

# Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good

Virtue, Happiness, and the Kingdom  
of God

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palgrave  
macmillan

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# Introduction

The present monograph deals with ethics and religion by comparing the theories of Kant and Kierkegaard, two central modern philosophers and theologians who continue to inspire contemporary debates.<sup>1</sup> I compare Kant and Kierkegaard by focusing on the relation between morality and happiness, dealing with moral evil, moral character, the ethical commonwealth (the kingdom of God) as well as religious faith and hope. The monograph addresses the relations between moral and religious hope, secular and religious ethics as well as human and divine agency. It emphasizes not only ethics and religious faith but also the central role hope plays for moral agency and religiousness, and it shows how Kierkegaard's critique of Kantian autonomy anticipates contemporary discussions in metaethics.

The last decades have witnessed renewed interest in moral evil that has made Kant's doctrine of radical evil and Kierkegaard's psychological approach towards evil more relevant to contemporary concerns. We have also witnessed a renewed interest in religion that has led philosophers and other academics to reengage with religion. One prominent example of this is contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, a discipline which has often focused on the relation between ethics and religion and partially evolved by engaging past thinkers such as Kant and Kierkegaard.<sup>2</sup> Another prominent example is Jürgen Habermas, whose recent writings draw upon Kant and Kierkegaard amongst others when discussing religion.<sup>3</sup> This should come as no surprise, since both Kant and Kierkegaard are great thinkers with the potential of giving us a better understanding of religion as well as related ethical and existential issues. Although both can be placed within the protestant tradition, their importance and relevance is not restricted to that tradition, something that is indicated by the reception of their ideas within philosophy

and theology. Kantian ethics has long been central to modern moral philosophy, and more recently, we have witnessed a renewed interest in Kant's philosophy of religion and its relation to Kantian ethics, which has resulted in a relatively large number of publications on Kant and religion. Finally, there has been an increasing interest in Kierkegaard over the last years, as shown by publications, conferences, and the establishment of societies, networks, and research centers dedicated to the study of Kierkegaard.<sup>4</sup>

One of the themes that have received renewed attention over the last years is Kierkegaard's relation to Kant. I believe this relation is not only of historical importance but that it can help us to understand Kierkegaard's thought and its significance as well as some of the ways in which Kantian philosophy and deontological ethics can be used in contemporary debates. As the 'father of existentialism,' Kierkegaard has often been taken to be opposed to classic German philosophy, particularly the systematic philosophy of Kant and Hegel.<sup>5</sup> However, recent scholarship has changed this picture considerably by examining Kierkegaard's relations to his contemporaries in Germany and Denmark in some detail. The present monograph focuses on Kierkegaard's relation to Kant, perhaps the single most important modern philosopher that influenced Kierkegaard. The book reconsiders Kierkegaard's relation to Kant by focusing on philosophy of religion and its relation to ethics, philosophical anthropology, and philosophy of history.

The aim of the present work is to reexamine Kierkegaard's relation to Kant's philosophy of religion by focusing on radical evil and the highest good, two controversial doctrines with important consequences for ethics and religion. I argue that for both Kant and Kierkegaard, the twin doctrines of radical evil and the highest good (that is, the idea of a moral world in which evil is overcome and moral agents are happy) form the proper background for understanding the relations between ethics and religion in general and religious faith, hope, and neighbor-love in particular. Although Kant and Kierkegaard give different accounts of these relations, I try to show that their theories nevertheless overlap more than what has been acknowledged by previous scholarship and that Kant's and Kierkegaard's analyses are still relevant for contemporary discussions. This book treats Kant and Kierkegaard not only as important historical figures but also as philosophers who speak to contemporary ethics and philosophy of religion, particularly in the fields of moral psychology, normative ethics, metaethics, moral agency and practical reason as well as arguments for God's existence. The book brings the work of Kant and Kierkegaard into contact not only with contemporary

Kantianism and Kierkegaardianism but also with modern philosophers, such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Jürgen Habermas, Philip Quinn, and John Hare.

The main theses of this monograph can be summarized as follows:

1. A comparison with Kant, one of the most important and well-researched modern thinkers, makes Kierkegaard not only more understandable but also makes it possible to partially reconstruct his theory and to highlight areas of Kierkegaard's relevance for post-Kantian philosophy. A comparison with Kant is particularly useful for understanding Kierkegaard's negative argument against philosophy and secular thinking, as well as Kierkegaard's creative use of transcendental arguments, Kantian terminology, the doctrine of radical evil, the concept of the highest good and the moral argument for the existence of God and immortality. It is also useful for understanding the coherence of Kierkegaard's thought and identifying its strengths and weaknesses.<sup>6</sup>
2. This work problematizes the widespread view that there is a radical break between classic German philosophy and existentialism.<sup>7</sup> It shows that the 'father of existentialism' has a much closer relationship with Kant's philosophy of religion and anthropology than is usually assumed. There is more overlap between the theories of Kant and Kierkegaard, and even more Kantian influence on Kierkegaard, than has been acknowledged in the relevant literature to date. Existing literature has often overlooked Kantian elements in Kierkegaard and has tended to exaggerate differences between the two thinkers, because of a lack of direct, dual engagement of each thinker's body of work; Kant scholars rarely work on Kierkegaard, and *vice versa*. Thus, it is just this very direct and dual engagement of Kant and Kierkegaard's thought that makes this proposed work timely, significant, and relevant in its field.
3. Kierkegaard makes use of Kantian conceptualizations of rationality, finitude, the highest good, and natural theology when developing his own thought. He accepts the Kantian view that our knowledge is essentially finite and restricted, and that theoretical proofs for the existence of God are therefore impossible. However, Kierkegaard also makes creative use of Kant's moral argument and the doctrines of the highest good and radical evil, while relying on a broadly Kantian notion of ethics that is egalitarian, deontological, rigoristic, anti-eudaimonistic, and highly demanding. Kierkegaard's negative argument against philosophy, and non-Christian thinking, relies not only

