France:

Kierkegaard as a Forerunner of Existentialism and Poststructuralism

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When one thinks of Kierkegaard's influence in the Francophone world of letters, it is natural that one immediately thinks of the appropriation of his thought by French existentialism and poststructuralism. However, French Kierkegaard reception was far richer than this and indeed began far earlier than these movements. Today French Kierkegaard studies has developed into a specialized field with scholars who define their professional profile in terms of the Danish thinker. It can be said without hesitation that Kierkegaard research in France at present is flourishing more than at any time in the past.

I. Denmark and France: The Cultural Ties

During Kierkegaard's lifetime, many Danish scholars, writers, and artists regularly visited Paris, which ranked probably just after Berlin and Rome as a favorite destination of Golden Age intellectuals. This was no accident, for Denmark had close cultural and political ties to France. During the Napoleonic War, Denmark was allied with France, and at this time many French embassies came to Copenhagen, where they were treated virtually as celebrities. The atmosphere of these times is wonderfully portrayed in the novel Two Ages (1846), from the pen of Thomasine Gyllenborg (1773–1856), a work reviewed positively by Kierkegaard.1 In the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries there were also a handful of francophone

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There was thus a long tradition of an active exchange of culture and information between France and Denmark dating from the eighteenth century and continuing into the Danish Golden Age. It is therefore natural that French thinkers would take some interest in the cultural affairs of Denmark and the work of Søren Kierkegaard.

II. From the Earliest References to the First World War

The earliest known French reference to Kierkegaard appears in 1856 in La Revue de Deux Mondes. The Revue published a series of overview articles about the political and cultural state of affairs in different countries. There in an article on Denmark, a special section is dedicated to “Religious Questions,” in which the anonymous author describes the confusion surrounding the question of freedom of religion and freedom of speech in Denmark after the introduction of the Constitution in 1849. The occasion for this discussion is Kierkegaard’s attack on the Danish State Church. The author is generally quite positive about Kierkegaard’s actions:

The virulent attacks of S. Kierkegaard and his followers have, it is true, bewildered many minds and troubled many weak or fearful consciences, but they have also awakened many sheep and many indolent and drowsy pastors; they have shaken or brought down many things and persons of but little importance; they have caused profound and serious souls to reflect. In brief, the Danish church, both pastors and parishioners, will doubtless emerge from this spiritual struggle more sure of themselves, more clear-sighted, in the things of faith and worship.

After this general assessment of the ultimate significance and impact of Kierkegaard’s attack, the author turns to a more general introduction and assessment of Kierkegaard as a writer. The text continues:

Without ever occupying any public position, S. Kierkegaard has come to rank, during the last fifteen years or so, as one of the most productive and remarkable, and also one of the most singular, of writers in Denmark. With a lively imagination, a shrewd, caustic, and mocking mind, a far from ordinary debating talent, but bizzare in his way of writing, he has proved to be at once a speculative philosopher, an unrelenting moralist, and a merciless religious reformer. At first secretly, finally openly, he has undermined and unsettled everything; taking as his battle cries the words “freedom” and “independence,” he tended to bring down everything, society and church, but without worrying about reconstruction.

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10. Ibid., p. 135. The counterintuitive characterization of Kierkegaard as “a speculative philosopher” may be taken as an indication that P.L. Møller is the author of this piece. In the Corsair controversy, Møller had reproached Kierkegaard for his “barren dialectic that swirled around an infinite center” (COR, Supplement, p. 101) and referred to “the dialectical-critical-
Finally, the article recounts briefly Kierkegaard’s death and the scandal surrounding his funeral caused by the outbreak of his nephew Henrik Lund (1825–97), who, during the ceremony, protested against the Church and the clergy. There can be little doubt that this account was written by a Dane with knowledge of French.

The first French translation of Kierkegaard was also the work of a Dane, Johannes Gotzsche (1866–1938). In 1886 his translation *En quoi l’homme de génie diffère-t-il de l’apôtre?: Traité éthique-religieux* appeared in Copenhagen and Paris. It is a translation of the second of Kierkegaard’s *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* (1849). The work includes a Preface by the theologian Hans-Peter Kofod-Hansen (1813–93), which offers a brief overview of Kierkegaard’s works and recommends him to the French reader. This early translation seems, however, not to have made any real impression in France.

In 1893 an article appeared entitled “Sören Kierkegaard. Le moraliste danois” in *La Nouvelle Revue.* This work is from the hand of one Bernard Jeannin. The author is apparently inspired by the critical works of Georg Brandes (1842–1927), who mentions Kierkegaard in connection with Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906). In his article Jeannin portrays Kierkegaard as a central Scandinavian author, who inspired many other Danish and Norwegian writers who were to follow. His criticism of the hypocritical Christianity of his day and of petty bourgeois philistinism are mentioned, and it is in this context that he is regarded as a moralist.

By the end of the century Kierkegaard’s name began appearing in French reference works. A one-paragraph article on him by Théophile Cart (1855–1931), a professor of German Studies in Paris, appears in *La Grande Encyclopédie,* which was published from 1886 to 1903. Here the author summarizes Kierkegaard’s thoughts in terms of the well-known stages:

He [Kierkegaard] declared that an unbridgeable gulf exists between science and faith and, in language that was vivid and paradoxical but of outstanding dialectical vigor, he preached renunciation of the world; a purely aesthetic conception of life, in his view, leads fatally to an egoistical search for pleasure; a purely moral (ethical) conception has neither foundation nor sanction; only the religious conception is Christian, i.e., the isolated individual face to face with God can stand his ground... 

Kierkegaard is characterized as “a rather unorthodox theologian,” and no mention is made here of his philosophical or literary side.

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program. This approach would be followed by many secular French thinkers in the twentieth century. Further, there seems to be a general consensus that, among these pioneers of French Kierkegaard studies, Basch had the best knowledge of Kierkegaard’s actual texts and, unlike many of the others, did not base his opinions on second-hand accounts.

Another French-language dissertation was written at the University of Geneva, appearing in 1907 under the title *Kierkegaard et la certitude religieuse*. *Esquisse biographique et critique.* The author of this work, Raoul Hoffmann (1881–1972), was perhaps bilingual; he was familiar with the German Kierkegaard literature and published the work in a German translation in 1910. This work focuses, among other things, on the concept of the paradox. Hoffmann did not pursue his Kierkegaard studies but instead went on to be a surgeon.

