

Kierkegaard, Fichte and the Subject of Idealism

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Abstract: While the philosophical and religious authorship of Søren Kierkegaard is often said to be absolutely anti-systematic, and in particular anti-idealist in its orientation, this essay argues that Kierkegaard's philosophical project can in fact be best interpreted as offering a critical appropriation of the philosophy of German Idealism. Through a reading of his text, Johannes Climacus, the author shows that Kierkegaard is interested in exploring the existential stakes of the philosophy of German Idealism from the perspective of the dynamic development of consciousness. Along with this, he uses the work of J. G. Fichte to further show the manner in which this concern with the life of the individual subject places Kierkegaard in continuity with one of the key figures of German Idealism.

Along with a systematic reading which places Kierkegaard in clear historical continuity with German Idealism, the paper concludes by arguing that this idealist interpretation of Kierkegaard not only places his thought more clearly in a nineteenth century philosophical context, but equally that this reading can offer conceptual support to contemporary theories of subjectivity. In particular, the author argues that only by rereading the work of Kierkegaard via the conceptual framework of German Idealism can we bring his thought to life in a way that makes it absolutely crucial to contemporary philosophical debates on the nature of subjectivity and the political.

I

 WHEN we ask the question of what the legacy of the philosophy of German Idealism will be in the twenty-first century, and in particular when we inquire into what sort of ‘new life’ can be injected into this nineteenth century tradition, one does not immediately think of the religious authorship of nineteenth century Danish author Søren Kierkegaard as a crucial resource for this task. To begin with, Kierkegaard was not German *or* an idealist, and in many senses his legacy is most strongly connected to his religious and existential rejection of the totalizing metaphysical aims of the absolute idealism of Hegel. This then leads to his being considered as a proto-existentialist critical thinker with little concern for systematic accounts of the structure of consciousness or formal ontology. Along with this, Kierkegaard is often thought to be necessarily theological in his orientation and subsequently outside the realm of those proposing to think the real of both subject and reality in the terms of a systematic idealism.

This reading is problematic on (at least) two counts; first, a reading that places Kierkegaard as in any way *contra* the systematic aims of German Idealism (Fichte-Schelling-Hegel) misses the philosophical spirit of his authorship completely. Kierkegaard was not only deeply indebted to the thought of the German idealists, but his own work touches on many of the same systematic aims, only from a different perspective. As Lore Hühn and Philipp Schwab have recently argued, “it is precisely by means of his critical reaction against idealism that Kierkegaard outlines the shape of his own philosophy.”¹ While Kierke-

1. Lore Hühn and Philipp Schwab, “Kierkegaard and German Idealism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55.

aard is critical of many of the philosophical tendencies of German Idealism, it is only through this critical appropriation that Kierkegaard develops his own post-idealist systematic philosophy.

Some of this confusion regarding Kierkegaard's relation to idealism can be attributed to a difference in style. While Hegel aimed at a rigorously systematic and logical exposition of his philosophical idealism as it pertained to consciousness, logic, nature and the state, Kierkegaard flirted with a number of different literary styles to outline his systematic thought. Rather than provide an objective (or, external) account of an ideal ontological framework, he provides an account of ontological structure via the perspective of the individual subject itself (or, an internal account). However, instead of putting him at odds with the literary style of the German idealist, this emphasis on considering the stakes of idealism through the eyes of the particular subject places Kierkegaard in a tradition utilized by Fichte himself in his *Vocation of Man*, a text that Kierkegaard was familiar with.²

In this sense, the divergence between Kierkegaard and German Idealism is not a matter of great ontological or systematic difference, but rather, a matter of perspective and literary style. Hegel (and to various extents Schelling and Fichte) aimed to articulate the dynamics of the absolute through an objective, or external, account (through an elaboration of either spirit or nature); Kierkegaard's style shows the relationship between the individual subject and systematic thought from the perspective of the becoming of the consciousness of the individual philosophical subject. Whereas the conceptual structures at play remain largely the same, in Kierkegaard's case we see the becoming of the concept develop via the movements internal to the reflective activity of the subject. In particular, as I will argue in this essay, Kierkegaard preforms this sort of idealism in *Johannes Climacus*, an unfinished text published posthumously.³ While stylistically this is one of Kierkegaard's most literary texts, when read in a similar fashion to texts such as Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* we can see it as an existential account of the stakes of idealist philosophy from the perspective of the dynamical development of subjective consciousness.

