Kierkegaard's Romantic Legacy

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Published by University of Ottawa Press


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WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHY we should consider Kierkegaard's theory of the self, and how I intend to develop it. In what follows, we shall grasp the importance of investigating Kierkegaard's theory, and how I shall proceed.

Historically, the romantics reacted against the imposition of reason, by which they meant something akin to the naturalist methods of science. Scientism can be understood as an extreme form of naturalism. A. Brook and R. Stainton, in a useful account of the variety of naturalisms, write of the extreme version:

Stronger naturalism is the idea that philosophical problems about knowledge and the mind (and almost everything else) are really scientific ones and can be adequately answered by using only the methods of science, natural science in particular...Strongest naturalism is the idea that one accepts stronger naturalism but goes one step further. It holds that neuroscience is the only justifiable approach to cognition. [Emphasis mine.]

For the strongest naturalist, there is likely no self, only biochemical happening.

In the enlightened tradition, scientism has had many guises. We have alternately been considered the totality of our experiences; the end product of socialization; a result of our particular historical or biological situation. According to this tradition, there is nothing under the surface, there is no soul, no “real me.” Scientism's greatest challenge to theorists of the self is its denial that there is such an entity.

Furthermore, some extreme naturalists and existentialists claim the self is a tabula rasa. According to the strongest naturalists, our bodies are simply biochemical machines that allow imprinting, while according to existentialists, we are the results of acts of will.

G. Pence remarks:

[A] central principle of existentialism [...] holds that the essence of any human being is completely determined by the free choices made by that already-existing person. It denies that God or anything else created a
human nature that makes humans a certain way. For existentialists, what we know as "human nature" is not something we inherit but is merely a generalization we make from millions of ways of acting that people have chosen and hence, could have chosen differently.  

Also, to claim the self is nothing but its (personal and social) history, without qualifications, leads to cultural relativism. If there is no universal archetype to which we ought to conform, human nature is denied. Søren Kierkegaard, upon my reading, does not subscribe to the slogan "existence precedes essence"; Kierkegaard would have rejected existentialism. His view is closer to Aristotle's than, say, to Jean-Paul Sartre's.

The Romantic movement can be said to stem from two points of conjecture, namely, (1) the rejection of scientism, and (2) the assumption of an ethic where we find our fulfillment in the world alone. Kierkegaard embraced the former notion while rejecting the latter, but can nonetheless be considered a romantic, as the former point is of some significance.

In the first part of this book, I develop a notion of a theological self from the writings of Kierkegaard. My argument proceeds by citation of textual evidence. In chapter 1, I set out the existential problem Kierkegaard sees residing in the self (despair). In chapter 2, I consider Kierkegaard's attempt to solve the problem, which culminates in the ethical stage of existing. In chapters 3 and 4, I consider his contention that we find our fulfillment in a relationship to God. In the interpretive exegesis, one may wish to note, I rarely distinguish between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, and my reason for this conscious blur is the fact that Kierkegaard himself at times cites his pseudonyms as saying what he himself wants to say. I explain this at greater length in chapter 5.

In the second part, I introduce sociological accounts of human nature as being anchored in the world. Human behaviour becomes, for the sociologist, neither right nor wrong, but functional or non-functional. I trace how a theological view of the self gave way to a social one, in the writings of, for example, Rousseau, Durkheim, and, more recently, Winnicott. A formerly ethical issue, such as becoming a virtuous self, has here in various ways been turned into a social issue.

However, I also attempt to use sociological thought to bring out the hidden social dimension of Kierkegaard's thought; that is, I use sociological thought in constructing my Kierkegaardian theory of the self. At the end of chapter 8, I argue that those sociological efforts considered are not necessarily at odds with Kierkegaard, but differ by degree. In fact, like Kierkegaard, the sociological theorists considered can generically be described as being in the romantic tradition.

