources (Miles 2011, 274).

Instead of focusing on Nietzsche's knowledge of – and interest in – Kierkegaard, the present article focuses on conceptual analysis. I offer a comparison between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche which focuses on how the concepts of despair and nihilism seem to converge in significant ways.[2] I do not offer close readings of the original texts but rather build on existing scholarship that offers valuable (argumentative and rational) reconstructions. I am particularly indebted to the work of Grøn (1997), Kosch (2006), Reginster (2008), and Miles (2013), yet I try to go beyond existing literature by showing how a comparison of despair and nihilism points to convergence. I believe that recent scholarship has bettered the prospects of dialogue between Kierkegaardians and Nietzscheans and that there is more convergence than shown by earlier scholarship. So far, most comparisons have focused on how Kierkegaard and Nietzsche disagree, and tried to use one thinker to criticize the other. Consequently, much of the literature is somewhat biased, and convergence between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is somewhat under-researched (Miles 2011 and 2013, ch. 5).

There is a fundamental structural similarity between Kierkegaardian despair and Nietzschean nihilism. Both concepts not only represent the very essence of inauthenticity; they also imply that existence itself has become fundamentally problematic and intolerable. Both concepts represent radical alienation as well as the lack of meaning, value, and purpose in life. Both involve an existential *aporia* in which one is trapped in an intolerable, meaningless, and hopeless situation. Miles (2013, 156) argues compellingly that "Nietzsche's notion of nihilism is structurally very similar to

---

Kierkegaard's notion of despair. Nihilism and despair both name a misrelation in one's fundamental existential stance towards oneself, others, and the world". Both represent whole ways of life which fail according to their own standards (or values).

This failure makes possible an *internal critique* of different forms of despair and nihilism, even if all these forms are not manifest or not something we are consciously aware of. In Hegelian terms, we can criticize a *Gestalt* on its own terms, see how it collapses, and progress to the next *Gestalt* until we reach a *Gestalt* which does not collapse internally. We can distinguish between typologies of different ways of life and morphologies in which one form of life is replaced by another. Although both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche sketch such typologies and morphologies (Miles 2013, chs. 1-2), I do not attempt to cover all the details in this article. Instead, I only try to supplement and complement existing literature in a few respects.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche do not agree on all aspects of ways of life that collapse or exactly how they collapse. There seems to be more overlap in terms of structure, problems, and methodology than in terms of ethico-religious content. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche raise the same kinds of question concerning the best way of life and try to criticize different ways of life on their own terms. Both try to show that failing according to one's own standards results from an underlying stance in which the person misrelates to herself, others, and the world (Miles 2013, 12, 156f.). Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's different diagnoses of failed ways of life overlap in several respects, and their different typologies also overlap somewhat (as I will argue). But there is more agreement about negative points than about positive points, although both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche think that the best way of life must include suffering and self-overcoming. Nietzsche believes that the best way of life is only available to an elite, whereas Kierkegaard is an ethico-religious egalitarian who believes that the highest good is universally available.

Kierkegaard understands the best way of life in traditional ethical and Christian terms. Even the notion of despair is a fundamental *ethical* notion, referring to an unwillingness to accept human agency in general and moral responsibility in particular (Kosch 2006, 142f., 154, 208). Nietzsche, by contrast, associates nihilism closely with traditional ethical and religious values. Still, it is often claimed that Nietzsche criticizes Platonico-Christian

values and modern ethics rather than ethics in general. Nietzsche is commonly associated with virtue ethics, whereas Kierkegaard is associated with deontology and virtue ethics (cf. Fremstedal 2015b, 114f.). Nihilism seems to be an ethical notion insofar as it enables a distinction between life-affirming and life-negating values (Reginster 2008; Miles 2013).

In the following I will focus on the *diagnoses* of nihilism and despair rather than the different cures suggested by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Whereas Nietzsche tries to replace nihilistic values with life-affirming values, Kierkegaard sees Christian faith, hope, and charity as the only alternative to despair. But even if Kierkegaard and Nietzsche believe in very different solutions, this does not prevent them from, at least partially, agreeing when it comes to the problems or diagnoses.

Nihilism – phenomenon and concept

Commentators such as Reginster (2008) have pointed out that Nietzsche speaks of nihilism not just as a socio-cultural *phenomenon* but also as a *logical consequence* of certain value commitments. On the one hand, nihilism represents a psychological and a socio-cultural phenomenon experienced by individuals and society. Presumably, this would refer to the meaninglessness and valuelessness (and related phenomena) experienced particularly in modern Western societies. On the other hand, nihilism is said to represent "the ultimate logical conclusion [*die zu Ende gedachte Logik*] of our great values and ideals".[3] More specifically, nihilism is rooted in the moral interpretation of the world found in the Platonico-Christian tradition. Nietzsche thinks that the values and ideals of this tradition are not just other-worldly but also life-negating and nihilistic. This involves a conceptual and normative claim about certain value commitments that individuals or society may or may not be aware.

---

[3] Nietzsche (1968), Preface 4; KSA 13, 190. KSA refers to Nietzsche (1999).

