

KIERKEGAARD'S SUBJECTIVE ONTOLOGY: A METAPHYSICS OF THE EXISTING INDIVIDUAL

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ABSTRACT: In the context of the contemporary emergence of a “postmodern Kierkegaard,” I take issue with the idea that Kierkegaardian thought involves an anti-essentialist rejection of ontology. I argue that Kierkegaard’s keynote existential analysis is paralleled by, if not tacitly set within, a less developed yet explicit ontology of human being. This “subjective ontology” is at once an ontology of the existing subject and a subjectization of ontology. Thus, the essay has two aims. First, I seek to revive and advance debate concerning the structure of the Kierkegaardian self by tracing something of its dynamic three-fold relational structure and various metaphysical polarities. Spirit, anxiety, and despair need to be understood in their ontological dimensions and not just as existential possibilities. Second, I propose a way of bringing together Kierkegaardian existentiality (the three stages) with his ontology (the three relations). Despite important asymmetries between these two structures, the unity of Kierkegaard’s approach can only be appreciated through viewing them synoptically.

EXPLICATING THE CONTOURS of the individual’s task of existence is clearly the central positive intention of Kierkegaard’s voluminous writings. For him, the existential task involves the individual in an intensification of consciousness and freedom: an itinerary that leads from the shallowness of the aesthetic sphere of existence to the intensity of faith in the transcendent God of Christianity. But precisely what *is* this being for whom such a task is set? What can be said about Kierkegaard’s conception of human being as such, and how can this be understood as relating to, and indeed illuminating, the task as he presents it? What, indeed, is the connection between the dimensions of existence of the individual (in its three stages), and the ontological structure of the self (in its three relations)?

There has been surprisingly little recent scholarship on the ontology of human being in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works, and even less on the relationship between this understanding and his keynote contentions regarding the existential task.¹ Of more concern than this silence, however, is the claim that Kierkegaard

¹Certainly the most important piece in English concerning this theme is John Elrod’s *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), and it is a large part of the ambitions of this essay to revive and take forward some of Elrod’s key insights. Also worthy of mention are parts of Preston J. Cole’s *The Problematic Self in Kierkegaard and Freud* (New Haven and

rejected ontology altogether, and that in his opposition to philosophical rationalism (and especially rationalistic idealism) and in his consequent emphasis on the existing subject, he spurned the whole notion of the essential structure of this subject.

Over the last decade or more, Kierkegaard has attracted a great deal of new interest precisely on the basis of his perceived anti-essentialism, as this has been variously understood. Thus, recent years have seen the emergence of a broadly “postmodern Kierkegaard,” a development highlighted by Derrida’s reading of *Fear and Trembling*² and one given extended treatment by scholars such as John D. Caputo and Mark C. Taylor, who have persuasively argued, in different ways, for a quasi-deconstructionist Kierkegaard.³ According to Caputo, for instance, in their opposition to the ultra-essentialism of the Western tradition (summed up in “the infinite appetite of Hegel’s totalizing dialectic”), Kierkegaard and Derrida “have a common nemesis . . . and a common affection for everything singular and fragment-like.”⁴

Of course, such readings of the Kierkegaardian project—rooted as they are in some important aspects of his thought—are far from new; but there are clear dangers with absolutizing such interpretations. More than half a century ago, for example, Gilson baldly proclaimed: “In the case of Wolff and Hegel, we had ontologies without existence, but in Kierkegaard’s own speculation we seem to be left with an existence without ontology.”⁵ In Gilson’s view, Kierkegaardian existentialism was an over-reaction to the domination of essentialism—a declaration of divorce between existence and philosophy *qua* essentialism—whereas what was (and is) needed was a reorientation *within* philosophy in which existence and essence each receive their rightful place.

In what follows, I will take issue with this (variously articulated) conception of Kierkegaard as an opponent of all essentialist reflection. I argue, *contra* Gilson, that Kierkegaardian thought is *not* a matter of “existence without ontology” and, *contra* Caputo, that his campaign is *not* reducible simply to the championing of singularity and the banishment of universalist claims. On the contrary, I will argue that from the perspective of the authorship as a whole, Kierkegaard may in fact be seen as making an extraordinary response to the very task indicated by Gilson. Kierkegaard’s reorientation of philosophy does indeed proceed by “de-essentializing” it, but in so doing

London: Yale Univ. Press, 1971) and, of course, Mark C. Taylor’s *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975). Unfortunately, such scholarship seems to have been left in the 1970s.

²See Jacques Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995).

³See John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993) and “Instants, Secrets and Singularities: Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida” in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušítko and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995). Also, Mark C. Taylor, *Tears* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1990), and *Altarity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁴Caputo, “Instants, Secrets and Singularities,” 216.

⁵Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952) 146. This issue of the need for balance between essentiality and existentiality, which has recently emerged to some prominence in Heidegger scholarship, has perhaps been underplayed in Kierkegaard studies. Of the former, see, for example, Oliva Blanchette, “Suárez and the Latent Essentialism of Heidegger’s Fundamental Ontology,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999) 3–19, and A. D. Traylor, “Reassessing Heidegger on Existentialia,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75 (2001) 523–45.

he does not banish essentialist onto-metaphysical categories as much as redeploy them so that they are placed in the service of existential thinking. The result, I claim, is that *Kierkegaardian thought provides not simply an existential view of human being, but an ontology of the existing individual*, and that these two aspects are eventually inseparable.

Accordingly, the essay falls into two main phases. First, I make some inevitably cursory comments concerning the complex structure of Kierkegaard's largely implicit ontology of human being, by drawing on a line of continuity embedded in two of his most important later pseudonymous works, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death*, as well as the early and posthumously published manuscript, *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*. The key here is to note the way in which these works trace the dynamics of "spirit" and "self" within a schema of the three dialectical relations (and five metaphysical polarities) that *is* the essence of the individual. Second, I will suggest that it is *only* through considering this "three relations" conception (ontology and essence) *together with* the familiar "three stages" framework (existence) that the unity of Kierkegaard's understanding of the individual can be fully presented, namely, as an approach that implicitly situates its existential contentions within a discernible, if less developed, ontological conception.