In 1914 André Bellesort (1866–1942) published an article on Kierkegaard in the *Revue de deux mondes* entitled “Le Crépuscule d’Elseneur.” This article portrays Kierkegaard’s understanding of Christianity as typical of the dark and depressive Nordic spirit. Kierkegaard is associated with Hamlet, as a figure obsessed with anxiety. Some years later this piece was printed as an independent monograph.

Since Pascal (together with Descartes) has traditionally been one of the main points of cultural orientation for French thinkers, it was natural to present Kierkegaard as a kind of Scandinavian Pascal. In 1913 the Danish philosopher Harald Hofding (1843–1901) gave a lecture on this theme that was subsequently translated into French and published in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*. In 1930 an article with the same title by another Danish scholar appeared in French in the *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses*.

### III. The Influence of the German Sources and the Russian Émigrés

Much of French Kierkegaard reception has been mediated by that of foreign sources. One of the most important of these was the body of German translations and secondary literature on Kierkegaard, which began to appear at a remarkably early period. While many French scholars could read and speak German well, Danish remained an esoteric foreign language. It was thus natural that the German-language materials played a role in pioneering French reception. Christoph Schrempp’s (1860–1944) 12-volume translation of Kierkegaard’s *Gesammlte Schriften* appeared in 1909–


25. For an account of this see Darya Lounina’s outstanding article “Russia: Kierkegaard’s Reception through Tsarism, Communism, and Liberation” in *Ib*., pp. 170–200.


or play down Kierkegaard’s striking claims about things such as martyrdom and despair.

Shesov was reproached for writing about his own thoughts more than expounding those of Kierkegaard. This charge is, however, in a sense understandable given Shesov’s existential mission to appropriate Kierkegaard’s message in his own life and thinking. In any case, this book and Shesov’s accompanying lectures were to be a source of great inspiration for the French existentialists. Shesov was to French Kierkegaard studies what his fellow émigré Alexandre Kojève (1902–68) was to French Hegel studies.

It has often been noted that the general mood in Europe in the wake of the First World War and the Russian Revolution was highly receptive to Kierkegaard’s message. The Second World War would see this interest repeated and further intensified.

### IV. Forerunners of the Existentialists

While Kierkegaard’s influence on French existentialism has become a signal episode in the French reception of his thought, this influence did not appear overnight or spontaneously. The ground was made fertile for it by a handful of lesser known thinkers, who are only indirectly associated with the existentialist movement itself.

One important figure in this regard was Jean Wahl (1888–1974), a professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne. Although not a tremendously productive or original author, his didactical work was important for introducing Kierkegaard to the generation of French scholars that would make existentialism famous. In addition to his influential teaching, he wrote introductions to some of the early French translations of Kierkegaard’s works. His essay on anxiety in Kierkegaard from 1932 may well have served as an inspiration for Sartre’s later interest in this concept. His many short studies of individual concepts were put together in 1938 under a single cover with the title *Études Kierkegaardiennes*. His understanding of Kierkegaard was profoundly influenced by the incipient German Kierkegaard studies. In the following years this book was carefully studied by the existentialists.

Another important figure in this regard was the Romanian Benjamin Fondane (1898–1944), whose interest in Kierkegaard was inspired by Shesov. In 1936 he published his *La Conscience malheureuse*, a title taken from the famous motif in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In this work Fondane analyzes Kierkegaard together with Heidegger and Dostoïevsky. Fondane’s work was cut short as he ultimately fell victim to the Nazis, dying in the gas chamber in Birkenau in 1944.

A pioneering translator and interpreter of Kierkegaard, Paul Petit (1893–1944), tried to understand Kierkegaard’s critique of the Danish State Church and contemporary complicity in religion as an attempt to revert to a pre-Lutheran Catholic position. Despite his attack on the public and the masses, Kierkegaard was, according to Petit, consistent with a Catholic position. In addition to a handful of articles, Petit published a translation of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in 1941. A posthumous translation of the *Philosophical Fragments* appeared in 1947. Petit, who was active in the French resistance movement, was executed by the Germans in August 1944.

Another important French interpreter of Kierkegaard in the 1940s was the Catholic thinker Régis Jolivet (1891–1966), a professor in Lyon. In 1946 he published his much read *Introduction à Kierkegaard*. Two years later he gave one of the earliest attempts at an overview of the existentialist movement, with his *Les doctrines existentialistes de Kierkegaard à J.P. Sartre*. His final major work on Kierkegaard appeared in 1958 under the title *Aux sources de l’existentialisme chrétien, Kierkegaard*. Jolivet gives Kierkegaard a sympathetic interpretation and, like Petit, enlists him as a defender of Catholicism.

In 1944 Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) published his *Le drame de l’humanisme athée*, which attempts to provide an overview of atheist thinking since the nineteenth century, treating primarily Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Comte, and Dostoïevsky. De Lubac, who was a highly influential and prolific French Catholic cardinal, examines Kierkegaard’s thought and juxtaposes it to Nietzsche. Despite the apparent contradiction of Nietzsche’s atheism and Kierkegaard’s faith, there are, according
to de Lubac, a number of surprising points of coincidence, including their struggle against Hegelian historicism.

The professor of philosophy Pierre Mesnard (1900–69) played a significant early role in French Kierkegaard studies. He was particularly captivated by the *Concept of Irony* and Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegel and the German Romantics. His main work is the much discussed *Le vrai visage de Kierkegaard* from 1948. The book treats Kierkegaard’s main pseudonymous works, which Mesnard interprets as stages in Kierkegaard’s own development. Mesnard also authored an introduction to Kierkegaard’s writings in 1954 under the title *Kierkegaard. Sa vie, son œuvre, avec un exposé de sa philosophie*. This work also presents Kierkegaard’s thought and authorship primarily in terms of the three stages. After Mesnard’s own introduction, the second half of the text consists of selected extracts from Kierkegaard’s writings, which are likewise organized into categories following the different stages. Sections are also dedicated to Kierkegaard’s concepts of humor and irony.