We may think it as absurd to locate Kierkegaard in the romantic tradition because of his asceticism as doing so with Durkheim, because of Kierkegaard's desire to be scientific. Yet, I contend, they represent different strains within the romantic tradition. Like William Blake, the archetype of Romanticism, Kierkegaard, with his discussion of faith, fits within the romantic tradition's reaction against scientism. Also like Blake, Durkheim was concerned about
the losses we incurred with industrialization. In the context of this study, both Kierkegaard and the sociologists share three things: first, the rejection of scientism (i.e., they have a non-reductive account of the self); second, in their unique ways, they provide a social account of the self; and in so doing offer a critique of the modern world; finally, their accounts of the self are teleological.

Obviously, Kierkegaard differs from sociologists in his emphasis upon the God-relationship. Derivatively, there is also a difference between the theological and sociological conception of the self in relation to a notion central to the romantic tradition, namely, that the eschatology of the self terminates in a radical individuality, which Kierkegaard embraces and sociologists do not. Yet, I shall not dwell upon the God-relationship as indicating a broader incommensurability between Kierkegaard and the sociologists, since there is much to be gained, as I suggest, by bringing them together. In chapter 8, I argue that the tension between the two notions of where the self finds fulfillment—alone (with God) or in a community—can be reconciled, to a significant extent, along the lines of Winnicott. The commonality, I shall argue, is to be found in Winnicott’s notion of interdependence. Concisely put, a Kierkegaardian would say that we require a social vehicle in order to be independent at all, and in order to find fulfillment.

In the third part of the book, I consider the practical consequences of adopting the romantic conceptions of the self as discussed. In chapters 9 and 10, I have chosen two examples, those of suicide and schizophrenia, to illustrate how historically the theological conception of the self has had a different effect on practice than the sociological one. In chapter 11, however, by considering the thought of A. Adler, L. Binswanger, R. May, and R. D. Laing, I draw out what uniform consequences to practice have been obtained from the generically Kierkegaardian conception of the self.

I do not claim that Adler, Binswanger, May, or Laing (or J. Hillman for that matter) actually read Kierkegaard or the sociological thinkers here considered, and developed their practice based on such studies. Biographically, that could perhaps be determined; but investigating the specific sources of each individual thinker goes beyond the more general point I aim to make. Namely, that it is the bits and pieces of the thought of people like Kierkegaard, filtered through the romantic tradition, that has made the work of the existential psychiatrists possible.

Finally, in chapter 12, I provide three conclusions about the Kierkegaardian self. My intention is not to merely rehearse Kierkegaard’s theory of the self but to develop it in relation to criticisms. I shall, in what follows, use the designation “Kierkegaardian,” referring (unless the context suggests otherwise) to the theory of the self developed in this work. My Kierkegaardian account of the self, or its application, is not intended to be a faithful (re)creation of what Kierkegaard himself may have thought.

My account differs from many contemporary theories about the self. The Kierkegaardian self is metaphysical. The authors I consider contend, specifically, that there is such a thing as a self and that it has a nature. I shall
provide a contribution to theories of the self by looking to the little-remarked upon writings (in this context) of Kierkegaard. I shall also criticize and amend his view in light of a sociological alternative. Tracing the legacy of several theories of the self, all of which I locate within the Romantic movement, is an historical project; yet I suggest the Kierkegaardian self as developed here has contemporary relevance.

All the views presented in this study are anti-reductionist. I do not specifically argue against the strongest form of naturalism; I merely refer to it as the backdrop against which the romantic views, discussed here, react. Since my goal is to develop a Kierkegaardian theory of the self, I avoid delving into all contemporary criticisms of reductionism.6

Furthermore, while not all naturalists are prey to scientism, for the purpose of elucidation, I bypass views in cognitive science and medical psychiatry that would be consistent with the authors I consider. Also, bringing Kierkegaard’s thought into dialogue with practice, without considering, for example, the most recent literature surrounding reductionism in medical psychiatry, is justified. I attempt to illustrate the suggestion that the Kierkegaardian self is relevant to practice today by considering some contemporary romantics, for instance, the existential psychiatrists.

As Heraclitus cautioned, however, “You would not find out the boundaries of the soul though you travelled every road, so deep is its logos.”7 There are limitations to how far we can detail what constitutes human nature. Yet, it is awareness of limitations that defines the accuracy of knowledge.