I. THE IDEA OF A KIERKEGAARDIAN ONTOLOGY

In arguing that Kierkegaardian thought does not amount to an anti-essentialism *per se*, it is first important to be clear about what is meant by a Kierkegaardian ontology. Kierkegaard's approach might well be described (with Heideggerian echoes) as something of a "regional ontology." That is, the question of Being as such, or the being of things in general, is far from his concern, and he is of course fundamentally opposed to any hubristic attempt to enclose theology within an over-arching ontological conception. Yet, despite his extreme suspicion about the systematizing nature of ontological speculation, Kierkegaardian thought is shot through with what I will call an implicit "subjective ontology": *an ontology of the existing subject in which ontology is subjectivized*. Obviously—as Kierkegaard goes to enormous lengths to show throughout his *Postscript*—an existential *system* cannot be given,⁶ but there is a great deal of difference between "system" in a totalizing Hegelian (or any other) sense and a broad conception of an underlying commonality as a background against which human existentiality may be understood. What Kierkegaard's subjective ontology *does* provide is a clear set of essential metaphysical parameters within which the contentions of his mature pseudonymous works can operate.

The ironic ambiguity of the term "subjective ontology" is deliberate. The suggestion is that in developing his view of the self, Kierkegaard is saying something not simply about the individual but also about the nature and limits of metaphysics. The "subjective ontology" is first of all an *ontology of the individual subject*, albeit a subject very differently conceived from the substantialist definitions of subjectivity to which Kierkegaard takes exception. It refers to his largely implicit

⁶See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992) 118–25. Hereafter, CUP.

conception of the basic ontological structure of the human person: the—albeit minimalist and dynamic—“essence” or common factors involved in all human being; the definitively human *way of being*. Notwithstanding his clear wish to center attention on the existing individual, Kierkegaard has a very definite set of characteristics in mind that for him make a human being—any human being—the *kind of being it is*.⁷

But, second, Kierkegaard’s “subjective ontology” is also a *subjectization of the traditional metaphysical categories* that he uses in his work. It is not a speculative ontology or a theory of being in general: it is an ontological perspective oriented purely toward illuminating the individual’s task of existence, an ontology that has validity only when it is “read off from man’s concrete lived experience.”⁸ Kierkegaard’s ontology is “subjective” insofar as it refuses to validate a traditional type of objective, speculative, de-personalized, de-particularized ontology. Even in utilizing a traditional (and indeed, an idealistic) metaphysical vocabulary, he refuses to deploy it so as to make any claims “from nowhere” about the nature of being *per se*.

It is, I would argue, important not to mistake Kierkegaard’s deliberately indirect style and his rejection of theoretical system-building for a simple anti-essentialist focus on singularity to the exclusion of all else. Nor, indeed, should his approach in any way be seen in terms of a commitment to philosophical obscurity. On the contrary, far from his thought having anything to do with a post-essentialist refusal to recognize the validity of universalist categories, the central concepts that comprise his ontology are precisely universals, and classical ontological oppositions at that. The key point, however, is that Kierkegaard’s universals do not statically define the meaning of the individual’s existence but rather are general categories for organizing the individual’s reflection upon its existence in all its unique richness; they provide a horizon within which this reflection may take place, without detailing what must lie within that horizon.

Finally, just as important as noting Kierkegaard’s idiosyncratic style and poetic tone is the recognition of important structures in his work that for strategic reasons (i.e., the priority of his attack on totalizing ontologies in which the individual *qua* individual disappears) do not emerge as clearly as other more programmatic structures. Yet Kierkegaard’s absolute insistence on the one God who graces humankind with the one means of universal salvation by bringing the eternal into the temporal and who calls the individual toward its “ideal self” all presuppose an underlying commonality in human being. But it is a commonality that is given content, concretion, and meaning only through the individual’s struggling with its task of existence.

⁷John Elrod (9–10) made this point well: “[While] Kierkegaard’s desire to lure his reader into a practical rather than abstract or theoretical involvement with philosophical problems prevented him from writing a book with a title like *The Ontological Foundation of Human Existence* . . . at the same time [he recognized that this] . . . did not preclude the possibility, indeed the necessity, of developing an ontology. . . . [Accordingly,] the concept of the self in the pseudonyms provides a philosophical principle of unity which enabled Kierkegaard to develop a coherent, systematic and unified view of human existence.”

⁸*Ibid.*, 23.

II. EXPLORING THE ONTOLOGY

The suggestion is not that in *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard introduces anything particularly marginal to his purposes as set out elsewhere in the authorship, nor indeed that these works represent any qualitative change in his thinking. On the contrary, it would appear that in discussing the dynamic ontological constitution of the individual self the pseudonymous authors of the psychological works are simply making explicit the metaphysics of existence as it is discussed throughout the Kierkegaardian corpus. After all, one constant throughout these texts is the way in which the authors build their edifices of thought around such keynote concepts as actuality/possibility, finitude/infinity, temporality/eternity, subjectivity/objectivity, real/ideal, and so on.

The often quoted opening passage of *The Sickness unto Death* has been the subject of so much interest because—notwithstanding the mind-boggling density of its quasi-Hegelian prose—it is one of the very few instances in the Kierkegaardian authorship where a more or less explicit and cohesive interpretation of the structure of human being is presented. Consequently, this is a passage of enormous importance for understanding not only the unity of the Anti-Climacian text it introduces but also Kierkegaard's ontological vision as a whole as it is also developed—often in seemingly very different ways—in works by Vigilius Haufniensis and Johannes Climacus.

In considering the web of claims made in this passage and how these play out throughout the texts in question, it is first important to focus on the key terms “spirit,” “self,” and “synthesis.” Of particular interest here are the essentialist claims Kierkegaard makes through their deployment, especially through his characteristic use of the cupola. Second, the relational—and thus dynamic and “synthetic”—aspects of the ontology will be investigated by noting the contentions made about the essential (ontological) structure of the individual's ascent toward the eternal.