It should now be clear why a reading that attempts to place Kierkegaard in opposition to the systematic aims of German idealist philoso-

2. For a detailed account of Kierkegaard's relations to Fichte, and in particular his reading of *The Vocation of Man*, see David Kangas, "J.G. Fichte: From Transcendental Ego to Existence," in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries*, ed. Jon Stewart (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

phy holds little weight; however, the question of the theological basis and aims of his thought still remains. Although I have argued for the possibility of a non-theological interpretation of Kierkegaard at length in another work,⁴ I will provide a concise summary of that argument to set up the main argument of the present essay.

The first step of this is to note that many of the theological aspects of Kierkegaard's philosophical thought are merely posited as existential (or ethical) *solutions* to fundamental ontological (or philosophical) *problems*. For example, even though faith can be considered in an explicitly theological fashion, it can equally be seen as an existential concept showing the possibility of the individual subject to commit to existential projects without any underlying ontological certainty. Following this reading one can still give weight to these theological solutions, but they do not prove any sort of retroactive theological necessity in terms of the philosophical problems outlined by Kierkegaard (contingency, uncertainty, despair, anxiety, etc.).

Along with this, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard never provides any clearly theological content in his pseudonymous authorship.⁵ The religious is a general existential structure without any particular systematic content. This has led to readings in which traditional Lutherans, contemporary Catholics, and fanatic evangelicals can all claim Kierkegaard's thought as their own. While this tendency can lead to a variety of theological readings of the existential-religious solutions provided by Kierkegaard, it is clear that these are merely religious solutions to many of the problems left in the wake of the systematic ontology of German idealist philosophy.

To counter this tendency to read Kierkegaard as either necessarily theological and/or absolutely opposed to the philosophical project of German Idealism, this essay will argue that Kierkegaard's thought develops via a critical repetition of the key philosophical ideas of German Idealism. However, Kierkegaard differs from traditional idealism by placing a focus on the ontology of the actuality of lived human life, rather than a strictly conceptual account of life in a more formal sense. Reading Kierkegaard alongside the idealist anthropology of Fichte will highlight this emphasis on the ontology of lived activity. This historical reading of Kierkegaard against the backdrop of German Idealism

4. Michael O'Neill Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

5. For more on this see Jon Stewart, *Idealism and Existentialism: Hegel and Nineteenth and Twentieth Century European Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2010).

also bears relevance to contemporary debates in continental philosophy, specifically those aiming to utilize the theoretical resources of German Idealism to contribute to contemporary political philosophy and theory. Following this, the essay will conclude by arguing that this idealist informed reading of Kierkegaard opens up the path to consider the life of the subject in a materialist and political context.

II

Kierkegaard's *Johannes Climacus* (hereafter *JC*) is an unfinished work not published during his lifetime that manages to be both one of his most literary texts while conceptually being one of his most purely philosophical. In *JC* Kierkegaard offers a narrative account of a young man, Johannes, who has an encounter of sorts with philosophy and subsequently falls in love with thought, and in particular, the process (or act) of thinking. This amorous relationship with thought leads him to an obsession with the foundational moment, or beginning, of the process of philosophical thinking. For Johannes this creates a tension between ideality and actuality, as this obsession with fully comprehending the absolute leads him to abandon any concern with the seeming inconsistencies of nature and actuality. In the terms of German Idealism, Johannes becomes completely enamored with the possibility of absolutely knowing the ideal structure that exists beyond the mere appearances of actuality, and thus "ideality became his actuality."⁶ While Johannes is certain that the end of philosophical speculation is this form of absolute knowing (which in many ways is a parody of the Danish Hegelians) in which 'the rational is the actual', he struggles to fully account for the originary grounds of this form of speculation. To attempt to think in a retroactive fashion towards these grounds, he begins an investigation of the foundations of modern philosophy, which for him can be captured in the statement: *philosophy begins in doubt*.⁷

It is worth mentioning at this point that much of Kierkegaard's critique of German idealist philosophy has to do with what he considers to be an ironic use of the concept of actuality, and in *JC* we see him exemplify this issue through the particular anxieties of the individual philosophical subject, Johannes. For Kierkegaard, the issue becomes apparent when the idealist philosopher conflates conceptual actuality with existential actuality, and subsequently thinks that conceptual thought is capable of consistently comprehending pre-conceptual

6. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, 124.

7. *Ibid.*, 132.

existential reality. In this model there is a consistent relation between thought and being, or ideality and actuality. For Kierkegaard this misuse (which he identifies in the Danish Hegelians) leads the individual philosopher to believe that conceptual thought (which has to do with the internal consistency of concepts) can allow a person to comprehend the whole of reality (and their own existential activity).

This leads to a consideration of the role of doubt as the foundational moment of the act of philosophical speculation, and in particular, a consideration of what makes the act of doubt possible in the first place. Johannes begins by considering what ‘the philosophers’ have said about the possibility of beginnings, stating that there are three possibilities: absolute beginning, objective beginning, and subjective beginning.⁸ The absolute beginning is equated with absolute spirit (the absolute concept), objective beginning is absolutely indeterminate being (nature), and subjective beginning is consciousness (reflection).

