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Adorno and Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, first published in 1933,¹ is a modified version of Adorno's *Habilitationsschrift*, which had been written a few years earlier. The book, which is critical of Kierkegaard, was at odds with the sentiment of the time, for Kierkegaard's thought was experiencing a renaissance in Germany due to the writings of Tillich, Barth, Jaspers, and Heidegger. Yet, as Susan Buck-Morss states, although he was nominally attacking Kierkegaard, Adorno actually had his sights on the entire existential tradition, and, at least with respect to Heidegger, who was his secondary target, Kierkegaard compared rather favorably:² "Heidegger 'falls behind' Kierkegaard, by Adorno's criteria, since the latter's critical perception of social reality led him at least to pose the ontological question negatively."³ Going one step further, I would argue that a good deal of Adorno's hostility toward existentialism arises from his distaste for its particular German manifestation, and that his "negative dialectics, [which] kept alive an insistence on undefined experience," has strong affinities with many elements of Kierkegaard's "negative" existential philosophy.⁴

After first examining *Kierkegaard*, which anticipates a good deal of Adorno's later work, I shall try to show that Buck-Morss actually tends to understate the allure that Kierkegaard holds for Adorno. Although Adorno uses Hegel's dialectic to expose the ways in which Kierkegaard's thought collapses into the kind of idealism that it purports to leave behind by rejecting Hegel, he is also extremely sympathetic to

Kierkegaard's attack on Hegel's "identity thinking." Of course, for Adorno, Kierkegaard's ultimately undialectical approach backfires, which leaves him open to attack on the precise grounds that he attacks Hegel: Kierkegaard, despite his intentions, makes individual existence abstract. Still, confronted with what he refers to as the "totally administered society," whose levelling drive progressively extirpates individual subjectivity, Adorno embraces certain aspects of Kierkegaard's philosophy, as well as a number of Kierkegaard's techniques for reviving individual subjectivity in mass society—albeit, of course, in a dialectical framework that is more mediative and materialistic.

ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF KIERKEGAARD

After beginning *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* with a crucial discussion of the need to avoid interpreting philosophy as poetry, which "tear[s] philosophy away from the standard of the real," and thus "deprives it of the possibility of adequate criticism" (K, p. 3),⁵ Adorno points out that Kierkegaard equivocates with respect to his own status. Although usually adopting the poet's stance of "speaking without authority," and often stating, in various ways, that he is "a kind of poet," Kierkegaard also sees himself as a philosopher, maintaining in *Fear and Trembling*, for example, that "I am no poet and I go at things only dialectically."⁶ Still, certain distinctive attributes of poetry do resonate within Kierkegaard's philosophy, and nowhere is this phenomenon in greater evidence than in his exposition of "the aesthetic," which, in addition to art and art theory, can refer to immediacy, or subjective communication. In all three of these cases, however, Kierkegaard "was not involved with giving form to the contents of experience," which, for Adorno, is the hallmark of aesthetics, "but [merely] with the reflection of the aesthetic process and of the artistic individual himself" (K, p. 8). This leads to what will be the essence of Adorno's attack: "He who as a philosopher steadfastly challenged the identity of thought and being, casually lets existence be governed by thought in the aesthetic object" (K, p. 6). Thus, in response to Kierkegaard's brand of dialectics, in which both the concrete subject and the concrete object are lost, Adorno contends that to understand Kierkegaard philosophically rather than poetically (as Kierkegaard himself demands), we must pierce his poetic pseudonyms, those "altogether abstract representa-

tional figures” through whom he presents his philosophy, which is only in keeping with his own requirements: “Kierkegaard the person cannot simply be banished from his work in the style of an objective philosophy, which Kierkegaard unrelentingly, and not without good cause, fought” (K, p. 13).

The intangibility of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors is symptomatic of his deeper perspective on the nature of subjectivity itself, which, Adorno states, can be correctly interpreted only by considering the relation between the flesh-and-blood Kierkegaard and the socio-historical conditions in which he lived, and from which he was largely estranged. As an early nineteenth-century *rentier* involved in neither economic production nor capital accumulation, Kierkegaard lived off a fixed sum of invested money, and was thus highly subject to the market fluctuations of his age (such as the economic downturn caused by the worker revolts of 1848). He was a member of a declining economic class, and, as such, was externally powerless. Under these circumstances, his philosophy “adapts”:

In Kierkegaard the “I” is thrown back on itself by the superior power of otherness. He is not a philosopher of identity; nor does he recognize any positive being that transcends consciousness. The world of things is for him neither part of the subject nor independent of it. Rather, this world is omitted. It supplies the subject with the mere “occasion” for the deed, with mere resistance to the act of faith. In itself, this world remains random and totally indeterminate. (K, p. 29)⁷

