

A Companion to Kierkegaard

Edited by

Jon Stewart

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Kierkegaard's Conception of Psychology

How to Understand It and Why It Still Matters

RENÉ ROSFORT

Psychology plays a major role in Kierkegaard's thinking. Even philosophers and theologians who are critical of Kierkegaard usually do not deny that he is a remarkable psychologist. Nevertheless, his influence on twenty-first-century academic psychology is negligible or non-existent. The present chapter will examine this peculiar situation with the threefold aim of clarifying Kierkegaard's conception of psychology, examining the principal reasons for his absence in the work of present-day psychologists, and arguing for the relevance of Kierkegaard's thinking for major issues in contemporary psychology.

One way to explore Kierkegaard's psychology, as does Alastair Hannay (1982, 157–204), is to turn to the three works that carry the word “psychological” in the subtitle; that is, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Repetition*, and *The Sickness unto Death*. Since these works are, indeed, Kierkegaard's major psychological works, this is both an obvious and a fruitful approach. Another way is to examine the theoretical significance of psychology in Kierkegaard's thinking throughout the authorship. The most successful attempt at the latter remains Kresten Nordentoft's seminal works (Nordentoft 1973, 1977, 1978). I will follow Nordentoft in this regard. In fact, the pages to follow not only carry deep imprints of Nordentoft's patient attempt to tease out the structure and dynamics of Kierkegaard's psychology, but they are also written in accordance with Nordentoft's insistence on the priority of psychology in Kierkegaard's thinking (Nordentoft 1978, 10–11). In order to articulate the philosophical aspects of Kierkegaard's conception of psychology, however, we need to turn to other secondary sources. Here I make heavy use of the works of Michael Theunissen (1958, 1979, 1981, 2005) and Arne Grøn (1996, 1997, 2004, 2008, 2010). Their combined efforts to clarify and situate basic notions such as subjectivity, negativity, dialectics, phenomenology,

and ethics remain, as I will try to show, fundamental for any attempt to understand the philosophical strength of Kierkegaard's psychology.

Kierkegaard writes on the brink of the development of psychology as an individual academic discipline (Tang 2006; Klempe 2014), and the subsequent development of psychology is crucial in order to understand his conception of psychology, the strength of his rich explorations of the human mind, and his lack of influence on contemporary psychology. So, the first section will sketch the general development of contemporary psychology as a scientific discipline, trying to shed some light on the principal reasons why contemporary academic psychologists have a difficult time assessing and understanding the strength of Kierkegaard's psychological inquiry. This historical background brings out a curious feature of Kierkegaard's psychology; namely, that his approach to the human mind is, at the same time, embarrassingly obsolete and surprisingly relevant to current issues in psychology. The following three sections will then present Kierkegaard's philosophical conception of psychology, with each section focusing on two central Kierkegaardian topics that still stir up major debates in psychology. These sections develop my principal argument. I shall argue that the question of autonomy—in terms of the intricate entanglement of activity and passivity—is the fundamental philosophical problem at the heart of Kierkegaard's psychology. By way of conclusion, the final section closes with an outline of how Kierkegaard's exploration of the problem of autonomy can contribute to contemporary psychology.

30.1 Psychology between Philosophy and Theology

The principal impediment to a qualified use of Kierkegaard in contemporary psychology is, as one commentator has noted, that "there is a noticeable paucity of sustained discussion of psychology in Kierkegaard's texts" (Sharpless 2013, 90). Yet, psychology seems to be everywhere in his writings. This curious circumstance stems from the fact that his psychology is a philosophical psychology. Kierkegaard's treatment of psychology, and of psychological issues, is ingrained in an intricate philosophical and theological texture, which makes it difficult for contemporary academic psychologists to use his explorations of the human mind without getting caught up in tedious philosophical problems and buying into obsolete theological convictions. Although Kierkegaard's explicit Christian vocabulary and fundamental theological notions make his psychology appear more obsolete to a contemporary academic psychologist than, for instance, the psychology of Spinoza or Hume, this is nevertheless a problem that affects most philosophical psychologies.