(a) *Spirit, Self, Synthesis*

Anti-Climacus's use of the term “spirit” (*Aand*) is particularly problematic in terms of its varied set of associations and broad semantic field drawn from both a Christian and a German Idealist background. The relationship with Hegel's *Geist* is especially poignant. For both Kierkegaard and Hegel, a life lived to greater degree in accord with spirit is a life of mature flourishing, guided by far-sighted perspective. However, for Hegel, the life of spirit concerns the way of philosophical science; for Kierkegaard, it concerns subjective commitment. For Hegel, spirit is at once human and divine; for Kierkegaard spirit is an eminently human category, even if it does actively open the individual toward the demands of the eternal. For the Kierkegaardian pseudonymous authors in question, spirit appears to function as an innate human “faculty” that operates by unsettling the individual through awakening it to its eternal *telos*. In itself, it is neither a source of good nor evil; in being the foundation of

consciousness, it is rather the condition of possibility for both.⁹ Spirit is the gnawing voice within that breathes fire and intensity into human existence, driving it along the difficult road toward fulfillment of its potentiality. Thus, *spirit is of the essence of human being*. “The human being *is* spirit,” Anti-Climacus declares, for as Haufniensis puts it, it is precisely spirit that distinguishes the human from the animal.¹⁰

The notion of the “self” (*Selv*) is similarly crucial, but again his usage of the term poses difficulties. This is particularly occasioned by the Anti-Climacian tendency to use it both for the entire system of relations that comprise the individual (the *ontology* of the self) as well as in the narrower and more programmatic sense to refer to the outcome of the process of spiritualization through which the individual “becomes” a self (the *existential* task of becoming a self).¹¹ When used in the former sense, the self-system corresponds to the subjective ontology as a whole. When used in the latter sense, an ontological dimension is still evident insofar as the self is specifically linked to spirit, even to the point of functionally identifying the two: “spirit *is* the self.” That is, spirit and self are functional equivalents to the extent that spirit is roused in the self and is thereby the ground of the self or, alternatively, the self is the creation of spirit. In any case, both are *essential to what it is to be a human being*.

Finally, the key Anti-Climacus passage refers at various points to the self as “synthesis” (*Synthese*). This too carries with it significant ambiguities, for while the pseudonymous authors of the psychological works name several metaphysical polarities that comprise the self, each of which have their own synthetic imperatives, they also insist upon the *oneness* of the synthesis of the self.¹² When the accounts of Haufniensis, Climacus, and Anti-Climacus are taken together, what emerges is a picture of the individual as essentially comprised of a series of five metaphysical polarities that, when viewed together, form a single quinary synthesis. The essential unity of the various polarities is perhaps best illustrated by noting the operation of a limiting and an infinitizing function in all but one of the polarities. Thus, the single quinary synthesis might be said to have a “factual” and a “hyperbolic” pole in which the former (body, soul, finitude, necessity, reality, and temporality) sits in stark and apparently irreconcilable opposition to the latter (infinitude, possibility, ideality, and eternity). This is no small claim: that *the human being is, in essence, a series of prima-facie metaphysical dichotomies*. And it is only through an analysis of the itinerant dynamics of the relations of selfhood—to which the essay now turns—that it becomes clear how Kierkegaard avoids the rather Sartrean conclusion that the individual is therefore simply a contradiction, a “useless passion” as it were.

⁹See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989) 72–3 (hereafter, SD), where Anti-Climacus describes the devil as “pure spirit, and to that extent absolute consciousness and transparency.”

¹⁰See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980) 41–5 *passim*. Hereafter, CA.

¹¹Following Mark C. Taylor, the term “self-system” will here be used for the first of these senses, and “self” will be used for the second. See Taylor, 88.

¹²Consider Haufniensis’s inconsistency on this in CA 88, 90.

In Anti-Climacus's dialectical view of human ontology, the self-system and the journey towards selfhood are understood within the framework of three dialectical relations that I will refer to as the relations of "immediacy," "self-reflexivity," and "eternity."¹³ Fundamental to this conception is the idea of the teleological orientation towards the third of these, although at no point does this imply any sense of inexorable momentum toward this end. On the contrary, a central Kierkegaardian contention is that anxiety (*Angest*) operates as a powerful *disincentive* to the movement from immediacy to self-reflexivity and beyond, and that despair (*Fortvivleslse*) is therefore the usual state of being for the individual.

The major foci of those sections of the pseudonymous authorship that develop the ontology are: (a) the structures of each of the three relations of the ontology and (b) the nature of the two "leaps" by which the individual moves from immediacy to faith. Spirit, which is posited or "awakened" in self-reflexivity and which reaches its telos with the establishment of the eternal relation, functions as the impetus for the forward movement towards faith, while anxiety and despair, which grow proportionately with the increase in spirit, function in different ways as causes of stagnation. The movement from lower to higher levels of the ontology is understood in terms of a developing complexity in the synthetic relations: from the simple unity of immediacy, to the self-reflexivity of the second relation, to the "relation which relates in turn to that which has established the whole relation" (SD 43) in the state-of-being of faith. This "itinerary" may be represented as follows:¹⁴

- | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1) Relation of immediacy: | body-soul |
| 2) Self-reflexive relation: | Self (body-soul) |
| 3) Eternal Relation: | God [Self (body-soul)] |

(b) The Relation of Immediacy: An Ontology of Dreaming Spirit

The status of the relation of immediacy within the self-system is by no means a simple matter, particularly when juxtaposing the perspectives of Haufniensis and Anti-Climacus. It would seem, however, that both Kierkegaardian authors conceive of immediacy as the simple psycho-somatic unity prior to the active positing of spirit.

While it is tempting to read this foundational relation in terms of a paradigmatic symmetry with the other polarities of selfhood (as has often be done)—thus, to designate body as the factual pole and soul as the hyperbolic pole—the way in which Haufniensis discusses the nature and function of soul would mitigate against such an interpretation. Unlike, for example, a Thomist conception of soul that is understood as both the animating (morphic) principle of the body as well as the

¹³Given the purposes of the essay, this is not the place to engage in a thorough investigation into the considerable complexities of the formal dialectics of these synthetic relations, including the immanent critique of Hegelian logic they produce. Recent scholarship on this theme is, however, sparse. Alastair Hannay's "Spirit and the Idea of the Self as a Reflexive Relation" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1987) 23–38, is perhaps still one of the most penetrating short treatments of this theme.