on Lutheran ideas but also on what Kant calls the antinomy of practical reason (that is, that the highest good is seen as simultaneously necessary and impossible). Kierkegaard went beyond traditional Christian and Lutheran views by replacing hereditary sin with original sin and radical evil, by sketching a post-Kantian anthropology, by criticizing eudaimonism, and reinterpreting the highest good and natural theology. As a result, there is a significant Kantian influence on Kierkegaard, and Kierkegaard's views belong to a post-Kantian context in Denmark and Germany where Kant's philosophy of religion and anthropology played a central role.

4. Kierkegaard uses Kantian ideas, terminology, and arguments to promote non-Kantian ends. More specifically, Kierkegaard uses the doctrine of radical evil and the moral argument not only to reinterpret central Christian ideas (something Kant also did) but also to reinforce them in a Lutheran form that would be unacceptable to Kant.
5. Kierkegaard comes close to Kant and contemporary ethicists (for example, John Hare) who argue that ethics leads to religion, since there is a gap between our moral duties and natural capabilities that cannot be bridged apart from divine assistance. Kant and Kierkegaard both see ethics and religion as closely related, and their (albeit differing) accounts of exactly what this relation consists of are still relevant for contemporary debates on metaethics, moral agency, and philosophy of religion.
6. Both Kant and Kierkegaard sketch compelling accounts of hope that contribute to moral psychology and converge with much of the contemporary research on trust and hope. Both thinkers argue that hope, the expectancy of the good, is crucial for both moral agency and religiousness, although this confluence has received little scholarly attention.
7. Kierkegaard's use of Kantian ideas is instructive, since it points to problems with Kant's philosophy of religion and indicates how Kantian philosophy can be used to reinforce Lutheran ideas. I agree with previous commentators (Ronald Green and Gordon Michalson)<sup>8</sup> that Kierkegaard avoids some of the problems associated with Kant's doctrine of radical evil, but go beyond these commentators by arguing that Kierkegaard's position introduces problems of its own.

# 1

## Methodological Considerations: Contextual and Analytic Approaches to the History of Philosophy

### 1 Introduction

Few, if any, of the present academic disciplines makes as extensive use of its history as does philosophy. Unlike most other disciplines, philosophy often views its history as an integral part of itself as a discipline, with the result that philosophy develops by way of its engagement with its own history. However, the history of philosophy has long been marked by controversies over method. One central question is whether we should contextualize theories (and thinkers) by situating them in their original historical context or rather focus on how they can contribute to present discussions. Another is whether we should study how different thinkers in fact relate to – and influence – each other or whether we should present and compare historical (that is, non-current) theories in a systematic (thematic) and non-chronological manner. The two main approaches which have risen out of these debates are known in the Anglophone world as the *contextual* history of philosophy and the *analytic* history of philosophy, respectively. Whereas the contextual approach tends to focus on the historicity of philosophy, the analytic approach tends to focus on the meaning and validity of philosophical theories.

This chapter discusses historical and systematic approaches to studying Immanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard, a case which tends to mirror more general methodological questions within the history of philosophy. In what follows I will discuss methodology in the history of philosophy

by addressing research on the relation between Kant and Kierkegaard, in particular Ronald M. Green's *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (1992) and Ulrich Knappe's *Theory and Practice in Kant and Kierkegaard* (2004). Green represents a historical and contextual approach which focuses on Kant's influence on Kierkegaard, whereas Knappe represents a thematic (systematic) and non-chronological approach which is largely analytic.

## 2 The historical approach: contextual history of philosophy

The most influential example of the historical approach today, at least in the Anglophone world, is the contextual history of philosophy. Sometimes this approach is referred to as the antiquarian approach or merely antiquarianism. It is more closely related to the history of ideas, intellectual history, historical-philological scholarship, and classical studies than is the analytic history of philosophy. At its very heart lies the idea that we only understand thinkers and theories by contextualizing them, by situating them in their original historical context. In the case of Kant and Kierkegaard, this involves reading German texts from the late 18th century and Danish texts from the mid-19th century, as well as knowing the contexts of Königsberg and Copenhagen and having access to relevant texts from the period, including secondary sources which Kant and Kierkegaard could have relied on.