After a consideration of each of these options, which each equate to a particular concept of German idealist philosophy, Johannes remains in despair as he concludes that none of these accounts of philosophical beginnings can offer the space for doubt. For an absolute beginning, doubt is impossible since absolute spirit is wholly consistent with absolute structure, and there is no space or tension from which any form of doubt could emerge. An objective beginning, which is ‘absolutely indeterminate being’, can be thought of as pre-reflective nature, before the emergence of mind, i.e., before there can be any contradiction between the process of nature and the act of mind by which doubt could occur. Finally, Johannes equates subjective beginning with the sort of self-positing account of consciousness by which the subject is self-produced, and once again, there is no space (or difference) within which the subject would have room for doubt.

Once he works through the inadequate accounts of the philosophers regarding the possibility of doubt, Johannes asks, “by what act can the individual begin” (to philosophize)?⁹ Put otherwise, he wants to know what needs to occur to make doubt possible, as the philosophers have convinced Johannes that philosophy begins in doubt, and if doubt is not possible for the individual, than philosophy becomes impossible. In particular, Johannes asks whether doubt is something that individuals are capable of producing on their own, or must something external take place to make this possible?

8. *Ibid.*, 149.

9. *Ibid.*, 150-151.

This line of inquiry leads Johannes to the realization of the inadequacy of his attempts to begin the act of philosophy (doubt) as his own grounds, i.e., as a completely consistent and self-identical subject. Rather than the act of philosophy being something immediately possible to consciousness as such, he realizes that for philosophy to be possible for the individual, an ordeal is required, something which exists absolutely outside of the consistent activity of self-consciousness. This ordeal is what creates the conditions that make doubt, and thus philosophy, possible. In systematic terms, this ordeal is a moment of contradiction by which a space of rupture emerges between the seeming consistency of the self and reality, and in this space doubt comes to be possible. In more properly ontological terms we could say that this ordeal is a moment in which there is an abyss between the self and its grounds, and this disjunction creates the conditions for doubt.

One could here think of the ordeal as that which breaks the seeming consistency of a dialectical process by which thought and being are neatly synthesized into a consistent conceptual structure without remainder, a reading often ascribed to the systematic aims of German idealist philosophy. While in this version of the project of idealism, thought (and being) begin and end with a moment of consistency, through this emphasis on subjective experience Kierkegaard is outlining a model by which philosophy begins and ends (or more precisely, fails to ever properly end) with ordeal, and inconsistency. Consistency in the purely conceptual realm is not problematic for Kierkegaard, it is the notion that this consistency bleeds into our conception of reality as such which is the enemy; and this false notion of consistency leaves the philosophical subject in a place of ironic conflation.

At this point Johannes is able to push the previously offered account of the genesis of the philosophical act even further; rather than being satisfied with 'philosophy begins in doubt', he now realizes that before this is possible, "philosophy requires an ordeal."¹⁰ Whereas the first definition (philosophy begins in doubt) assumes only the autonomous act of the singular philosophical subject in her own act of doubt, this updated understanding (philosophy requires an ordeal) now presupposes that something external to the act of the thinking subject must occur to create the very conditions by which actual philosophical speculation, and doubt, is possible in the first place.

While this will be discussed in more detail in the present essay, we can already begin to see how Kierkegaard's internal critique of the subject of idealism shares an affinity with that of J.G. Fichte. As Fichte

10. *Ibid.*, 158.

himself wrote in 1804, “life has become merely historical and symbolic while real living is scarcely ever found.”¹¹ For Fichte, a certain strand of idealism has mistakenly turned life (and in particular, the life of the individual subject) into an historical and symbolic concept at the expense of accounting for the actual life (and living) of the individual philosophical subject. In both cases, it is clear that this critique is not against the structure of idealist philosophy as such, but rather, against the conflation of the conceptual consistency of idealist thought with the inconsistent experience of actual existence. I will return to a further discussion of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Fichte later in this essay.

Kierkegaard’s analysis (via the narrative account of Johannes) has remained largely existential up until this point, but he makes a transition to considering the ontological conditions that make this existential situation possible, and this is where we can most clearly see Kierkegaard’s critical re-articulation of the German idealist project. Johannes asks, “What must the nature of existence be in order for doubt to be possible?”¹² Put otherwise, he is inquiring into the ontological conditions for the existential possibility of doubt, or, the difference between the *possibility of* and the *production of* doubt.¹³ As Johannes considers it, this possibility must be essential for human consciousness to emerge. Through this line of questioning, Kierkegaard is implicitly critiquing German Idealism inasmuch as these philosophies run the risk of skipping ahead to assuming that human consciousness is immediately able to *do* philosophy in terms of conceptually comprehending the absolute in thought. Johannes is here realizing that this moment of doubt must precede the constitution of speculative consciousness. He then outlines this through an exposition of Johannes’ own journey to/through consciousness.

