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From Jena to Copenhagen: Kierkegaard's relations to German idealism and the critique of autonomy in *The Sickness Unto Death*

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Abstract: **This article seeks to demonstrate the influence of J. G. Fichte's philosophy on Søren Kierkegaard's theory of the self as he develops it in *The Sickness unto Death* and to interpret his theory of the self as a religious critique of autonomy. Following Michelle Kosch, it argues that Kierkegaard's theory of the self was developed in part as a critique of idealist conceptions of agency. Moreover, Kierkegaard's view of agency provides a powerful way of understanding human freedom and finitude that has implications for contemporary debates about autonomy, normativity, and agency.**

Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard's intellectual milieu was one heavily influenced by nineteenth-century German philosophy. As a student at the University of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard, through lectures and study of primary and secondary sources, gained a thorough acquaintance with German philosophy and literature. The major idealist philosophers, J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel, had a profound influence on Kierkegaard's thought, and it was primarily within the context of idealist philosophy that he waged his battle against any philosophy or theology that rationalized Christian dogma or ignored the importance of existential subjectivity.

Idealist thought, particularly Hegelian philosophy and theology, is often the foil against which Kierkegaard highlights the distinctiveness of orthodox Christianity. While Kierkegaard's polemics against Hegelianism have been extensively studied in the Kierkegaard literature, not until recently has Hegel's positive influence been the object of careful scrutiny, particularly within the anglophone literature, which has largely ignored the German scholarship on Kierkegaard's relations to

idealism. Consequently, the English secondary literature devoted to Kierkegaard's relations to German idealism is remarkably sparse, with the vast majority being devoted to studies of Kierkegaard and Hegel. The influence of Fichte and Schelling on Kierkegaard's thought is significantly underappreciated, although Michelle Kosch is one scholar who is beginning to rectify that situation.[1]

The purpose of this article is to sketch an interpretation of Kierkegaard's theory of the self in *The Sickness Unto Death* that demonstrates the profound influence of idealist philosophy, specifically Fichte's, on Kierkegaard and in so doing to suggest that ignoring the idealist influence on Kierkegaard's thought renders it very difficult if not impossible to gain a historical understanding of the significance and originality of Kierkegaard's philosophy. For it was against the idealist tradition of autonomy that Kierkegaard developed some of his most significant concepts, including his theory of the self set forth in *The Sickness Unto Death* [hereafter *SD*].

Although Kierkegaard has been appropriated in contemporary philosophical discourse, these appropriations often operate on the tacit assumption that Kierkegaard's world of thought is irrelevant to how we understand and use him. In contrast to this way of approaching Kierkegaard, Wilhelm Anz noted long ago that Kierkegaard poses a difficulty to his readers because his world of thought is now strange to us. Moreover, Anz saw that these now distant influences and presuppositions are 'by no means only details for historical scholarship; they are deeply meshed in Kierkegaard's thought'.[2] In detailing the specific manner in which Fichte influenced Kierkegaard's theory of the self, it is hoped that greater clarity can be achieved, not only in the project of understanding Schelling's and Hegel's influence on Kierkegaard, but also in the project of bringing Kierkegaard's thought to bear on contemporary philosophical concerns. To that end, after tracing Fichte's influence on *SD*, this essay will, following Kosch, sketch the significance of Kierkegaard's theory of the self for contemporary debates about autonomy and the self. In order to appreciate the manner in which Kierkegaard is indebted to, yet challenges idealism, it is crucial to offer a brief sketch of idealism before turning to a more focused discussion of Fichte.

German idealism and Fichte's theory of the self

German idealism arose as a response to powerful criticisms of Kant's philosophy.[3] Although Kant published the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, it was not until the pantheism controversy, instigated by Jacobi in 1785, that Kant's critical philosophy gained widespread popularity. This was a result of K. L. Reinhold's *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, the publication of which was, says Karl Ameriks, 'a world-changing event'.[4]

Reinhold's *Letters* offered a popularized form of Kant's philosophy, tailored to fit the context created by the Pantheism controversy, i.e. a context in which

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German intellectuals were shaken by serious doubts as to the compatibility of the critical reason of the *Aufklärung* and faith and social stability.[5] Reinhold's interpretation attempted to show that, in Kant's language (slightly modified) from the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had truly critiqued reason to make room for faith; critical reason need not lead to atheism and fatalism, as Jacobi maintained, for the proper route to God was not through reason but rather through morality. Following the publication of his *Letters on the Kantian System*, Reinhold became a celebrity practically overnight. However, his initially uncritical enthusiasm for Kant metamorphosed into the realization that Kant had, from Reinhold's perspective, failed to secure his system's foundations.[6] This led Reinhold to develop his *Elementarphilosophie*, which became the target of the criticisms that would lead Fichte to develop his *Wissenschaftslehre*.[7]