As evidenced by the “immanent dialectic” that he proffers within the framework of his explication of the three “spheres of existence,” Kierkegaard purports to operate in a dialectical way. Yet, this estrangement from the world leads him to take undialectical stances on the internal relations between subject and object, internal and external history, and history and nature. As to the subject-object relation, Adorno tells us:

What Kierkegaard describes as “being quit with everything fundamental to human existence” was called, in the philosophical language of his age, the alienation of subject and object. Any critical interpretation of Kierkegaard must take this alienation as

its starting point. Not that such interpretation would want to conceive the structure of existence as one of “subject” and “object” within the framework of an ontological “project.” The categories of subject and object originate historically. . . . If subject and object are historical concepts, they constitute at the same time the concrete conditions of Kierkegaard’s description of human existence. This description conceals an antinomy in his thought that becomes evident in the subject-object relation, to which “being quit” may be traced. This is an antinomy in the conception of the relation to ontological “meaning.” Kierkegaard conceives of such meaning, contradictorily, as radically devolved upon the “I,” as purely immanent to the subject and, at the same time, as renounced and unreachable transcendence.—Free, active subjectivity is for Kierkegaard the bearer of all reality. (K, p. 27)

By breaking off the subject-object dialectic, Kierkegaard hopes to open up spaces within which, come what may, one’s personal “meaning” can be preserved. (Indeed, one’s personal meaning does not even have to be “positive,” as is the case with Kierkegaard’s negative theology.) But this tactic—namely, the attempt to protectively isolate subjectivity by casting out everything that is not subjectivity—is fundamentally misguided: “The harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself from the heteronomous, indeterminate, or simply mean world, the more clearly the external world expresses itself, mediatedly, in subjectivity” (K, p. 38). When internalized, therefore, the melancholy that is engendered by an alienated existence becomes an “existential condition.” Kierkegaard’s melancholy “does not mourn vanished happiness. It knows that it is unreachable” (K, p. 126).

Just as Kierkegaard aims to exclude the external world from subjectivity, he aims to exclude external history from one’s “personal” history, which is marked totally by interiority. Nevertheless, external history again comes crashing through the perimeter. Language, ostensibly the form of the communication of pure subjectivity, is itself sedimented by the historical dialectic that Kierkegaard refuses to recognize, and, therefore, drags external history’s meanings into the core of inwardness (K, pp. 34–35), thus leading Kierkegaard all the more to fall prey to the objective historical situation that he would just as soon escape. For Adorno, Kierkegaard’s objectless “I” and its immanent history is spa-

tiotemporally symbolized by the historical image of the *intérieur* of Kierkegaard's childhood apartment. Drawing on Kierkegaard's own works, Adorno recounts how father and son would stroll within the parlor, all the while pretending that they were passing exciting places. In this way, the external world is subordinated to the *intérieur*, but the very nature of existence in the *intérieur* is simultaneously delimited by the unseen world. (The only semblance of the external world that manages to work its way into the *intérieur* does so through the hall mirror, and what is reflected—the endless row of apartment buildings off which the *rentier* makes his living—is the very historical situation that imprisons its inhabitants.) The *intérieur* is thus analogous to the role of subjectivity in Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Finally, in characterizing the Kierkegaardian *intérieur*, which contains images of the sea, flowers, and other things from nature, Adorno maintains that Kierkegaard fails to differentiate history and nature. In attempting to hold onto a world that has already effectively receded into the past, the *intérieur*, which is designed to preserve that past, would make of it something that transcends the merely historical. It would make this bygone period into something eternal and natural—in other words, into a thing of unchanging nature. In the apartment, then, eternity and history merge together: “In semblance . . . the historical world presents itself as nature” (K, p. 44). Of course, this consolidation of history and nature in the *intérieur* is a counterfeit one, and the artificial representations of nature are symbolic of Kierkegaard's desire to dominate nature, which, according to Adorno, all but precludes an existentially meaningful reconciliation.

Adorno goes on to explicate this relation between history and nature in the penultimate section of the book (“Reason and Sacrifice”) in a manner that clearly anticipates the themes of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁸ Accordingly, he states that objectless, self-identical consciousness, which is Kierkegaard's “exclusive category” for breaking out of systematic idealism, is actually “the archimedian point of systematic idealism itself: the prerogative of thought, as its own law, to found reality” (K, p. 107). But, paradoxically, while consciousness is posited as an empirically pure foundation on which self-liberation hinges, its sacrifice is ultimately the price of ontological reconciliation, for a meaningful personal existence demands a spiritually inspired leap of faith that requires consciousness to disavow itself in the process of submitting to God. Adorno thus asserts:

The category that dialectically unfolds here is that of paradoxical sacrifice. Nowhere is the prerogative of consciousness pushed further, nowhere more completely denied, than in the sacrifice of consciousness as the fulfillment of ontological reconciliation. With a truly Pascalian expanse, Kierkegaard's dialectic swings between the negation of consciousness and its unchallenged authority. . . . The category of sacrifice, by means of which the system transcends itself, at the same time and fully contrary to expectation, holds Kierkegaard's philosophy systematically together as its encompassing unity through the sacrificial abstraction of all encountered phenomena. (K, p. 107)

Kierkegaard's trumpeting of consciousness sacrificing itself in order to achieve reconciliation is mythical in character, as is the broader project of idealism itself, because the commitment to reconciliation cannot be immanently fulfilled. By placing nature out of bounds in favor of a spiritual comportment, Kierkegaard's brand of idealism more firmly entangles itself in the very nature that it attempts to escape: "By annihilating nature, hope enters the vicious circle of nature; originating in nature itself, hope is only able to truly overcome it by maintaining the trace of nature" (K, pp. 109–110).