¹⁴With acknowledgments to William Desmond, with whom in private conversation this schema took shape.

spiritual dimension of human being (through which the individual has a subsistent mode of being not intrinsically dependent on body), soul seems to have only the former meaning in Kierkegaard's psychological works. In this way, the body-soul polarity would appear to be a synthesis of two quite finite terms. Certainly Haufniensis's discussion of the polarity places it logically prior to the active intervention of spirit that marks the movement into the second relation of selfhood, and with it self-conscious freedom through the positing of the hyperbolic polarities. "In innocence," he contends, "man is not qualified by spirit, but is psychically qualified, in immediate unity with his natural condition. The spirit in man is dreaming."¹⁵ It is not, therefore, that the immediate individual is entirely devoid of spirit; it is rather that in such a person the spirit's potentiality lies undeveloped. In a similar vein, Anti-Climacus comments that "[t]he immediate person (in so far as immediacy can persist entirely without reflection), is specifiable only as soul" (SD 81).

In the language of Anti-Climacus, immediacy is a "negative unity" insofar as the middle term of the relation—spirit—plays only a passive role in the synthesizing process (for spirit is, after all, according to Haufniensis, "dreaming.") Notwithstanding its "unconscious" state, spirit's role in the dialectic of immediacy is to act as a "pathway" (as Hannay helpfully puts it, SD 168 n5) along which body and soul may relate; to be the passive principle of unity that facilitates a basic level of integrity of being prior to the emergence of self-reflexive consciousness.

(c) *The Self-Reflexive Relation: An Ontology of Waking Spirit*

To pursue Haufniensis's metaphor, it might be said that the second relation in Anti-Climacus's schema is made possible by the "waking" of spirit and thus the emergence of reflexive consciousness. It is at this point that the troubling dreams of immediacy caused by the slumbering giant of spirit spill over into the emergence of consciousness and thus the positing of the reflexive polarities. But here a great irony emerges: that any development in consciousness (i.e., "spiritualization") brings with it an increase in anxiety. And this is precisely the reason for the pervasive attraction of immediacy that is explored throughout the Kierkegaardian corpus: the implicit desire to dwell in the false Eden of mediocrity. Here, as everywhere, the ontology opens windows into the key issues involved in the existential stages.

A great deal of *The Sickness unto Death* is devoted to fleshing out the dynamics of the polarities that emerge in this second relation, particularly as seen by the failure to synthesize them successfully, a situation that is referred to as the imbalance (*misforhold*, literally, "mis-relation") of despair. In terms of the ubiquity of despair, the nub of the problem is to be seen precisely in the shared nature of the reflexive polarities: namely, the human *impossibility* of synthesizing the factual poles (finitude, actuality, necessity) with the hyperbolic poles (infinite, ideality, possibility). Thus, apart from the climax of the eternal relation, the human being *is*

¹⁵CA 41. Thomte's "psychically qualified" is perhaps more clearly rendered by Lowrie's "soulishly determined." See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), 37.

essentially a contradiction, hopelessly stretched between finitude and infinitude, unambiguously neither one thing nor the other.

The medium of the infinitization of the self is the faculty of imagination, which thus occupies a central place in the Kierkegaardian ontology. Imagination is relatively inactive in the individual who is in despair of finitude; but equally the person who is intoxicated with the infinite—who is cast adrift from reality on the ocean of imagination—also suffers from this mis-relation of despair. In a brief series of passages, Anti-Climacus develops a theory of imagination (*qua* the direct function of waking spirit) that might profitably be compared with those of Fichte, Kant, and Heidegger. He says of imagination: “It is not a faculty like the other faculties—if one wishes to speak in this way—it is the faculty *instar omnium* [for all faculties]. What feelings, understanding, and will a person has depends in the last resort upon what imagination he has—how he represents himself to himself” (SD 60–61). If, as I have maintained, “spirit” for Kierkegaard is to be understood as the originating faculty of human consciousness, then there would appear to be something of a three-tiered understanding of the human faculties here, with (a) cognition, volition, and emotion being made possible by (b) the activity of the imagination, which is itself a product of (c) the upsurge of spirit.

In terms of the finite-infinite polarity of the self-reflective relation, “concretion” is the synthetic goal. Yet this notion of synthesis must give us pause, for in Anti-Climacus’s formulation the synthesis of this polarity is an “achievement”¹⁶ of hyperbolic proportions. Concretion of the self, Anti-Climacus says, consists in “infinitely coming away from oneself in an infinitizing of the self, and in infinitely coming back to the self in the finitization” (SD 60). Here is an image of a life lived to the utmost intensity, the individual swinging prodigiously from one pole of its essence to the other and repeating this movement—as the standard assumption must be—in each moment. Nor can such a position be written off as merely an extreme voice within the Kierkegaardian panoply of pseudonyms. It is, after all, Johannes Climacus’s conviction in *Postscript* that “[i]t is only momentarily that the particular individual is able to realize existentially a unity of the infinite and the finite which transcends existence” (CUP 176). The radical nature of Kierkegaard’s metaphysics of the existing individual comes to the fore at this point: in a *prima facie* sense, becoming a self would appear to be *beyond the possibility of actualization*. And this seems to be exactly Anti-Climacus’s point: ultimately such a task *is impossible, but for* the positing of the eternal through which the self is able to undergo a kind of infinitization that is no longer despairing but both rigorous and sustainable.

This is a crucial point. At first glance, Anti-Climacus’s discussion of ontological balance in the self-reflexive polarities (i.e., “despair considered without regard to consciousness”) does lend itself to being read as a psychology of intra-personal balance through which the spirited individual is able to do justice to the full dimensions of its being. Such a tame and entirely “reasonable” reading of Anti-Climacus’s ultra-Christian persona allows for an easy secularization (and

¹⁶Is “achievement” the right word? This is a moot point in view of the potentially Pelagian interpretations of Anti-Climacus’s analysis.