Another early translator was Jean-Jacques Gateau (1887–1967) who translated some of Kierkegaard’s journals and “The Diary of a Seducer,” which he published as individual articles. The latter text was then republished in 1929 as a monograph in the series *Le Cabinet Cosmolopolite*, which included texts from foreign literature. In the 1930s a series of translations of Kierkegaard’s main pseudonymous works that Gateau made together with the Dane Knud Ferlov were published at Gallimard. Finally, Gateau and Ferlov produced a five-volume selection of Kierkegaard’s Nachlaß, which appeared from the beginning of the 1940s into the 1960s. This edition, which is based on the Danish edition of the *Papiers*, remains to this day the most extensive collection of Kierkegaard’s journals and notebooks in French.

The study of Kierkegaard in France was facilitated by the first systematic translation of Kierkegaard’s works by Paul-Henri Tisseau (1894–1964). Prior to Tisseau, many of the French Kierkegaard translations, like those of Gateau, were chapters or parts of larger works, such as “The Diary of a Seducer” or *In Vino Veritas*, misleadingly published as Kierkegaard’s signed works and as independent monographs. Tisseau wished to give the French reader a more accurate picture of Kierkegaard’s writings by translating complete texts.

Tisseau had the opportunity to learn Danish since he was married to a Dane and in 1926 received an appointment as a lecturer at the University of Lund in Sweden, just across the sound from Denmark. He soon became interested in Kierkegaard and began translating individual works, without any vision of a collected edition. The first translations appeared in 1933. Tisseau experienced many setbacks in his attempts. He lost his Kierkegaard books and materials when his house in Nantes was destroyed by a bomb in the Second World War. He also had difficulty finding the financial resources to support his translations. After his death in 1964, Tisseau’s daughter Else-Marie Jacquet-Tisseau (1925–2003) took it upon herself to organize and supplement her father’s translations in the form of a collected works edition. This was published in 20 volumes from 1966 to 1986 at the publishing house Éditions de l’Orante under the editorial supervision of Jacques Lafarge. This translation used the second edition of the *Samlede Værker* as its textual basis.

V. The Existentialists

There can be no doubt the many of the leading figures associated with the French existentialist movement were in some ways influenced by Kierkegaard, and some of them indeed explicitly attempted to appropriate him to their cause. This appropriation has rightly or wrongly earned him the title of “the father of existentialism” and has assured the dutiful inclusion of a few excerpts from his texts in virtually every anthology of existentialist authors ever assembled. The existentialists readily identified with Kierkegaard’s protest against sterile, abstract philosophy that has nothing to do with actuality as individuals experience it in their daily lives. In an age of totalitarian regimes, his emphasis on the individual and human freedom found a natural resonance. Similarly, his criticism of the masses and the public in works such as *A Literary Review of Two Ages* struck a chord in the quickly developing anonymous and spiritless modern society of the twentieth century.
of existentialism. Maritain also offers a criticism of Kierkegaard's separation of subjective and objective thinking:

Kierkegaard's great error, amid all his great intuitions was to separate and oppose as two heterogeneous worlds the world of generality, or universal law, and that of the unique witness (irrespective of the bare fact) borne by the "knave of faith." Consequently, he had to sacrifice, or at least suspend, ethics. In reality these two worlds are in continuity, both form part of the universe of ethics, which itself is divided into typically diversified zones according to the degree of depth of moral life.60

Maritain insists that there is a continuity in the spheres or stages, which are conceived by Kierkegaard as being radically distinct. He also notes Kierkegaard's polemic with Hegel as follows:

Subjectivity marks the frontier which separates the world of philosophy from the world of religion. This is what Kierkegaard felt so deeply in his polemic against Hegel. Philosophy runs against an insurmountable barrier in attempting to deal with subjectivity, because while philosophy of course knows subjects, it knows them only as objects. Philosophy is registered whole and entire in the relation of intelligence to object; whereas religion enters into the relation of subject to subject. For this reason, every philosophical religion, or every philosophy, which, like Hegel's, claims to assume and integrate religion into itself, is in the last analysis a mystification.61

Here Maritain seems positively disposed towards Kierkegaard's efforts to keep philosophy and religion separate.

At the end of the work Maritain makes the connection between Aquinas and existentialism by means of Kierkegaard:

We believe that the central intuition on which the existentialism of a Kierkegaard lived was in the last analysis the same as that which lies at the heart of Thomism. We refer to the intuition of the absolutely singular value and the primacy of the act of existing, the existentia actus. But in Kierkegaard it sprang from the depths of a faith filled with anguish, robbed of its intelligible or superintelligible structure, desperately expecting the miraculous and rejecting the mystical possession for which it thirsts; it sprang from a radically irrationalist thought which rejects and sacrifices essences and falls back upon the night of subjectivity.62

53 For a useful thematic account of this relation, see J.B.L. Knox, Gabriel Marcel, Håber filosofi, forvækkehus dramatik, Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag 2003, pp. 26–7; pp. 34–6; p. 72; pp. 100–2. See also Jeanne Parin-Vial, "Gabriel Marcel et Kierkegaard," in Kierkegaard, ed. by Jean Brun, Nyons: Borderie 1981 (special number of Obliques), pp. 185–91.


56 Marcel, L'Homme problématique, p. 131. (Problematic Man, p. 104.)


60 Maritain, Court Traité de l'Existence et de l'existant, pp. 93–4. (Existence and the Existent, p. 56.)

61 Maritain, Court Traité de l'Existence et de l'existant, p. 119. (Existence and the Existent, p. 72.)

62 Maritain, Court Traité de l'Existence et de l'existant, pp. 208–9. (Existence and the Existent, pp. 130–1.) Here Maritain is actually quoting himself from a previous article.
Maritain thus finds that Kierkegaard and what he refers to as the "first existential generation" kept true to this principle, while the later atheist existentialists, such as Heidegger and Sartre, betrayed it by turning it into something academic.