A central concern that Reinhold and Fichte shared with Kant, and that led them to believe that their major systematic overhauls of Kant's critical philosophy did not prevent them from being Kantians, was autonomy, or self-determining freedom.[8] Kant attempted to defend our knowledge of nature, conceived along deterministic Newtonian grounds, while also claiming that the self, conceived as a member of the noumenal world and a citizen of the kingdom of ends, was rationally self-determining. His transcendental idealism was partially an attempt to harmonize these two apparently contradictory theses, to secure autonomy while defending our knowledge of the natural world. As Reinhold's *Letters* demonstrate, it was the 'results' of the Kantian system that were so relevant for those who feared the dilemma of choosing either dogmatic obscurantism or fidelity to the principles of the *Aufklärung*, a fidelity that would ineluctably lead to nihilism. Yet the chief result of Kant's system, autonomy, could only be defended by rejecting significant aspects of Kant's critical philosophy, like the thing-in-itself. As Frederick Beiser has noted, the apparent dogmatism and 'revival of metaphysics' in German idealism was in fact, from the idealists' perspective, the only move that would save Kant's system from its critics.[9]

Although Fichte would have denied that he was regressing to pre-critical metaphysics, he believed that it was crucial that he modify Kant's system to preserve its tenability in the face of the serious criticism offered by G. E. Schulze in his *Aenesidemus*,[10] a task from which his theory of the self originated. Schulze's criticisms of Kant and Reinhold in *Aenesidemus* had a profound impact on the young Fichte, shaking the foundations of his philosophy.[11] Fichte's response to Schulze, the *Aenesidemus Review*, was, says Beiser, 'a seminal text for the development of his later philosophy'.[12] Among the key insights in the *Aenesidemus Review*, the most important for our concerns is the significance and nature of self-consciousness.

Fichte's development of self-consciousness into the fundamental principle of his philosophy marks him as a quintessentially modern philosopher, for in

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the importance he assigns to self-consciousness he stands firmly in the modern tradition. Manfred Frank observes that 'the lowest common denominator of modern philosophy … is self-consciousness'.[13] What is significant about Fichte is thus not simply his emphasis on self-consciousness, but is rather his insight into the *structure* of self-consciousness.

Fichte's advance on previous thinking about self-consciousness, what Dieter Henrich calls his 'original insight',[14] was his development of a theory of self-consciousness that was not subject to the weakness of what Frank calls the 'reflection model' of self-consciousness.[15] The 'essential feature' of this theory 'is that it interprets the consciousness that we have of ourselves on the model of representation: as the result of a turning-back of a representation onto itself, which transforms the representation in question into an object'.[16] The problem with this theory, in brief, is that it is unable to account for the identity of the subject with itself *prior to* its reflection upon its self as an object. As Frank puts it: 'Every reflection occurs between two distinct terms; its [the reflection theory's] paradoxical character consists in the fact that it must then deny this difference, otherwise the goal reached by my turning back on myself would be something, or someone, else.'[17]

Schulze had criticized Reinhold's foundational principle of representation, showing that, for reasons related to the 'paradoxical character' of any representational theory of consciousness noted by Frank, it could not play the role Reinhold assigned to it, and it violated key aspects of the critical philosophy.[18] While Fichte realized that Reinhold's theory had a serious weakness in the way it conceived of self-consciousness, he did not, as Neuhouser observes, think that Schulze had decisively refuted a critical theory of consciousness. Rather, for Fichte:

> Schulze's criticism implies that the defender of Critical Philosophy must reject Reinhold's claim that the structure of representational consciousness is the structure of *all* consciousness and must provide instead an account of the self-awareness involved in representational consciousness that avoids the infinite regress into which any account based on Reinhold falls.[19]

It was this attempt to develop an account of self-awareness that led Fichte to argue for a form of intellectual intuition and to criticize Schulze in the *Aenesidemus Review*, for it was in this review that Fichte sketched his insight into the nature of self-consciousness that he would develop in the his 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* and throughout his philosophical career.

According to Frederick Beiser, Fichte thought that Schulze hypostatized the Kantian subject by regarding it as something that could exist apart from our knowledge of it. Against this idea of the subject, Fichte argued that:

> … we cannot think of the transcendental subject as something that exists apart from and prior to its knowledge of itself, as something that transcends all its own

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> self-conceptions, because that is to ignore the simple but fundamental point that self-consciousness is *essential to, and constitutive of, the very nature of our subjectivity.*[20]

Beiser notes that this principle 'means that the ego does not exist, or at least does not fully realize its nature, apart from and prior to its self-conceptions; its very essence and existence is constituted by its self-conceptions'.[21] Thus, against the idea that a subject could exist apart from a relation to itself that is always already present, Fichte characterizes the 'basic structure of the mind', according to Henrich, as 'self-referential'. In the *Science of Knowledge* (1794), in which Fichte gives systematic formulation to this theory, he says that '[t]he self exists only insofar as it is conscious of itself'.[22] As Henrich observes, Fichte was the first thinker to develop a theory devoted to self-consciousness, and his ideas here had a significant historical impact, leading to 'the theories of the *self* … in existentialism, as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre elaborate them'.[23]

Flowing directly from the self-referential structure of the mind, another key aspect of Fichte's theory of subjectivity is, according to Henrich, the oppositional structure of the mind.[24] While this could be seen as a way of merely restating the mind's self-referential structure, by arguing that the mind is inherently oppositional, Fichte takes a significant step towards altering the way we think of human identity. Fundamentally, the self or I, for Fichte, is not pure unity. Rather, the self exists inherently in a subject–object relationship to itself. Essential to consciousness is the relation of the subject to itself. Fichte explains this when responding to an imaginary interlocutor's question: '*What* was I then before I came to self-consciousness?'. After he first states that without self-consciousness there is no self, he explains that the question 'is based on a confusion between the self as *subject*, and the self as *object* of reflection for an absolute subject, and is itself utterly improper'. Then, in language which anticipates Kierkegaard's description of the self, he states: 'The self presents itself to itself, to that extent imposes on itself the form of a presentation, and is now for the first time a *something*, namely an object.'[25]