“pop-psychologization”) of Kierkegaard’s thought. But on closer inspection it is clear that Anti-Climacus is offering no such thing: there is nothing remotely “sensible” or “reasonable” about Anti-Climacus’s contentions; and this is, after all, the point. The whole section on the despair of finitude/infinity begins with the programmatic claim that the emergence of selfhood through the “conscious synthesis of finitude and infinity . . . *can only be done in relationship to God.*”¹⁷ Thus, right at the very beginning of the section the inevitability of the failure of any attempt to achieve selfhood is highlighted, and with it the synthesis of the self-reflexive polarities, in terms of self-reflexivity alone. The eternal relation, far from being a possible “added extra” once the individual has become ontologically balanced in its own right, is essential for the synthesis to occur in the first place. Anti-Climacus’s conclusion is extreme: self-consciousness without God-consciousness is despair, and ultimately the epitome of absurdity.

The second polarity of the self-reflexive relation—necessity/possibility—appears to function as an overt application of the finite/infinite polarity to the dynamics of existence. Thus, the individual is open to the infinite scope of possible actions, thoughts, emotions, commitments, and so on, as well as to the finite nature of the options that factually lie open before it; despair arises through the inevitable misrelation of these two. Again, the essential metaphysical basis underlying possible modes of existence is thereby made clear: all individual becoming occurs through the intersection of necessity and possibility.

Necessity—understood, of course, existentially—is the limited context for one’s possibility. But it might also, and with equal legitimacy, be put the other way around: possibility is the openness arising out of one’s context of necessity. The Kierkegaardian authors tend to merge the concepts of “necessity” [*Nørdvendighed*] and “actuality” [*Virkelighed*]: both refer to the limiting context in which one finds oneself in the moment of decision by which one is able to become oneself in freedom. Thus:

κατὰ δύναμιν, the self is just as much possible as necessary; although it is indeed itself [actuality], it has to become itself [existence]. To the extent that it is itself [actuality], it is necessary; and to the extent that it must become itself [potentiality], it is a possibility.¹⁸

Having said that, there remains an implicit “in principle” distinction between the two conceptions. What *is* (actuality) for Kierkegaard is the result of the past syntheses of possibility and necessity; but in the moment of decision, the two categories blend so that actuality becomes the limiting context for one’s horizon of possibilities. That is, necessity *is* actuality insofar as it is instantiated in the moment.

While the self’s becoming is indeed a function of the continual openness to future possibilities, this is not to identify necessity and actuality, on one hand, and becoming and possibility, on the other. Becoming is always a function of possibility and necessity *in synthesis*, for without necessity there can be no “where”

¹⁷SD 59, my emphasis.

¹⁸SD 65–6, my insertions in square brackets

according to which possibility may take its meaning and its context and from which it may “launch” itself. After all, actuality is itself the product of past syntheses of necessity with possibility, and to this extent possibility as it presents itself in the moment of actuality is parasitic on actuality/necessity. This is important because the authorship as a whole frequently attaches negative connotations to the category of necessity (as also with finitude), but—notwithstanding significant caveats—extols possibility as positively salvific. This at times uncritical preference for the hyperbolic over the factual is characteristic of Kierkegaard, and this remains one of the more problematic features of the subjective ontology.¹⁹

As the middle term in the polarity,²⁰ freedom is of defining *essential* significance for human being: “the self *is* freedom.” It is the dialectical structure of the necessity/possibility polarity in the ontology that ensures that the Kierkegaardian notion of freedom stands in strident opposition to any notion of freedom as “*liberum arbitrium*,” for all freedom is by definition, situated.²¹ Furthermore, the Kierkegaardian ontology of freedom is thoroughly *theological* in its sweep, as would have to be any synthetic third term that requires the positing of the eternal relation for its realization. In Anti-Climacus’s words, the possibility of despair for an individual teleologically oriented towards its creator is explained when one understands that “God, who made man this relation, as it were, lets go of it” (SD 46). This “letting go” is a metaphor for the granting of freedom, but by virtue of its ontological foundation in God, human freedom does not amount to true autonomy. Here is a paradox in Kierkegaard’s notion of freedom that Louis Dupré has referred to as the “dialectic between autonomy and theonomy in the constitution of the self.”²² The individual is entirely “free” to reject God, but in so doing it is not acting truly in freedom, for it is ontologically—*essentially*—related to its creator.

In the early Kierkegaardian work, *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, a final reflexive polarity may be identified, albeit one coming out of a quite different conceptual context. It is out of the “collision”²³ between the real (actual self) and the ideal (imagined self) that self-consciousness is said to emerge, a quality that for Kierkegaard is both intimately connected with the waking of spirit and that is also the

¹⁹See, for example, “[W]ithout possibility it is as though a person cannot draw breath . . . [for] possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing” (SD 69–70); this metaphor deserves much further consideration. See also Kierkegaard’s Platonic image of the horses: “Who thinks of hitching Pegasus and an old nag to one carriage for a ride? And yet this is what it is to exist [as a] compound of finitude and infinitude” (*Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong [Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1967], Vol. 1, 55, my emphasis.) Similarly illuminating is his programmatic maxim, placed at the climax to *The Concept of Anxiety*: “Whoever does not wish to sink in the wretchedness of the finite is constrained in the most profound sense to struggle with the infinite” (CA 160, my emphasis).

²⁰See SD 59. Note, however, the inexplicable break in this pattern in the otherwise programmatic first passages of the work, in which “freedom and necessity” are named as the two dialectical terms (SD 43).

²¹This nonetheless does not prevent Haufniensis from making the extraordinary comment that “freedom is infinite and arises out of nothing” (CA 112).

²²Louis Dupré, “The Constitution of the Self in Kierkegaard’s Philosophy,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963) 506.

²³Søren Kierkegaard, *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), 171.

first fruits of spirit. Of course, the motif of synthetic balance applies here also: the individual who is swamped by ideality (by fantastic and unrealizable flights of the imaginative ambition)²⁴ is as much in despair as one who labors under the weight of the real, devoid of imaginative transcendence.