There are also additional requirements for contextual history of philosophy. Gary Hatfield comments: "The minimum aim for a contextual approach must be to consider both the major and minor works of a chosen philosopher, the major and minor predecessors against whom the philosopher reacted, and the contemporaries who formed his or her audience."<sup>1</sup> Finally, the contextual approach should seek to work upwards from past philosophers' own statements in establishing the aims or motives of individual philosophers or schools.<sup>2</sup> An example of such an approach is Jon Stewart's work on Kierkegaard and Hegel, which takes Kierkegaard's comments on Hegel as its starting point.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to Kant and Kierkegaard, the foremost example of the historical approach is the work of Green, who investigates the degree and extent to which Kant influenced Kierkegaard. However, since Green hardly articulates and defends his methodology,<sup>4</sup> we have to look elsewhere for a defense of the historical or contextual approach. The most prominent representative of this approach within Kierkegaard scholarship today is Jon Stewart. Stewart is currently editing *Kierkegaard*



*Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, a series which uses the contextual approach to investigate Kierkegaard's sources and the reception of his thought.<sup>5</sup> Green has authored the article dealing with Kant's influence on Kierkegaard in this series, presumably because Green is the leading expert on Kant's influence on Kierkegaard and because Green's methodology is in line with the contextual approach.<sup>6</sup>

### 3 The systematic approach: analytic history of philosophy

Within the history of philosophy, the most influential example of the systematic approach today – at least in the English-speaking world – is the analytic history of philosophy. This approach focuses on the meaning and validity of theories rather than on their historicity. It favors those philosophical positions, principles, and arguments which are believed to contribute to present philosophical research. Rather than being concerned with, for example, Kant's historically situated intentions, analytic history of philosophy concentrates on whether Kant makes valid points and whether his theory is relevant to current philosophical debates. Analytic historians of philosophy are not only interested in what a philosopher said, but also in what he or she could and should have said.<sup>7</sup> Partially as a result of this, analytic historians often analyze historical positions by using contemporary terminology, instead of the thinker's own historically contextualized vernacular.<sup>8</sup> Within this approach, historical and philological research is only of importance insofar as it contributes to contemporary philosophical discussions.

With regard to scholarship on the relationship between Kant and Kierkegaard, the closest we get to analytic history of philosophy is probably the research of Ulrich Knappe, a German philosopher writing in English.<sup>9</sup> Knappe tries to develop his analysis in a systematic way by focusing on a given topic (for example, hypothetical imperatives) and then comparing what the theories of Kant and Kierkegaard each say about this topic. Rather than merely referring to what Kant and Kierkegaard actually said, Knappe tries to reconstruct their thinking in a systematic way by analyzing key concepts that are abstracted from the relevant texts. In order to analyze and clarify concepts, Knappe tries to reconstruct their definitions.<sup>10</sup> In doing this Knappe emphasizes argumentation and tries to think *with* Kant and Kierkegaard. In his own words, he tries to 'illuminate how the distinctions they draw are systematically related to each other and to discuss to what extent their views are plausible.'<sup>11</sup> Knappe is interested in the meaning, validity, and

relevance of their views (although he does often not relate these views to contemporary discussions explicitly).

Knappe criticizes the lack of a systematic structure in Green's research, stressing that we are not told the exact status of, for instance, Kierkegaard's theory of stages. Knappe concludes that

we still lack for the most part a systematic approach in a comparative study of Kant and Kierkegaard. ...I take up the challenge and develop a systematic reconstruction of Kant's and, to a greater degree, Kierkegaard's thinking. ...Contrary, then, to Green's approach, my analysis is first of all conceptual. By this I mean that I abstract important concepts from Kierkegaard's text and analyse them for the most part in isolation from any historical or contextual concerns ....The few times I refer to 'historical' issues, I do so in order better to understand and illuminate what Kant and Kierkegaard mean. The historical is not for this study a concern in and of itself.<sup>12</sup>

The last point is important. As Hatfield puts it:

One might, of course, be well aware of the need for historical context to gain better access to past texts while still wanting to use those texts primarily as a source of raw material for solutions or answers to present philosophical problems. This would be historically sensitive reading in the service of fixed-upper ends. [Hatfield's note:] The practice of combining historical scholarship with fixing upper aims is found especially in writings on Kant's works...presumably because philosophers today find much in Kant worth salvaging, but realize that miming his rich texts is aided by scholarly attention to context.<sup>13</sup>

Knappe is not concerned with whether Kierkegaard actually read Kant (like Green is). Instead he focuses on the extent to which 'Kierkegaard's thinking is *internally connected* to Kant's thinking.'<sup>14</sup> Knappe explains the latter by stating that the framework and meaning of one body of thought can be in agreement with the framework and meaning of the other without the respective philosophers having ever read each other's text: 'Hence the analysis and the corresponding establishment of such internal connections is valid independent of any historical influence. Such an analysis stands on its own feet and, in this respect, the approach of this investigation differs and indeed intends to differ from the way in which most present day literature on Kierkegaard is written.'<sup>15</sup>

## 4 Discussion

Studies in the history of philosophy are rarely historical in a narrow sense, since they typically want to focus on the *philosophical* issues at stake.<sup>16</sup> This can mean different things, however, since the meaning of philosophy itself has undergone numerous changes over the past two and a half millennia. Whereas the historical approach takes philosophical issues in their original historical context (for example, what Kierkegaard meant by philosophy<sup>17</sup>), the analytic approach focuses on contemporary philosophical issues. This involves reading past philosophers as if they were our contemporaries, as if they can contribute directly in our discussions. By doing this, analytic history of philosophy is often criticized for being Whig history, for viewing history as a progress towards the present situation. Richard Watson argues that the proper background for understanding this much repeated claim is:

- 1) 'that analytic historians must prove that their work really is of contemporary significance';
- 2) that 'analytic historians do not have to know much about the history of philosophy';
- 3) and that they are restricted to working on positions and arguments that they think will contribute to contemporary work in philosophy. This cuts out most of history. You cannot work on minor figures, or look at the general historical context and intellectual milieu, unless you think there is something there that will advance philosophy today. In short, for analytic history of philosophy, history is irrelevant.<sup>18</sup>

What this would mean for the case of Kant and Kierkegaard is not easy to tell. Today, Kant scholarship is oriented both towards historical research and contemporary relevance. Kierkegaard scholarship is somewhat less oriented towards contemporary discussions.<sup>19</sup> This is partially due to Kierkegaard's being a less influential or more minor figure compared to Kant, and that there exist fewer attempts to reconstruct and defend the theory of Kierkegaard.<sup>20</sup> It follows from this that working on Kierkegaard within the analytic approach is quite demanding, since the scholar who makes such an attempt typically ends up with the lion's share of the burden of proof.

The claim that the 'analytic historians do not have to know much about the history of philosophy'<sup>21</sup> seems to have problematic implications when it comes to Kant and Kierkegaard. Working on Kierkegaard without

historically contextualized knowledge of 19th century Copenhagen may lead to misunderstandings or could have the result that the claims are taken out of context in an anachronistic manner.<sup>22</sup> Stewart says that ‘if there was ever a thinker rooted in a specific historical context, it was surely Kierkegaard.’<sup>23</sup> Alastair Hannay makes a similar claim about Kierkegaard’s works: ‘perhaps more than the work of any other contributor to the Western philosophical tradition, these writings are so closely meshed with the background and details of the author’s life that knowledge of this is indispensable to their content.’<sup>24</sup>

If this is correct, it seems that a lack of familiarity with the 19th century historical context is risky indeed. For instance, Stewart has argued that earlier scholarship has misconstrued Kierkegaard’s relation to – and critique of – Hegel *precisely because* it has not paid sufficient attention to historical context.<sup>25</sup> Rather than holding the contextual approach to be superior, Stewart makes only a limited defense, claiming that the contextual approach is more suited when doing research in cases where there exist historical points of contact:

The fact that Kierkegaard read Hegel’s texts and had contact with his philosophy from different concrete sources seems to justify a historical approach of this kind. It would be a different matter if one wanted to compare on some thematic issue the thought, for example, of Socrates with that of Confucius, where there was no historical point of contact. In that kind of study there would be no alternative but to make thematic analysis in the absence of any actual historical connection.<sup>26</sup>

Still, it seems

to be a mistake to employ it [a thematic analysis] when one is concerned with historical figures who are contemporaries and where at least one of them is known to have had contact with the thought of the other. Given that Kierkegaard in fact knew the works and thought of Hegel, it seems absurd to abstract from this and to try to make comparisons and contrasts, which Kierkegaard himself never conceived of.<sup>27</sup>

*First*, even if we assume that Stewart is correct in the case of Kierkegaard and Hegel, it does not follow that a contextual approach is the more appropriate if the historical point of contact is much harder to establish than in the case of Kierkegaard and Hegel. Kant and Kierkegaard were not contemporaries and the historical point of contact is not easily

established since Kierkegaard rarely refers to Kant or Kantians. Neither does he refer at any length to Kant's works or technical Kantian terms. We will see, however, that Kierkegaard does occasionally make use of Kantian ideas, albeit somewhat cryptically.

*Second*, Stewart concedes that a thematic analysis is preferable if we are interested in how Hegel would (or could) have responded to Kierkegaard. Indeed, Stewart himself relies on such a methodology when formulating a Hegelian critique of Kierkegaard.<sup>28</sup> By implication, if we are looking for a Kantian response to Kierkegaard, Green's historical approach will not do. Green actually depicts Kierkegaard as overcoming problems in Kant's philosophy of religion, without showing how Kant could have responded to Kierkegaard. Green presents Kierkegaard's Christian religiousness as overcoming problems in Kant's critical philosophy, especially problems posed by the doctrine of radical evil. Although this is partially a result of Green's methodology, I find that it results in a somewhat one-sided presentation of the relation between Kant and Kierkegaard, a presentation which does not do full justice to the subject matter, especially the theory of Kant (see Chapters 7–10).

*Third*, Stewart concedes that 'one can make illuminating and interesting comparisons that Kierkegaard himself never saw or at least never wrote about.'<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Stewart claims that we need a historically oriented interpretative approach in order to obtain a clear picture of whom Kierkegaard was arguing against.<sup>30</sup> Although Stewart argues that a historically oriented interpretative approach is a necessary part of obtaining a clear picture of whom Kierkegaard was arguing against, he does not claim that this approach exhausts the meaning and validity of Kierkegaard's texts. Merold Westphal comments: 'Knowing of whom Kierkegaard was thinking when he wrote a particular text does not tell us the scope of its force.'<sup>31</sup> Whereas Stewart is interested in whom Kierkegaard argued against, Westphal seems interested in the meaning and validity of Kierkegaard's texts. In this connection, drawing a distinction between the historicity and trans-historicity of philosophy can be helpful. Yves Charles Zarka explains:

[A] work of philosophy has a historicity which roots it in a determinate context and, at the same time, transcends that historicity in its philosophical meaning, which cannot be pinned down to the context in which it appeared, and must be capable of being taken up again in a different context – that is, at a different point in history. Thus, it is both the historicity and the trans-historicity of philosophy which need to be brought out by the history of philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

The history of philosophy must not only focus on the historical context in which a theory originated, but also on the meaning that transcends said context. Understanding Kierkegaard therefore means not only understanding 19th-century Denmark but also understanding the meaning – and trans-historicity – of Kierkegaard’s theory. We must understand both the historically situated origin of Kierkegaard’s theory (like Green and Stewart do) and its meaning and validity (like Knappe and Westphal do).