Johannes begins by considering the first state of consciousness, which he refers to as ‘immediate consciousness’, which is indetermi-

11. J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowing*, trans. Walter E. Wright (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 21.

12. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*, 166.

13. It is worth noting that this distinction, between the ontological and the existential, is one of the key issues that has kept Kierkegaard’s work from being considered as a resource in the contemporary revival of interest in German idealist philosophy. When one simply stops at the existential, Kierkegaard continues to be considered in an anti-idealist (and even an anti-philosophical) fashion. However, once we aim at uncovering the ontological conditions that make these existential concepts possible, we see that Kierkegaard is always-already engaged in the process of critically building upon the systematic ontology of German idealist philosophy.

nate and has no relation.¹⁴ Here we can think of consciousness as something like an immediate comprehension of its nature with nothing external that would constitute the possibility of relation. This form of consciousness simply is what it is, with no gaps between subject and object, or, internal and external reality.

The emergence of the possibility of relation is what leads to the cancelation of this immediacy, and a relation is made possible when consciousness is brought into relationship with something wholly external to itself. At this point, according to Kierkegaard, untruth becomes possible, as the possibility of relation has cancelled immediacy, or, subject and object are no longer in a consistent relation to one another.

As he goes on to explain, immediacy is reality itself, and mediacy is the word which is able to cancel immediacy by presupposing it. We can think here of the difference between immediate existence and the space created when this immediate nature is conceptualized via language, since language creates a difference between the thing and its conceptualization. (We here see the difference between the conceptual and the existential-actual.) So, when immediacy moves to a state of conceptualization (in language), there is no longer any immediate relationship to reality by the self, as everything is now mediated through conceptual language, and relation is made possible by this space. When immediacy moves to the act of conceptualization, there is no longer any immediate relation to reality, given that everything is now known through the mediation of conceptual language.

Immediacy thus equates to reality-in-itself, and language to ideality. Consciousness is subsequently neither reality *nor* ideality, but rather, the possibility of the contradiction, and subsequent relation, between the two. Consciousness is only made possible through a contradiction between reality and ideality, as consciousness is the very possibility of a relation between ideality and reality, since in reality itself there is no space for doubt. Using this discussion of Johannes' journey to consciousness, Kierkegaard places emphasis on the fact that it is always a *particular subject* that brings ideality into relation with reality *for herself*. Without mutual contact, consciousness exists only according to its possibility.

It is therefore precisely the act of the individual subject which both splits reality and ideality through the conceptual abstraction of language, and then subsequently is able to bring these two aspects (reality-ideality) into relation with one another through the dialectical ac-

14. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*, 167.

tivity of consciousness. For Kierkegaard, then, the condition of actual existence (and not merely conceptual actuality) is collision, and in particular, the collision between ideality and reality that takes place in consciousness. Because Kierkegaard's concern here is with placing emphasis on the particular subject of idealism, he notes that this collision must necessarily involve an 'I', and does not merely take place by itself. This then leads to a discussion of the crucial difference between consciousness and reflection, a difference that further makes sense of Kierkegaard's critique of certain aspects of German idealist philosophy.¹⁵ For Kierkegaard, many idealist philosophies mistake reflection, which is an act of abstract thought, for consciousness, which has to do with appropriation and activity. In other words, the split between reflection and consciousness could be seen as the difference between abstraction and activity, with Kierkegaard falling on the side of the later and idealism too often stopping at the former.

Kierkegaard outlines this distinction by placing emphasis on the dialectical nature of his own conceptual structure. According to Johannes, reflection's categories are dichotomous, i.e., ideality-reality. In reflection these categories touch each other in such a way that relation becomes possible, but as long as one stays in reflection these relations are only *possible* and not *actual*. In this manner reflection creates the conditions for a relation, but does not actively force the relation, since there is always a gap between these dichotomous categories, i.e., there is no third which could offer the possibility of an indirect relation between them.

Rather than the dichotomous categories of reflection, consciousness' categories are trichotomous, and are demonstrated by language. As Kierkegaard states, "consciousness is mind,"¹⁶ and when one is divided in the world of mind there are three, never two. He is here arguing that mind is what separates the two categories (ideality-reality) via language. Instead of serving as an alternative to reflection, consciousness presupposes it, which is what can allow us to adequately understand both the ontological conditions and the existential activity of doubt, given that doubt is possible because of the possibility of relation offered by this third category (mind) which is able to facilitate a collision between ideality and reality. Doubt is then the sign that consciousness is in fact possible, since the act of doubt presupposes the possibility of consciousness created through reflection.