What is crucial here is that for Fichte the subject that presents the self to itself as object never does so apart from its positing of the self as such. That is, to speak of the absolute subject positing itself is to speak of the positing of self-consciousness (awareness of one's self as subject–object relationship) along with the self; though they are distinct, they are inseparable. Thus as Henrich says, 'Fichte concludes that there is no way of finding out what the mind is unless one makes reference to the fact that the mind is already related to itself. It is by virtue of this fact that the mind is defined.'[26] Contrary to the tradition which sees the self's reflexivity as somehow in relation to an already established subject, which then reflects on itself as an object, Fichte argues that a self just is that entity which is by its nature composed of the subject–object relation; thus, the primordial character of the self is inherently relational and specifically oppositional.[27]

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Fichte's account of the self, though striking and original, raises a question that would vex him for the duration of his philosophical career: if the self posits the I, yet also posits the I as limited by the not-I, how is the self able to posit itself, especially since its 'self' is necessarily in a relationship with the not-self? Though this question applies generally to Fichte's account of the I-world relationship, it also applies to his account of self-consciousness. The basic problem is that consciousness is a unity of the subject–object relationship, and this relationship is somehow constitutive of, yet posited by, itself. Fichte's uneasy solution to this problem was the 'absolute subject'.[28] The finite or 'empirical' self is not to be simply identified with the absolute self, the self that posits the I and the not-I. Both the I and not-I must be posited *within* the (absolute) self, a point Fichte insists on in the *Science of Knowledge*.[29] Though it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the problems that the absolute subject poses for Fichte's philosophy, it is imperative to understand that Fichte was at least partly driven to the doctrine of the absolute self to avoid denying his fundamental principle that the I is essentially self-existent: it is what it posits itself to be, or as Fichte puts it, '*self-positing* and *existence* are one and the same'.[30]

Fichte's deeply problematic emphasis on the self's positing itself absolutely should be understood in the context of the central motivation of his philosophy: to articulate and defend autonomy. The flights of theoretical abstraction characteristic of Fichte's thought connect directly to what Günter Zöller identifies as the thread that weaves its way through all of Fichte's work and life: 'Fichte's basic belief in the supreme value of free self-determination'.[31] As Neuhouser observes, Fichte's idea that the subject constitutes itself through self-positing 'ultimately rests upon his (and Kant's) view of the spontaneous, unconditioned nature of subjective activities'. On this view, 'the activity of self-positing that constitutes the subject is uncaused; it has no ground in anything external to itself'.[32]

We can anticipate our discussion of Kierkegaard by noting two things: first, the language which scholars use to describe Fichte's position, as well as his own language, already suggests an obvious connection to the opening paragraphs of *SD*. Fichte is concerned with how the self grounds or accounts for its existence, particularly in light of the illuminating but problematic theory of self-consciousness that he provides. Second, Fichte's motivation as a good Kantian and idealist, is, as noted above, to develop a viable theory of self-determination. In order to accomplish this task, Fichte finds it necessary to build on Kant's theory of self-consciousness, constructing his entire philosophy around the self-positing nature of the self. Thus, while Fichte's theory of self-consciousness is itself a philosophical development and, as both Henrich and Frank see it, an improvement,[33] Fichte uses it to articulate and defend autonomy, and it is this motivation that leads him to insist on the problematic idea of the self's externally ungrounded nature.

From Jena to Copenhagen

But how do we move from Fichte, who delivered the first public version of his *Wissenschaftslehre* in 1794 to his students at Jena and died in 1814, to Kierkegaard, who matriculated at the University of Copenhagen in 1830? While this is a question to which English-speaking Kierkegaard scholarship has given minimal attention,[34] by selectively sketching the influence and reception of Fichte's theory, we may establish a context within which the influence of Fichte in *SD* will become plausible, based not only on the internal evidence in *SD* itself and its similarity to Fichte's thought, but also based on the intellectual context that Kierkegaard inhabited, i.e. post-Kantian philosophy, including both German idealism and early German romanticism (*Frühromantik*).

The point of such an historical sketch is not to attempt to establish a direct genetic link from Fichte to Kierkegaard, for as Michelle Kosch has observed, 'Fichte was more than enough ''in the air'' both in Copenhagen and Berlin (where Kierkegaard did some work) that [one need not] seek a specific written source for Kierkegaard's access to his thought.'[35] Rather, its purpose is to deepen and broaden our view of the intellectual framework that Kierkegaard inhabited, thereby granting us more clarity in discerning his complicated, and by no means merely antipathetic, relation to post-Kantian thought.