In 1957 Maritain authored a short essay specifically on Kierkegaard entitled "Le champion du singulier." He offers a critical reading of Kierkegaard, who is again reproached for being an irrationalist who rejects any form of binding ethics. Here it seems that Kierkegaard is made to pay for the sins of Sartre, who, as we will see below, highlights Kierkegaard's thought on freedom at the expense of his thoughts on morality. Kierkegaard also plays a role in Maritain's grand work on ethics, La Philosophie morale from 1960. In his treatment of Socrates, Maritain refers to Kierkegaard's account of Socratic irony in The Concept of Irony. Kierkegaard is also mentioned in connection with Kant's philosophy. Maritain claims that the abstract nature of Kant's ethics was one of the factors that made Kierkegaard revolt against abstraction and the universal. Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel's understanding of religion is treated in a couple of different passages. Kierkegaard is also mentioned as an important source of Sartre's existentialism. Finally, Maritain compares Kierkegaard's account of the divine with that of Bergson (1859–1941).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), probably the most important ideologue of the existentialist movement, apparently first read Kierkegaard during his time as a soldier in 1939–40. Sartre had already made a careful study of Husserl and Heidegger in part during a stay in Berlin in 1933–34. Sartre in fact records his reading of Kierkegaard in the so-called War Diaries, which he kept at this time. In his Notebook 5, on December 17, 1938, Sartre writes:

If Kierkegaard is right to call "the possibility of freedom" anxiety, it's not without a touch of anxiety that I discovered once again yesterday morning that I was entirely free to break the piece of bread which the waitress had placed beside me, and free also to convey the fragments to my mouth. Nothing in the world could stop me from doing so, not even myself.

In a letter dated December 1, 1939 he requests to Simone de Beauvoir that she send him a copy of The Concept of Anxiety. In the same notebook on December 19, 1939, he lists this work among the books which he has read recently. This reading is reflected in some of the entries in the same journal. On December 18, he quotes the following passage from The Concept of Anxiety: "...the relation of anxiety to its object, to something that is nothing (linguistic usage also says pregnantly; to be anxious about nothing)...." This Kierkegaard quotation and the passage quoted above can be taken as evidence that Kierkegaard is the original source of Sartre's doctrine of the anxiety in the face of the nothingness of absolute freedom.

Like many of the thinkers of his generation, Sartre was aware of Heidegger's interest in Kierkegaard. He notes this explicitly in a letter dated December 16, 1839: "I'm reading The Concept of Anxiety, in which there are countless things within theological terms that are obviously a bit forbidding. His influence on Heidegger is undeniable." In the same notebook mentioned above, Sartre then goes on to note a similarity between the two thinkers:

The influence upon Heidegger is clear: use of the stock phrase "to be in anxiety of nothing" is found word for word in Sein und Zeit. But it's true that for Heidegger anxiety is anxiety-at-Nothingness, which is not Nothing but, as Wahl says, "a cosmic fact against which existence stands out." Whereas, for Kierkegaard, it's a question of "a psychological anguish and a nothing that is in the mind." This nothing, in short, is possibility. Possibility that is nothing as yet, since man in the state of innocence does not yet know of what it's a possibility. But it's there, nevertheless, as a sign of freedom: "What passed by innocence as the nothing of anxiety has now entered into Adam, and here again it is a nothing—the anxious possibility of being able...as a higher form of ignorance, as a higher expression of anxiety." The last part of this passage is a quotation from The Concept of Anxiety. The point here, with respect to Kierkegaard, is the same as in the previously quoted passages. According to Sartre, Kierkegaard's view is that there are no facts but only possibilities. We realize these possibilities by means of our freedom. But since there
are no rational criteria for choosing which ones to realize; one is left with an anxiety in the face of the manifold of equally meaningless possibilities.

Again in his journals Sartre takes up the question of moral responsibility and accountability. He writes, "the more I see that men deserve war—and deserve it more, the more they wage it. It's like the sin of Adam that each individual, according to Kierkegaard, freely adopts as his own. The declaration of war, which was the fault of certain men, we adopt as our own, with our freedom." Sartre has his own account of appropriation according to which one makes the world one's own by means of one's freedom. In Sartre's extreme view, by accepting certain morally repugnant situations, one not only condones them but even makes oneself responsible for them.

Sartre's study of Kierkegaard corresponds to the period when he was writing his philosophical masterpiece Being and Nothingness, which was published in 1943 in occupied France. This work argues for the irreducibility of human freedom and authenticity and clearly bears the stamp of some of Kierkegaard's thoughts on these subjects. Here Sartre again draws primarily on The Concept of Anxiety and the account of freedom given there. At the beginning of the work he writes:

Kierkegaard describing anxiety in the face of the absent subject characterizes it as anxiety in the face of freedom. But Heidegger, whom we know to have been greatly influenced by Kierkegaard, considers anxiety instead as the apprehension of nothingness. These two descriptions of anxiety do not appear to us contradictory; on the contrary the one implies the other.

This observation is an echo from his War Diaries, where he writes, "Anxiety as Nothingness, with Heidegger? Anxiety of freedom, with Kierkegaard? In my view it's one and the same thing, for freedom is the apprehension of Nothingness in the world.\(^\text{92}\)" Sartre continues in Being and Nothingness: "First we must acknowledge that Kierkegaard is right; anxiety is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anxiety is fear before myself." According to Sartre, for Kierkegaard there is a personal or subjective dimension of anxiety that involves the self-relations and not a relation to a genuine, objective danger in the external world. This may well be what Sartre refers to in a letter dated December 21, 1939, when he writes, in reference to The Concept of Anxiety, "I also found a theory of nothingness while reading Kierkegaard.\(^\text{93}\)

Sartre thus avails himself of the old cliché of Kierkegaard as the champion of the individual in the face of Hegel's unworldly claim for the lifeless universal. Finally, there is an allusion to Kierkegaard's understanding of irony,\(^\text{94}\) but Sartre does not say enough for one to adjudicate whether or not he actually made a study of The Concept of Irony.

In his famous lecture from 1946, Existentialism is a Humanism, Sartre mentions Kierkegaard explicitly as a forerunner of existentialism. Here reference is made to Kierkegaard's analysis of the story of Abraham in Fear and Trembling, which Sartre uses as a model for his theory of radical freedom, without reasons or excuses. He writes:

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\(^9\) Sartre, L'Étre et le néant, p. 138n. (Being and Nothingness, p. 94n.)