The latter claim differs from the socio-cultural and psychological claim about how nihilism has spread in late modern European culture. Medication and physiological and psychological treatment may stop the spread of nihilism in modern societies, but it will not address the normative, philosophical problem that Nietzsche points to. Indeed, this philosophical problem may continue to exist even if there is little or no awareness of it. In the words of Reginster, one can be in a nihilistic predicament without realizing it.[4] Like despair, nihilism can be either conscious or non-conscious.

Conceptually, nihilism involves the conviction that existence is *meaningless* or not even worth living.[5] Meaninglessness results from the lack of a significant, realizable goal that can give our lives meaning. The underlying idea is that a goal can inspire and convey meaning to life only if the goal is realizable and perceived as valuable (Reginster 2008, 24, 33). Without a realizable and valuable goal, we have nihilism.

The first type of nihilism is one which lacks goals and values to strive for, resulting in life without a point, value, or meaning. This type of nihilism involves a disorientation that hinders the very ability to act, choose, strive, and live actively. This is particularly dangerous, since human life needs values in order to flourish. Indeed, Nietzsche thinks that human life would be virtually impossible without adherence to values (Horstmann 2012, 187).

Nietzsche claims that the growth of this type of nihilism among Western societies results from a historical process in which ideals and values are *devaluated*. Nietzsche argues that the Platonico-Christian tradition undermines itself, since its morality values truthfulness and intellectual honesty above anything else, and that this leads to an internal critique of the tradition in which its fundament is attacked.[6]

---

[4] Reginster (2008, 38). Nietzsche (1974, §125; KSA 3, 480ff.) famously thinks that even those who are aware of the death of God fail to see its nihilistic implications.

[5] Vattimo (2006, 12); Reginster (2008, 8ff.); KSA 12, 211ff., 366; KSA 13, 45-48. Nietzsche uses meaningless (*sinnlos*) and valueless (*werthlos*) interchangeably, suggesting that meaning requires values.

[6] KSA 12, 211ff. On Nietzsche's genealogical and psychological critique, see Reginster (2008, 41ff.) and Vattimo (2006, 56ff.).

459

This critique of the tradition also brings us to the other type of nihilism, a type which has valuable but unrealizable goals. Nietzsche believes that this type of nihilism results from the other-worldly and life-negating ideals of the Platonico-Christian tradition (notably, the concept of the highest good). This form of nihilism implies an inescapable conflict between ideals and reality, between "ought" and "is". Nietzsche writes: "A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist" (Nietzsche 1968, §585A; KSA 12, 366). This type of nihilism presupposes that we expect, or hope for, the realization of the highest values and that we lack alternative values which do not depend on these higher values. The problem arises because our ideals or goals are unrealistic and impossible to realize, both now and in the future. They cannot be realized in this world, nor can they be realized in another world (Reginster 2008, 8).

This type of nihilism can easily be avoided if we give up traditional, nihilistic ideals. Unfortunately, this will only return us to the first type of nihilism (disorientation), unless nihilistic ideals are replaced with this-worldly, life-affirming values (something Nietzsche actually tries to do).[7] Nihilism thus has two sources: a devaluation of goals and ideals which results in disorientation *and* the conviction (or realization) that our goals and ideals are unrealizable. Nietzsche summarizes: "'Either abolish your reverences or — *yourselves*!' The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be — nihilism?" (Nietzsche 1974, §346; KSA 3, 581). The former represents nihilistic disorientation, which lacks values. The latter suggests that "the world as it is […] ought not to be", whereas the "world as it ought to be […] does not exist" (cf. Nietzsche 1968, §585A; KSA 12, 366).[8]

Without referencing Kierkegaard, Reginster (2008, 8ff.) claims that the latter type of nihilism is best characterized as *despair*. Presumably, the reason

---

[7] It is often claimed that Nietzsche is much more successful with his negative project than the positive one. For a sympathetic reading of the latter, see Reginster (2008, chs. 2-6). Cf. Williams (2014, chs. 3, 9, 11).

[8] The former is analysed in the published writings, whereas the latter is mainly analysed in the *Nachlass*. But not everything fits into Reginster's typology. For a more complex account, including many different forms of nihilism, see Sommer (2009).

is that it involves being completely trapped in a hopeless and meaningless situation (or even being trapped in a world that should not be or being forced to live a life that seems worthless). I think Reginster's description of nihilism as despair is apt and particularly suited for showing overlap between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in the following respects: First, both despair and nihilism involve a radical, existential aporia in which a person is trapped in an intolerable situation, although this holds not only for the type of nihilism which Reginster names despair but also for the other type which he names disorientation. More specifically, disorientation involves being trapped in a situation in which we cannot choose or act, because we lack ideals and meaning. We are forced to live a vegetative life instead of an active life.