Attending Fichte's 1794 Jena lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* were a number of young men who would become the leading figures of *Frühromantik*. Aware of and influenced by Fichte's theory of the self, they pursued the question of the identity of the subject in their own thought and writings.[36] For both Friedrich Hölderlin and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), for example, the oppositional structure of consciousness was a key part of their philosophy.[37] Although the *Frühromantiker* recognized Fichte's advance on the reflection model of consciousness and his insights into the identity of the self, they by no means accepted the radically subjective implication of his theory of absolute self-positing. As Frank notes, the traditional way of viewing their relationship to Fichte is that they outdid 'Fichte's alleged subjectivism'. Moreover, he says, 'this view of romanticism', long dominant in the scholarly tradition, 'actually reverses the main current of the early romantic continuation of the Fichtean project'.[38] Indeed, focusing on Hölderlin and Novalis due to the 'thoroughness and clarity' of their thought, Frank says that they issued the following criticism of Fichte: although 'he had been lucid enough to spot the shortcomings of the reflection model of self-consciousness', he 'had ultimately failed to find a way around them'.[39]

This criticism, which Frank argues was reasonable and even to an extent acknowledged by Fichte,[40] moved the romantics away from the subjectivist implication of Fichte's theory to an emphasis that we predominantly associate with

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Schelling, Kierkegaard, and the existentialist tradition. Karl Ameriks summarizes the early romantics' 'key claim':

> … the subject … *contrary* to Fichte and most stereotypical understandings of Romanticism itself – does *not* 'posit' itself as an absolute ego (which would know anything passive only as a posited counterforce to its own original activity), but is instead encountered originally in a basic and continuous experience of *Selbstgefühl* marked by the key passive feature of feeling, that is, of *givenness*.[41]

Kierkegaard, as we will see, was far closer to the romantics than he realized.

Kierkegaard, Fichte, and *The Sickness Unto Death*

As we turn to Kierkegaard and his theory of the self in *SD*, it will be helpful to survey the English-speaking research on Fichte and Kierkegaard. Currently, David J. Kangas's article, 'J. G. Fichte: from transcendental ego to existence' is the only overview of Kierkegaard's relationship to Fichte in English.[42] Based on references to Fichte in journal entries and published works, Kangas characterizes Kierkegaard's relationship to Fichte as one of both appropriation and criticism.[43] Though he acknowledges the relative sparseness of direct references to Fichte in Kierkegaard's writings, he says that Fichte could be an overlooked resource for Kierkegaard scholarship.[44] Kangas proceeds to note 'convergences' between Kierkegaard and Fichte's thought in five areas.[45] However, the theory of the self presented in *SD* is discussed only briefly in the section on 'Divergences between Fichte and Kierkegaard', which does not mention Fichte's theory of the self's structure.[46] Broadly speaking, however, Kangas effectively establishes that Kierkegaard was conversant with Fichte's philosophy and significantly influenced by it, although the only work of Fichte's that we are sure he read is *The Vocation of Man*. Most if not all of the above data has been recognized prior to Kangas, and thus the value of his article is primarily for those unfamiliar with either scholarship on idealism or with any of the German literature on the subject.[47]

With our treatment of Fichte and the reception of his theory by early romanticism, we are now in a position to read Kierkegaard's theory of the self in a new light. Kierkegaard's theory of the self is explicated in six paragraphs in *SD*, the first, and most famous, of which, we will now analyse:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. (*SD*, 14)

In this paragraph we have two relations. The first relation is synthetic, and is composed of the three oppositions of infinite/finite, temporal/eternal, and

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freedom/necessity. The second relation is that of self-consciousness, or self-reference. In light of the our discussion of Fichte's conception of a synthesis, it is clear that Kierkegaard's account of the synthesis as a relation between three pairs of *relata* accords with a Fichtean,[48] not Hegelian, notion of synthesis (mediation). For here the opposition is not cancelled and elevated to a higher level; rather 'synthesis' simply denotes the unity of two opposites, whose tension is preserved. This synthetic relation then relates to itself,[49] and Kierkegaard makes it clear that the self is not the synthetic relation but the act of self-reference, the 'relation's relating itself to itself'. Thus the self is relational, and, specifically, oppositional in structure. For the self is not merely the synthetic relation of opposing properties, it is self-consciousness of that relation. Like Fichte, then, Kierkegaard builds self-consciousness and its oppositional structure into his definition of the self. The subject–object relationship is fundamental to the self.

The second paragraph is an explanation of the first. Kierkegaard explains that if the only relation is that of the synthesis of the two *relata* (e.g. finite/infinite), then this is a negative unity or 'third'; this explains his statement that considered as a synthesis, 'a human being is still not a self'. A positive unity is where the synthesis is characterized by a second relation, namely a relation to itself. As we observed, then, the self is thus far characterized by a synthetic relation and that relation's self-reference. It is crucial to realize that Kierkegaard is, so far, in agreement with Fichte's analysis of the structure and significance of self-consciousness. What this means, however, is that Kierkegaard is on a trajectory to run into the same problem Fichte did, namely, how one explains the self's foundational structure as oppositional and self-conscious.