A working definition is helpful. Philosophical psychology is the comprehensive study of the human mind, explicitly involving philosophical questions concerning ontological, epistemological, ethical, and religious issues that are normally subdued or disregarded in the clinical focus of contemporary psychological research. In this sense, philosophical psychology is more comprehensive than psychology in a narrow academic or clinical sense (Titus 2009, 1–37). This comprehensive character of philosophical psychology makes it a quaint notion in contemporary discussions in both philosophy and psychology. This was not always the case. The nature and function of the mind have been abiding concerns in philosophy, and since Aristotle's *De Anima*, philosophical psychology has been the name for overarching theoretical attempts to account for the workings of the human mind. Philosophical psychology differs from contemporary psychology in terms of scope

and philosophical ambition. While contemporary academic psychology normally focuses on local problems (e.g., perception, attention, language, or neuronal structures), the theoretical explorations of the mind in traditional philosophical psychologies were never pursued in isolation from ethical, political, and religious concerns. In fact, since psychology and philosophy parted ways toward the end of the nineteenth century, and with the development of psychology as an independent scientific discipline in the twentieth century, philosophical psychology has been washed out of the academic vocabulary (Hayward 2011, 524–42).

Besides the crucial separation of philosophy and psychology, for more than a century now both philosophy and psychology have experienced an increasing compartmentalization and a constantly more aggressive naturalization, which have made scientifically disreputable the comprehensive accounts of the human mind traditionally advanced by philosophical psychologies (Kagan 2009, 19–25). The doubts that were at work in the emerging suspicion against the comprehensive models of philosophical anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century also struck at philosophical psychology in the same period. These doubts were first and foremost concerned with the validity of grandiose and theoretically coherent accounts of the human mind after the Darwinian disclosure of the biological roots of the mind, the Freudian uncovering of the unconscious, and the general discrediting of metaphysical explorations in existentialist and positivist philosophy alike (Landmann 1982, 42–52; Turchin 2014). Psychoanalysis and phenomenological and existential psychologies still worked with some remnants of a philosophical psychology, trying to construct unified theoretical accounts of feeling, thinking, and behavior. However, three interconnected scientific revolutions in psychology—the cognitive sciences in the 1960s, evolutionary psychology in the 1980s, and the neurosciences in the 1990s—finally put philosophical psychology out of the mind of psychologists and philosophers for good (Smith 2013, 238–82).

In the twenty-first century, the philosophical interest in psychology has split into four distinct fields of research: philosophy of mind, dealing primarily with epistemological and metaphysical issues in continuity with more traditional philosophical concerns (Kim 2011, Heil 2013); philosophy of psychology, working primarily with the nature and mechanisms of cognition in close collaboration with interdisciplinary scientific research (Botterill and Carruthers 1999; Bermúdez 2005); metaethics and moral psychology, concerned with the ontological and epistemological aspects of normativity that are normally left out of the two previous fields (Miller 2013; Tiberius 2015); philosophy of religion, taking on the questions concerning God, faith, and religious beliefs that only rarely find their way into the dominating contemporary debates concerning the relationship between philosophy and psychology (Davies 2004; Wilkinson and Campbell 2010). The fact that the disciplinary boundaries of these fields are rather impermeable, and that most researchers shy away from the all-encompassing accounts of the mind characterizing traditional philosophical psychologies, makes Kierkegaard's multifarious conception of psychology appear outdated to most scientific psychologists. Moreover, the poetic character of his writing, the colorful play with pseudonyms together with the explicit theoretical emphasis on subjectivity, indirect communication, and passion, makes difficult headway in research environments characterized by the epistemic virtues of clarity, objectivity, and neutrality. Finally, Kierkegaard's abiding insistence on the human being as spirit—and his explicit use of the heavy theological and Christian connotations of this notion—sits uncomfortably with the naturalistic grounding of contemporary psychological research.

This last issue, in particular, deserves some clarification. The debate concerning science and religion gained momentum in the founding period of the academic discipline of psychology. The second half of the nineteenth century was saturated with heated academic discussions concerning the role of religion, and particularly Christian theology, in the wake of Darwin's revolutionary publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. In spite of early attempts to develop religious interpretations of Darwin's naturalistic reconfiguration of biology, a wedge had been driven between science and religion that made religious narratives seem increasingly suspicious to enthusiastic advocates of the newly found scientific methods (Brooke 1991, 275–320). This tension and sometimes open conflict between science and religion are present in academic psychology today. While the question of religion is considered a critical topic in contemporary psychological research, the investigation of it is carried out against a solid naturalistic background. As Thomas Dixon writes, the naturalization of the study of the mind around the turn of the twentieth century entailed the adoption, for a majority of academic psychologists, of a “secular-scientific worldview” that assumes “matter or nature to be the ultimate reality,” privileging “experimentation as the way to discover the nature of that reality” and turning to “natural history and mathematics for narrative and explanatory tools” (Dixon 2003, 240). This means that the issue of religious belief and the reality of religious experience is embedded in a scientific narrative that acknowledges the importance of religious issues, but does not tolerate the specific theological notions (e.g., revelation, sin, God, Jesus, neighborly love) that are fundamental to Kierkegaard's thinking. The naturalistic background prevalent among academic psychologists today has turned the two multifarious and inherently vague notions of “science” and “religion” into fossilized ontological categories that are mutually exclusive (Harrison 2010). Psychological research that wants to secure scientific acclaim today cannot, in other words, include serious investigation of theological notions, which, in turn, makes the use of Kierkegaard's investigation of the human mind difficult.