Second, Kierkegaard's distinction between authentic and inauthentic despair overlaps structurally with Nietzsche's distinction between nihilism as a psychological phenomenon and nihilism as the result of certain value commitments. Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism as something implicit and hidden may not just parallel Kierkegaard's notion of inauthentic despair but also helps us to make sense of it (at least in part) without starting with theological presuppositions (e.g. original sin) or a twentieth century depth psychology notion of the unconscious. Even if Kierkegaard, or Anti-Climacus,[9] does rely on theological presuppositions (or anticipates twentieth century depth psychology[10]), this need not prevent us – as far as possible – from trying to reconstruct or make sense of the notion of inauthentic despair without relying on such controversial presuppositions. Although inauthentic despair is often interpreted as "unconscious despair" (cf. Grøn 1997, 125ff.; Rudd 2012, ch. 9), I prefer to use the more neutral expression "non-conscious despair". The possibility of being in despair without being

---

[9] I rely mainly on Anti-Climacus' *Sickness unto Death* when analysing despair. Attributing the views of Anti-Climacus to Kierkegaard is somewhat controversial but should not be so. Kierkegaard himself explains that he invented Anti-Climacus to avoid being criticized for not living as he preached. Kierkegaard thus shares Anti-Climacus' views and ideals, but he does not claim to live up to them. Cf. Theunissen (1993, 13).

[10] Rudd (2012, ch. 9) argues for instance that Kierkegaard anticipates Jung's depth psychology. See also Theunissen (1991 and 1993).

consciously aware of it need not imply that despair belongs to the unconscious in a Freudian or Jungian sense. It is perfectly possible to be unaware of something without this implying that it resides in the unconscious. Indeed, Kierkegaardian despair is much closer to Sartre's bad faith than Freud's (mechanistic) concept of the unconscious (Westphal 2014, 243).[11]

Finally, Kierkegaard's despair of finitude and despair of necessity converge with Nietzsche's nihilism as disorientation, whereas despair of infinitude and despair of possibility converge with Nietzsche's nihilism as despair. Although despair and nihilism share structural features, they are not identical. And even though some parallels and similarities can be identified, Miles (2013) cautions that there are no neat parallels between types of despair and types of nihilism. Still, I want to compare the different forms of inauthentic despair in *Sickness unto Death* with the two main forms of nihilism in Nietzsche (disorientation and despair) to see if there is significant overlap.

Despair – phenomenon and concept

Like nihilism, despair is both a phenomenon and a concept. Kierkegaard claims that despair is more widespread than usually thought, since it is often hidden or unacknowledged. It is the structure of human agency (or selfhood) which makes despair possible, according to Kierkegaard. Our agency (or selfhood) is not just given but must also be established and developed. Despair represents a deficient form of agency, a form which fails to realize

---

[11] Sartre (1998, ch. 2) shows that introducing the unconscious does not solve the problem of self-deception; it only shifts the problem from the conscious domain to the censor controlling the demarcation line between the conscious and unconscious. Another approach, suggested by Michael Morreau, would be to argue that anything that fragments our awareness of ourselves might lead to inauthentic despair. Distractions and absent-mindedness (e.g. caused by recreational drug use) could fragment awareness so that it becomes possible to actively despair (i.e. to give up hope and courage) without even noticing it.

its potential. This failure is so radical that it involves an "unwillingness to accept human agency" itself (with all its particular conditions).[12] This unwillingness is closely related not just to self-deception but to the attempt to escape moral responsibility and to misconstrue the ethico-religious choice between good and evil (Kosch 2006, 142f., 208; Fremstedal 2014 and 2015a).

Despair is not only a psychological phenomenon or something we can experience or suffer (e.g. a state or feeling of hopelessness). Despair always involves *an act* whereby we actively despair by giving up hope and courage. Despair thus involves both passivity and activity.[13] It is not just a psychological notion but also a moral category that concerns how we relate to ourselves and others (Kosch 2006, 206f.). Despair involves a fundamental existential stance in which we are alienated from existence and unwilling to accept it (and its conditions). A person does not accept existence as it is, nor does he have hope of future improvement. Hence, he is trapped in an intolerable situation; he wants to get rid of himself but cannot do so since he is trapped.[14]

But this needs to be qualified. Despair often takes the form of accepting existence on false terms, so that one does not accept existence in its actuality or in its potentiality (although one fails to realize this). One believes to be free of despair but deceives oneself by accepting existence on false terms. Despair involves not just being unwilling to be oneself (as one is actually and potentially); it often also involves wanting to be someone else (although this is impossible – cf. Grøn 1997, 111ff.). Basically, despair implies that one's ideals and expectations are impossible to realize, given the situation in which one finds oneself. This implies a conflict between ideals and reality,

---

[12] Kosch (2006, 154) reaches this conclusion after discussing alternative interpretations of despair (143ff., 204ff.). For a somewhat different approach, see Grøn (1997) who builds on Theunissen (1991 and 1993).

[13] Grøn (1997, 153) emphasizes the interplay between activity and passivity in despair. He concludes that despair involves suffering a loss, or despairing over something which happens, and attributing infinite weight to the loss or event one despairs over. The result is that one gives up courage and hope.

[14] SKS 11, 133ff.; Kierkegaard (1983, 18ff.); cf. Grøn (1997, 114). SKS refers to Kierkegaard 1997-2013.

much like nihilism. Put in Nietzschean terms: the world as it is, ought not to be, whereas the world as it ought to be, does not exist. Thus, we face an existential aporia characterized by a fundamental double-mindedness which Kierkegaard thinks is characteristic of despair.

Despair involves misinterpreting oneself and one's situation, although one may not be aware of it. This could take the form of not being aware of the situation as it is, as it could be, or as it ought to be. One could fail to face reality as it is, fail to see possibilities, or fail to acknowledge one's task. Insofar as one is not even aware that one despairs, one is in inauthentic despair; insofar as one acknowledges it, one is in authentic despair.