Stewart warns that transferring Kierkegaard’s views into a context for which they were never intended runs the risk of rendering them ridiculous, since we risk looking at ourselves in a mirror rather than looking back to Kierkegaard for insight.<sup>33</sup> However, it seems that we cannot avoid this type of risky engagement with past thinkers, since our views of the present and the past are *interdependent*. In order to make sense of the present we need the past, and *vice versa*. The way in which we view contemporary philosophy affects how we conceive of the history of philosophy, and *vice versa*. Even if some attempts to use or revive historical theories fail, it seems that there is a risk inherent to all engagement with past thinkers that cannot be avoided. Stewart himself concludes that ‘we should continually pose our modern problems to thinkers of the past and continually ask ourselves about the relevance of our research projects on them.’<sup>34</sup> This conclusion is not mistaken, since a historical study would not be possible in the first place unless there is some continuity between the present context and the historical contexts we want to study.

To summarize thus far: The contextual approach tends to focus on the historicity of philosophy, while the analytic approach tends to focus on the trans-historicity of philosophy. Whereas the former favors textual exegesis and contextualization, the analytic approach tends to favor philosophical criticism and reconstructions of what a philosopher did say, could have said, or should have said. This type of reconstruction is sometimes described as rational, or argumentative, reconstruction.<sup>35</sup> The contextual approach is also oriented towards reconstructions, but a different kind of reconstruction – namely, the reconstruction of historical positions and their respective contexts.<sup>36</sup>

The problem of contextual history of philosophy has been characterized by Alasdair MacIntyre as turning the past into ‘the realm of the *de facto*,’ whereas the systematic approach turns the present into the ‘realm of the *de jure*.’<sup>37</sup> While the former has problems judging the *validity* of past philosophical theories, the latter lacks any means of *historicizing* the current discipline and showing its contingency. Whereas the

contextualist has difficulties with explaining why historical research is important and relevant to our society, the analytic historian is prone to anachronism and tends to adopt a Whig perspective on history.<sup>38</sup>

## 5 Both historical and systematic?

The above can be taken to suggest that the analytic and contextual approaches *complement* and *supplement* each other rather than compete with one another.<sup>39</sup> It could be argued that we need both approaches in order to bring out both the historicity and the validity (trans-historicity) of philosophy. The contextual and analytic approaches can be seen as representing two different dimensions, dimensions which – at least ideally – work together within research into the history of philosophy. Another way of putting it is that the contextual and analytic approaches represent two distinct ideal types that research resembles to varying degrees: most research lies closer to one side than the other, but few, if any, are exclusively systematic or historic. Also, progress within either approach can benefit the other. Attempts at rational reconstructions which indicate the validity or plausibility of Kant's theories can contribute to historical research by making the theories of the historical Kant more intelligible to us – and the same holds true for Kierkegaard.<sup>40</sup> Posing questions to historical texts can make them more intelligible to us as contemporary readers. Rational or argumentative reconstructions can be particularly fruitful, since they involve charity of interpretation (Wilson, Quine, and Davidson) or anticipation of perfection (Gadamer). Finally, historical research can play an instrumental role by enriching present philosophical discussions, by bringing into view alternatives, and making present positions look less obvious by showing their historicity and contingency.

Partially for these reasons, Richard Rorty has argued that a historical reconstruction cannot be separated from a rational reconstruction, since 'you will not know much about what the dead [philosophers] meant prior to figuring out how much truth they knew. These two topics should be seen as movements in a continuing movement around the hermeneutic circle'.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that contextual research in the history of philosophy is rarely wholly unsystematic or totally without thematic orientation. Historical texts in philosophy often deal with philosophical problems in a systematic and argumentative way,<sup>42</sup> suggesting that argumentation, analysis, and critique are important for understanding historical texts in philosophy. It seems that we cannot do without philosophical judgment if we

are to understand the essential points that past philosophers made and to give a best statement of their views.<sup>43</sup>

It also seems that we cannot really pursue the analytic approach without relying on contextualization. Steven Nadler argues that ‘Analytic history of philosophy’s very own goals – understanding what a philosopher did say, could have said, and even should have said – cannot be achieved unless it pays attention to the large picture within which the thesis and arguments it is so interested in are to be situated [historically].’<sup>44</sup> Even analytic approaches take various historical texts and discussions as their point of departure, although these are usually relatively recent. Analytic approaches are sensitive to the contexts of arguments and can indeed rely on rigorous documentation, meaning they relate to historical contexts – although they favor new debates over old ones. The analytic approach is only ahistorical in the narrow sense of abstracting concepts from historical and contextual concerns, and from historical development itself.

Finally, even if we prefer arguments and rational reconstructions to historical research, this does not mean that we can do away with all historical information or anything that is not clearly argumentative. The reason for this is that we simply do not have any arguments or reconstructions at our disposal that are so complete and perfect as to eliminate the need for historical information altogether. So because the arguments and reconstructions are imperfect and incomplete, we cannot avoid relying to some extent on historical research and exegesis.

