Kierkegaard's Romantic Legacy

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Using biographical information to assess an argument is regarded as a fallacious line of reasoning, the infamous ad hominem attack. When dealing with the writings of Kierkegaard, however, two reasons allow us to bypass the rule. First, examining Kierkegaard's life can be instructive in understanding his motivations. Second, by Kierkegaard's own standards, his life is relevant. He posits a relationship to knowledge the vital thrust of which emphasizes the relationship between the truths we hold and who we are: “only truth that builds up is the truth for me.” Or, as he first said in 1835, his goal was to find the truth that was true for him. What Kierkegaard means can be explained this way. What we consider true can count as so if we can live by it. Also, what we consider true should be yielded by experience; it helps us “build up.”

Anti-Climacus says, “The kind of scholarship that is not in the last resort edifying is for that very reason un-Christian. An account of anything Christian must be like a physician’s lecture beside the sick-bed.” The words of Anti-Climacus are consistent with the connection between our work and life that Kierkegaard authorizes. Just as a doctor deals with the physically sick, the philosopher is to aid one in finding a way to live; that person, first and foremost, is the self. In the previous chapter, I began to critically reflect upon Kierkegaard’s theory of the self. We need, however, to be much more aggressive in our criticisms. In this chapter, we shall see how Kierkegaard’s life perhaps reflects deficiencies in the socio-historic aspects of his theory of the self. I begin with a look at his life.

Life and Psychology

Søren Kierkegaard was born on 5 May 1813, and few mourned his death forty-two years later in November 1855. Even so, his funeral almost ended in a small riot over whether he should be buried by the church against his wishes.

Søren was the youngest of seven children, and his mother was his father’s second wife, previously the first wife’s maid. His father’s first wife died childless after being married for two years. Before Søren was even nine years old, one brother and one sister had died. His two surviving sisters, a brother, and his mother all died before he was twenty-one. He was convinced he would not live to be more than thirty-three. Søren’s father died at age eighty-one, when
Søren was twenty-five. His father had much influence upon him, yet much of this was experienced as oppressive. (His relation to his father was complex, oscillating between feeling deprived of his childhood to feeling guilty for not loving his father enough.)

Kierkegaard was no stranger to death, having witnessed the death of most of his family at such an early age. When he remarked on the temporal nature of existence, on resignation, anxiety, or despair, it was because these themes were close to his own experiences: “I must dare to believe that through Christ I can be saved from the power of depression which I have lived.”

Kierkegaard attempted to locate himself in relation to his pseudonyms: “I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus...Climacus is lower, he denies he is a Christian. Anti-Climacus is higher, a Christian on an extraordinary level.” Yet, in *Practice in Christianity*, he considered withdrawing the pseudonym: “I went to the printer. It was too late... So the pseudonym [of Anti-Climacus] was established.” As he pointed out, the pseudonym added an impersonal touch, and thus did not belong in *Practice of Christianity*.

Although Kierkegaard was at times conflicted about the idea of writing under pseudonyms, it is only too obvious that he never wrote as if he were absent; rather, he is in evidence on every page we read. More generally, the pseudonyms often express Kierkegaard’s own thoughts, frustrations, and even his experiences. In one work he describes an imaginary character who is never happy, has no friends, no love, and thinks there will be no grief at his death. Another imaginary construction, Johannes Climacus, also resembles Kierkegaard: he is portrayed as an alien, an outsider, and a stranger, removed and disinterested. In fact, Johannes Climacus is described in terms that could well apply to Kierkegaard himself:

He felt pressure; it was as if forceps had to be used in his youth when he was delivered into the world, as if he were still wanting to slip back; he was not born easily and thus did not come into the world smiling and victorious, as if everything were merely waiting for him.

In Kierkegaard’s own eyes, he never had a childhood. He thought of himself as born old. Even his schoolmates remarked how he always dressed in a relatively serious and “adult” manner for a child. He always perceived himself as old, deformed, or physically unfit. Some have even argued that he had a hunchback, although there is no evidence for this claim. It could be imagined that he walked as if he did have one due to his own self-perception. On 25 September 1855, he remarked, “Through a crime I came into existence...I came into existence against God’s will.” His constant complaint that he had never lived, never been a man, even less had a childhood, resonates in his idea that he was born old.