\(^9\) Sartre, L'Être et le néant, p. 153. (The War Diaries, p. 120.)

\(^9\) Sartre, L'Être et le néant, pp. 295-6. (Being and Nothingness, pp. 239-40.)

\(^9\) Sartre, L'Être et le néant, p. 669. (Being and Nothingness, p. 580.)

This is the anxiety that Kierkegaard called "the anxiety of Abraham." You know the story: an angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son; and obedience was obligatory, if it really was an angel who had appeared and said, "Thou, Abraham, shallst sacrifice thy son." But anyone in such a case would wonder, first, whether it was indeed an angel and secondly, whether I am really Abraham. Where are the proofs? ... I shall never find any proof whatsoever; there will be no sign to convince me of it. If a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not of an angel. 

For Sartre, the upshot of this story is that Abraham illustrates the anxiety that we feel when we realize that we are constantly in positions where we are obliged to choose, but yet we ultimately have no rational criteria by which to determine our choices. We must nonetheless accept and embrace our freedom with our choices and actions.

Kierkegaard continues to be an interest for Sartre in his later works. In *Search for a Method*, which was originally printed as an article in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1957, then later as an introductory part of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and finally as an independent monograph, Sartre juxtaposes Kierkegaard to Hegel in his attempt to sketch the relation between Marxism and existentialism. Hegel is presented as the champion of knowledge and universality, while Kierkegaard is portrayed as the exponent of the individual and subjectivity. Sartre claims that in the historical development of thought, Kierkegaard represents a development:

"Kierkegaard is right: grief, need, passion, the pain of men, are brute realities which can be neither surpassed nor changed by knowledge. To be sure, Kierkegaard's religious subjectivism can with good reason be taken as the very peak of idealism; but in relation to Hegel, he marks a progress toward realism, since he insists above all on the primacy of the specifically real over thought, that the real cannot be reduced to thought."

Sartre can thus see Kierkegaard as an intermediary figure between Hegel and Marx, who also criticized Hegel's idealism and insisted on a focus on the concrete material relations. Kierkegaard is seen as anticipating Marx's emphasis on action in contrast to thinking.

There was a major conference held in Paris in 1963 organized by UNESCO on occasion of the 150-year anniversary of Kierkegaard's birth. This conference, entitled *Kierkegaard vivant*, brought together many of the major intellectuals of the period. On this occasion, Sartre presented a paper entitled "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal." This is clearly his most straightforward statement of his understanding of Kierkegaard's thought and its significance for French philosophy at the time. Here Kierkegaard is portrayed as the progeny of the individual, who fights against all attempts to reduce people to objects and patterns of history. For Sartre, Kierkegaard should not just be "an object of knowledge" for us, but rather we must also try to understand and appropriate for ourselves "the determination of his praxis." Sartre points out the interpretive paradox of trying to understand Kierkegaard today—a man who claimed that the interiority and subjectivity of another person is "always inaccessible to cognition in its strict sense." Given this, does it even make sense to try to understand Kierkegaard, and if we do, what is it that we are really understanding?

Philosophical Fragments is the Kierkegaard text that Sartre makes the point of departure for this study. Sartre refers to the doctrines of the paradox, redundancy and contemporaneity and quotes the text directly. He outlines the problem of Hegel's all-encompassing system, which seems to swallow everything in its path. In this sense Kierkegaard was, according to Sartre, aware that he would be taken up as a moment in this universalizing system. As some authors have suggested, he represents the stage of the unhappy religious consciousness, sketched in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But, for Kierkegaard, this universal knowledge is not ultimately what is important. Rather, the key for the individual is the lived truth. With a quotation from the Fragments, Sartre interprets this as a statement about freedom and autonomy:

"And so he could write, in the Fragments: "My own Untruth is something I can discover only by myself, since it is only when I have discovered it that it is discovered, even if the whole world knew of it before." But when it is discovered, my Untruth becomes, at least in the immediate, my Truth. So subjective truth exists. It is not knowledge but self-determination: it can be defined neither as an extrinsic relation of knowledge to being, nor as the internal imprint of a correspondence, nor as the indissoluble unity of a system. "Truth," he said, "is the act of freedom.""

This fits in well with Sartre's understanding of Kierkegaard as a forerunner of his own theory of radical freedom. It must, however, be said that Sartre presents this pseudonymous statement straightforwardly as Kierkegaard's own and indeed mentions nothing about the fact that this part of the text is conceived as a "thought project" in which secular Socratic knowing is sketched, only later to be contrasted to Christian knowing.


AAR 4, 223 / 15, 15.

into the system. As a single individual, “he desperately wanted to designate himself as a transhistorical absolute.”199 However, this ended with his death and the destruction of his subjectivity. Then all that remained was objective knowledge for later thinkers to appropriate. His subjectivity will continue to elude us forever. Thus, Kierkegaard represents for Sartre the paradox of “the singular universal.” He poses this paradox as a problem at the end of the essay.

Finally, Kierkegaard also appears briefly in Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason from 1960.200 At the beginning of this work Sartre dwells on some methodological considerations concerning the nature of dialectical thinking and analysis. In a footnote, he refers as follows to Kierkegaard’s concepts of the paradox and ambiguity:

Theoretical psychoanalysis simultaneously employs determinism, the dialectic, and “paradox” in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term. Ambivalence, for example, cannot now be regarded as a contradiction or exactly as Kierkegaardian ambiguity. Given the way the concept is used, one is tempted to think of a real contradiction with interpenetrating terms or, in other words, of a contradiction without opposition. In my opinion, what psychoanalysts lack is opposition, at least in certain respects (for there is dialectical conflict between the id, the superego and the ego). They have nonetheless constructed a rationality and what might be called a logic of ambiguity—which would scandalize poor Kierkegaard.201

Here Sartre appeals to Kierkegaardian concepts in a criticism of psychoanalysis. By Kierkegaard’s concept of ambiguity, Sartre refers to the analyses of the individual as a synthesis of contradictory elements such as infinity and finitude. This reference is quite casual, and the point that Sartre wishes to make concerns psychoanalysis and not Kierkegaard.