This disqualification of Kierkegaard due to an unarticulated intolerance of theological notions is unfortunate. That is so especially because of Kierkegaard's particular use of psychology. One of the important roles that psychology plays in Kierkegaard's thinking is that of a critical tool to examine and reformulate the theology of his day. Kierkegaard's insistence on the explanatory priority of the concrete individual means that psychology operates in between the philosophical and theological aspects of Kierkegaard's thinking, and—as we shall see in the following sections—it is exactly his psychological investigations that allow him to criticize and reformulate basic philosophical and theological notions.

Despite the lack of direct influence on contemporary psychology, understood as the scientific study of the human mind, Kierkegaard has nevertheless exerted an immense indirect influence. Aspects of his psychology and philosophy, rather than his philosophical conception of psychology, have influenced major phenomenological psychopathologists (Karl Jaspers, Hubertus Tellenbach, and Wolfgang Blankenburg), psychoanalysts (e.g., Karen Horney, Heinz Kohut, Jacques Lacan), and existential psychologists (e.g., Ludwig Binswanger, Rollo May, R.D. Laing, Carl R. Rogers).¹ In particular, Kierkegaard's treatment of issues such as subjectivity, negativity (psychopathology), alienation, affectivity, imagination, and suffering has left traces in these thinkers, and Kierkegaard's influence on contemporary psychological research is thus best assessed and examined through the prism of phenomenological psychopathology, psychoanalysis, and existential psychology. This is not, of course, the place to perform such an examination. However, the following three sections will articulate the issue of subjectivity and the other central issues just

mentioned, providing an outline of Kierkegaard's philosophical conception of psychology that may form a background against which further research may be conducted.

The three sections present three interconnected dimensions of Kierkegaard's investigation of autonomy. The first brings out *the dialectics of autonomy* (using our freedom, we do something with ourselves) through negativity and subjectivity, while the second examines alienation and affectivity, bringing attention to *the difficulty of autonomy* (our freedom is entangled in itself). The third section, then, articulates *the fragility of autonomy* (the troubled reality of freedom) in terms of imagination and suffering.

30.2 From Life-View to Existence: Subjectivity and Negativity

Kierkegaard's conception of psychology is entangled with his tireless search for an understanding of how to live a human life. While a philosopher like Hegel, as Jon Stewart notes, "is not interested in particulars for their own sake or in the single individual" (Stewart 2003, 637), making sense of the particular life of individuals is the indisputable objective of Kierkegaard's thinking (Theunissen 1958, 25–51; González 1998, 160–67). His principal interest lies not so much in understanding *what* human life is as in *how* a person understands life. As he writes in an early discourse: "It does not depend, then, merely on what one sees, but what one sees depends on how one sees it" (SKS 5, 69 / EUD, 59). It is this insistence on self-understanding and engagement that discloses psychology at the heart of his thinking (Nordentoft 1978, 1–15). This is not to say, however, that Kierkegaard's thinking abandons the philosophical ambition of objectivity and universality. On the contrary, as his self-proclaimed psychological pseudonym, Vigilius Haufniensis, proudly declares: "If an observer will only pay attention to himself, he will have enough with five men, five women, and ten children for the discovery of all possible states of the human soul" (SKS 4, 427 / CA, 126). At work in his meticulous investigation of the inexpressible life of the individual, we find an ineluctable conviction of universality expressed with the recurrent motto "*unum noris, omnes* [if you know one, you know all]" (SKS 4, 382 / CA, 79; SKS 7, 323 / CUP1, 353).