Another way to understand the distinction between reflection and consciousness is through an emphasis on the importance of the inter-

15. Ibid., 160.

16. Ibid., 169.

est of the subject. Reflection, while providing the possibility of a relation between reality and ideality, remains disinterested. Consciousness, as a relation, is interested. This interest (*interesse*) is equivalent to a “being between.”¹⁷ While a pure reflection can be observed positively as a form of purely objective thinking, Kierkegaard considers doubt to be of a higher form, as it prepossess objective thought but also has a third, which is the interest of consciousness. To relate back to the previously quoted passage from Fichte, reflection may understand life in a symbolic and historical sense, but only the interest of consciousness is concerned with the actual living of individual subjects. Accordingly, consciousness (as interest) creates the conditions for an actual (and active) subject, and with this breaks the myth that the subject can be wholly reflective and objective in its activity. Interest is necessary to move from the passivity of reflection to the activity of consciousness.

According to Kierkegaard, the subject must have a genuine interest in reality if she is going to move beyond a simply objective and systematic *knowledge* and towards an active and interested *existence*. Systematic knowledge fails to relate to life inasmuch as it is disinterested, whereas doubt is based on interest. Because doubt is based on an actual interest, it is the beginning of the highest form of existence, and not merely the beginning of systematic thinking.¹⁸

In the terms of systematic ontology, while reflection presupposes a sort of objectivity and stability on both sides of its activity, consciousness emerges through and presupposes collision and contradiction. Kierkegaard can here be read as inverting the traditional notion that idealism begins and ends with completion (or, totality), as for him, a contradiction and collision reside on both sides of a seemingly immediate, or complete, form of consciousness. This construction of consciousness is in opposition to an idealist form of reflection and leads to a particular set of implications for the lived existence of the philosophical subject, and one of the keys to understanding these implications is Kierkegaard’s well-known category of *repetition*.¹⁹ In particular, following this line of thought we can see how this understanding of consciousness provides the ontological conditions for repetition as existential activity.

17. *Ibid.*, 170.

18. *Ibid.*, 170.

19. For his most famous employment of this concept see Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

To begin with, Kierkegaard notes that whenever the question of repetition arises, there must be a collision present, as in reality as such there is no repetition—reality only *is* in the moment.²⁰ There is no repetition in ideality either, but when ideality and reality touch, repetition is made possible. At the level of consciousness, repetition can be understood through the concept of redoubling, by which the moment of actuality emerging through the collision of reality-ideality redoubles within consciousness.²¹ Rather than being an external act divorced from the activity of consciousness, this collision between reality and ideality takes place within consciousness itself, and in this way consciousness has a disjunctive role more so than it does a synthetic one, and in fact, this disjunction is the necessary pre-condition for any attempt at a synthetic act. The only possible synthesis is the synthetic act by which ideality and reality are momentarily held together—a purely subjective act, which never has the reflective effect of bringing thinking and reality into a completely consistent relationship. Consistency *is* only in this brief moment which facilitates the necessary act of repetition that follows.

Because consciousness has the structure of a fractured dialectic, repetition is the manner by which this fracture is momentarily bridged only to return back to a state of fracture. Through repetition consciousness is paradoxically involved in recuperative acts which are marked by a further disjunction, as the dialectical interaction between the real and language, neither of which is a necessarily consistent category, means that the dialectic is always moving both ways, and it is not the case that it is only the work of language, and the language of logic in particular, to fully conceptually comprehend reality. The conceptual importance of this repetition has recently been explained as such:

The form and manner of this repetition can consequently be characterized as an operation that both maintains and renews the tension of the relation to this originary event, a tension generated by the unsublatable and ultimately unfathomable difference between what brings the repetition and what is repeated.²²

This passage highlights the manner by which repetition serves as a category explaining the possibility of the philosophical subject's existence against the backdrop of an inconsistent and disjointed reality. While Kierkegaard's antagonism to the philosophy of Hegel is much

20. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, 170.

21. *Ibid.*, 171.