To support these claims, Kierkegaard utilizes a descriptive and analytic exposition of different forms of consciousness reminiscent of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Sprit*. Different forms of consciousness are criticized on their own terms by identifying a conflict between what is said and what is shown, between what is intended and what is achieved (Grøn 1997, 33f., 133, 138f.). This approach presupposes that the forms of consciousness analysed involve self-consciousness and that they express themselves by utilizing signs. It must be possible for an external observer to show that a form of consciousness fails according to its own standards (or values) by having an inadequate self-understanding and then move on to the next form of consciousness (and so on until we have a position that is not self-defeating).

Kierkegaard stresses that despair can motivate a transition (leap) to Christian faith. Indeed, genuine Christian existence presupposes that one has gone through despair, according to Kierkegaard. It is impossible to realize human agency, or to reach one's telos, without first despairing. Despair points indirectly to a telos that is not reached; attained selfhood points to selfhood as an ideal or a (ethico-religious) task to be realized, although the process from the former to the latter is anything but smooth. Kierkegaard develops a negativistic approach to agency (and selfhood) which claims that we only understand agency (and selfhood) through its failure, through despair (Grøn 1997, 227; Theunissen 1991 and 1993). This approach denies that agency is given prior to the possibility of failure. Rather, the normative task of becoming oneself presupposes the possibility of failure, so that being oneself represents a problem (Grøn 1997, 227, 261f., 277). And the case of failure represents the rule, not the exception. To obtain a proper under-

standing of agency, we therefore need to approach it indirectly by focusing on despair.

Nietzsche also approaches the best way of life negatively by focusing on nihilism and how it can be overcome. Nietzsche's approach resembles Kierkegaard's insofar as he begins with nihilism (and pessimism) and sketches life-affirming values afterwards (cf. Miles 2013, chs. 4f.). Still, Kierkegaard may use a negativistic approach – and Hegelian methodology – more extensively than Nietzsche does, and sees despair as contingent but inevitable (in the sense of being humanly or subjectively necessary, not objectively necessary). The identification of despair with sin, in Part Two of *Sickness unto Death*, indicates that despair ultimately results from the fall, from the rebellion against God. This suggests that the person in despair is somehow unwilling to accept creation and his place in it. Despair results not from devaluation but from human sinfulness (something which primarily involves an individual fall and only secondarily a social and historical process in which one is corrupted by others). These theological presuppositions also transcend the internal critique of despair sketched in Part One of *Sickness unto Death* by introducing an external standard revealed by God (Grøn 1997, 33ff., 230ff., 296ff.).

In contrast to Nietzsche's claims, Kierkegaard does not believe that Platonic-Christian values have devaluated, nor does he believe that Platonism and Christianity, reason and revelation, represent one unified tradition. But he still believes that the Christian tradition is corrupted to a great extent and that despair is widespread in so-called Christian societies. However, the corruption of the visible church and Christian societies – what Kierkegaard calls "Christendom" – does not undermine Christian ideals for Kierkegaard; authentic Christianity is possible, although Christendom has failed. Nietzsche's nihilistic Christianity resembles Christendom more than Kierkegaardian Christianity, with the important exception of Kierkegaard's notions of guilt and sin (Miles 2011, 281ff. and 2013, 206f.). The identification of despair with sin represents the element of despair which diverges most radically from Nietzsche. Instead of seeing nihilism as the result of sin, Nietzsche sees it as the result of physiological sickness and weakness (KSA 13, 46ff., 529). Rather than being entirely contingent as a result of the Platonico-Christian tradition, nihilism seems to have a deeper root in human nature as the effect of physiological degeneration,

decadence, and weakness. This physiological illness affects not just weak individuals but also stronger individuals who are corrupted by ideals of the weak (partially as a result of mixing of races, classes, and other groups (KSA 5, 367ff., 375ff.)).[15]

One might object that despair, unlike nihilism, does not involve meaninglessness and the conviction that life lacks value. At least there are interpretations of despair that do not explicitly describe it in terms of meaninglessness and valuelessness.[16] Still, despair does involve a radical self-alienation or an unwillingness to accept one's situation. A person is unwilling to be whoever she is, and instead wants to be someone else. Stated differently, she values (or identifies with) something fundamentally incompatible with her situation. As a result, she sees no value or point in her situation – it appears to lack value (and meaning). Still, one might ask if the unwillingness to accept agency that Kierkegaard analyses does not differ from the value commitments that Nietzsche diagnoses. It is not clear that these need to be identical, but they can overlap and combine in some ways. Indeed, an unwillingness to accept agency could *result* from unrealizable values or from a lack of values. The act of despairing, the existential stance whereby one gives up courage and hope, would seem to imply value judgements in the sense of making demands on the world and condemning it for failing to meet our expectations.

Nihilism also seems to involve an unwillingness to accept human agency with its particular conditions. Both despair and nihilism are closely connected not only to the state of the world but to our nature and particularly our values, ideals, demands, and expectations. Nietzsche thinks of our values and ideals as contingent illusions, as things which are necessary for psychological and pragmatic reasons, whereas Kierkegaard believes in objective values and moral facts (more on this later).