Furthermore, in his journals he “imagines” a man walking who would not care if something fell from the sky and killed him. Kierkegaard’s own personal journal tells of the exact same sentiment pertaining to himself. In short, he
often took his personal experiences and transferred them to his imaginary characters. (Nonetheless, Kierkegaard was of the opinion that the authorship of his work should be attributed to mankind at large, as to express the universal applicability of the psychology he elucidated.)

We would not have fully considered Søren Kierkegaard’s personal life unless we were to mention his infamous engagement to Regine Olsen. He courted this seventeen-year-old girl, and succeeded in becoming engaged to her. In some sense all Kierkegaard’s voluptuous writings are love letters to her, although he saw this work in a larger perspective: as part of his quest for the “religious,” and hence his attempt to break with “the world,” with Regine. He broke his engagement with Regine, although she begged him not to. When she asked him what he was going to do, he cruelly remarked that he intended to “sow his wild oats”—and perhaps write. The first was a patent lie, which he used strategically to push Regine away from him; after returning home he did nothing but cry. Later he was to remark: “When I left her I chose death.” Although, for a short time, he openly admitted his regret at breaking the engagement, he soon saw it as a necessary step on his path. He had already stated that becoming an author required “sacrificing everything,” and he had already developed the habit of retreating from the world, so it is no surprise that post-Regine, women would become his symbol for the world, for temporality, and stand in opposition to the spirit world of ideas. He wrote: “If I had faith, I would have stayed with Regine. Thanks to God I now see that. I have been on the point of losing my mind these days.”

The personal reason why Kierkegaard broke off his engagement, in my view, was his fear of bringing someone such as Regine, innocent and beautiful, into his dark life, his melancholy, his depression. Kierkegaard says that, spiritually speaking, everything is possible. Yet his engagement to Regine showed that he did not really believe everything was in fact possible; it forced him to realize his lack of faith. He considered a successful relationship with Regine as an impossibility:

I would have to initiate her into terrible things, my relationship to my father, his melancholy, the eternal night brooding within me, my going astray, my lusts and debauchery, which, however, in the eyes of God are perhaps not so glaring; for it was, after all, anxiety that made me go astray, and where was I to seek a safe stronghold when I knew or suspected that the only man I had admired for his strength was tottering.

Not only was Kierkegaard worried about introducing Regine to his life, but he admits that it was anxiety that made him seek a safe foundation when the only man he admired, his father, that austere authoritarian, was “tottering.”

He is at odds with his own philosophy and life, since it is anxiety that made him go astray, yet is precisely that which is the key in his theory of the self. In his philosophy, it will be anxiety that acts as the main conduit for human development toward the religious. If we are not to see his flight from temporal life to the eternal as an attempted cure for constant anxiety, in which case this progression is undertaken on mistaken grounds, we have to mitigate his
remark. That is to say, we have to suggest that Kierkegaard had an ambivalent attitude toward his life. On the one hand, there is acceptance of being an instrument of God, a martyr and an author; on the other hand, there is regret over Regine and over never taking up a profession.

Kierkegaard understood himself, at the most basic level, as a melancholy person. His idea that he was old played into his further notion that he did not fit in: someone who is “old” cannot easily fit in with playmates. Indeed, as a child he was an outsider, and he remained one his entire life. On numerous occasions, he would speak of himself as a ghost, of belonging to the world of spirits and ideas, not “the world,” and always being outside of himself. It has been remarked that he lived in his body as one lives in a rented room. His body was that of a runt, which he had to deal with as a sort of luggage. The idea of estrangement, alienation, is present again in his elucidation of Johannes Climacus:

His comments would not meet with sympathy. It was impossible for him to speak as the others did, and, on the other hand, he realized very well that the others would not understand him...For a moment it pained him that once again he was not like the others, but soon forgot the pain in the joy of thinking.\(^\text{15}\)

Kierkegaard was the outsider who could not enjoy life as others did, seemingly carefree and happy. Yet, his imaginary pseudonym could find quietude in thinking, and Kierkegaard in writing. We get a glimpse into his mental life, from his writing of May 1839:

I live in my room as one besieged—I prefer to see no one, and every moment I fear that the enemy will try an assault—that is, someone will come and visit me...I cry myself tired...I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow is my castle...I live and feel these days somewhat as a chess man must feel when the opponent says: That piece cannot be moved—like a useless spectator...\(^\text{16}\)

He had a fear of “others,” yet he was lonely. His constant sorrow was the one thing by which he knew himself; it was his “castle.”