22. Hühn and Schwab, "Kierkegaard and German Idealism," 79.

more nuanced than it is often presented, and much of Kierkegaard's systematic style is completely Hegelian in form, we can here see one of the biggest points of distinction between Kierkegaard and Hegel. For Kierkegaard, any emphasis on a conceptual completion that exists in the realm of pure thought serves the purpose of undermining the particular activity of lived subjectivity, and this activity is only possible through the primacy of an originary incompleteness and subsequent collision, rather than a final sublation. This is what leads to an emphasis on the practical dimensions of human existence, and as Hühn and Schwab have argued:

In making this objection to Hegel's system, however, Kierkegaard comes into proximity to the late philosophy of Fichte, who, in precisely the opposite way, makes the practical-ethical dimension of human self-affirmation the center of his thought.²³

As we see, this reading of Kierkegaard as in opposition to a traditional reading of Hegel does not place him at absolute odds with idealism, but rather, allows us to consider his relevance to idealism through the emphasis on self-affirmation he shares with Fichte.²⁴ To once again quote Hühn and Schwab:

Kierkegaard may have sought critically to portray the aesthetic life as a perverted form of a life that should be otherwise constituted, but Fichte should rightfully be acknowledged as having decisively anticipated this basic motif of Kierkegaard's thought.²⁵

III

While Kierkegaard is most often considered in historical relation to (and his reaction against) the work of Hegel and to a lesser extent Schelling, for the purpose of the present argument I find it most useful to (briefly) consider this project in relation to the work of Fichte. The intellectual continuity between Kierkegaard and Fichte has received little attention in the recent literature (likely due to Kierkegaard's own brief, and dismissive, interaction with his work), and while at first the systematic aims of Fichte's philosophy can seem at odds with Kierke-

23. *Ibid.*, 80.

24. It must be noted, however, that the reading that places Kierkegaard in opposition to Hegel rests upon a traditional reading of Hegel's dialectic, in which there is a moment of final synthesis in absolute knowing.

25. Hühn and Schwab, "Kierkegaard and German Idealism," 80.

aard's seeming assault on the scientific aspirations of German Idealism, when we set these characterizations aside we see that Kierkegaard and Fichte were engaged in extremely similar projects, and in particular shared extremely similar practical aims.

I have previously shown that Kierkegaard's critique of idealism was not a critique of systematic philosophy *as such*, but rather, a critique of the lack of subjective appropriation on the part of the individual subject engaged in the activity of philosophical speculation. Rather than offering a full-scale critique, Kierkegaard is instead critiquing the idea that the individual subject is ever capable of occupying the perspective of the absolute idea. This equates to a serious consideration of the *how* of idealist speculation and not just the *what* which is the absolute object of this speculation. Kierkegaard's concern is with giving both an existential and systematic account of the subject of idealism, which is capable of supplementing a non-subjective account of the object of idealist speculation.

Fichte is crucial on this point since he levels the same critique of the tendencies of idealist philosophy in a work that bears much stylistic resemblance to Kierkegaard's own authorship, *The Vocation of Man*. In this work Fichte provides a narrative analysis of three forms of philosophical (and existential) activity: Doubt (associated with a sort of Spinozist determinism), Knowledge (associated with Kantian transcendentalism), and finally Faith (associated with Fichte's own brand of idealism). While the very mention of the place of faith as an alternative to either absolute doubt or absolute knowledge (which each produce their own form of despair), can bring to mind a clear connection with Kierkegaard's own emphasis on faith as a response to the despair induced by idealist speculation,²⁶ the English translator of *The Vocation of Man* is quick to dismiss this comparison:

The use of the word "faith" should not suggest a kind of Kierkegaardian collapse into orthodox religion. Rather, faith indicates a free (i.e., theoretically unjustifiable) act of mind by which the conditions within which we can act and use our intellects first come to be for us.²⁷

Fortunately for the present argument, this dismissal of the connection between Kierkegaard and Fichte rests upon deeply shaky, if not com-

26. On this point see Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

27. J.G. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), "Editor's Introduction," xi.

pletely non-existent, grounds. First, it completely misses the systematic role of faith within Kierkegaard's account of the constitution of human subjectivity, which is never a collapse into orthodox religion. Second, this wildly reductive reading of Kierkegaard derails any possible productive encounter between Fichte and Kierkegaard. Most importantly for the purposes of this essay, in *The Vocation of Man* we see Fichte place emphasis on the distinction between knowledge and activity, a problem that both he and Kierkegaard see in idealist philosophy. As Fichte states, "your vocation is not merely to know, but to *act* according to your knowledge"²⁸—a similar distinction to the one Kierkegaard noted between reflection (which is concerned with knowing) and consciousness (by which one acts in response to knowledge). For Fichte, this emphasis on action is not to be read as some sort of supplement to the primary purpose of human subjectivity in knowing, as he states clearly, "you exist for activity."²⁹

We can here see a structural similarity to the role of repetition in Kierkegaard, a concept signifying an existential response to the truth of various forms of knowledge, when Fichte states that, "faith is no knowledge, but a decision of the will to recognize the validity of knowledge."³⁰ We could equally say that for Kierkegaard repetition is the act by which the subject recognizes the validity of various forms of knowledge and subsequently repeats this form and its set of implications in an existential fashion.