According to Adorno, then, much like his nemesis Hegel, Kierkegaard relies on reason to bring about a mythic reconciliation. But in contrast to Hegel's use of reason, which "produces actuality out of itself" to bring about "universal sovereignty," Kierkegaard's use of reason, which results in "the negation of all finite knowledge," suggests "universal annihilation" (K, p. 119). Adorno contends that the mythic quality of these philosophers arises from a depreciation of aesthetic considerations, and, furthermore, that it is only by returning to "the aesthetic" as a methodological principle that the concrete social reality that is the driving force behind these conflicting philosophies can be revealed. These would seem to be the two impulses that hang behind Adorno's phrase "construction of the aesthetic," which is the book's subtitle, as well as the name of its final chapter.⁹

At the outset of Adorno's book, we saw that while Kierkegaard equivocates with respect to "the aesthetic," every one of its articulations failed to make contact with the concrete contents of experience. To the extent that the aesthetic deals with the nonspiritual—that is to say, the object, sensuous matter, or nature—Kierkegaard depreciates it. (While

referring to the later Kierkegaard's aversion to art, Adorno states: "His antipathy for art expresses the longing for an imageless presence . . . an imageless self-presentation of truth" [K, p. 136]). The Kierkegaardian aesthetic is thus wholly rarefied—devoid of a trace of nature. But by virtue of this denial of nature, as we saw, Kierkegaard's thought becomes blindly entangled within it. Adorno asserts, to the contrary, that the aesthetic "sphere of existence," which is the first step in Kierkegaard's "existential dialectic" (and before both religion and philosophy in Hegel's dialectic), is where the greatest truth lies: "Where his philosophy, in the self-consciousness of its mythical semblance, encounters aesthetic characteristics, it comes closest to reality" (K, p. 66). According to Adorno, there can be no impetus for reconciling with reality without first coming to grips with both history and nature, which dialectically "interweave" but can be neither reduced nor sublated.¹⁰ Kierkegaard, however, simply avoids the dialectical problem altogether by fleeing both.

Adorno's "construction of the aesthetic" also reveals his Benjamin-inspired methodology. According to Adorno, for whom, roughly speaking, "the aesthetic" pertains to the "object" side of the subject-object dialectic, "the category of the aesthetic is, in contrast to the position of [Kierkegaard's] aesthete, one of knowledge" (K, p. 14). And in *Kierkegaard*, which employs the same method that he delineated in "The Actuality of Philosophy," Adorno indicates how such knowledge is to be acquired. In "The Actuality of Philosophy," Adorno had maintained that "philosophy is interpretation,"¹¹ and that philosophical interpretation involves a process akin to "riddle-solving":

Authentic philosophic interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time. Just as riddle-solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears—so philosophy has to bring its elements . . . into changing trial combinations [constellations], until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer.¹²

In *Kierkegaard*, Adorno arranges the miscellaneous elements of Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* into a constellation of images that metaphorically

illuminates the historical truth that was the impulse for his philosophy. As previously discussed, from the petrified reproductions of nature to the threatening social reality reflected in the hallway mirror, it was the image of Kierkegaard's childhood apartment, the bourgeois *intérieur*, that symbolized Kierkegaard's philosophy of inwardness. And while Kierkegaard could no more escape the reality from which he sought refuge in "inwardness" than in his childhood apartment, the attempt itself, Adorno states, reflects the social truth of his time (i.e., the increasingly perilous fate of "the individual" in industrial society). For Adorno, the appropriate response to this levelling reality is to move toward "the aesthetic," not away from it, as Kierkegaard does. This means adopting a dialectically informed materialist aesthetics that might induce the recognition that, historically, both external and internal nature had been sacrificed in the name of self-preservation, but that the perpetuation of this sacrifice had outlasted any of the objective demands that might have precipitated it.