---

[15] Even if nihilism results from physiological decadence, this need not prevent it from involving philosophical claims and arguments that should be treated rationally (see Reginster 2008, 39).

[16] Grøn (1997) speaks of identity rather than meaning and value. But Rudd (2012) and Fremstedal (2015a, 178ff.) interpret despair as the lack of meaning, value, and purpose in life.

Inauthentic despair

To many the very idea of inauthentic despair seems problematic, speculative, dogmatic, or outdated. For how could despair which is not experienced as despair from the first-person perspective qualify as despair? Kierkegaard says that it is not real (*egentlig*) despair – but isn't this too weak? Is inauthentic despair really despair?[17] One promising way of approaching this would be to compare despair with the concept of eudaimonia in virtue ethics.[18] If it is possible to conceive of happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*) as something involving objective, formal constraints that go beyond subjective experiences, why are we not able do much the same with unhappiness or despair? Virtue ethicists argue that not every type of happiness qualifies as *eudaimonia*; we can feel happy without being *eudaimon* (notably by lacking the virtues and/or the external goods necessary for *eudaimonia*). Put in Kierkegaardian terms, we might feel happy (and thus show no sign of authentic despair) yet be in inauthentic despair. I believe it is against this ancient Greek background – and not just the Christian tradition – that we should understand Kierkegaard's concept of despair. Indeed, the Christian tradition Kierkegaard belongs to builds on Greek virtue ethics. Kierkegaard himself acknowledges this by viewing Greek, Socratic thinking as a necessary (but insufficient) presupposition for Christian thinking (Fremstedal 2014, chs. 6-10).

It is important to realize that inauthentic despair normally refers to a form of consciousness which not only speaks about itself but which also claims to be free of despair, typically by claiming to be safe and content with life (Grøn 1997, 127ff.). Kierkegaard believes there is a conflict between what this form of consciousness says and what it shows, between

---

[17] Theunissen (1993, 31), the leading German scholar, concludes that we cannot be in despair without somehow knowing it. Westphal (2014, 243) stresses that inauthentic and authentic despair are *ideal types* that actual cases of despair resemble to various degrees. Very often the person in despair has a dim idea of his state, and there seems to be some element of consciousness at work normally.

[18] For eudaimonist approaches to Kierkegaard, see e.g. Rudd (2012); Kosch (2006, 146f.).

what it intends and what it achieves (Grøn 1997, 33f., 133, 138f.). This makes it possible for the psychological observer to conclude that the self-understanding of inauthentic despair is inadequate because it misinterprets the situation. Kierkegaard argues that this misinterpretation results from a complex interplay between cognition and volition, in which man tends to deny or obscure the problems to himself so that he does not even realize his state of despair. Partially as a result, Kierkegaard stresses that inauthentic despair implies self-deception and a volitional failure rather than a cognitive failure. Although he thinks that all forms of despair involve some self-deception, inauthentic despair involves a particularly strong form that denies its state of despair or its need of any kind of cure or improvement (cf. Grøn 1997, 204, 218, 376). One is not conscious of despairing and fails to have a proper understanding of what it means to become a self, nor can one deal with the situation by overcoming despair.

In his influential analysis of human agency and selfhood, Kierkegaard argues compellingly that agency and selfhood are characterized both by freedom and limitations, transcendence and facticity.[19] *Sickness unto Death* describes these as possibility and necessity, infinitude and finitude, respectively.[20] The point is that neither of these two poles can be eliminated; we cannot just identify with our freedom (as Sartre tends to) or with our given character (as Schopenhauer tends to) (Rudd 2012, 31-34). Indeed, any attempt to avoid one pole will show itself as a distortion of the other pole (Grøn 1997, 121ff.). The attempt to exaggerate our freedom or possibilities, for instance, involves understating our limitations and depreciating the real possibilities found in reality. Freedom and possibilities become abstract and fantastic by being disconnected from the situation in which we find ourselves.

---

[19] This analysis – and the concept of facticity – has been particularly influential in European philosophy from Heidegger to Sartre and Habermas. However, Rudd (2012, chs.1-8) demonstrates its relevance to contemporary analytic philosophy as well.

[20] Note that infinitude is taken in the sense of the unlimited (Greek, *ápeiron*). SKS 11, 151; Kierkegaard (1983, 35). This probably also means that this notion need not be fundamentally unacceptable to Nietzscheans.

Possibility and necessity, infinitude and finitude, are opposites which always stand in a tense relation to each other. This is also why we tend to exaggerate either possibility or necessity, either infinitude or finitude. Whereas the former represents the despair of possibility (and the despair of infinitude), the latter makes up the despair of necessity (and the despair of finitude). Taken together these forms of despair represent the basic forms of inauthentic despair (SKS 11, 145-157; Kierkegaard 1983, 29-42). These forms of despair can only be overcome if these opposites are reconciled (Rudd 2012, 48f.). Rather than balancing the opposites against each other, Kierkegaard favours an asymmetric relation that prioritizes possibility and infinitude without losing sight of necessity and finitude (Hannay 2006, 73; Grøn 1997, 123).