While this brief discussion of Fichte's *Vocation of Man* provides a sort of existential insight into the role of faith in practical philosophy, and in particular, the manner by which faith is a way out of the dead end of the subjective despair produced by determinism and skepticism, we can glean a more conceptual picture of this form of idealist subjectivity through Fichte's 1804 presentation of his systematic project, *The Science of Knowing*. One of the main arguments of Fichte in that work is that idealism cannot merely be presented in an objective fashion, but rather, must be appropriated by the individual who hopes to understand the conceptual structure of the idea. Among other things, Fichte is concerned with drawing a distinction between *life* as an intellectual concept, and *living* as the activity of the particular subject, as he argues, "life has become merely *historical* and *symbolic*, while *real* living is scarcely found."³¹ The point is to not confuse understanding a sys-

28. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, 67.

29. *Ibid.*, 68.

30. *Ibid.*, 71.

31. Fichte, *The Science of Knowing*, 21.

tem of philosophy with actual living, and thus not merely to grasp the system of philosophy, but instead to “undertake this thought process again for oneself.”³²

For Fichte, each individual has to “fulfill these terms [of the true] in himself, applying his living spirit to it with all his might, and then the insight will happen of itself without any further ado.”³³ There is a subjective element, and active involvement, that plays a part in any sort of actual philosophical knowing. Here we can see a similar point to the one expressed so forcefully in *JC*, namely, that any idealism that forgets the importance of appropriation of the truth by the individual subject necessarily becomes ironic and fails to account for the importance of individual subjective activity. Of course it is crucial to note that this in no way implies that each of us has our own version of the absolute, but rather that we each necessitate an individual experience of this absolute, and that there must be an inward appropriation if we are to move beyond a merely symbolic and historical existence and towards real life. In more conceptual terms Fichte states that there must be a “universally applicable distinction between the mere concept and the real.”³⁴ For Fichte this is a distinction between apprehending and appropriation, according to which merely apprehending is history, and appropriation is living.³⁵

Here we once again find the emphasis placed on the gap between an abstract concept and its real. It is important to note, however, that I am not attempting to fully align the systematic aims of Fichte and Kierkegaard, as there still remains a crucial difference at the level of the ontological, or put differently, while they both argue for a similar conception of the relationship between the individual subject and the absolute, they do not conceive of the absolute in the same way. For Fichte the absolute still carries a largely monistic character, as he states, “...absolute oneness is what is true and in itself unchangeable, its opposite purely contained within itself.”³⁶ For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, there is no absolute oneness, and the absolute itself is characterized by a primordial fracture, or as a lack of access to primary ontological grounds. To stay within the realm of German Idealism, we could say that while Kierkegaard and Fichte are aligned in the emphasis they each place on the act of subjective appropriation, Kierkeg-

32. *Ibid.*, 21.

33. *Ibid.*, 22.

34. *Ibid.*, 23.

35. *Ibid.*, 24.

36. *Ibid.*, 24.

aard's conception of the absolute is significantly more aligned with the work of Schelling.³⁷

IV

At this point we could rightly pose the question of whether or not this Kierkegaardian conception of the relationship between idealism and subjectivity has anything to offer either the relevance of German Idealism or the relevance of Søren Kierkegaard's thought for contemporary philosophical debates.

The first thing this reading offers is a sort of idealism with what we could call an open, or even broken, structure. Rather than positing an initial and final moment of absolute synthesis, this structure grounds the emergence of thought in an ordeal that must first take place. This open sort of idealist dialectic does not, then, reject Hegelian philosophy, but rather re-figures it in such a way as to account for the necessity of each particular philosophical subject engaging in the act of doubt, and thought, for themselves. As a result, Kierkegaard's post-idealism provides an account that maps out the conditions for subjective activity, and not merely the structural conditions of thought. In this way idealism is less about ideal systematic structures as such, and more about the manner by which this ideal structure creates the conditions for the thought and activity of the individual philosophical subject. Finally, this emphasis on activity leads to certain socio-political consequences, and in other words, lets us see a Kierkegaard of action, and not just the Kierkegaard of isolated religious despair. This is especially relevant as much contemporary European philosophy, and in particular those attempting to build upon the legacy of German Idealism, has been deeply concerned with the relationship between subjectivity and the political.³⁸ Through this reading we see how a political philosophy which falls into the traps of a wholly internal idealism (i.e., one in which all that matters is intellectually understanding objective political concepts) lacks the ability to ground political activity and subjectivity.