The real and the ideal are brought into relationship through the mediatory oversight of consciousness. Existential reflection is thus a function of self-consciousness: the self-conscious self accepts the challenge of existence as a task and as such is prepared to struggle with the *prima facie* dichotomies that, as it is well aware, comprise it. In this way, self-consciousness stands between the actuality of the self and its ideal image of itself. If immediacy is “disinterested,” self-consciousness is—by virtue of its relational nature—intensely interested.²⁵

Through its various polarities, the self-reflexive relation is, according to Anti-Climacus, a “positive relation,” since the various synthesizing middle terms involved—the concrete self, freedom and self-consciousness—are all “positive third terms.” These are synthesizing terms that actively “supervise” (again, to use Hannay’s word at SD 168 n5) the dialectically opposed terms of each polarity. There is no sense in which these pivotal Kierkegaardian categories are to be understood simply as mediations between position and negation *à la* the Hegelian dialectics of *Aufhebung*. They are not simply sublimations and preservations of the opposed poles of each synthesis but must rather be understood as qualitatively new realities that are, in fact, *the ontological foundations of human existentiality*.

(d) *The Eternal Relation: An Ontology of Faith as the Telos of Spirit*

To this point, the theme of synthetic balance has been central. However, in turning to the third and final relation in the Kierkegaardian ontology—the point at which the relation that relates to itself *in turn* relates to that which established the whole relation—the notions of balance and synthesis noticeably slip away. In relating to the source of its being, the person of faith sides specifically with one side of the temporal-eternal opposition. That is, as Dupré has pointed out,²⁶ the dialectic of faith is precisely to side with the eternal (the faith perspective) over the temporal (the worldly perspective). For Kierkegaard, the *telos* of spirit is precisely the eternal.²⁷

²⁴In Kierkegaard’s *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967) 185, Anti-Climacus provides an image of such an individual: the youth who constructs an ideal “picture” of himself to which he is drawn and with which he falls in love.

²⁵In *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, 170, Kierkegaard notes that these meanings are neatly summed up in the Latin, *interesse*, which means both “to be between” and “to be a matter of concern.”

²⁶Louis Dupré, “Of Time and Eternity” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1987), 155ff.

²⁷There are, of course, differences of interpretation concerning the meaning of “the eternal” in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works. For example, John D. Glenn in his “The Definition of the Self and the Structure of Kierkegaard’s Work” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, 9, sees the eternal-temporal distinction as one of unity versus dispersal; and Taylor, 91 sees the key issue as one of unchangeability versus becoming. My own approach is to see both of these as subsumed within a larger picture: that for the Kierkegaardian authors, in terms of the relation of the self, “the eternal” is inseparable from the unchanging unity of “the power that established it” (SD 43–4).

Kierkegaard's pseudonyms nowhere extrapolate upon the dialectics of this third relation that I refer to simply as the "eternal relation" (or alternatively, the "God-relation"), for in a sense this in-breaking of the transcendent represents the impossibility of dialectical thinking. Nonetheless, it is clear that in this third relation the "horizontal" of the first and second relations give way to a transformative "verticality." But what is more, under the influence of the eternal, the reflexive hyperbolic poles (the infinite, the possible, and the ideal) are all transformed into states that are sustainable and stable (i.e., "eternalized") as well as filled with an intensity appropriate for the fulfillment of spirit. In terminology borrowed from *The Concept of Irony*,²⁸ the "external infinity" of imagination (that takes the individual beyond and away from itself) is replaced by the "internal" or "true infinity" of the inwardness of faith. Similarly, the vast but empty spaces of temporal possibility are replaced by the faith that (as Anti-Climacus repeats almost mantra-like in sections of *The Sickness unto Death*) "for God, everything is possible" (SD 68ff). Finally, once the eternal relation has been posited, the notion of the ideal self becomes linked to the idea of the self's "absolute *telos*."

It is only by recognizing such a shift in the meaning of some of Anti-Climacus's key terms through the movement into the eternal relation that rhapsodic passages such as the extraordinary final chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*—in which infinity, possibility, and eternity are used more or less synonymously—can be made comprehensible. Thus, just as the movement from immediacy to self-reflexivity marks a qualitative ontological change in the individual's mode of being, so too does the second great leap into the relation of eternity. And whereas the movement from immediacy to self-reflexivity involved the positing of the hyperbolic aspects of human being, the establishment of the God-relation brings these aspects to fruition by absolutizing or "eternalizing" them.

The theological focus of this final relation of selfhood thus confirms *the theological trajectory of the entire ontology*, as has already been glimpsed in terms of the impossibility of synthesis in the self-reflexive relation. For Anti-Climacus, the ontological situation is astonishingly clear: "[a] person who has no God has no self either" (SD 70). From the point of view of eternity, mere self-reflexivity appears as the frustration of spirit, the suffocation of the self. From Anti-Climacus's perspective, it is only through "transparently resting" in one's ground of being, that selfhood *per se* can be truly realized. For him, this is not a matter of religion but of ontology!

Closely associated with the strikingly theological nature of Kierkegaard's subjective ontology is its thoroughly teleological nature: "every human being," he asserts, "is primitively organized as a self, characteristically determined to become himself" (SD 63). The individual "become[s] himself" not simply by striving to become *any* self—although it is true that at the lowest levels of spirit, the individual resists even that task—but by becoming the self that is in tune with its creator: its *absolute telos*. *Far from sharing the anti-essentialist perspectives of post-modernity, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms insist that there is a definite transcendent "standard" to which*

²⁸See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992) 313.

the existing individual is directed, and the failure to acknowledge and seek this in-built *telos* within the self is by definition a form of despair.