Kierkegaard’s entire psychological orientation toward the world rendered him a spectator. In his position of spectator, he felt a crippling paralysis. At one point he wrote: “I feel like a spider that preserves its life by remaining overlooked in its corner, although it shivers and quakes inwardly with presentiments of a storm...My thought and its fate are not of the slightest importance to anyone, with the exception of myself.”\(^\text{17}\) And, in the same vein, “A secret anxiety broods over my whole inner being, an oppressiveness that forebodes an earthquake.”\(^\text{18}\)

Again, the idea that he was constantly oppressed by some anxiety or deep pathos fits well with his self-perception as old, melancholy, and in a constant sorrow, his “castle”: “Now I dive down once again into the depths—and there
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I hide myself; I envelop myself within myself—I live on depression.” At times he described his mood as a theatre after everyone has left, empty. In this connection, he complained of reaching a type of despair in which he could not even feel sadness, his one loyal friend. “The only thing I see is emptiness; the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness—I do not even suffer pain...my soul is like the Dead Sea, over which no bird is able to fly; when it has come midway, it sinks down in a stupor to death and destruction.”

Anxiety serves a positive, instrumental purpose in human development within Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Anxiety, like the other points of meditation for Kierkegaard, was not foreign to him:

All existence makes me anxious, from the smallest fly to the mysteries of the Incarnation; the whole thing is inexplicable to me, I myself most of all; to me all existence is infected. I myself most of all. My distress is enormous, boundless; no one knows it except God in heaven, and he will not console me; no one can console me except God in heaven, and he will not take compassion on me.

The essential nature of Kierkegaard’s anxiety remains elusive. He was not anxious over this or that thing, an event in the past or possible future, but just anxious in general. In fact, the reason he was anxious was that he was not confronted with a clearly defined problem that he could rationally deal with. For instance, if we are worried about an examination we have to write, we can take care to prepare well, and thus quell our anxiety. But Kierkegaard was anxious about everything and nothing. If I were to locate a more specific cause of his anxiety, I would still be forced to speak in very general terms. He was anxious about his place in the world, in the universe at large as well as in the human world (community): “Deep within every human being there still lives the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the millions and millions in this enormous household.”

Johannes Climacus writes of his standing as an author, “I am so insignificant that I am an outsider in literature. I have not even added to subscription literature, nor can it truthfully be said that I have a significant place in it.” In his own day, he sees a trade of inauthentic authors and “two-bit reviewers” and wrote: “A genuine author means a sacrificed life...” The first lines of Fear and Trembling begin by stating that “Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages a real sale.” He made it clear that one should not write aspiring to become famous, “noticed, recognized or praised,” as women adorning themselves, but that an author is best to have no readers or perhaps only five “genuine readers.” Kierkegaard sums up his view of his contemporaries in literature like this:

If it were conceivable that one could become an author without writing, could purchase this dignity just as one buys a title, yet, please note, actually enjoying a bit of a reputation—then a great many of the authors of our
generation would perhaps stop writing. And if one could, without doing any writing, earn the money one earns writing, then many contemporary authors would undoubtedly refrain from writing, and we would see how many genuine authors we do have.27

Furthermore, Kierkegaard confirmed that some of what he wrote under the cloak of his pseudonyms was applicable to himself, as we can tell by consulting his journal: “Assigned from childhood to a life of torment that perhaps few even conceive of, plunged into the deepest despondency, and from this despondency again into despair, I came to understand myself by writing.”28 Kierkegaard says:

[B]efore God I regard my whole work as an author as my own education. I am not a teacher but a learner...But I have not said that I, measured against every part-time teacher, could not be called a teacher, but that before God, measured against the ideals for being a teacher, I call myself a learner...