And, indeed, the third paragraph, anticipating this problem, speaks directly to it: 'Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or been established by another.' The logic of the theory of the self given in the first paragraph demands this issue be raised, and here Kierkegaard avoids the numerous problems Fichte engendered when dealing with this issue. As we saw above, Fichte's concept of the absolute ego was an attempt to explain how the self could posit (or establish) itself. Yet how the absolute and finite self related to each other created significant, arguably insurmountable, problems for Fichte's philosophy. Kierkegaard is willing to contravene the idealist conception of autonomy, which both Kant's transcendental and Fichte's absolute ego attempted to preserve, while affirming the essential contingency of the self. Thus, he says the 'human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself, and in relating itself to itself relates to another' (*SD*, 14–15). This is Kierkegaard's major modification of Fichte's theory, the first principle of which is the self's positing of itself. Fichte's idealism has to explain how all experience of necessity (e.g. the external world) and otherness are compatible with the idea that everything that is is posited within the self. By contrast, for Kierkegaard the self does *not* posit itself but is rather posited by another.

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The implication of being posited by another is that there are now fundamentally three relations within the self, one which is synthetic, one which is self-referential, and a third which is the relation of the self to God, that is, 'the power that established it'. The first synthetic relation and that of self-consciousness generally pose a problem to which the third is a solution.[50] The idea of the self as synthetic relation of opposites like the finite and the infinite raises the question of how such a relation comes to exist. For Fichte, such a relation is ultimately a result of the absolute self-positing of the subject, as we saw above. But if you remove the absolute subject from an essentially Fichtean theory of the self, how is one to explain this primordial synthetic relation? Moreover, how is one to explain this relation and its self-referential structure?

To ask these questions is to understand more precisely the role that God plays in the constitution of the Kierkegaardian self. To think of God as the being who gives unity and existence to the synthetic self-referential relation that is a human being is simply to understand what it means for Kierkegaard to say that the self has been 'established by another'. Whereas Fichte would have accorded all of this power to the absolute ego, Kierkegaard transfers it to the power that establishes the self. So while the self is genuinely a creation of a kind, it is not its own creator but instead finds itself in and as a relation that it could not itself have constituted.[51] For Fichte, to be a self is to be what one posits oneself to be (at least this is the ideal); whereas for Kierkegaard, to be a self is to become what one already is, 'which can only be done through the relationship to God' (*SD*, 30).

Thus, while Kierkegaard is deeply influenced by Fichte, on the crucial point of the self's grounding, Kierkegaard reveals the influence of his quarrel with idealist autonomy as well as the influence of Schelling.[52] Kosch views the 'complex of problems surrounding the accounts of freedom and autonomy in German idealism' as being 'utterly central to Kierkegaard's philosophical concerns and to his project in the pseudonymous works'.[53] Central to Kierkegaard's theory of agency (the foundations of which we have been looking at in his theory of the self), according to Kosch, is a concern to provide a superior view of agency than those offered in German idealism. Kierkegaard's theory of the self (and agency, which I will refer to under the 'self' for the sake of simplicity) allows him to develop an account of despair and sin that constitutes an attack on Idealist theories of agency.

On Kosch's reading of Kierkegaard's project, Kierkegaard saw idealist metaphysics as leading to distorted visions of human agency. Kierkegaard shared with the idealists a 'commitment to rejecting any metaphysics that precludes making sense of one's own activity in doing metaphysics (or anything else)'. But Kierkegaard 'disagreed with Kant and the idealists' about what metaphysical views could make sense of our agency partly because he would not replace the concept of freedom as spontaneity with the concept of freedom as self-determination.[54] Significantly, as Kosch notes, Kierkegaard does affirm a kind of

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freedom (spontaneity), however, he does not regard it as implying radical self-determination. Indeed, on Kierekgaard's analysis, such a view of freedom is a form of despair. Despair, says Kierkgaard, 'is not a simple misrelation but a misrelation in a relation that relates itself to itself and has been established by another' (*SD*, 14).

Kierkegaard here emphasizes the fact that despair is not a problem with a *part* of the self; it is problem of the self as a whole, a mis-relation within the complete and positively defined structure of the self. Despair is thus bound up with our self-conceptions, our ways of consciously relating to our nature as we conceive it. On this account, a failure to conceive of one's nature properly would result in a failure to relate to oneself properly; the result of such a failure would be a wrong or flawed view of the self. Using different language but articulating a similar position, Kosch argues that 'in all instances of despair described in *The Sickness Unto Death* … the person in despair has the wrong conceptions of himself as agent'. And that 'in the most general sense despair will turn out to be the unwillingness to accept human agency with all of its particular conditions'.[55] Thus, on Kosch's reading, the problem with autonomy is that it depends on and produces a distorted view of the self, such that we cannot account for features of agency that seem inescapable.

While I agree with Kosch's interpretation of despair, I believe that Kierkegaard's treatment of the self and despair can be further elucidated in light of Charles Taylor's work on human agency, which Kierkegaard in certain ways appears to anticipate.[56] An insight central to Taylor's work on human agency is that human beings are self-interpreting, that is, that we form views of ourselves and these views of ourselves are not *merely* conceptions or interpretations of ourselves. Rather: 'To say that man is a self-interpreting animal is not just to say that he has some compulsive tendency to form reflexive views of himself, but rather that as he is, he is always *partly constituted* by self-interpretation'.[57] This idea of 'self-interpretation' provides a stronger way to describe what Kosch calls 'conceptions'. Despair on this view is not merely a wrong conception of one's agency (although it is that); it is a false self-interpretation, and because our self-interpretations are partially constitutive of who we are as agents, we can speak of despair, as Kierkegaard does, as a state in which we exist, and not merely choices we make or even conceptions we have of ourselves.