Yet, in moving away from Hegel's dialectically informed idealistic aesthetics toward what he mistakenly takes to be a "materialist" aesthetics based on "sense perception" (in which "the aesthetic in a man is that by which he immediately is what he is"¹³), Kierkegaard falls into the very idealism that he sought to escape. According to Adorno, this is invariably the result when the dualism of form and content is rigidly maintained, as is the case with Kierkegaard, who attempts to master the breach with the primacy of a subjectively engendered form that "cancels the specific substance of the contents" while simultaneously purporting to give the contents their due: "Through selection, subjectivity becomes the dominant factor by its prerogative over the material, and those contents are omitted that would challenge the rule" (K, p. 18). By managing "the material" in such a way as to exclude the treatment of social experience, Adorno contends, Kierkegaard falls behind Hegel, who mediates the relation between form and content (as well as subject and object, external history and personal history, and history and nature), but veers into idealism by producing the entire process—which from the contrived standpoint of the Absolute is "meaningful" and "rational" throughout—out of his own thought determinations. Thus, although Hegel precipitously brings this concrete dialectical process to completion, Kierkegaard, by stripping "meaning" from existence, never even embarks on it—that is, he fails to attain historical concretion in the

first place, a failure that sets a precedent the German existentialists of the twentieth century would emulate.

Accordingly, as was indicated at the start of this chapter, Adorno's attack on Kierkegaard also implicitly functions as an attack on Heidegger. In concluding this review of *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, therefore, I shall briefly examine Adorno's analysis of the relation between Kierkegaard and Heidegger, which is cursorily set forth in section four ("The Concept of Existence") of the book. Because it is my view that the grounds for seeking a *rapprochement* between Adorno and Kierkegaard are more ample, not to mention more productive, than for seeking one between Adorno and Heidegger, which, nonetheless, has been the far more dominant trend, it is necessary to clarify the basic differences, as Adorno sees them, between Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

According to Adorno, Heidegger erroneously reads the question of the "meaning of existence" out of Kierkegaard because, for Kierkegaard, "existence" is not to be seen as some "manner of being"; rather, the question for Kierkegaard is what gives existence meaning. In other words, unlike Heidegger's "fundamental ontology," which holds that there is a meaning to which existence must correspond, the meaning that Kierkegaard would find is generated entirely out of the domain of existence itself. Without a contribution from the subject, existence itself is meaningless. Consequently, Kierkegaard would have found Heidegger's fundamental ontology as intolerable as Hegel's system, for it fosters the kind of objectifying attitude toward existence that Kierkegaard so thoroughly denounced.

[Kierkegaard] critiques not only the scientific comprehension of the objective world, but equally the "objectifying" interpretation of subjectivity and, therefore, a priori, the possibility of an "existential analytic of existence." Fichte's "I am I" and Hegel's "subject-object" are for Kierkegaard hypostatizations under the sign of identity and are rejected precisely to the extent that they set up a pure being of existence in opposition to the existing "particular individual." . . . Because the existing takes the place of existence, ontology is removed from existence the more that the question of the existing is directed toward the existing particular person. Individual existence is for Kierkegaard the arena of ontology only

because it itself is not ontological. Hence the existence of the person is for Kierkegaard a process that mocks any objectivation. (K, pp. 70–71)

More broadly, as this passage suggests, what ultimately differentiates Kierkegaard and Heidegger is that Kierkegaard is a philosopher of nonidentity, while Heidegger is a philosopher of identity. Because, for Kierkegaard, there is no transcendent meaning that is at a distance from the individual's interpretation of his own particular existence, and because the move toward his "ultimate sphere of existence," the religious sphere, necessitates a "leap of faith" into "absolute difference," Kierkegaard's thought is negative. (Conversely, Heidegger's ontology, despite the so-called ontological difference, is positive, as I shall discuss in the next chapter.) Of course, given its objectless inwardness, Kierkegaard's "infinitely negative" subject arguably becomes something positive due to its indeterminate nature, which would suggest that, like Heidegger, Kierkegaard's thought ultimately collapses into an identity theory. Still, due to Kierkegaard's refusal to equate the attainment of what he would deem a truly Christian comportment with a state of reconciliation in either a spiritual or secular sense, it seems to me that he fundamentally remains, like Adorno, a philosopher of nonidentity and negativity. Like Adorno, Kierkegaard longs for a reconciliation that cannot be spoken and is a keen critic of mass society who seeks to revivify individual subjectivity within it.

ADORNO'S KIERKEGAARDIAN DEBT

Given Kierkegaard's unremitting attacks on the pretensions of Hegelian reason, with its supposed ability to sublimate "otherness," his embrace of irony, and his use of pseudonyms (which presages the idea of a decentered subject), deconstructionists frequently take Kierkegaard to be a harbinger of many of their own positions.¹⁴ And, in certain respects, they might be right. Still, the "Kierkegaard as proto-deconstructionist" line can be pushed too strongly, for every one of the aforementioned theoretical commitments is in the service of that which deconstruction cannot abide, namely, an efficacious subject who is far more than just a function of language. Indeed, although it goes without saying that deconstruction is heavily influenced by Heideg-

ger's thought, what it disagrees with most in it is Heidegger's idea of existential authenticity, which is the very point at which he draws most heavily on Kierkegaard.