According to Kierkegaard, the writer must sacrifice his life. Not surprisingly, his icons Christ and Socrates were both martyrs of a sort. In fact, he also at times considered himself a martyr. This was perhaps his most resonant understanding of his life. That is to say, if he had been asked what his “purpose” was, he would himself have been amazed at how well God had shaped him for his task as poet, Christian thinker, philosopher, the writer-martyr, and ultimately to be himself.

Kierkegaard’s purest intentions are transferred to the reader. In his writings, he often refers to his “reader” or “dear reader.”29 (He perhaps hoped that this reader would read him out loud, as if he was writing one of those sermons he was so fond of reading in his earlier days.) Kierkegaard worried that none of his readers would understand what he could call his “total plan” (from Danish: total-anleg), which underlies all his various pseudonyms. He writes:

There will be no judgment at all on my authorship in its totality, for no one had sufficient faith in it or time or competence to look for a comprehensive plan [Total-Anleog] in the entire production. Consequently the verdict will be that I have changed somewhat over the years. So it will be. This distresses me. I am deeply convinced that there is an integral coherence, that there is a comprehensiveness in the whole production.31

Also, he hoped that his reader was “like me,” whom he characterized as “dead”; not having died, but rather not having lived. Søren Kierkegaard’s last name translates to “churchyard” or “cemetery.” Perhaps this is the best image for the tone of his life.

His one goal, ultimately, was to be “saved” from his suffering; however, he saw this salvation only as an effect of achieving his goal: “If only I myself manage to be just a simple Christian...I must dare to believe that through
In the end, Kierkegaard did not feel he ever became “a Christian” (something he raved against so-called Christians for never attaining.) He lived to produce, to write; or, put differently, his writing allowed him to live, while he felt that the Christian thing to do was not to produce but to exist. This is some of the reason why his journal writing waned toward the very end of his life; he was gradually ceasing to produce.

Kierkegaard suggested a possible way: “Psychology is what we need, and, above all, thorough knowledge of human life as well as sympathy for its interests. Herein lies the task, and until this is resolved there can be no question of completing a Christian view of life.” He wanted to understand what it truly means to be a human being in order to know how to live, in order to be ethical. Psychology, then, becomes central to a Christian ethics, for we cannot know how to live if we do not know who we are. Again, we return to Kierkegaard’s psychological quest to know himself, which he represented as having both a Socratic and Christian motif.

The motivation for many renowned psychologists has been the quest to know oneself. It is well known, for example, that Sigmund Freud’s self-analysis was a motivation behind his work, and Carl Jung’s self-exploration or search for himself was extensive. Kierkegaard was no different in this respect.

That the themes of many of Kierkegaard’s works are psychological is evident by the titles or subtitles of his books: The Concept of Anxiety is subtitled “A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation...”; a subtitle in Stages on Life’s Way is “An imaginary psychological construction”; “…Development of Personality” is a section in Either/Or II; “A Christian Psychological Exposition...” is the subtitle of Sickness unto Death, and Repetition is called “A Venture in Experimenting Psychology.” In fact, in 1881, Georg Brandes wrote a letter to Nietzsche commenting that Kierkegaard was one of the most profound psychologists who ever lived.

**Modern Loss**

Kierkegaard notes, in The Practice of Christianity, that we usually act in relation to an established authority. We have to look out for our interests, which may require keeping those who hold the keys in good spirits. We would like to think that our position in the world is consistent with having a God-relationship. Yet, the God-relationship may in fact be at odds with our position (which may require heeding customs antithetical to the personal relationship to God we seek). Having two masters may not work, especially when fitting in with one’s fellows represents, as he saw it, the elusive security of the temporal world: “My whole view, which I have always avowed, is that the evil is not the government but the crowd.”

A passage from The Present Age, completed in 1846, reads: “Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose.” His complaint in this instance is that his age never reaches action, but remains alienated from the world.
Nowadays not even a suicide kills himself in desperation. Before taking the step he deliberates so long and so carefully that he literally chokes with thought. It is even questionable whether he ought to be called suicide, since it is really thought which takes his life. He does not die with deliberation but from deliberation. It would therefore be very difficult to prosecute the present generation because of its legal quibbles: in fact, all its ability, virtuosity and good sense consists in trying to get a judgment and a decision without ever getting as far as action.\(^9\)

The effect of reflection that remains, as it were, in our heads is a type of paralysis. And the age is, according to Kierkegaard, utterly lost in reflection.