Because the structure of the self is fundamentally given, however, our ability to determine the nature of our selves is limited, and it is precisely the presence of an already existing nature that constitutes the human ability to form false self-interpretations, and thus to be in despair and, when considering the self in relation to God, to be in sin. Thus, for Kierkegaard, normativity is not, as it is for Kant or Fichte, derivable from the agent's own willing. On this view, as Kosch notes, sin becomes inexplicable: 'If the criterion of value is taken to be internal to the will it governs, in the sense of being the law of its operation or the condition of

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its effectiveness, then willful defiance of the standard is impossible and the idea of intentional, imputable deviations from it absurd.'[58] Kierkegaard's insistence that the source of the self's existence and its nature derive from something external to the self provides the conditions for understanding not only moral evil but also any failure in self-interpretation. Adopting a false, or less than adequate, interpretation of a situation or object, such as the self, assumes that there are some criteria whereby the terms 'false' or 'less than adequate' derive their meaning.

If such criteria were ultimately only the result of the self's will, then the problem of explaining interpretive failure or inadequacy becomes intractable. For even if one were to concede that there are 'givens' of a sort, things that do not in any obvious sense stem from our willing, that does not mean these givens possess normative authority. Rather, such authority would have to derive from the agent's own will in order for autonomy to be preserved. Thus, all situations in which I interpret myself in a way that seems fundamentally inadequate to *who I am* as a human being are inexplicable as I experience them, viz. as a genuine tension or problem that is not merely the result of my willing to be two mutually exclusive things (a case of irrationality).

Kierkegaard's theory of the self and the nature of despair thus provides an illuminating way of understanding how external normativity need not be an instance of heteronomy: on his view, because the self is constituted by another, to properly account for what it means to be a self entails recognition of the fact that the self is not independent; it has external power woven into its being. On the picture of man often assumed by conceptions of autonomy, the self is an independent datum in the universe, upon which alien forces can exercise binding authority, thus resulting in heteronomy. Kierkegaard rejects this picture of man as a significant distortion of what it means to be a self; human beings are not independent in this way, and their dependence on someone outside of themselves has normative, as well as existential, implications.

It is important to realize that Kierkegaard's view of the self is not a complete repudiation of self-determining freedom. For while our nature is, in one sense, given, we have the freedom and responsibility to become a certain type of self that we are not simply in virtue of existing. The self that 'rests transparently in the power that established it' is a self that has become concrete, has become itself, as Kierkegaard says. And this task can only be accomplished 'through the relationship to God' (*SD*, 29–30). A discussion of how Kierkegaard conceives of the process of becoming concrete lies beyond the scope of this article. What is crucial for our purposes is the fact that the nature that Kierkegaard thinks that we have is not fully determinative. We can choose to acknowledge and determine ourselves (with God's help) in accord with it, or we can fail to do so, and the choice always remains our own. Thus our identity is, in a substantive sense, in our own hands.

Conclusion

The detailed similarities, in concepts and even vocabulary, between Kierkegaard and Fichte's theories of the self, particularly the importance of self-consciousness and the oppositional structure of consciousness, suggest that Kierkegaard was deeply influenced by Fichte's philosophy. Given the significant role Kierkegaard's theory of the self plays in *SD* and throughout his authorship, Fichte's influence on Kierkegaard on this point would seem to support Kangas's claim that '[g]reater focus on the Fichtean stratum of Kierkegaard's thought has the potential to reshape the understanding of his basic concepts and strategies'.[59] An appreciation of Fichte's influence on Kierkegaard also has the potential to provide a far more nuanced account of Kierkegaard's relations to German idealism, for understanding the specific ways in which Kierkegaard was influenced by Fichte (and Schelling) would in turn contribute to a more nuanced understanding of his relationship to Hegel. There has been a tendency to treat anything in Kierkegaard that appears to stem from German idealism as an allusion or debt to Hegel, with the result that the less well-known idealists, like Fichte and Schelling, are ignored, even if they have had an equal, if not greater, influence on Kierkegaard. That Hegel influenced Kierkegaard is undoubted, but we will not attain an accurate assessment of Hegel's influence on Kierkegaard until we understand how he was influenced by the other idealists.

Careful scholarship is required to differentiate the strands of idealism that weave their way through Kierkegaard's work and to identify lines of influence and areas of similarity, difference and critique. As we have seen, more significant than the philosophical similarities between Kierkegaard and Fichte in *SD* is the way in which Kierkegaard parts ways with Fichte on the issue of autonomy. Understanding the fact that Kierkegaard was both adapting and adopting insights from German idealism while also engaging polemically with a central emphasis of idealism gives us a more nuanced appreciation of Kierkegaard's own philosophical project. It also suggests the contemporary relevance of that project. Seen at least partly as an attack on autonomy, Kierkegaard's theory of the self may be as relevant now as it was when he developed it. For, whether she is right or wrong, Christine Korsgaard, a powerful continuer of the Kantian tradition, surely speaks for many when she says that '[t]he ethics of autonomy is the only one consistent with the metaphysics of the modern world'.[60]