In this way the defiant individual who is engaged in its own “*causa-sui*” project²⁹ is to the deepest extent in ontological mis-relation, for such a person “wants to tear his self away from the power that established it” (SD 50), to refuse the final relation of the ontology of this self. Anti-Climacus’s assessment is stark: “[t]he self, which in his despair he wants to be, is a self he is not” (SD 50). Thus, despair at its most intense is not simply defiant but self-defeating: it is to make oneself a contradiction. This is probably as strong a claim for theism as it is possible to make, and it perhaps also provides an insight into the extreme ideality of Anti-Climacus’s outlook from which even Kierkegaard himself shrunk back.³⁰

The deeply theo-teleological³¹ nature of the subjective ontology highlights the extent of the onto-essentialism residing at the heart of the pseudonymous authorship’s philosophy of the existing individual. However, what starkly differentiates this essentialist focus from that of Hegel (or Aristotle for that matter) is Kierkegaard’s rejection of the logic of inexorability. For Kierkegaard, the individual becomes itself *only* through its conscious exercise of freedom, and even then only *against* the considerable momentum of anxiety. In a sense, this logic of non-inexorability stems directly from Kierkegaard’s insistence on divine transcendence (according to which God transcends the dialectic of selfhood according to the structure of the third relation) over Hegel’s theology of immanence (in which the divine is a function of Spirit).

It is Haufniensis who provides the key concept for understanding the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. For him, the eternal serves as the “foothold” in the flux of time, a foothold that structures and humanizes time, not flooding the temporal and thereby destroying it, but merely “touching” it in the moment (*Øieblikket*). If existentially, the eternal moment is the instant of decision, ontologically it is the point at which the temporal and the eternal—the human and the divine—ineffably come into relation. In this way, the temporal and the eternal are no longer terms requiring a positive third of their own, since for Kierkegaard, in terms of the subjective ontology, there can be nothing higher than the eternal. Instead—and in so far as it is still permissible to speak of dialectical synthesis in this context—I would suggest that “the eternal moment” should be understood as the synthesizing term between the temporal (*qua* past) and the temporal (*qua* future).³²

²⁹The reference, of course, is to Spinoza, but it is strongly suggested by Anti-Climacus’s description of the defiant individual who “wants to begin a little earlier than most people, not at and with the beginning, but ‘in the beginning’” (SD 99).

³⁰See *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), Vol. 6, 6446.

³¹I do not say “onto-theological” because the Kierkegaardian texts in question develop a theo-teleological ontology of human being that is at all times a subjective ontology. The ontological language is here never deployed in an objective metaphysical sense, even in the case of the culminative category of the eternal.

³²This is a point of some subtlety that cannot be done full justice here. Suffice it to say that this suggestion is an alternative solution to the problem of the synthesizing of eternity and temporality in Kierkegaard, as identified by Taylor in his *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*. Here Taylor proposes that “the

From this perspective, the temporal and the eternal may be seen as “summative categories” in Kierkegaard’s subjective ontology, and it does so in a way that reinforces the divine-human dualism that runs throughout the authorship. Under the category of temporality may be gathered the elements of the psycho-somatic unity (body and soul), finitude, necessity, reality (or the real self), and the externally imaginative (or “un-eternalized”) forms of infinitude, possibility, and ideality. There may be gathered, on the other hand, all those elements of the ontology that relate teleologically to the eternal: spirit, freedom, self-consciousness, the concrete self, the absolute *telos*, and the internally imaginative (or “eternalized”) forms of infinitude and possibility. *This dualistic structure of Kierkegaard’s subjective ontology serves as the onto-metaphysical foundation for the stages of existence.*

III. VIEWING THE STAGES AND THE RELATIONS TOGETHER

Given this cursory consideration of the three relations of the ontology, the question remains as to the nature of their relationship with the three stages of existence that are so richly and explicitly developed in other areas of the authorship. Insofar as Kierkegaard planned his various works to form a multi-dimensional whole, it makes sense that there would be significant points of interactive parallel between these two literary-conceptual structures.

My suggestion is as follows: *the three relations may be seen as providing an ontological account of what is deeply going on, and what is essentially at stake, in the three stages of existence.* Kierkegaard’s subjective ontology embodies a dialectical liveliness through which it relates directly to the existential task by providing an ontological horizon within which the dimensions of existence may be understood. This is to say that the process by which the individual moves from one stage/sphere of existence to the next bears direct comparison to the positing of the various metaphysical polarities that constitute (though not in any substantialistic sense) the relations of selfhood. Further, the ontology highlights the essential significance of the experience of both anxiety and despair, which must thereby be understood as ontological categories in their own right.

Having said that, it would be quite misleading to suggest that these two structures correspond in any neat linear fashion, for there are important asymmetries here that Kierkegaard (*via* his various pseudonyms) seems unconcerned to reconcile. First, there is no simple correlation between the aesthetic stage and the relation of immediacy. As the archetypal aesthete “A” from *Either/Or* amply demonstrates, the individual at the aesthetic stage is constantly and reflectively fixated on the quest for the “interesting.” Indeed, not only is A’s search for the interesting infinitely restless but, as seen in his failure to make firm choices and commitments, he

moment” be understood as a bringing together of the temporal and the eternal (116–22). The problem with Taylor’s solution, I would argue, is that in focusing on the existentiality of decision to the neglect of the ontology, he has Kierkegaard raising the temporal-eternal mediation above the eternal *per se*. But this is equivalent to insisting upon the continuation of the pattern of ontological horizontality (as per the preceding temporal relations) within the eternal relation as well and refusing to recognize the post-dialectical verticality that takes over here.

represents an almost perfect case of what Anti-Climacus refers to as the despair of infinity and/or possibility. Given that the finite/infinite and necessity/possibility polarities are clearly posited and strongly operational in such a scenario, spirit must clearly have been roused, and thus the aesthete so described must have moved beyond immediacy proper.

Yet, while immediacy and aestheticism cannot be said to provide a neat ontological-existential correlation, they are nonetheless brought together in so far as the individual so constituted and/or at this stage shares the characteristic of dealing with the world according to the dictates of the senses and of viewing the world from a pre-ethico-religious standpoint. But more importantly, if the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms fail to provide any consistent portrayals of immediacy in their illustrations of spiritlessness provided in the discussions of the stages, this might well be explained by the fact that *in practice* pure human immediacy—pure “spiritlessness”—would be exceedingly rare, and in his desire to address the situation of his times Kierkegaard would have been disinclined to spend pages detailing the existential situation of such “theoretical” cases. This is to suggest that in Kierkegaardian ontological terms, spirit is almost always roused/posited to some extent, even if only to provide the petty level of reflection seen in the aesthetic stage of existence. Nonetheless, the ontology—*via* the more “theoretically inclined” pseudonymous authors responsible for developing it—*is* concerned with understanding the constitution of the immediate individual “*in so far as* immediacy can persist entirely without reflection,” a theoretical stage at which s/he is “specifiable only as soul.”³³

Secondly, the self-reflexive relation cannot be simply correlated with the ethical stage of existence, for self-reflection is a mode of being that in itself says nothing about the criterion taken by the individual as the organizing principle of its existence. As has already been seen, the highly reflective individual is not necessarily one for whom the categories of good and evil have meaning. Thus, both the aesthete and the ethically oriented individual are self-reflexive, as is (at the very least) the person existing at the religious stage.