The despair of necessity vs. nihilistic disorientation

The despair of necessity and the closely related despair of finitude represent the two most dangerous forms of despair (cf. Grøn 1997, 123, 133, 153, 157f., 169), much like nihilistic disorientation represents the most dangerous form of nihilism (cf. Miles 2011, 266). The "despair of necessity" lacks possibility (freedom), whereas the corresponding "despair of finitude" lacks infinity (transcendence) (SKS 11, 149-157; Kierkegaard 1983, 33-42). Both deny that they are free or capable of transcending facticity (e.g. by breaking with an evil past). Both have given up on life and taken a fatalistic and careless attitude towards existence. They make themselves into suffering victims, entirely in the hands of fortune. They do not try to realize themselves, because they lack proper awareness of themselves and the task of becoming a self. They are fundamentally unwilling to accept the freedom and responsibility that comes with human agency, and try to be passive spectators instead.

Both forms of despair lack what Kierkegaard calls ideality, something which represents freedom, ideals, and goals to strive after. Neither is able to value anything; both forget the very need for values and meaning in life.

As a result, we are left with what Reginster describes as nihilistic disorientation – a state in which we are incapable of acting and choosing. Whereas disorientation involves a passive or vegetative life, the despair of necessity involves a similar passivity and carelessness that hinders active striving and commitment.

We need values in order to avoid disorientation. To be sure, the very function of values is to make life meaningful, according to Nietzsche (KSA 4, 74-76). Nietzsche holds life to be oriented towards values, rank, and priorities. Indeed, human life would be virtually impossible without adherence to some set of values (Horstmann 2012, 187). Values are necessary for life, and Nietzsche thinks that values either serve life or undermine it. He thus discusses the value of values for life and attempts to re-evaluate values so that they become life-affirming.

Nietzsche (1974, §§ 301, 345; KSA 3, 539f., 577ff.) sees moral judgements as either literally true or false (i.e. cognitivism). But he believes that all moral judgements are literally false, since they falsely project moral attributes onto an amoral nature. He thereby anticipates the moral error-theory of John Mackie (Reginster 2008, 86). Moral values are false yet humanly necessary for Nietzsche. We need values in order to live meaningful lives and to avoid nihilistic disorientation. But values lack objective grounding – they are not moral facts – and must be created by us in a contingent manner. Nietzsche assumes that at least some individuals manage to ascribe normative authority to values which they know are self-created and contingent (Reginster 2008, 58ff.). Nietzsche thus accepts fictionalist simulacra of objective values in order to avoid both disorientation and moral facts. Still, Nietzsche concedes that not just any value will do if nihilism is to be avoided. There are formal, existential constraints which rule out unrealizable and life-denying values.

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, not only thinks that moral judgments are literally true or false (i.e. cognitivism) but also that some are literally true (i.e. success theory). Whereas Nietzsche tends towards subjectivism, fictionalism, relativism, and anti-realism, Kierkegaard accepts moral realism (Fremstedal 2015b, 118-120). Kierkegaard even formulates a strong critique of the type of position suggested by Nietzsche (cf. Miles 2011, 284ff. and 2013, 187ff.). Kierkegaard argues that our ability to bind ourselves only creates hypothetical, unstable, and revocable imperatives, since the au-

thority of these imperatives is contingent on the fact that we do not unbind ourselves. When subject and lawgiver are identical, it becomes possible to constantly change minds about what to do and to lazily create new tasks instead of realizing given tasks. Values that are only contingent creations of fallible and imperfect individuals open for lawlessness and arbitrary experimentation. Kierkegaard therefore concludes that unless grounded in objective norms or intrinsic values, human freedom threatens to collapse into an arbitrary and motiveless choice (Rudd 2012, chs. 4-6; Fremstedal 2014, 201ff.). This also brings us to the next type of despair, a type which exaggerates freedom so that it leads to arbitrariness and motiveless choice.

The despair of possibility vs. nihilistic despair

The despair of possibility lacks necessity, whereas the closely related despair of infinitude lacks finitude (SKS 11, 146-153; Kierkegaard 1983, 30-37). Both collapse by over-emphasizing freedom and self-creation, not by denying it. Both see limitations or facticity as mere hindrances to freedom, instead of something which makes real freedom possible. Both absolutize freedom, understood negatively as freedom from limitations (facticity). As a result, freedom itself becomes abstract and empty, since it does not allow for positive freedom to realize anything specific or concrete. Neither does it allow for criteria for choosing between different possibilities or alternatives, which means that it ends up with arbitrariness, because all possibilities are equally (in)valid and equally abstract and empty.

Basically, this type of despair is unwilling to accept the facticity of human agency. It wants to *create itself*, without any restrictions, to get rid of the constraints of the present situation. Kierkegaard argues that this implies not wanting to be the person one actually is, not wanting to be positively free (Theunissen 1991, 38-51; Grøn 1997, 119-132, 182-189). As a result the agent is double-minded or in despair, since he is split between necessity and possibility, finitude and infinitude. This makes sense if we

keep in mind that our (real) possibilities only reside within the specific individuals we are and in the particular situations we find ourselves in.