Part of Kierkegaard's enduring significance derives from the fact that his rejection of the tradition Korsgaard continues was not uncritical; it was, one could say, a family quarrel, for even when he differs from Fichte and departs from the idealist tradition, his departures are still firmly embedded in a generally idealist framework, a fact that has major significance for the development of Kierkegaard's thought. Thus, Kierkegaard is far more the child of the idealists than he knew.[61]

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Notes

1. See Michelle Kosch *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); *idem* 'Kierkegaard's ethicist: Fichte's role in Kierkegaard's construction of the ethical standpoint', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, **88** (2006), 261–295; and *idem* '"Actuality" in Schelling and Kierkegaard', in Jon Stewart and N. J. Cappelørn (eds) *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2002).
2. Wilhelm Anz *Kierkegaard und die Deutsche idealismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1956), 5–6.
3. For excellent treatments of German idealism, see Karl Ameriks *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), *idem* 'Introduction: interpreting German Idealism', in *idem* (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–17; Frederick Beiser *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); *idem* 'The enlightenment and idealism', in Ameriks *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, 18–36; and Frederick Beiser *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Paul Franks 'All or nothing: systematicity and nihilism in Jacobi, Reinhold, and Maimon', in Ameriks *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, 95–116, and Paul Franks *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Dieter Henrich *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Terry Pinkard *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Robert Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
4. Karl Ameriks *Kant and the Historical Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 163.
5. Beiser *Fate of Reason*, 232–236; Franks 'Systematicity and nihilism', 102–105; Karl Ameriks *Historical Turn*, 163–184.
6. Beiser *Fate of Reason*, 226–255; Ameriks *Fate of Autonomy*, 81–160, *idem Historical Turn*, 185–206.
7. This aspect of the post-Kantian story is not directly relevant to Kierkegaard, so I will not focus on it. Beiser and Ameriks, cited above, treat it in some depth.
8. I borrow 'self-determining' freedom as well as 'radical freedom' from Charles Taylor.
9. Beiser *Fate of Reason*, 326.
10. *Idem German Idealism*, 242–248; Fredeick Neuhouser *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 69 ff.
11. Beiser *German Idealism*, 242–243. For good accounts of the *Aenesidemus Review* and the general philosophical background of the period, see *ibid.*, 240–260; *idem Fate of Reason*; Henrich *Between Kant and Hegel*, esp. 157–173; Ameriks *Fate of Autonomy*, 63–85. Excerpts from Schulze's *Aenesidemus* have been translated by George di Giovanni, in *idem* and H. S. Harris (eds) *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 104–135.
12. Beiser *German Idealism*, 243.
13. Manfred Frank 'Fragments of a history of the theory of self-consciousness from Kant to Kierkegaard', *Critical Horizons*, **5** (2004), 54.
14. Dieter Henrich 'Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht', in *idem* & H. Wagner (eds) *Subjectivität und Metaphysik* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1966), 166–232.
15. Frank, 'Fragments of a history', 68. For a detailed discussion of this theory, see *ibid*, 54–78.
16. *Ibid.*, 68.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Neuhouser *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 70–72.
19. *Ibid.*, 72.
20. Beiser *German Idealism*, 246, (emphasis added).
21. *Ibid.*, 247.
22. J. G. Fichte *Science of Knowledge*, trans. and ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 98.
23. Henrich *Between Kant and Hegel*, 250.
24. *Ibid.*, 174. Much of the subsequent account follows Henrich's excellent treatment of the issue.
25. Fichte *Science of Knowledge*, 98.
26. Henrich *Between Kant and Hegel*, 172.