Thus our own age is essentially one of understanding, and on the average, perhaps, more knowledgeable than any former generation, but it is without passion. Every one knows a great deal, we all know which way we ought to go and all the different ways we can go, but nobody is willing to move. If at last some one were to overcome the reflection within him and happened to act, then immediately thousands of reflections would form an outward obstacle. Only a proposal to reconsider a plan is greeted with enthusiasm; action is met with indolence.\(^{10}\)

It is not that he considered reflection bad in itself, but he did find it reprehensible when its proportions nullified acting.\(^{11}\) As he said:

> Reflection is not evil; but a reflective condition and the deadlock which it involves, by transforming the qualities which precede action into a means of escape from action, is both corrupt and dangerous and leads in the end to a retrograde movement.\(^{12}\)

We are reduced to the status of spectators, which, if we recall, Kierkegaard always felt he was. He speaks of the inability to act: “A revolutionary age is an age of action: Ours is the age of advertisement and publicity.”\(^{13}\)

Kierkegaard regards the notion of “the public” as an abstraction: it lacks reality, in much the same way everyday life lacks reality and purpose. He writes:

> Only when the sense of association in society is no longer strong enough to give life to concrete realities is the Press able to create that abstraction: “the Public,” consisting of unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization—and yet are held together as a whole.\(^{14}\)

While admitting that society was in possession of a great deal of technical know-how, Kierkegaard asked, somewhat rhetorically, what "knowing" really meant.\(^{15}\) As he so succinctly put it, what would be the point of having explained the whole world and yet not understand myself?
Since Kierkegaard viewed the crowd as reinforcing the tendency of inauthentic individuals who reflect "without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose," we can begin to construct what Kierkegaard takes the authentic individual to be. Kierkegaard presented two paradigms of authenticity: the genius and the apostle. Both have in common that their reason for action does not lie with the general public, with society at large. Thus, the genius is teleologically oriented, in that he "relates himself to himself" and not, at least primarily, to others. The apostle relates himself to God, and, in fact, acts for God. The apostle has divine "authority" to command the public. So, neither the genius nor the apostle uses the so-called public as their lead. The differences between the two in respect to their relation to the world is that the genius does not write (or act) to affect others, while the apostle's mission is absolutely to affect others.

Aristotle remarked that men began to philosophize out of wonder. However, Kierkegaard clearly philosophizes out of dread. His work allows us to characterize him as part of the romantic reaction against (aspects of) modernity. In the first place, he emphasizes subjectivity. Also, he sees the mass age as an inauthentic response to our common sickness (emblemized, according to him, in the established church). And, of course, his conception of the self is teleological.

Admittedly, he does differ from the romantic poets, for example, in his demotion of the temporal world. Also, his attempt to write subjectively is often overshadowed by his use of pseudonyms, which, paradoxically, seem to objectify human existence. It could be argued that if he were serious about subjectivity he would have written only autobiographically (notwithstanding that subjectivity pervades his pseudonyms).

Kierkegaard's most profound mistake, perhaps, is to seek his foundation outside of temporal existence. It is the search outside temporality that leads to his ascetic denial of the world, and leads him to claim: all is nothing...smoke in the wind. We need not deny that within the framework of Kierkegaard's creation, it is better to be ethical than to be a seducer, for example. Yet, there may be other ways in which to find fulfillment that do not require his degradation of the temporal world. More specifically, his emphasis on the God-relationship seems to have put him into conflict with his fellow human beings, which induces skepticism regarding the possibility of realizing the love for others (other than Kierkegaard's Republic) that is the earthly token of the religious life.

I have not offered a sustained criticism of Kierkegaard's solution. Rather, I have pointed out that his solution may not be optimal; Aristotle, for example, would probably not think Kierkegaard's solution moderate enough to be optimal. Nor does Kierkegaard's own life, after all, seem a desirable model for human existence. His thinking may reflect a particular historical situation relating to modernity. Concern over the plausibility of Kierkegaard's solution prompts us to at least consider various attempts to locate the ground of the self within a socio-historical context, where finding fulfillment in harmonious relations with others is emphasized. In what follows I therefore consider the self from a sociological point of view.