But again this acknowledgment of the lack of paradigmatic symmetry should not blind us to the compelling kinship between the second relation of the ontology and the second stage of existence. This is to say that if the individual who has posited the self-reflexive polarities is not necessarily at the ethical stage of existence, it nonetheless follows that the ethically oriented individual has by definition posited the self-reflexive relation (as well, of course, as the relation of immediacy). It also follows that the merely ethical individual has yet to posit the eternal relation. Judge William, for example, for all his talk about God, would appear to be more one who has faith in the social order of Christendom than one who “rests transparently in God” in the radically demanding sense of Anti-Climacus. In other words, *the self-reflexive relation is the precondition (necessary but not sufficient) for existing at the ethical stage*. Further, in so far as the self-reflexive polarities cannot be brought to synthesis prior to the positing of the eternal relation (as has

³³SD 81, my emphasis.

been seen), then it must be said that the ethical stage of existence is, for Kierkegaard, ultimately self-defeating: a conclusion that sits quite squarely with the notion of the moral complacency of the ethical.

Finally, there is also no simple linear correlation between the religious stage(s) and the positing of the eternal relation. In other words, the individual who “consciously exists before God” is not necessarily to be identified with the individual who has made the leap of faith itself. On the contrary, Anti-Climacus specifically considers the case of those defiant—and as he sees it, excruciatingly despairing—individuals (not to mention the devil himself) who exist consciously in relation to God while simultaneously rejecting God. In fact, that it is possible to exist before God and yet to be in despair is the central argument of the second part of *The Sickness unto Death*, and what is more, Anti-Climacus’s very definition of sin itself (see SD 109ff).

But once more, this asymmetry is not nearly as important as the deeper relationship between the third relation and stage. As was the case with the self-reflexive and the ethical, *the positing of the eternal (or God-) relation is a necessary but insufficient condition for existing at the religious stage*. Accordingly, those at the religious stage must by definition have undergone the inward synthesis whereby the hyperbolic elements of the self-reflexive polarities have been eternalized. In this way, the ontology of the eternal relation provides an important insight into the key metaphysical issues at play in the religious stage of existence.

The question remains, of course, as to whether this applies also to what Johannes Climacus refers to as “Religiousness A.” It would appear not. What the uncompromising Anti-Climacus has in mind when he speaks of the relation of faith is nothing other than the full intensity of “Religiousness B.” This is made quite clear in the final pages of *The Sickness unto Death* where he speaks of the inadequacy of the Socratic definition of sin. But in this case Religiousness A lacks any clear or univocal place within the structure of the ontology. As a “dialectic of inward deepening” (CUP 556), the individual at this stage has clearly transcended a merely self-reflexive relation, but on the other hand s/he cannot be said to be transparently at rest in God, as having come before this “power that established it” in his/her endemic sinfulness. In this way Religiousness A appears as something of a transitional state between the two relations and to this extent bears interesting comparison with what Anti-Climacus refers to as the “borderline case” of the “poet existence” (see SD 109).

Notwithstanding the clearly asymmetrical relationship between the ontological relations and the existential stages—and this should come as no surprise, given Kierkegaard’s keynote opposition to totalizing systems that would “mummify”³⁴ the individual out of its existence—these two conceptual-literary structures clearly cast considerable light and detailed perspective on each other. In its exploration of the essential dynamic structures of the relations of selfhood, the ontology sets out the subjective preconditions for the spirit(ual) growth of the individual through the stages of existence. There is a subtle relationship here that spans the scope of the

³⁴With a bow to Nietzsche. See “Twilight of the Idols” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954) 35.

Kierkegaardian authorship, and it is one that deserves further consideration particularly in a period when Kierkegaard's anti-speculative metaphysical agenda is often mistaken as an anti-essentialism *per se*.

IV. A CONCLUDING METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

It is true that in specifically focusing on the "psychological works," a deliberate choice has been made here to highlight a theme that does not so explicitly emerge in other more straight-forwardly existential texts in Kierkegaard's *œuvre*, where perhaps a more clearly "deconstructive" sense is discernible. I would suggest, however, that this diversity is thoroughly in keeping with the nature and tactics of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, for this is precisely the function of the strategy of creating a range of carefully deployed authorial voices. This does not mean the very notion of a unified "Kierkegaardian" perspective is untenable; for, on the contrary, if we are to speak meaningfully about a Kierkegaardian view on human existence, it is surely necessary in principle not only to consider *all* the pseudonymous and signed works but also to consider them *synoptically*: to try to understand the claims of one in the light of the claims of others. Any reading of Kierkegaard that gives precedence to any one work or pseudonym in particular will by definition yield a distorted view of the authorship as a whole.

Seen in this context, the subjective ontology developed principally in the psychological works, while being a comparatively minor movement in a vast symphony, is of crucial and transformative significance to the authorship as a whole. It is to be seen in a dual light: as delimiting ontology within a subjective context as well as providing an ontology of the existing subject. To focus on the ontology is not to deny the crucial importance of Kierkegaard's attack on the ultra-essentialism of the rationalistic metaphysics of his day, but it is to insist on the need to heed the claims of this often marginalized corner of the pseudonymous corpus and to thereby avoid a "taming" of Kierkegaardian thought that allows it to be too-easily subsumed into the contemporary post-essentialist philosophical *Zeitgeist*.³⁵

³⁵I would like to thank William Desmond, Gordon Marino, and an anonymous reader from *International Philosophical Quarterly* for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.