Given Habermas's rejection of every "philosophy of the subject," which is a position that he shares with deconstructionists, it is ironic that it is exactly Kierkegaard's defense of individual subjectivity that prompts him to assert that elements of Kierkegaard's thought are indispensable to his own enterprise, which is based on the idea of "communicative rationality."¹⁵ But while the appeal that Kierkegaard holds for Habermas is, in some sense, understandable—in the absence of robust personal subjectivities the uncoerced consensus of Habermas's "ideal speech community" rings a bit hollow—it is hard to conclude that Habermas's attempt to incorporate Kierkegaard into his own project is anything but misconceived. If, as Kierkegaard contends, only subjective thought can be meaningfully communicated, and then just "indirectly" so as to only provide an occasion for the listener to come to his own subjective truth, how can meaningful intersubjective agreement be reached within the rationalistic confines of Habermas's ideal speech community? Such agreement smacks of the very objectivity that renders "direct" communication superfluous. That is to say, if intersubjective agreement can be reached, then both the speaker and the listener were already in possession of the truth, which is the case with what Kierkegaard describes as that unmeaningful "objective thinking [that] is indifferent to the thinking subject and his existence."¹⁶ Under these conditions, however, the very notion of subjective truth goes by the wayside, and therefore so does the robust individualism with which Habermas would energize his system. Consequently, to fit within Habermas's architectonic, Kierkegaard's thought would have to be domesticated to the point that it would fail to meet the very needs for which it was imported.

Unlike deconstructionists and Habermas, Adorno never explicitly sought to connect with Kierkegaard's philosophy, and his basic criticisms in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* were never explicitly renounced. Still, a comparison of the works of Kierkegaard and Adorno suggests that various Kierkegaardian themes were assimilated by Adorno—albeit, of course, in a considerably different framework. This was not by accident. As a very young man, Adorno was engrossed in Kierkegaard's thought,¹⁷ and it might well be the case that as Adorno increasingly came to focus on the fate of the individual in "the totally

administered society,” his earlier work on Kierkegaard came to be increasingly salient.

Along these lines, it should be recognized that *Kierkegaard* was unlike most of Adorno’s other works in that it was written before Hitler seized power in Germany. And although, in one sense, Adorno’s work was relatively unified over his lifetime—one cannot clearly distinguish between an early and a late period in his works as is often the case with other philosophers—it is, in another sense, undoubtedly the case that his war experiences led him to stress different aspects of his thought. In *Kierkegaard*, Adorno attacks Kierkegaard for breaking off the subject-object dialectic by positing an “abstract self” whose “abstractness is the counterpole to the abstractness of the universal” (K, p. 75)—in other words, his attack on Kierkegaard’s “abstract self” comes from the viewpoint of the universal, which dialectically shapes the individual’s existence. But, during the war years, when it became increasingly clear that “the abstract universal” (namely, advanced capitalist society, both in its fascist and liberal forms) was tending to wholly assimilate individuality with its homogenizing impulse, Adorno turns his attention toward the individual’s viewpoint so as to revivify his subjectivity—albeit, of course, without sacrificing his earlier criticisms of abstract subjectivity, which are the flip-side of the dialectical coin. “World history is for Hegel what the individual is for Kierkegaard” (K, p. 74), and in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*, which were written around the time of the war, Adorno no longer feels compelled to show that the individual cannot escape world history. To the contrary, he seeks to expose world history so that he might at least open up spaces for critical thought to think against it. Accordingly, during this time period, Adorno also advances a more favorable analysis of Kierkegaard in “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love,” which will briefly be considered below.

In the opening paragraphs of *Minima Moralia*, for instance, Adorno declares that Hegel ultimately denies his own thought by failing to carry through the dialectic, and that this failure, which arises from his system’s claim to totality, leads him to give short shrift to the individual:

The dismissive gesture which Hegel, in contradiction to his own insight, constantly accords the individual, derives paradoxically enough from his entanglement in liberal thinking.

The conception of a totality harmonious through all its contradictions compels him to assign to individuation, however much he may designate it as a driving moment in the process, an inferior status in the construction of the whole. The knowledge that in pre-history the objective tendency asserts itself over the heads of human beings, indeed by annihilating individual qualities, without the reconciliation of general and particular—constructed in thought—ever yet being accomplished in history, is distorted in Hegel: with serene indifference he opts once again for the liquidation of the particular. . . . The individual as such he for the most part considers, naively, as an irreducible datum—just what in his theory of knowledge he decomposes. (MM, pp. 16–17)

Although Hegel's "method schooled that of *Minima Moralia*" (MM, p. 16), his "large historical categories" not only reflect history's "objective tendency" to destroy individuality but also help facilitate the process, and are thus "no longer above suspicion of fraud" (MM, p. 17). Therefore, Adorno states, it may have become necessary for resistance to revert back to the individual:

In the period of his decay, the individual's experience of himself and what he encounters contributes to knowledge, which he had merely obscured as long as he continued unshaken to construe himself positively as the dominant category. In face of the totalitarian unison with which the eradication of difference is proclaimed as a purpose in itself, even part of the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere. If critical theory lingers there, it is not only with a bad conscience. (MM, pp. 17–18)

It is clear from these statements that Adorno stands in an ambivalent relation to Hegel, and that the source of this ambivalence arises from concerns that are similar to those of Kierkegaard. At the very least, it would seem that the way in which Adorno would deal with these concerns—that is, "a withdrawal to the individual sphere"—puts him in closer proximity to Kierkegaard than one might have initially suspected given his critique in *Kierkegaard*. In what follows, I shall try to put Adorno's interpretation of Kierkegaard in a somewhat broader perspective.

In *Kierkegaard*, Adorno rails against Kierkegaard because he, like Hegel, fails to carry through the dialectic. But in legitimately attempting to recuperate the individual in the face of Hegel's idea of world history, Kierkegaard catapults to the other extreme. In order to vindicate the individual's existence in the face of objective history, he does away with the object, external history, and nature, thereby leaving the individual in objectless inwardness. As a result, Adorno contends, existence is actually no less abstract for Kierkegaard than Kierkegaard claims it is for Hegel: "Kierkegaard's doctrine of existence could be called realism without reality" (K, p. 86). Jettisoning both the social and the natural world, Kierkegaard's idea of individuality is based on an infinitely negative "vertical" relation to God. Conversely, as we just saw, Adorno is no less troubled by Hegel's individual, who is concretized—indeed, in a real sense, all too concretized. Hegel's concept of *sittlichkeit* is based on a view of "horizontal" relations among people. The community is the ethical substance of the individual, and if it is "rational," Hegel declares, the individual should be reconciled to it. According to Adorno, however, Hegel's ethical community achieves its harmony by crushing the particularities of individuality. Thus, harmony—or at least what has historically passed for harmony—is the "totalitarian unison" to which Adorno refers.

Adorno thus buys into neither Kierkegaard's "vertical" model nor Hegel's "horizontal" one. Indeed, since both ultimately succumb to idealism's siren song, he thinks that neither one gives "the other" its due. Nevertheless, both have an undeniably strong influence on his thought. Of course, this influence has always been much clearer in the case of Hegel, for there can be no question that Adorno embraces the moving impulse in Hegel's dialectic, determinate negativity, if not the ends with which he precipitately brings the process to a conclusion.¹⁸ (And, of course, it is just as clear that he rejects the indeterminate negativity of Kierkegaard's wholly inward dialectic.) But in terms of Adorno's attack on the unrelenting drive toward systematic totality in Hegel's philosophy, Kierkegaard's influence has been underappreciated. In trying to resuscitate the subject in the face of a society that has left him with few resources with which to resist it, Kierkegaard and Adorno share a number of theoretical and stylistic commitments.

Above all, Kierkegaard and Adorno are averse to Hegel's "metaphysics," which both take to be a system that purports to reconcile thought and being at the latter's expense. By rejecting the notion that

this is a relation of identity, they converge in their aim to open up spaces for “the other,” which is just what Hegel’s “system” closes off. By “the other,” however, they mean very different things. In Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, which is the exact title that Adorno and Horkheimer first selected for what would become *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,¹⁹ Johannes Climacus offers up the “absolute paradox” to confound all attempts to identify “the absolutely different” (which he calls “the god”), of which there is not even a distinguishing mark.²⁰ This “absolutely different” is designed to escape thought, and the price of reconciliation, as we saw, is intellectual suicide. For Adorno, who still defends a self-conscious form of enlightened thought, “the paradox” itself is an illicit resort to metaphysics, “the other” is not “absolute” because everything is mediated,²¹ and the job of philosophy is to try to “unlock” the ephemeral other from the petrified sociohistorical forms within which it has not been permitted to express itself.

Despite their differing theoretical conceptions of “otherness,” both also play Kant and Hegel off one another—although, for Kierkegaard, this methodological approach is less self-conscious than it is for Adorno. According to Adorno,

Kierkegaard’s project is the precise antithesis of the Kantian thesis and the Hegelian synthesis. Against Kant, he pursues the plan of concrete ontology; against Hegel, he pursues the plan of an ontology that does not succumb to the existent by absorbing it into itself. He therefore revises the process of post-Kantian idealism; he surrenders the claim of identity. (K, p. 74)

As an initial matter, it should be noted that if we substituted “dialectics” for “ontology” in this passage, it could refer to Adorno himself. Moreover, as antitheses to the “Kantian thesis” and the “Hegelian synthesis,” Adorno and Kierkegaard could not help but draw on the thought of both. On the one hand, Adorno’s debt to Hegel is clear enough. And although Kierkegaard’s “existential dialectic” culminates not in a Hegelian synthesis but rather in a final either/or, it is impossible for even the staunchest anti-Hegelian to deny that “the existential dialectic” bears strong similarities to Hegel’s characterization of consciousness formation in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Despite its cheapening of individuality, then, Hegel’s dialectic furnishes a level of concretion that is missing in, say, the Kantian subject, the transcendental unity of apperception.