In his first booklet from 1838, a contorted review of Hans Christian Andersen's novel *Only a Fiddler* published the previous year, Kierkegaard criticizes Andersen for his lack of a clear life-view. Without such an understanding we are helpless in front of the challenges of a life in which "every day we encounter the most ridiculous combinations of individuals shaken together like bits of glass in a kaleidoscope" (SKS 1, 28 / EPW, 72). The notion of life-view plays a fundamental role in Kierkegaard's early writings and nourishes the seeds fundamental to the development of his mature conception of psychology:

[A] life-view is more than the quintessence or sum of propositions maintained in its abstract neutrality; it is more than experience, which as such is always fragmentary. It is, namely, the transubstantiation of experience; it is an unshakeable certainty in oneself won from all empirical experience If we now ask how such a life-view is brought about, then we answer that for the one who does not allow his life to fizzle out too much but seeks as far as possible to lead its single expressions back to himself again, there must necessarily come a moment in which a strange light spreads over life without one's therefore even remotely needing to have understood all possible particulars, to the progressive understanding of which, however, one now has the key. There must come a moment, I say, when, as Daub observes, life is understood backward through the idea. (SKS 1, 32–3 / EPW, 76, 78; translation slightly modified)

Kierkegaard explores the notion of life-view (aesthetical, ethical, or religious) carefully in his hectic production in the years from 1843 to 1846, in the pseudonymous works as well as in those issued under his own name. The two most famous works in this regard are, of course, *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*, but apart from the content of these early writings, the pseudonymous form itself operates as a decisive analytical tool in the exploration of different life-views. Each pseudonym is teeming with his own particular feeling, thinking, and behavior, which provide the reader not only with an understanding of the structure, integrity, and success of a particular life-view, but also with the affective resonance of the life-view in question. The emphasis that Kierkegaard puts on the affective dimension of a life-view is crucial to the development of his psychology. As he explains in a footnote in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*, an introduction that contains most of the theoretical germs of his mature conception of psychology:

That science, just as much as poetry and art, presupposes a mood in the creator as well as in the observer, and that an error in the modulation is just as disturbing as an error in the development of thought, have been entirely forgotten in our time, when inwardness has been completely forgotten, and also the category of appropriation. (SKS 4, 322 / CA, 14)

The affective resonance of our ideas sets in motion our thinking about life, and shifts the attention of our thinking from disinterested understanding to appropriation. In other words, Kierkegaard's interest is not exclusively directed at explaining basic features of human life, but at how we appropriate and live with these explanations. A case in point is his abiding interest in death, the point of which is clearly explained in the early discourse "At a Graveside" from 1844: "Death has no need of an explanation and certainly has never requested any thinker to be of assistance. But the living needs the explanation—and why? In order to live accordingly" (SKS 5, 466 / TD, 99).

So, to live the life we want, we need a reflective grip on the kaleidoscopic occurrences that constitute our life. In other words, the early production explores ways to arrive at a substantiated life-view that can make sense of our thinking, feeling, and behavior, and can thus secure a psychological autonomy that enables the individual to create a life of her own, instead of being a slave to the pleasures of the moment and tossed around by the contingent features of life. The ideal of autonomy had been the apex of most philosophical projects before Kierkegaard, and the quest for autonomy was intensified in the German idealists' feverish attempts to overcome Kant's radical conception of autonomy as untethered to the workings of the natural world (Ameriks 2000; Richards 2002). The idealistic attempt to arrive at a less paradoxical, more objectively secure conception of autonomy constitutes the immediate background for Kierkegaard's thinking, and his notion of life-view is dependent on this idealistic heritage.

However, a major change in Kierkegaard's thinking occurs in 1846. The change is epitomized by the deconstruction of the notion of life-view in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *A Literary Review*, and by the inauguration of the systematic investigation of the notion of existence that will consume most of his philosophical energy in the remaining years. Whereas the quest for a life-view still pursues a philosophical objectivity able to secure psychological autonomy, the notion of existence destabilizes this philosophical ambition of arriving at some kind of objective measure to make sense of the bustling human mind. The change in Kierkegaard's conceptual focus is radical (the notion of life-view drops almost completely out of his conceptual vocabulary), but the notion of existence can be

considered a direct philosophical consequence of his intense investigation of the problems involved in the notion of a life-view. Already in the early pseudonymous writings one finds a nagging suspicion about the apparent stability proffered by a certain kind of life-view. This suspicion of the stability of philosophical configurations of reality bears heavy traces of his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony* from 1841, where he criticizes the life-view of romantic ironists for distorting actual life due to their penchant for poeticizing everything (SKS 1, 320 / CI, 284). At work in Kierkegaard's critique of the ironist is his discovery of the existential significance of irony as a pernicious psychological attitude; namely, irony used as a means to isolate oneself from the challenges of a concrete reality. The "ghost of irony" haunts the rest of Kierkegaard's authorship (Söderquist 2013a, 201–30) in the form of a "playful negativity" (Söderquist 2013b, 347) that, among other things, uncovers an inescapable instability of apparently stable life-views.