It is interesting that such a profoundly secular thinker as Sartre could be so keenly interested in the thought of such a profoundly religious thinker as Kierkegaard. Indeed, it is telling that Sartre effectively ignores the context of Kierkegaard’s account of freedom, namely, an analysis of the concept of sin. By contrast, he is keen to exploit Kierkegaard’s sense of the anxiety in the world of freedom and choice. Similarly, in his analysis of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Sartre abstracts from the very obvious religious dimension of the narrative. He is not in the least interested in the question of the obedience to a divine command or the nature of faith as Kierkegaard is; rather, for Sartre, the only real point that the story is intended to demonstrate is that Abraham has radical freedom. It is not a question about faith but rather action.

Another oddity about this appropriation is that Sartre seems to ignore the fact that Kierkegaard is an existentialist. Sartre is known for his slogan claim that “existence precedes essence” in the sense that there is no ultimate human essence, but rather our essence is fluid and mutable since we choose it freely. In Existentialism is a Humanism Sartre presents this as an attempt to provide a single unified doctrine that all those associated with the existentialist movement could sign on to. By contrast, while Kierkegaard does not speak of a fixed human essence as such, he does emphasize that humans are created beings subject to certain limiting factors, e.g., a dependence on God. It is thus strange that Sartre picks out Kierkegaard as a forerunner of the existentialist school given that he clearly could not agree to that school’s first premise, according to Sartre’s own definition of it. Finally, from these passages it is also clear that Sartre’s main philosophical point of orientation is Heidegger, and his discovery of Kierkegaard came only later. Kierkegaard is thus understood by Sartre, at least in part, not on his own but rather in terms of Heidegger’s universe of concepts.202

Albert Camus (1913–60) makes active use of Kierkegaard in his famous work The Myth of Sisyphus from 1942. There he avails himself of Kierkegaard’s analysis of the absurd and expands it from Kierkegaard’s original context as faith by virtue of the absurd to a major existential statement about the absurdity of a meaningless world. Like Sartre, Camus seems to ascribe to Kierkegaard a special role as a forerunner of the existentialist movement: “since Kierkegaard’s fatal sickness ‘that malady that leads to death with nothing else following it,’ the significant and tormenting themes of absurd thought have followed one another.”203 Also like Sartre, Camus runs through a series of existential thinkers, giving a brief account of the contribution of each. His blurb on Kierkegaard is as follows:

Of all perhaps the most engaging, Kierkegaard, for a part of his existence at least, does more than discover the absurd, he lives it. The man who writes: “the surest of stubborn silences is not to hold one’s tongue but to talk” makes sure in the beginning that no truth is absolute or can render satisfactory an existence that is impossible in itself. Don Juan of the understanding, he multiplies pseudonyms and contradictions, writes his *Edifying Discourses* at the same time as that manual of cynical spiritualism, “The Diary of the Seducer.” He refuses consolations, ethics, reliable principles. As for that,Born he feels in his heart, he is careful not to quiet its pain. On the contrary, he awakens it and, in desperate joy of a man crucified and happy to be so, he builds up piece by piece—lucidity, refusal, make-believe—a category of the man possessed. That face both tender and sneering, those pirouettes followed by a cry from the heart are the absurd spirit itself grappling with a reality beyond its comprehension. And the spiritual adventure that leads Kierkegaard to his beloved scandals begins likewise in the chaos of an experience divested of its setting and relegated to its original incoherence.204

Camus seems to take Kierkegaard to be a forerunner of the doctrine of the meaninglessness of the world, which is reflected both in his writings and in his


201 Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 117n. (Critique of Dialectical Reason, pp. 17n 18n.)

202 This has been noted before by Grimsley, “French Existentialism,” pp. 121–34.


biography. In other words, he ascribes to Kierkegaard a doctrine quite close to that of Romantic irony that Kierkegaard was so keen to criticize in The Concept of Irony.

In his most substantial discussion of Kierkegaard, Camus praises him for recognizing the paradoxical nature of faith and for focusing on despair and the absurd. On this point Camus seems somewhat more sensitive to the religious dimension in Kierkegaard’s thought than Sartre. However, according to Camus, Kierkegaard should have held fast with this view and not attempted to resolve it. The point is “not to be cured, but to live with one’s ailments.” He continues, “Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish, and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antimony of the human condition.” By embracing Christianity, Kierkegaard, according to Camus, sought an inauthentic solution to the problem of existence that he had so astutely described. Kierkegaard cannot bear the meaningfulness of existence and thus flees to an illusory comfort. Even though Kierkegaard talks about the difficulty of faith, it is still clearly a goal or ideal and what gives life meaning. By contrast, for Camus, the true existential hero is one who, like Sisyphus, can accept the absurd and the lack of meaning, and leave it at that without seeking any reconciliation. To defend his interpretation, Camus quotes extensively from Kierkegaard’s journals. In a comparison of Kierkegaard with Husserl, Camus continues his critique: “The leap does not represent an extreme danger as Kierkegaard would like it to be. The danger, on the contrary, lies in the sudden instant that precedes the leap. Being able to remain on the dizzying crests—that is to say, to remain in a dialectic with the absurd, fear, and trembling. However, even if Camus has got this part wrong, what he wants to point out is that the general wish for religious reconciliation is an illusion and a self-deception for the disaffected existential hero.”

Camus rightly notes that “antimony and paradox become criteria of the religious.” Then he goes on to expand this from what Kierkegaard calls “the sphere of subjectivity” to the world in general; Kierkegaard makes the absurd the criterion of the other world, whereas it is simply a residue of the experience of this world.” In other words, it is not just faith that is absurd but the entire universe. Here, however, one might object that Camus is using the word “absurd” in a way different from Kierkegaard’s sense. While in Kierkegaard “absurd” refers to the doctrine of the paradox and implies the contradiction of the finite and the infinite, the eternal and the temporal, Camus takes it to imply meaninglessness or nihilism.

An illuminating connection has also been suggested between Camus’ novel The Fall from 1956 and Kierkegaard’s analysis of sin in The Concept of Anxiety and despair in The Sickness unto Death. Connections are also waiting to be explored between Kierkegaard’s works and Camus’ novel, The Plague, which portrays an existential struggle against a sickness, which can be understood metaphorically, in the sense of a confrontation with despair, in the way Kierkegaard suggests.