On the other hand, while Adorno's debt to Kant's aesthetics is also clear enough, less clear is the fact that both Adorno and Kierkegaard draw sustenance from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thus, although the critical philosophy proffers the kind of "constitutive subjectivity" that Adorno so ardently rejects in the Introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno claims that Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself at least acknowledges the ultimate impossibility of obtaining a conceptual stranglehold on reality—although, clearly, Adorno does not want to buy into its deeper metaphysical implications. Instead, for Adorno, the thing-in-itself is the phenomenon grasped from the standpoint of a sociohistorical reconciliation. Of course, such sociohistorical reconciliations do not attract Kierkegaard—or, at least, not in the same way as Adorno—but, despite Kant's emphasis on reason, Kierkegaard also adverts to him so as to protect "otherness" from being conceptually hypostatized. It is Kant, after all, who limits the pretensions of reason in order to make room for faith, which includes rejecting those proofs of God's existence that Kierkegaard perceives as an affront to Christianity. Furthermore, while neither Adorno nor Kierkegaard buys into Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, both of them avail themselves of the space that it affords to critical thought. Despite his rejection of Kant's transcendental subject on the basis of its abstractness, Kierkegaard sees in irony the ability of subjectivity to detach itself from all determinations, which is precisely why Adorno claims that the Kierkegaardian subject is in no way less abstract than the Kantian one (see K, pp. 74–75). Still, Adorno, too, "presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence" (MM, p. 247)—although, to be more precise, Adorno would argue that this "hair's breadth," which runs against the grain of existence, is actually to be accounted for by drawing on that which is already in the realm of existence but has not yet been conceptualized due to identity-thinking. Implicitly referring to Hegel's claim in the *Philosophy of Right* that "philosophy paints its grey in grey," which means that "philosophy succumbs to the existent," Adorno declares that "grayness could not fill us with despair if our minds did not harbor the concept of different colors, scattered traces of which are not absent from the negative whole. The traces always come from the past" (ND, pp. 377–378). Thus, although Kierkegaard and Adorno have differing theoretical commitments, the form of their thought is more than superficially similar.²²

This similarity in form is principally due to the fact that both Kierkegaard and Adorno passionately embrace “the negative” and both hold fast to the idea of a “negative utopia,” albeit for one this idea is theological, while, for the other, it is sociohistorical. Thus, in the Preface to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard declares that “dialectically understood, the negative is not an intervention, but only the positive.”²³ And, in the chapter titled “Possible and Actual Theses by Lessing,” he states:

The negative thinkers therefore always have the advantage that they have something positive, namely this, that they are aware of the negative; the positive thinkers have nothing whatever, for they are deluded. Precisely because the negative is present in existence and present everywhere (because being there, existence is continually in the process of becoming) the only deliverance from it is to become continually aware of it. By being positively secured, the subject is indeed fooled.²⁴

As this passage suggests, the negative has a number of connotations for Kierkegaard. It is the source of our freedom; as was suggested above with respect to irony, the individual is always in a position to detach himself from “what is” and try to reconstruct it through his own actions. The negative also reflects our essential existential position in the world; there is no resting place, no end point at which we can just “be done with it.” It is only through the wholly negative phenomenon of death that this can come about. (The will to metaphysics is thus a will to death.) In life, however, we who actually “exist” are trapped in a negative relation between the rock of being and the hard place of thought,²⁵ and thus must bear an interminable deferral of truth. Yet, Kierkegaard says, we must strive toward this deferred truth in passion—that is, we must keep the negative tension alive—lest we become “deluded” and “fooled” persons that fail “to exist.” For Adorno, in contrast, the negative does not refer to metaphysical inquiries, but, instead, to the dialectical relation that constitutes such linked dualities as subject and object, individual and society, and nature and history. The fluid tension that is supposed to internally characterize these dualities, however, is fractured by the prevalence of identity thinking, which, in the pursuit of control and, ultimately, self-preservation, eradicates not only the other, but the self as well. (Kierkegaard would see identity thinking

as the result of the subject's confused desire to be "positively secured.") Nevertheless, these dualities must be viewed from the standpoint of their potential reconciliation, just as Kierkegaard's existing person must constantly embrace the Absurd with an eye toward his metaphysical reconciliation—regardless of whether the price of this metaphysical reconciliation is "the Absurd," or it is absurd to believe in this metaphysical reconciliation. And, indeed, more like Kierkegaard than one would expect given his atheism, Adorno speaks of a utopian social reconciliation (while questioning its prospect) in theological terms:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. . . . Beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters. (MM, p. 247)