The detailed examination of the notion of existence in the *Postscript* accentuates two psychological aspects of human life that are either merely employed as useful tools (e.g., Hegel, Fichte, Schelling) or regarded as a problem to overcome (e.g., Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz) in the philosophical quest for an objective life-view; namely, subjectivity and negativity. As Climacus famously writes in the *Postscript*: "to exist signifies first and foremost to be a particular individual, and this is why thinking must disregard existence, because the particular cannot be thought, but only the universal" (SKS 7, 298 / CUP1, 326). The peculiar fact that a person may actually live the life that she has always wanted—and perhaps fought hard for—and then still be unhappy reveals the problem and urgency of psychology. A reflectively acquired life-view is not enough. An objective life-view cannot secure the autonomy of the individual. A new dimension of autonomy is discovered with the notion of existence. The task is not to find an idea of life that as a logical consequence liberates one from the dangers of contingency and fate. On the contrary, the real task is subjective: how to become the unique self that every person is through the acquired life-view. In other words, one thing is to experience "the strange light" of a life-view able to clarify our confused ideas about life and help us to make sense of our particular desires, sorrows, and hopes; another thing entirely is how to exist with those ideas, desires, hopes, and sorrows. The notion of existence does not invalidate the notion of a life-view, it merely brings attention to the difficulty of freedom. It is not a goal for which we can strive. Human freedom is obligatory. It is something that we cannot choose. We are free whether we like it or not. Freedom is not something that we can secure once and for all; rather, it is a task that cannot be completed. To put it differently, freedom is dialectical; that is, it is something we feel and something we do.

Subjectivity and negativity are key features of this dialectics of autonomy (Grøn 1997, 2008; Theunissen 1981, 2005). We are the persons that we are, and yet many of the challenges of a human life stem from the strange fact that we find it difficult to be the particular persons that we are. We are somehow more than the persons that we are—in terms of *what* we are, biologically speaking, and *who* we are in the eyes of other people. A person is a self who constantly relates herself to what and who we are, and this relational character of our existence explains the importance that Kierkegaard confers to the notion of subjectivity. We have to become the persons that we are through the struggles of subjectivity; that is, through a constant work with the subjective character of our life. Our experience of universal human phenomena such as hope, dreams, fears, guilt, pain, and joy are saturated with our particular subjectivity, and our existential task is to make sense of and appropriate this experiential dialectic of universality and particularity. In this sense, subjectivity is the key to Kierkegaard's psychology, and to his conception of psychology as the science that "more than any other is

allowed to intoxicate itself in the foaming multifariousness of life” (SKS 4, 330 / CA, 23; see Klempe 2013). Our identity is unstable due to the subjective character of the persons that we are, and the conflicts that this instability brings about play a major role in Kierkegaard’s psychology (Nordentoft 1978, 110–99). In fact, it has been convincingly argued that negativity in the sense of problematic, or even failed, identity constitutes the core of Kierkegaard’s thinking (Theunissen 1981, 2005; González 2010). It is hard not to notice that happy lives are rarely, if ever, depicted in Kierkegaard’s works, and that most of his phenomenology concerns negative human experiences (e.g., anxiety, melancholy, and despair) rather than the more joyful aspects of existence (McCarthy 1978). Apart from the obvious fact that mental suffering is one of the principal reasons that make psychology relevant (happy people do not question their existence as do unhappy people—or at least not with the same urgency), Kierkegaard’s insistence on negative phenomena reflects, as Arne Grøn argues, a deeper concern with the conundrum of activity and passivity—of action and suffering—that constitutes the philosophical core of Kierkegaard’s psychology:

[T]hese phenomena are ways in which an individual can position herself. In “positioning herself,” the individual does something with herself. This shows that fundamentally subjectivity has a double significance: we are dealing with an action (the individual assumes a specific position), but also a suffering (through this movement the individual is itself affected, that is, it is brought somewhere itself). The phenomena are not merely moods, but ways of relating oneself [*forholdsmåder*]. They contain a decisive passive element, which is, however, interweaved with activity: through what she does the individual does something with herself. (Grøn 1997, 49)

The following two sections will articulate this dialectics of passivity and activity that constitutes the philosophical core of Kierkegaard’s conception of psychology.