For these reasons, the present work involves elements of both the contextual and analytic approaches. I sketch a rational reconstruction of central Kierkegaardian ideas (notably original sin and the highest good) by using Kant’s philosophy of religion. I deal with the Kantian background for Kierkegaard’s thinking (and to a much lesser extent some of the broader Augustinian background for Kant and Kierkegaard). Although I often abstract from much of the general historical context in order to focus on the philosophical content, there are nevertheless cases where I deal with historical context in order to understand the philosophical content better.<sup>45</sup> I have benefited greatly from the contextual research of Stewart, Beiser, and others, but have found it necessary to restrict discussion of historical issues to points that are particularly relevant for understanding radical evil and the highest good. I use contextual research to support a systematic approach, and try to make a best case for Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s essential points, without underestimating the controversial nature of the doctrines of radical evil and the highest good.



## 6 Green's *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*

The main theses in Green's *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* have been summarized as follows by Westphal: 'Green calls his book a detective story. Its central theses are that Kierkegaard is heavily indebted to Kant, far more than has previously been noticed, and that a major reason this has been overlooked is that Kierkegaard deliberately obscured his dependence on Kant. The task of this book is to put an end to the coverup.'<sup>46</sup>

Green's central claim is that Kierkegaard is heavily indebted to Kant.<sup>47</sup> Still, most of the material Green references in order to show Kant's influence on Kierkegaard provide circumstantial evidence rather than proof.<sup>48</sup> Even if Green succeeds in establishing similarities and overlap between Kant and Kierkegaard, he nevertheless fails to look for alternative (primary and secondary) sources of Kierkegaard's ideas.<sup>49</sup> As a result, he does not necessarily show that Kierkegaard was influenced by Kant. Westphal comments:

The case is considerably overstated, for, as Green himself keeps reminding us, themes that Kierkegaard may have read in Kant are often not distinctively Kantian and were available to him from other sources as well, especially the pietistic Lutheranism to which both he and Kant were heirs and the larger Augustinian tradition to which it belonged. When all these materials are set aside, what is left hardly seems as important as Green's overall presentation suggests. Still, he has called attention to an important part of Kierkegaard's intellectual background well deserving of attention, even if only more modest claims about it are warranted.<sup>50</sup>

However, Green's analyzes of overlapping passages are often helpful, even if the main conclusion about Kierkegaard's debt to Kant is problematic.<sup>51</sup>

## 7 Conclusion and choice of approach

In the case of Kant and Kierkegaard, the best historical research so far (that is, Green's work) has ended up with a somewhat speculative main conclusion. If we dismiss Green's conclusion, we are left with many indications of overlap between Kant and Kierkegaard that needs to be more thoroughly investigated in the light of recent scholarship. Since Green published his study in 1992, much new scholarship on Kant has arisen,

not at least on philosophy of religion, ethics, and anthropology. There is also much more Kierkegaard scholarship available today, notably the series *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources* and the critical edition of Kierkegaard's works (*Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*) finished in 2013.

With the possible exception of the Danish Kantians and a very few secondary sources,<sup>52</sup> I do not believe that there exists much promising material showing influence that Green has overlooked or omitted. It is therefore my view that the source material in general does not lend itself very well to historical research into Kant's influence on Kierkegaard (although it gives some information about Kierkegaard's view of Kant). Kierkegaard's texts generally make it very hard to establish the exact nature of Kant's influence on Kierkegaard in a reliable or definite manner. It therefore seems that a systematic or thematic approach is generally more promising than a historical approach which focuses on how Kant influenced Kierkegaard.

In a few instances, however, there are nevertheless clear indications of influence that Green has not dealt with satisfactorily. In Chapter 2 I first establish that there is a considerable overlap between Kant's doctrine of radical evil and Kierkegaard's views of guilt and sin. Then I show that there is some evidence that Kierkegaard was not only familiar with the doctrine of radical evil but also that he approved of it and was influenced by it. Similarly, Chapter 6 tries to show that in several different works Kierkegaard sketches an argument remarkably similar to Kant's moral argument for the existence of God and immortality, an argument Kierkegaard was clearly familiar with.

The main purpose of the present monograph is to provide a better understanding of Kierkegaard and his conceptual relation to Kant. The focus thus lies on whether there is conceptual overlap between Kierkegaard and Kant, rather than Kierkegaard's sources.<sup>53</sup> However, in cases where historical points of contact between Kant and Kierkegaard have the potential to shed light on Kierkegaard's thought, I look at how Kierkegaard uses Kant and Kantian terms. For instance, I argue that Kierkegaard's use of, and comments on, the twin doctrines of rigorism and radical evil help us understand not only the ethicist (the pseudonym Judge William) but also Kierkegaard himself. Partially as a result of this, this monograph does offer us some fresh insight into the historical relation between Kant and Kierkegaard, including Kant's influence on Kierkegaard. Although my main priority has been to provide a better understanding of Kierkegaard and his conceptual relation to Kant, the historical relation between Kant and Kierkegaard is also dealt with in

order to help the understanding of their theories. In order to understand Kierkegaard it is necessary to situate him in the history of philosophy, particularly by understanding his relation to post-Kantian philosophy and theology.