The despair of possibility converges with Nietzsche's desperate nihilism in the following respects: Both value something which is necessarily *impossible* to realize in this world and see our world as fundamentally inhospitable to our values. Both imply that our ideals are unrealistic or fundamentally at odds with reality. But whereas Nietzsche focuses on impossible, other-worldly, and life-negating values and ideals, Kierkegaard focuses on fantastic, abstract, and empty possibilities. Both imply a radical escapism which thinks that we are situated in an absurd world fundamentally hostile to human aspirations. Nietzsche favours Schopenhauerian and Jacobian terms, whereas Kierkegaard favours Hegelian terms, although this does not prevent overlap and agreement in content.[21] Indeed, both nihilistic despair and the despair of possibility involve an unresolved conflict between ideals and reality. Both imply that the world as it ought to be does not exist, while the world as it is ought not to be, since it is inhospitable to the realization of our ideals and values.

This is the fundamental split or double-mindedness Kierkegaard thinks is inherent in all despair. Like the German *Verzweiflung*, the Danish *Fortvivlelse* indicates a split or duality. Kierkegaard holds that despair takes the form of being in conflict with oneself by having *two wills* that collide: "[E]veryone in despair has two wills, one that he futilely wants to follow entirely, and one that he futilely wants to get rid of entirely" (SKS 8, 144; Kierkegaard 2009, 30). Whereas the despair of possibility (futilely) wants possibility without necessity, the despair of necessity (futilely) wants necessity without possibility. Similarly, Nietzsche's desperate nihilism (futilely) wants transcendent ideals without temporality or finitude, whereas the disoriented nihilism (futilely) wants reality without ideals. Desperate nihilism is split between ideals and reality, in a manner which resembles Kierkegaardian double-mindedness. However, it is perhaps less clear that disorientation implies the same structural duality, with two exceptions. First,

[21] See, notably, William's (2014) comparison of Nietzsche and Hegel. The term nihilism comes from Jacobi, whereas the life-affirming and life-negating values resemble Schopenhauer's *Bejahung* and *Verneinung* of the will to life, respectively.

disorientation implies a split between ideals and reality insofar as it results from a devaluation of ideals in history. Second, Nietzsche seems to think that human activity without values is virtually impossible; we cannot strive without presupposing valuable goals. Nihilism seems to involve a general conflict between human agency and certain value commitments. Insofar as the agent adheres to nihilistic values, the conflict is internal to agency, or internal to the will to power. But this conflict differs from the Augustinian notion of double-minded volition found in Kierkegaard (cf. SKS 8, 138ff.; Kierkegaard 2009, 24ff.)

I think Kierkegaard could accept Nietzsche's criticism of nihilistic disorientation and nihilistic despair. Kierkegaard would agree that these value commitments are impossible for us (while assessing the Platonico-Christian tradition very differently from Nietzsche's assessment). Nietzsche could concede that Kierkegaard is right to criticize both fatalism and self-creation, at least the form of self-creation which denies facticity (rather than the creation of values). Nietzsche's ideal of giving style to one's character presupposes the existence of unavoidable elements in agency (Nietzsche 1974, §290; KSA 3, 530f.; Miles 2013, 197). One is able to edit oneself but not to create oneself. However, this convergence regarding the dialectical relation between freedom and restrictions does not prevent Nietzsche and Kierkegaard from making use of very different anthropological, theological, and ethical assumptions.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard is clear that it is only by willing the good unconditionally that we can achieve the wholeheartedness necessary for overcoming despair (Grøn 1997, 261f.). It is only by willing the good categorically that we can agree with ourselves and avoid despair (SKS 8, 139f.; Kierkegaard 2009, 24). For Kierkegaard, the real choice thus stands between unconditional moral commitment and despair, between consistency and inconsistency.

For Nietzsche this would look suspiciously like the nihilistic values of Kantian ethics. Nietzsche thinks that nihilistic despair is overcome by replacing other-worldly ideals with this-worldly ideals, by substituting transcendence with immanence. Interestingly, Kierkegaard does not agree, at least not fully. Instead of abolishing transcendence as such, or dismissing the afterlife, Kierkegaard believes that the problem only arises from a certain use of it. Transcendent ideals need only to be problematic if they imply that we try to escape and depreciate temporality and finitude. They are not problematic if they allow, or make possible, meaning and orientation *in* this life. And it is exactly this that Kierkegaard holds. First, he follows Kant in thinking we can only make sense of human striving if we see it as an endless progression towards a regulative and transcendent God-idea. Indeed, human striving would lose its meaning if we somehow reached our final end. Kierkegaard's ethicist says that someone who merely hopes for his silver wedding would be incapable of celebrating it when the day comes (presumably because he would then be disoriented).[22] We constantly need challenges and should not rest on our laurels for a longer period of time (something Nietzsche accepts fully, without accepting transcendent goals).

Second, Kierkegaard thinks that the realization of the highest good requires not only transcendence from within but also transcendence from without (to use the terms of Habermas 2002, ch. 3). More specifically, the realization of the highest good requires not just an afterlife but also divine assistance and supernatural revelation.[23] Thus, Kierkegaard agrees with Nietzsche that the highest values of the Christian tradition, the Augustinian notion of the highest good as the kingdom of God, are necessarily transcendent and therefore necessarily impossible to realize fully in human history. Put in contemporary terms, the Christian tradition which Kierkegaard defends and Nietzsche attacks, involves a moral gap between our ideals and capabilities which cannot be overcome in history (since we cannot make

---

[22] SKS 3, 141, cf. SKS 8, 372f.; Fremstedal (2014, chs. 4-9).