30.3 Anxious Choices: Alienation and Affectivity

The question of what and how to choose is the umbilical cord of Kierkegaard’s investigation of the human mind. The trouble of choosing a life-view is the primary issue under investigation in major works such as *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Repetition*, and *Stages on Life’s Way*. It is in *The Concept of Anxiety*, however, that we find the theoretical account of freedom that eventually brings about the transformation of the notion of life-view into the concept of existence.

The Concept of Anxiety is a book in and about movement. It is a painstaking voyage into the subtlest movement of the human mind that manages, with rare systematic rigor, to connect this psychological examination with major philosophical issues such as the nature of science, ethics, sexuality, freedom, history, aesthetics, and religion. It is a book about change: change of heart, bodily change, change in and of time, and change of mood. This prominent role played by movement and change in the book follows, on the one hand, from the affective character of Kierkegaard’s writing and, on the other, from the fact that emotions, and of course anxiety in particular, are the central object of investigation. Of the three major emotions (anxiety, melancholy, and despair) of human negativity investigated throughout Kierkegaard’s works, anxiety is the most basic while despair is the most developed. We are told that anxiety has the same meaning as melancholy, although melancholy appears “at a much later point where freedom, having passed through the imperfect forms of its history, in the profoundest sense will come to itself” (SKS 4, 348 / CA, 42–3). In the footnote accompanying this claim, we are referred to *Either/Or* as the book wherein to learn about melancholy, while

the privileged work in which to learn about the existential meaning of despair is, of course, *The Sickness unto Death*. Anxiety is the most basic of the three in terms of time, epistemology, and ontology. It is the primordial feeling in the life of a human, it is the emotional rupture of innocence or immediate understanding, and it is the feeling of being human.

It is through the emotional discomfort of anxiety that a human being becomes conscious of itself as a strange creature: a stranger in nature, a stranger to other human beings, and a stranger to itself by being both similar to and different from all other creatures in the world. It is through the emotionally labile mood of anxiety that we discover what we are in virtue of the inchoate images of who we have become and who we are to become (Grøn 2008, 87). In other words, we feel ourselves through the anxious reverberations of being a creature that is not only affected by time, but who also has the possibility to affect time. Anxiety shows that the challenge of time to human nature is more complex than the lines that time draws in our faces. Our anxiety is a rupture of time that paralyzes our living in time with the restless awareness of being responsible for the time that has gone by and for the time to come.

Now, one way to make sense of Kierkegaard's phenomenology of emotional negativity is to view the affective complexity of anxiety, melancholy, and despair, and an emotional ladder going from anxiety over melancholy to despair, where each step brings with it an increasingly developed sense of selfhood. Anxiety is the feeling that to be human is to be a self. Melancholy, by contrast, is the feeling that being a self is a problem. And despair is the feeling that being a self is not something that we are, but a constant task of becoming the self that we are. This dissection of the affective tissue of human existence is, of course, artificial and rough-edged, but it enables us to understand more clearly the significance of anxiety.

The phenomenon of anxiety is characterized, first and foremost, by being a psychological state of "restless repose, not something restless that either produces itself or is repressed" (SKS 4, 329 / CA, 21). Anxiety is, as are all emotions, movement—but it is a peculiar movement. Contrary to other emotional states, it is a movement that cannot be repressed (as can anger, excitement, irritation) and cannot produce itself (as anger begets angry feelings, kindness kind feelings, desire craving, and so on). The reason for this peculiar emotive state is that anxiety manifests "dialectical determinations" resulting in a peculiar "psychological ambiguity" (SKS 4, 348 / CA, 42); in fact, "[t]here is nothing in the world more ambiguous" (SKS 4, 349 / CA, 43). This psychological ambiguity of anxiety, in turn, uncovers the heterogeneous character of the soul and the body as constitutive of being human, because anxiety is both a bodily and a psychic phenomenon. And since this phenomenological ambiguity cannot be appeased or disposed of by striving to exist as either a bodiless angel or a thoughtless beast, anxiety discloses that human nature cannot be reduced to the phenomenological reality of either the living body or the thinking soul. In other words, anxiety is an emotional manifestation of the complexity of human nature; namely, that being human is to be both a body and a soul. So if anxiety does not exclusively belong to either the body or the soul, of what is it then an expression? It is an expression of consciousness, or of spirit, or of the way the human being relates itself to itself as a synthesis of body and soul. Anxiety is an expression of that third aspect that makes it impossible for a human being to coincide seamlessly with the peculiar synthesis of body and soul that constitutes every human being.