While Kierkegaard’s influence on Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) seems to be less significant than that on Sartre or Camus, references to Kierkegaard’s works and ideas do appear here and there in Merleau-Ponty’s writings. Kierkegaard appears in the Preface to Merleau-Ponty’s magnum opus, the Phenomenology of Perception from 1945. There he is counted among the first phenomenologists. Merleau-Ponty claims that “phenomenology can be... identified as a manner or style of thinking” and that “it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as philosophy.” In this sense he can identify Kierkegaard as one of its many early practitioners: “It has been long on the way, and its adherents have discovered it in every quarter, certainly in Hegel and Kierkegaard, but equally in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.” In the body of the work he mentions Kierkegaard only a single time, where he refers in passing to Kierkegaard’s notion of objective thinking. In describing the way in which the world emerges from our perception and experiences, Merleau-Ponty writes, “I now refer to my body only as an idea, to the universe as idea, to the idea of space and the idea of time. Thus ‘objective’ thought (in Kierkegaard’s sense) is formed—being that of common sense and of science—which finally causes us to lose contact with perceptual experience, of which it is nevertheless the outcome and the natural sequel.” Here Merleau-Ponty simply refers to Kierkegaard’s distinction, from the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, between subjective and objective thinking, intended to distinguish the sphere of science and logic from that of religious faith. Unlike Kierkegaard, who consistently insists on the absolute separation, irreducibility, and incommensurability of these two spheres, Merleau-Ponty regards them as being necessarily related and in a dialectical relation. The analogy to the religious sphere of subjective knowing in Kierkegaard would be the immediate phenomenological experience in Merleau-Ponty.

In an article entitled “The Battle over Existentialism,” which appeared in Les Temps Modernes in 1945, Merleau-Ponty refers to Kierkegaard’s conception of faith in passing. In reference to the Catholic critics of existentialism, he writes:

Perhaps they are right in the end, when all is said and done. Perhaps the only way to sustain Christianity as theology is on the basis of Thomism, perhaps the Pascalian

113 Merleau-Ponty, Phénoméne de la perception, p. ii. (Phenomenology of Perception, p. viii.)
114 Merleau Ponty, Phénoméne de la perception, p. 86. (Phenomenology of Perception, p. 71.)
Although he deviates from Sartre's assessment in some regards, he agrees with him in the view that the movement of the time is one of existentialism. He writes:

"The term 'existentialism' has come to designate almost exclusively the philosophical movement which arose in France after 1945 as a result of the philosophical investigation that followed the Second World War. It is a name for a certain type of philosophical tradition, long and complicated, since it is derived from a rich heritage of philosophy, from the work of Sartre, Husserl, Heidegger, and others.

In this essay, I will examine the work of Merleau-Ponty, a philosopher who, while acknowledged as one of the most important figures of existentialism, is often overlooked in discussions of the movement. Merleau-Ponty's work, however, provides valuable insights into the nature of existence and the human condition.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a form of existentialism, or as he refers to it, "a philosophy of existence." He argues that existence is not simply a matter of being, but of experiencing the world through the body. This body, he says, is not仅仅是存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。这身体，他声称，不是简单地存在，而是通过身体体验世界。
books during his time as a soldier and subsequently as a prisoner of war. In a letter dated December 21, 1840, she reports that she has “heaps of books by Kierkegaard” that she intends to read over the Christmas holidays.126 Two days later she writes, again to Sartre, “I’m busy reading Kierkegaard and Wahr’s essays on him — it really interests me.”127 On December 26, she informs Sartre that she “read The Concept of Anxiety at the Café de Flore.”128 Her interest in this work was doubtless awakened at least in part by Sartre’s eager recommendation of it.

De Beauvoir uses Kierkegaard as a source of inspiration for her central work on ethics, The Ethics of Ambiguity from 1947.129 In this work she claims that there lie a number of fundamental ambiguities in human existence, such as mind and body or rational and animal, that traditional philosophical systems have attempted to eliminate in order to arrive at a single consistent principle. In this context she rails Kierkegaard as a forerunner of existentialism for his identification of this ambiguity and his insistence on it; he resists capitulating to the urge to reduce the ambiguous terms to a single principle. She writes, “It was by affirming the irreducible character of ambiguity that Kierkegaard opposed himself to Hegel, and it is by ambiguity that, in our own generation, Sartre in Being and Nothingness, fundamentally defined man.”130 Here she clearly refers to Kierkegaard’s thesis of human beings as a synthesis of the eternal and the temporal, finite and infinite, etc. She has no hesitation in identifying Kierkegaard with Sartre’s magnum opus, which was of course the defining work of the French existential movement.

Towards the end of the book she refers to Kierkegaard again by way of illustration. Like Sartre, she refers to Kierkegaard’s analysis of Abraham and Isaac in Fear and Trembling:

Kierkegaard has said that what distinguishes the Pharisee from the genuinely moral man is that the former considers his anguish as a sure sign of his virtue; from the fact that he asks himself, “Am I Abraham?” he concludes, “I am Abraham”; but morality resides in the painlessness of an indefinite questioning. The problem we are posing is not the same as that of Kierkegaard; the important thing is to know whether, in given conditions, Isaac must be killed or not. But we also think that what distinguishes the tyrant from the man of good will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas

Here she refers to Kierkegaard’s discussion from Fear and Trembling in order to illustrate the correct relation to a cause or a given end. Critical of those who wholeheartedly and without hesitation embrace nationalism or Stalinism, de Beauvoir argues that Kierkegaard has here provided us with a correct model of the proper relation to such ends; one must always seek to preserve the ambiguity, negativity, and tension involved in them and keep them present before one’s eyes, always questioning and always doubting. Thus, de Beauvoir takes Kierkegaard’s criticism of compliant Christianity as a model for any kind of authentic affiliation with a given end and subsequent action.