[23] This is the only significant point which I disagree with Miles 2013. Miles is right to claim that Kierkegaard presents the Judaism of Abraham in purely this-worldly terms, but he overlooks Kierkegaard's belief in personal immorality and his Augustinian-Lutheran interpretation of Christianity. Cf. Fremstedal (2014, chs. 4-9).

ourselves morally perfect, nor cause happiness by being moral, nor unite all moral beings in an ethical commonwealth or church). Unlike Nietzsche, Kierkegaard accepts Augustin's (1948, vol. 1, 16) idea that "God bids us do what we cannot, that we may know what we ought to seek from him". As Hare (2009, 83) points out, Augustin is not "denying that we are able to do what God commands, only that we are able to do *so on our own*". Whereas Nietzsche suggests that we can overcome nihilism on our own, Kierkegaard thinks that we can only overcome despair by receiving divine assistance. Still, he maintains that we are capable, by our own unaided powers, of seeing that we are in despair, although the identification of despair with sin requires divine revelation (Fremstedal 2014, 42f.).

Nietzsche thinks that the only way of overcoming nihilism is to unconditionally accept the world as it is by saying yes to the eternal recurrence of the same. We need to affirm life on its own terms and to abolish all transcendent ideals and goals. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, views our situation as unacceptable (in its actuality) and acceptable (in its potentiality) at the same time. Merely accepting existence as it is would amount to succumbing to the evil and injustice in history. Taking a hopeful attitude, by contrast, involves accepting our situation and enduring it because it is seen as leading to future progress and reconciliation. Hope involves a protest that makes it possible to try to overcome evil and injustice by enabling progress towards (transcendent) ideals in the future. Nietzsche seems to think that we can overcome nihilism if we have life-affirming values and the necessary strength or will to power. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, is clear that we need not just the right values but also the faith and hope (expectancy) that these values can be realized. And if this hope is to be sustained in all situations we need extra-human assistance rather than human strength. This is particularly the case with the highest good, an ethical commonwealth in which the virtuous are happy. In this case Kierkegaard sides with Augustin and Kant instead of Nietzsche (Fremstedal 2014, chs. 4-9).

I am in general agreement with Miles (2011 and 2013, 210) that we should try to resist (at least on the general level) the temptation to declare a decisive defeat to either Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. Much of the earlier literature has shown, if only unwillingly, that the tendency to champion either of these thinkers often results in a tendency to mischaracterize the other. Although there are specific points in which either thinker may have the ad-

vantage over the other, it is very difficult to say that one of them generally refutes or outdoes the other, partially because of their differences in terms of agendas and convictions. Still, I think Miles is correct in claiming that we can learn a great deal by bringing them into a critical exchange. If I am right in identifying substantial convergence between despair and nihilism, this may improve our understanding of how Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's theories relate conceptually and better the prospects of dialogue. It also indicates that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche address important existential, ethical, and psychological issues and make significant contributions to European philosophy.

References

Augustine. 1948. *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vols. 1–2, ed. by Whitney Oates. New York: Random House.

Brobjer, Thomas. 2003. Nietzsche's Knowledge of Kierkegaard. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41(2): 251-263.

Fremstedal, Roe. 2014. *Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014.

Fremstedal, Roe. 2015a. Why Be Moral? A Kierkegaardian Approach. In *Why Be Moral?*, ed. Beatrix Himmelmann and Robert B. Louden, 173-197. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Fremstedal, Roe. 2015b. Kierkegaard's Views on Normative Ethics, Moral Agency, and Metaethics. In *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Jon Stewart, 113-125. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Grøn, Arne. 1997. *Subjektivitet og negativitet*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2002. *Religion and Rationality*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hannay, Alastair 2006. *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Hare, John. 2009. *God and Morality*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Horstmann, Rolf-Peter. 2012. Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*. In *Introductions to Nietzsche*, ed. Robert Pippin, 178-198. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1983. *Sickness unto Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1997-2013. *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vols. 1-28. Copenhagen: Gad.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 2009. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kosch, Michelle. 2006. *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miles, Thomas. 2011. Friedrich Nietzsche: Rival Visions of the Best Way of Life. In *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, ed. Jon Stewart, 263-298. Farnham: Ashgate.

Miles, Thomas. 2013. *Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on the Best Way of Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968. *The Will to Power*. New York: Random House.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1974. *The Gay Science*. New York: Random House.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vols. 1-15. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Reginster, Bernard. 2008. *The Affirmation of Life*. London: Harvard University Press.

Rudd, Anthony. 2012. *Self, Value, and Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1998. *Being and Nothingness*. London: Routledge.

Sommer, Andreas Urs. 2009. Nihilism and Skepticism in Nietzsche. In *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson, 250-269. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Theunissen, Michael. 1991. *Das Selbst auf Grund der Verzweiflung*. Frankfurt a/M: Anton Hain.

Theunissen, Michael. 1993. *Der Begriff Verzweiflung*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp.

Vattimo, Gianni. 2006. *Dialogue with Nietzsche*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Westphal, Merold. 2014. *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*. Grand Rapid: Eerdmans.

Williams, Robert. 2014. *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.