One could here think of the work of contemporary figures like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, who rely on readings of both Kierkegaard and German Idealism in their major theoretical works, and who build upon

37. For one of the most detailed accounts of Kierkegaard's ontological relation to the work of Schelling see Alison Assiter, *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

38. We can here mention the work of Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Catherine Malabou, and Jean-Luc Nancy.

these figures to theorize the manner in which contemporary political thought depends on a form of subjectivity grounded in the necessity of activity. In this way, we could even venture to say that figures such as Badiou and Žižek are involved in furthering the project of a post-idealist philosophy of the subject already outlined by Kierkegaard in nineteenth century Denmark.

Along with the political ontologies and theories of subjectivity at play in figures such as Badiou and Žižek, Kierkegaard's emphasis on consciousness as the result of contradiction has recently been articulated (or even, redoubled) in the materialist philosophy of Catherine Malabou, for whom, "a reasonable materialism ... would posit that the natural contradicts itself and that thought is the fruit of this contradiction."³⁹ As we have already seen, Kierkegaard grounds the capacity for human thought in a collision, or contradiction, between reality and ideality, and argues that the possibility of philosophical speculation (and activity) in the individual subject is the product of this contradiction. Following this, we can note that contemporary European materialist philosophy does not render Kierkegaard's theory of idealist subjectivity antiquated, but rather, shows that we can now provide a material basis for this internal contradiction which produces a more-than-material form of subjectivity. This also helps solve some of the lingering theological problems of Kierkegaard's authorship, as the primordial contradiction that Kierkegaard could only think in spiritual or romantic terms⁴⁰ can be accounted for in material, and even neurobiological, terms. This contemporary re-consideration of Kierkegaard's creative repetition of German Idealism can further reinforce the bridge between nineteenth century idealist philosophy and the conceptions of subjectivity and ontology at play in twenty-first century materialist philosophy.

To approach a conclusion I would like to offer a quotation from Lars Iyer's recent novel, *Exodus*, a story involving two British philosophy lecturers attempting to reckon with the consequences of thought for a country being ravaged by the effects of contemporary capitalism. One of the themes of this novel is the two main characters' attempt to write on Kierkegaard and the political, and much of the stakes aimed at by these characters are similar to those of the present essay, mainly, what does an idealist such as Kierkegaard have to offer to contempo-

39. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 82.

40. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

rary philosophical debates? The character W. puts this in terms so similar to the ethos of the present essay that it is worth quoting at length:

W. snaps shut the copy of Josiah Thompson's *Kierkegaard* that he found on the library shelves. We should shun Kierkegaard scholarship, he says, Kierkegaard scholarship can only make us afraid to do what we must do: remake Kierkegaard in our image. We must be free to dream, as he has dreamt, of a Kierkegaard who was happily married to Regine, W. says. Of a Kierkegaard who understood that the religious sphere is no higher than the ethical one, and that love for God is really love for the other person. Hasn't W. dreamt of a Kierkegaard who never believed that Jesus was really the Messiah, or that messianism could never be understood in terms of the coming of a particular person? Of a Kierkegaard who had faith only in the *messianic epoch*?

His Kierkegaard is turned to the world, W. says. To politics! His is a Kierkegaard of the barricades, whose despair has caught fire, whose inwardness has become outwardness, whose *religious* faith has become *ethical* faith, has become *political* faith.⁴¹

It is my contention that this Kierkegaard, the one of ethical and political faith, must become our Kierkegaard. And that to get to this Kierkegaard, we must risk what many Kierkegaard scholars would find utterly paradoxical, and first reconsider Kierkegaard as an idealist figure concerned with a repetition of the structure of German idealist philosophy from a perspective of the individual subject. This idealist interpretation of Kierkegaard helps us circumvent the reading by which Kierkegaard's authorship is one of the crucial moments of anti-idealist philosophy that paved the way for existentialism, phenomenology, and quasi-mystical philosophies of religion. Rather, I am offering an interpretation that places Kierkegaard in the line of the creative post-idealist thinkers dealing with the implications of German idealist philosophy for issues of politics, human praxis, and materialism. Rather than being considered as a nineteenth century ally to twentieth century French existentialism (of both the Catholic and atheist varieties), this makes Kierkegaard a fellow traveler of Marx and the young Hegelians. While this is obviously important for reasons of historical context, this reading also bears direct consequences on contemporary philosophy as this circumvention also makes it possible to draw a logical line of connection between Kierkegaard's critical appropriation of German idealist philosophy and contemporary post-idealist philosophical tendencies, such as dialectical materialism, materialist

41. Lars Iyer, *Exodus* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2013), 157.

dialectics, and transcendental materialism. In this way, Kierkegaard's critical appropriation still has much to offer to the continuing life of German Idealism.

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