The main concern of the present monograph is to give a *comparative* presentation of Kant and Kierkegaard, focusing on ethics and religion, radical evil and the highest good. In and of itself, a comparative presentation does not obviate any historical approach; one could very well situate Kant and Kierkegaard in their respective historical contexts and then give a comparison of their theories. However, rather than merely focusing on the origin and historicity of these theories, I attempt to say something about their meaning and validity – about the trans-historicity of their theories. This means that I have attempted to go beyond a merely historical approach and tried to say something of systematical importance. As we have seen, Knappe concluded that ‘we still lack for the most part a systematic approach in a comparative study of Kant and Kierkegaard’.<sup>54</sup> And:

research on the relationship between Kant and Kierkegaard has not fully done justice to the complexity of the issues. Kierkegaard scholars are reluctant to engage in Kantian thinking, assuming perhaps that the two thinkers have little in common. A prominent example of this tendency in research is the work of Michael Theunissen. Although he is one of the few systematical thinkers in Kierkegaard studies, Theunissen hardly addresses the possible affinities that Kierkegaard may have with Kant. Other interpreters like Jamie Ferreira, Niels Thulstrup, Gregor Malantschuk, Herman Dies, Johannes Sløk, George Connell, David Gouwens and many others refer to Kant in a fairly casual way. Usually it is Hegel and not Kant who is mentioned by these thinkers. If they mention Kant at all, it is generally only to indicate that Kierkegaard *rejected* Kantian ethics.<sup>55</sup>

Kant scholars rarely work on Kierkegaard, and Kierkegaard scholars have paid relatively little attention to Kant’s philosophy of religion, anthropology, pedagogy, philosophy of history, aesthetics, and (to a lesser extent) ethics. Referring to the sociology of knowledge, Green calls this ‘the relative separation of the communities of Kant and Kierkegaard scholarship’.<sup>56</sup> Although there are a few exceptions to this trend,<sup>57</sup> it is still all too common for Kierkegaard scholars to dismiss Kant – almost in passing – as a rationalist or a formalist, whereas Kant scholars dismiss Kierkegaard as an irrationalist, an existentialist, or a religious and literary writer.

Knappe concludes that 'there still remains a need for a more thorough and more systematic analysis.'<sup>58</sup> Knappe himself takes up the challenge by dealing with theoretical philosophy and ethics. However, this still leaves out Kant's philosophy of religion, philosophy of history, aesthetics, anthropology, and pedagogy.<sup>59</sup> Although these parts of Kant's theory were often considered to be less important, earlier, newer scholarship has challenged this and given us fresh insight into the role these parts play within Kant's larger theory.<sup>60</sup> Benefiting from newer Kant scholarship, I attempt to take up part of the challenge by dealing more thoroughly with Kant's philosophy of religion, and to a lesser degree his anthropology and philosophy of history, than done by earlier Kierkegaard scholarship.<sup>61</sup> By doing this I hope to shed new light on the extent to which Kierkegaard's thinking is *internally* connected to Kant's. I investigate the extent to which Kierkegaard's theory is in agreement with or departs from Kant's theory. This comparative approach has the advantage of making positions look less obvious, thereby making room for critical thinking. For instance, I argue in Chapter 7 that the problems that Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) points to with philosophical ethics (the first ethics) need not imply that Christian ethics (as understood by Kierkegaard) emerges as the only alternative.

When dealing with the relationship between Kant and Kierkegaard, this monograph focuses on Kant's critical philosophy, especially the writings from the 1790s such as *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. The reason for focusing on writings from the 1790s rather than the early critical writings is that Kant deals more explicitly with moral evil, religion, and anthropology in the 1790s than the 1780s. This means that Kant deals with many of the issues that occupy Kierkegaard, and that there consequently is a greater affinity with Kierkegaard in these late writings than the earlier critical writings. The present monograph focuses on radical evil and the highest good because these concepts are central not only to Kant's mature philosophy of religion but also to Kierkegaard (something that has received little attention). More specifically, radical evil and the highest good are central for understanding the relations between ethics and religion, philosophy and theology. Although Kant and Kierkegaard conceive of these relations differently, radical evil and the highest good play crucial roles for both.

Kant's doctrine of radical evil received relatively little scholarly attention until fairly recently, something that is also the case with Kant's anthropology and his philosophy of religion more generally.<sup>62</sup> After 1800 the heyday of Kantianism was over in Germany and Denmark

(except in law).<sup>63</sup> Most philosophers and theologians left Kantianism, often preferring German idealism and – eventually – post-idealism instead. As a result of this, Kant's philosophy of religion and his anthropology received relatively little attention in the early-mid 19th century, and renewed interest in these parts of Kant's philosophy is a relatively new phenomenon, much of it belonging to the late 20th century. Partially as a result of this, the picture and evaluation of these parts of Kant's philosophy has varied widely. Whereas non-specialist often think that Kant's radical evil, highest good, and anthropology have mainly historical interest, specialized scholarship has challenged this recently by attempting to revive and reconstruct these parts of Kant's theory (see Chapters 2–9).

The renewed interest in Kant's philosophy of religion and his anthropology makes the case of Kierkegaard intriguing if I am right in claiming that Kierkegaard makes creative use of Kant's radical evil and his moral argument. This makes it natural to ask, as Green does, if Kierkegaard really went back to Kant and studied his work closely? Is Green right in claiming that 'Kierkegaard is not only one of Kant's best nineteenth century readers but also the genuine heir to the legacy of Kant's developed religious and ethical thought.'<sup>64</sup> The following analysis indicates that Kierkegaard, with a few important exceptions, appears to have a fairly good understanding of Kant's philosophy of religion, although his understanding of Kant is indebted to his own Danish contemporaries and Kant's successors in Germany.