27. This applies, of course, not just to the subject–object relation within the self, but also to the self–world relation. For Fichte the self that posits the I must also posit the non-I, and were this an essay focused solely on Fichte, the I–world relationship would also receive attention.
28. Henrich *Between Kant and Hegel*, 194, notes that the absolute subject was introduced to try to avoid admitting that any reality existed outside the self. For some of the different views in the scholarly literature about the absolute and finite subject, see Beiser *German Idealism*, 218–345, 307–313; Neuhouser *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 111–116; Robert Pippin 'Fichte's alleged subjective, one-sided idealism', in Karl Ameriks and Dieter Sturma (eds) *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 147–170. The general trend of these and other interpreters is to emphasize the finitude of the Fichtean self and stress the role of the absolute ego as a regulative or normative principle, not a constitutive one. While this is certainly the role of the absolute ego in Fichte's doctrine of striving which Kierkegaard draws on, as Kosch *Freedom and Reason*, 203, n. 36, notes, Kierkegaard himself seemed to have had the more typical view that the Fichtean ego was ontologically constitutive of itself and the world.
29. See, for example, Fichte *Science of Knowledge*, 106–107.
30. *Ibid*., 129.
31. Günter Zöller *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.
32. Neuhouser *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 113.
33. See Manfred Frank 'Non-objectal subjectivity', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **14** (2007), 152–173; in German, see *idem Selbstgefühl. Eine historisch-systematische Erkundung* (Franfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002). See also Henrich 'Subjectivity as a philosophical principle', *Critical Horizons*, **4** (2003), 7–27; *idem Between Kant and Hegel*; and *idem Denken und Selbstsein: Vorlesungen über Subjektivität* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007). For a helpful and sympathetic assessment of Henrich's and Frank's work, see Dieter Freundlieb, 'Why subjectivity matters: critical theory and the philosophy of the subject', *Critical Horizons*, **1** (2000), 229–245.
34. This article will offer a brief survey of the Kierkegaard scholarship on the influence of Fichte on Kierkegaard below. Echoing a claim made about Luther's influence on Kierkegaard in Craig Hinkson 'Kierkegaard's theology: cross and grace. The Lutheran and Idealist traditions in his thought' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1993), 11–12, we can affirm that the importance of Idealism's influence on Kierkegaard 'has never been adequately observed' in the English-speaking world.
35. Michelle Kosch, personal correspondence, 11 December 2008. We will, however, note possible sources that may have mediated Fichte to Kierkegaard, for an implication of my argument is that Kierkegaard was not merely influenced by Fichte's practical philosophy – an uncontroversial claim – but that he was also influenced by Fichte's theoretical philosophy.
36. Frank 'Fragments of a history', 84–100.
37. *Ibid*.
38. *Ibid*., 79.
39. *Ibid*.
40. *Ibid*.
41. Ameriks *Kant and the Historical Turn*, 271.
42. David J. Kangas 'J. G. Fichte', in Jon Stewart (ed.) *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries: Tome 1: Philosophy* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2007–2008), 67–95. Kangas draws heavily on Heinrich Schmidinger's article, 'Kierkegaard und Fichte', *Gregorianum*, **62** (1982), 499–542. For overviews of the Fichte–Kierkegaard connection, see *ibid.*, 504–512, and Matthias Wilke *Die Kierkegaard-Rezeption Emanuel Hirschs. Eine Studie über die Voraussetzungen der Kommunikation christlicher Wahrheit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 192–194, who offers a brief discussion of the 'Das Verhältnis Kierkegaards zur Philosophie J. G. Fichtes in der Forschungsliteratur'.
43. Kangas 'J. G. Fichte', 67.
44. *Ibid*., 68.
45. *Ibid*., 79–84.
46. *Ibid*., 84–87. Wilhelm Anz, in 'Selbstbuwusstsein und selbst. Zur idealismuskritik kierkegaards', in *Kierkegaard und die deutsche Philosophie seiner Zeit: Vorträge des Kolloquiums am 5. und 6. November 1979*, 47–61, clearly relates Fichte's philosophy to Kierkegaard's theory of the self in *SD*, as does

Manfred Frank (see below, n. 53). Anz (48), explicitly links the origin of Kierkegaard's concept of the self to 'der Kritik der idealistichen Reflexion'.

47. E.g. W. van Kloeden 'Kierkegaard und Fichte', *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, **4** (1979), 114–143, offers a good discussion of Kierkegaard's knowledge of and references to Fichte. Especially helpful are Kloeden's discussions (124–129), of Martensen's lectures on the history of philosophy, and of what points about Fichte Kierkegaard seemed to take an especial interest in.
48. Anz 'Selbstbewusstsein und selbst', 55, notes that the role synthesis places in Kierkegaard's definition of the self differs from the role it plays for Fichte.
49. Kosch *Freedom and Reason*, 202, n. 33 argues that the Hongs should have left out the first 'itself' in the phrase 'relates itself to itself'.
50. For Kierkegaard God is not an ad hoc solution, like Fichte's absolute subject, to the problem of self-consciousness; he would be so were this the only role he played and the only reason he was introduced, which is clearly not the case. Henrich *Between Kant and Hegel*, 263–276, esp. 270–272, notes that in Fichte's unpublished theological writings, he ended up positing just such an ad hoc God to explain the origin of the self.
51. Friedrich Hauschildt *Die Ethik Søren Kierkegaards* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1982), 196, also notes this contrast with Fichte when describing Kierkegaard's concept of the self in *SD*. Hauschildt's interpretation of despair supports Kosch's and my own understanding of it as having a wrong conception or interpretation of oneself (as an agent).
52. Kosch *Freedom and Reason*, gives a thorough analysis of Schelling's influence on Kierkegaard's theory of agency. Frank 'Fragments of a history', 110–121, makes a plausible argument for Schleiermacher as the mediator of the Fichte's idea of the self to Kierkegaard. As Schleiermacher was himself a romantic, Frank's claim highlights the significance of early romanticism for understanding Kierkegaard's relations to Fichte.
53. Kosch *Freedom and Reason*, 139.
54. *Ibid*., 140.
55. *Ibid*., 154. Kosch's interpretation of despair has much to commend it, not the least of which is its ability consistently to account for and to explain the meaning of despair from *Either-Or* to *SD*.
56. See Charles Taylor 'What is human agency?', 15–44, and *idem* 'Self-interpreting animals', 45–76, in *idem Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); *idem* 'Interpretation and the sciences of man', 15–57, in *idem Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
57. Taylor 'Self-interpreting animals', 72, emphasis added.
58. Kosch *Freedom and Reason*, 170.
59. Kangas 'J. G. Fichte', 78.
60. Christine Korsgaard *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.
61. I owe the phrase 'child of the idealists' to Craig Hinkson, who read an earlier draft of this paper and provided very helpful feedback.