Yet to be human, to be a self, is not primarily to be self-conscious. Reflection is secondary to freedom; or, as Theunissen writes: "*being* oneself is more than being self-consciousness, namely, will" (Theunissen 1981, 414). So besides disclosing that to be human is to be a self, anxiety further qualifies selfhood as freedom. It does so through the ambiguity of anxiety, which is nothing but the self-affection of consciousness in the sense that consciousness makes

itself known through the ambiguity of anxiety as “entangled freedom” (SKS 4, 354 / CA, 49), in which “the spirit relates itself to itself and its conditionality” (SKS 4, 349 / CA, 44).

Anxiety is a peculiar emotional state involving both bodily feelings and cognitive emotions; that is, it involves both body and mind. Feelings such as lust, tiredness, fatigue, and joy are a perception of something that happens to me more or less involuntarily, while I am more actively involved in emotions such as love, shame, resentment, compassion, and hate. Anxiety is, in this sense, both a feeling and an emotion: not merely an affection of our body, nor solely a product of our thinking. Anxiety tells us about being a human self that it is to be moved and to be able to move, to be changed and to be able to change. Or, to put it differently, to be a self is to live in and with the emotions that make us human; to become the persons that we are, we have to work with the entangled character of our freedom; that is, with the dialectics of activity and passivity that makes our freedom to be a self so fragile.

30.4 Troubled Reality: Imagination and Suffering

Kierkegaard’s investigation of imagination brings out another dimension of the conundrum of activity and passivity at the heart of human autonomy. Few have entrusted imagination with a more central role in what it means to be human than has Kierkegaard, and yet few have been as skeptical as he of imaginative transformations of human life. Imagination is inherently ambiguous, in the sense that it is both the organ and the trap of our autonomy. On the one hand, imagination is the condition and vehicle of freedom; that is, it is imagination that makes us aware of our freedom, and it is only through the use of our imaginative capacity that we can become the persons that we are. On the other hand, the same imaginative capacity can very easily ensnare us in the ruses of our own thinking; that is, we risk becoming the victims of the imaginative labor of our freedom.

The creative aspect of human life is basic in Kierkegaard’s understanding of what it means to be human. We have to relate ourselves to who and what we are in order to become the persons that we are. It is imagination that allows us to become who we are; namely, an individual self who is an anxious synthesis between body and soul, necessity and possibility, the finite and the infinite. This relation is one made possible through the process of infinite imaginary possibilities destabilizing the brute facticity of our identity. This is why Kierkegaard accentuates imagination as the most important of human capacities:

As a rule, imagination [*Phantasie*] is the medium for the process of infinitizing; it is not a capacity, as are the others—if one wishes to speak in those terms, it is the capacity *instar omnium*. When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing, and willing a human being has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how a human being reflects herself—that is, upon imagination. (SKS 11, 147 / SUD, 30–31; translation slightly modified)

However, the infinity of possibilities that is activated through the labor of imagination can make us lose our sense of the passive character of reality. Human reality is not pure possibility or the product of an active imagination, but always imaginative possibilities fractured through the necessities of brute facticity. We cannot imagine reality because it is concrete; that is, the product of active possibility and passive necessity grown together (*concrecere*) in a way that our imaginative capacities cannot imitate, produce, or mirror. It is, in other words, a reality that transcends the power of imagination; a reality against

whose concreteness our imaginative variations fracture. This concrete aspect of reality becomes urgent in our experience of suffering:

[C]ould a human being by means of his imagination [*Indbildningskraft*] experience exactly the same as in reality, live through it in the same way as if he lived through it in reality, learn to know himself as accurately and profoundly as in the experience of reality—then there would be no meaning in life But such is not the case either, and therefore in turn the image produced by the imagination is not that of true perfection; it lacks something—the suffering of reality or the reality of suffering. (SKS 12, 187–8 / PC, 188; translation modified)

The complexity of human suffering brings out the fragility of our autonomy. We do not merely suffer because of what happens to us. We also suffer from the imaginative construction that we have brought about ourselves. We both create and suffer the reality of our existence; that is, our freedom to create our existence through our imaginative capacities brings about the reality that causes our suffering. The strength of our mind is also our greatest vulnerability. The only way to exist with this vulnerability is constantly to work with the fragile character of the autonomy that makes us the individual persons that we are.