There has been a strong tendency in Kierkegaard scholarship – especially in the Danish scholarship until fairly recently – to want to deal with Kierkegaard without relating or comparing him to other thinkers. Text-immanent readings of Kierkegaard have long been considered to be the best approach. In this connection, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Jon Stewart state that 'much of the past generations of Kierkegaard scholarship dogmatically insisted upon an immanent reading of Kierkegaard's texts.... Similarly ... in the past there has often been a tone of apologia or even hero worship, which led to a sense of a Kierkegaard orthodoxy or dogma'.<sup>65</sup> By comparing Kierkegaard to one of the most important and well-researched modern thinkers, this work attempts to remedy some of these problems as well as to indicate some of Kierkegaard's relevance for post-Kantian philosophy (including why Kierkegaard thought that philosophy must ultimately be left behind).

The present work focuses on what Kierkegaard and Kant did say, and involves a partial reconstruction of Kierkegaard's views of ethics and religion focusing on original sin and the highest good. By doing this I try not

only to carry out textual exegesis but also to think with Kierkegaard and Kant by shedding light on how the distinctions they draw are systematically related to each other. In this sense, thinking with Kierkegaard involves not only showing what he (and his pseudonyms) said, but also necessitates a discussion and analysis of how the different distinctions he draws are related to each other. For instance, how does the important description of faith as a double movement found in *Fear and Trembling* relate to other texts, especially the distinction between immanent and transcendent religiousness in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*?

My main priority in writing this monograph has been to establish an interpretation of what the theories of Kant and Kierkegaard say about particular subjects. In doing this, I typically rely on – and refer to – the work of other scholars. I will engage in various discussions with rival interpretations of ethics and religion in Kant and Kierkegaard found in the scholarly literature. However, my goal is not to criticize others but to interpret Kant and Kierkegaard charitably by giving my best reading of their theories. This means that I have chosen to provide only a minimal amount of criticism of research with which I disagree or find wanting. I also often note competing interpretations of Kant without trying to resolve them, since resolving these disputes is often not necessary for understanding how Kierkegaard relates to Kant.

## 8 A closing note on Kierkegaard's pseudonyms

When referencing Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, I have chosen, for the sake of clarity to specify the pseudonymous author in the following manner: "Subjectivity is the untruth," says Kierkegaard (Climacus).<sup>66</sup> I believe we should read Kierkegaard's works and establish on a case-by-case basis what role (if any) the pseudonyms play for a given topic, instead of assuming from the outset that Kierkegaard and the different pseudonyms are all radically different. As regards Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel, for instance, Stewart has argued that the discussion of Hegelianism does not vary amongst the pseudonyms. Similarly, I want to claim that – with a few important exceptions – the discussion of the topics dealt with in this monograph varies little amongst the pseudonyms. Not only do the pseudonymous writings overlap with each other; the pseudonymous works often also overlap with the signed works. However, instead of saying that all the different voices overlap, I make the following limited and more specific claims only.

First, Kierkegaard's views on guilt and sin overlap with the views of *de silentio* (in *Fear and Trembling*), *Haufniensis* (in *Concept of Anxiety*),

Climacus (in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Postscript*), and Anti-Climacus (*Sickness unto Death*), but not with the views of Judge William or the aesthete (in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way* – see Chapter 2). Second, Kierkegaard's account of anthropology and selfhood overlaps with the views of William, Haufniensis, Climacus, and Anti-Climacus (see Chapter 3). Third, Climacus, Haufniensis, de silentio, and Kierkegaard are in basic agreement about the relation between happiness and virtue in this world (see Chapter 4). Fourth, Kierkegaard's views on the highest good overlap with the views of Climacus, de silentio, and Anti-Climacus, and appear basically consistent with aesthete A's notion of happiness (see Chapter 5). Five, we find virtually the same Kantian argument for the existence of God and immortality in Kierkegaard, Climacus, de silentio, and William (see Chapter 6), and Kierkegaard's views on Christian religiousness overlap with the views of de silentio, Haufniensis, Climacus, and Anti-Climacus (see Chapters 7–9). Finally, the metaethical views of Kierkegaard overlap with those of de silentio and Climacus (Chapter 10). My argument only requires that there is some essential overlap, coherence, and consistency between the different works in Kierkegaard's authorship when it comes to the subject matter investigated, not that we should overlook the pseudonyms.<sup>67</sup>

It is difficult to understand why it would be wrong to attribute claims made by the pseudonyms to Kierkegaard himself if it can be established that Kierkegaard's own views and arguments correspond to or overlap with views and arguments expressed by one or several of the pseudonyms.<sup>68</sup> Thus, if this monograph succeeds in its attempt to show that claims made in the pseudonymous works correspond to or overlap with things published (or intended to be published) by Kierkegaard under his own name, we may attribute these claims to Kierkegaard.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, there is one point where extra caution may be necessary, for, as we will see, Kierkegaard claims that religiousness is absurd and paradoxical to non-believers only. This means that while the pseudonyms (notably, de silentio and Climacus) portray religious belief as absurd and paradoxical, Kierkegaard himself refrains from this.<sup>70</sup>