It is from this "standpoint of redemption" that Adorno advances a rather more favorable interpretation of Kierkegaard in "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love,"²⁶ which was written in 1939, the same year that Adorno and Horkheimer began their collaboration on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This article begins with an examination of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, in which Kierkegaard upholds the universality of a Christian love that is ultimately based on pure subjective inwardness. But this love is like the Kantian ethics of duty. Concerned more with its own status than the other, the inward self must abstract from all natural preferences that its empirical self may harbor regarding the particularities of others in order to meet the requirement of universality. Such an indiscriminating love, however, can easily turn into its opposite, a universal hatred of other human beings, and, according to Adorno, this is what happens in the case of Kierkegaard. To this point, Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard's doctrine of love reflects his prior cri-

tique in *Kierkegaard*. The demand that the purely inward self love the universalized other reflects an expulsion of nature, and, in turn, nature revenges itself on this abstract self in the form of a mythical taboo against the preferences of natural love, which ultimately transforms into a universal hatred. Yet, Adorno goes beyond this analysis:

Kierkegaard's misanthropy, the paradoxical callousness of his doctrine of love, enables him, like few other writers, to perceive decisive character features of the typical individual of modern society. Even if one goes so far as to admit that Kierkegaard's love is actually demonic hatred, one may well imagine certain situations where hatred contains more of love than the latter's immediate manifestations. All Kierkegaard's gloomy motives have good critical sense as soon as they are interpreted in terms of social critique. Many of his positive assertions gain the concrete significance they otherwise lack as soon as one translates them into concepts of a right society.²⁷

Kierkegaard's hostility toward the masses, in other words, implicitly incorporates in it a hostility toward the dominating mechanisms of a society that turns human beings into a mass. And, in contrast to a positivistic outlook, this hostility can arise only because it is opposed to the ever-present moment of "possibility" in Kierkegaard's thought, the possibility of a transfigured world. (Moreover, Adorno says, "as a critic, he actually grasped the instant, that is to say, his own historical situation . . . Kierkegaard was Hegelian enough to have a clean-cut idea of history."²⁸)

Finally, despite the differing nature of their substantive commitments to "the other"—that is, the difference between seeing "the other" in theological-metaphysical terms (which raises questions of "immediacy" and "self-presence") and seeing "the other" in sociohistorical terms (which, among other things, raises questions about "the good life")—Kierkegaard and Adorno converge in the tactics that they use to facilitate their ends. (For instance, Kierkegaard would have us "believe against the understanding,"²⁹ while Adorno, who emphasizes the need to retain conceptuality, would have us understand against the existing understanding.) In particular, they share remarkably similar perspectives on the nature of communication. There is no reason to find this surprising, of course, since both are preoccupied with resurrecting the individual in the face of an intransigent social context that would do its best to wipe out

all particularity. Under these circumstances, to spoon-feed a doctrine—even an “antidoctrines”—would just reconstitute the type of passive individuality that is being mass-produced. Consequently, the very form of the communication must also be its content to perform its therapeutic task, and this is indeed the case for both Kierkegaard and Adorno.

In the first of his four “Possible and Actual Theses by Lessing,” which deals with the “paradox” of communication, Kierkegaard says that there are really two types of communication. The first type, which is not of particular interest, is that “direct” form of communication that “is completely indifferent to subjectivity and thereby to inwardness and appropriation.”³⁰ It has no “secrets,” but simply seeks to impart objective knowledge that is already possessed by all parties to the communication. It is only the second type of communication, the “indirect” type, that is meaningful. Instead of conveying “objective” truths, it respects the freedom of all parties to the communication by only providing the occasion for the recipients to come to their own subjective truths. For Adorno, too, the objective is to communicate in a fashion that forces the recipients to contribute something to their assimilation of the communication (which is precisely what mass society tends to discourage), and it is this objective that motivates the complex and fragmentary nature of his works. Even Adorno’s most “systematic” works, such as *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, appear to be little more than a constellation of essays structured around a loose organizing principle, while other central works, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*, are comprised (in part and whole, respectively) of aphorisms. Accordingly, in contrast to Hegel’s systematic “dialectical theory, [which] abhorring anything isolated cannot admit aphorisms as such,” Adorno’s antisystematic style seeks to open up spaces for late capitalism’s overdetermined subject: “If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty to consider the evanescent as essential” (MM, p. 16).

Ultimately, of course, Adorno, in contrast to Kierkegaard and the later Heidegger, will not identify his philosophical form with poetry, for in trying to break through language’s reified form, Adorno still relies on “the labor of the concept” to illuminate sociohistorical truths. Still, by virtue of Kierkegaard’s attempt to resurrect the subject through language, he stands in much closer proximity to Adorno than does Heidegger, who believes that a proper understanding of language will lead to the elimination of that very notion of subjectivity to which the works of Kierkegaard and Adorno are ultimately geared.