30.5 Conclusion: The Strength of a Fragile Mind

Kierkegaard's investigation of the mind revolves, as argued in this chapter, around the philosophical problem of autonomy. Psychology, for Kierkegaard, is "the intermediary term that has the ambiguity which rescues thought" (SKS 4, 379 / CA, 76; translation modified), in the sense that it is an exploration of the dialectics of activity and passivity at work in human self-consciousness. We are self-conscious creatures in possession of a reflective autonomy that allows us to relate ourselves to our feeling, perception, thinking, and action. This autonomy does not make us free of the world, other people, or ourselves, but it does make us conscious of the passivity and activity constitutive of our freedom. Kierkegaard's major psychological contribution lies in his strenuous endeavor to articulate the concrete reality of the life of the mind:

The most concrete content that consciousness can have is consciousness of itself, of the individual himself—not the pure self-consciousness, but the self-consciousness which is so concrete that no author, not the one richest in words nor the one most powerful in exposition, has ever been able to describe a single such self-consciousness, even though every single human being is such a one. (SKS 4, 443 / CA, 143)

This insistence on the concreteness of the mind destabilizes the indurated philosophical distinction between mind and reality constitutive of much contemporary psychology. The rich work in the four distinct branches of philosophical research in psychology mentioned in the first section (philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychology, metaethics and moral psychology, and philosophy of religion) is, most of the time, carried out on a naturalistic conviction of the exclusive reality of the material world and the consequent unreality of the mind. As one influential psychologist argues, many of the problems with which academic psychology struggles today are caused by psychology's heated "romance with genes and brains in the hope that they will supply the needed answers," which makes practicing psychologists forget that "a person's interpretations of feelings and events are as

fundamental to psychology as genes are to biology” (Kagan 2012, 248). The naturalistic conviction conceives of the mind as a passive receptor of a reality of which it is itself merely a fleeting neuronal shadow, and thus it eliminates the experiential autonomy of the individual mind.

This transformation of the life of the mind into passive neuronal functions does not, however, make the problem of autonomy go away. The concrete reality of mental suffering makes it evident that a sharp distinction between mind and reality is not tenable. Many of the problems involved in the rapidly increasing “epidemic” of mental illness are a doleful reminder that human beings suffer “because of who they ‘are’ rather than what they ‘have’” (McNally 2011, 213). We suffer not only because of what happens to us, but also because of what we ourselves do. It is exactly in virtue of his insistence on, and thorough examination of, the hazy distinction between mind and reality that Kierkegaard demonstrates his crucial relevance to contemporary psychology. He provides us with sharp analytical tools to make sense of and cope with the fragile life of the mind. In other words, he makes us understand, as one perceptive philosopher of psychiatry has noticed, that

[I]ittle is firm and decisive. Lives are riskily led. There is no unambiguous divide separating or demarcating when we need others from when we don’t, when we underestimate ourselves from when we overestimate, when we are autonomously able to achieve a goal from when we are not. Instability is inseparable from stability. Discord is in our concord. (Graham 2010, 263–4)

This fragility of our mind is not merely due to the fine-grained complexity of our neuronal constitution, but also due to the autonomous strength of every mind to contribute to a common reality that is uniquely individual.

Cross-references

See also CHAPTER 5, “KIERKEGAARD AND EXISTENTIALISM: FROM ANXIETY TO AUTONOMY”; CHAPTER 8, “KIERKEGAARD’S SKEPTICISM”; CHAPTER 24, “EXISTENCE AND THE AESTHETIC FORMS”; CHAPTER 28, “BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY, AND PSYCHOLOGY: THE INSIDER/OUTSIDER SELF”; CHAPTER 31, “KIERKEGAARD AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY”

Note

- 1 For an updated and detailed introduction to Kierkegaard’s influence on major psychologists in the twentieth century, see Stewart 2011. For cogent discussions of Kierkegaard’s influence on twentieth-century psychoanalysis, see Nordentoft 1978 (with an emphasis on Freud) and the various contributions in Smith 1981. Karl Jaspers is an exception to the unsystematic reception of Kierkegaard’s philosophical psychology in twentieth-century psychology. His *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* from 1919 (Jaspers 1919) and the fourth edition of his *General Psychopathology* from 1946 (Jaspers 1997) carry explicit Kierkegaardian traces, and, as has been noticed by two perceptive interpreters, “Jaspers’ work can be read as one single commentary on Kierkegaard” (Theunissen and Greve 1979, 62; for further exposition of Kierkegaard’s influence on Jaspers, see also Czakó 2011; Anz 1986; Wahl 1957).

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