She refers to Kierkegaard several times in her classic statement of feminist theory, The Second Sex from 1949.131 In her account of the “facts and myths” of women, she quotes Kierkegaard directly as follows: “To be a woman,” says Kierkegaard in Stages on Life’s Way, “is something so strange, so confused, so complicated, that no one predicate comes near expressing it and that the multiple predicates that one would like to use are so contradictory that only a woman could put up with it.”129 She refers to the beginning of Victor Eremia’s speech from “In Vino Veritas.”131 Her comment on this is simply, “This comes from not regarding woman positively, such as she seems to herself to be, but negatively, such as she appears to man.”132 She uses this to begin an explanation of the concept of the woman as the Other. Kierkegaard (or his pseudonymous work) is thus used as an example of a form of sexism. She quotes from the same work in more detail later in the analysis:

“Through woman,” writes Kierkegaard in In Vino Veritas, “ideality enters into life, and what would man be without her? Many a man has become a genius thanks to some young girl... but none has ever become a genius thanks to the young girl who gave him her hand in marriage...” “Woman makes a man productive in ideality through a negative relation... Negative relations with woman can make us infinitely positive relations with woman make a man finite for the most part.” Which is to say that woman is necessary in so far as she remains an idea into which man projects his own transcendence; but that she is insidious as an objective reality, existing in and for herself. Kierkegaard holds that by refusing to marry his fiancée he established the only valid relation to woman.

130 de Beauvoir, Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, p. 15. (The Ethics of Ambiguity, pp. 9, 10.)
131 de Beauvoir, Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, pp. 186–7. (The Ethics of Ambiguity, pp. 133–4.)
132 de Beauvoir, Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, pp. 186–7. (The Ethics of Ambiguity, pp. 133–4.)
135 SKS 6, 57–8. / SLW, 56. The Hongs render this passage somewhat more favorably to Kierkegaard: “To be a woman is something so special, so mixed, so compounded that there are no predicates to describe it, and the many predicates, if they were used, contradicted one another in a manner not a woman can tolerate.”
And he is right in a sense; namely that the myth of woman set up as the infinite Other entails also its opposite.\(^ \text{133} \)

She here again refers to a passage from Victor Eremita’s speech from “In Vino Veritas.”\(^ \text{134} \) She connects Kierkegaard’s biography more or less straightforwardly with what is said in his pseudonymous work.

De Beauvoir refers to Kierkegaard again in her insightful analysis of the mystique of the feminine. She writes:

"Of all these myths, none is more firmly anchored in masculine hearts than that of the feminine mystique. It has numerous advantages. And first of all it permits an easy explanation of all that appears inexplicable: the man who ‘does not understand’ a woman is happy to substitute an objective resistance for a subjective deficiency of mind; instead of admitting his ignorance, he perceives the presence of a ‘mystery’ outside himself: an abjad, indeed, that flatters laziness and vanity at once. A heart smitten with love thus avoids many disappointments: if the loved one’s behavior is capricious, her remarks stupid, then the mystery serves to excuse it all. And finally, thanks again to the mystery, that negative relation is perpetuated which seemed to Kierkegaard indefinitely preferable to positive possession: in the company of a living enigma man remains alone—alone with his dreams, his hopes, his fears, his love, his vanity.\(^ \text{135} \)

In the absence of any textual reference, this appears to be an allusion to Kierkegaard’s biography. De Beauvoir seems to ascribe to him the view that Kierkegaard found himself unable to marry Regine Olesen due to the fact that he was unable to penetrate the mystery of her person, and that he thus preferred to accept this mystery as an outward phenomenon than to ascribe to himself some role in it.

In the second volume of The Second Sex, she returns to Stages on Life’s Way. In the context of a discussion of the relation of love and marriage, de Beauvoir raises the question of the possibility, raised by Kierkegaard, of ever reconciling the two. She writes:

"To reconcile marriage and love is such a tour de force that nothing less than divine intervention is required for success; this is the solution reached through devious ways by Kierkegaard. Love, he says, is spontaneous; marriage is a decision; the amorous inclination, however, is to be aroused by marriage or by the decision to wish to marry. Something so mysterious as to be explained only by the divine action paradoxically occurs in virtue of reflection and decision, and the whole process must be simultaneous. This is to say that to love is not to marry and that it is hard to see how love can become duty. But the paradox does not dismay Kierkegaard. He agrees that ‘reflection is the destroying angel of spontaneity,’ but says that the decision is a new spontaneity based on ethical principles; it is a ‘religious conception’ which ‘should open the way to amorous inclinations’ and protect it from all danger. A real husband, he says, ‘is a miracle.’ As for the wife, reason is not for her, she is without ‘reflection’; she passes from the

\( \text{134} \) SKS 6, 60 / S.W. 59.
He gives an interpretation of Kierkegaard's account of evil in _The Concept of Anxiety_ and _The Sickness unto Death_. This is a somewhat technical, text-oriented piece. Unlike Sartre, Ricoeur is sensitive to the theological dimension of Kierkegaard's thought, in particular his account of sin. At the end of this article Ricoeur raises the question of what it means to philosophize after Kierkegaard, and this is made the topic for the second article.

In this essay, "Philosopher après Kierkegaard,"144 he explores for the first time in a more nuanced manner the complex relations between Kierkegaard's thought and the later French and German existentialists. Ricoeur was among the first to call into question Kierkegaard's association with the existentialists and the notion of a homogenous and unified school of thought called "existentialism." According to him, Kierkegaard represents an original alternative kind of philosophy, which Ricoeur refers to as a criticism of existential possibilities. With this separation of Kierkegaard from these later appropriations, Ricoeur opened the door for more independent studies of Kierkegaard on his own terms.

VI. Poststructuralism and Late Phenomenology

Kierkegaard's writings have also been claimed by the poststructuralists. Many of the features of his thought seem in different ways to anticipate some of the central themes of that movement. For example, his use of pseudonyms as a way to undermine his own authority as an author and to create a polyphony of authorial voices has been seen as an anticipation of the so-called death of the author, the defacement of meaning, and the relativity of interpretation. Moreover, Kierkegaard's interest in the concept of irony also finds resonance in a number of poststructuralist theorists. These interpreters tend to focus on the disruption of straightforward communication implied in Kierkegaard's discussion of irony. In this context, his writings become a springboard for investigations into the destabilization of meaning and the difficulty of univocal communication.

One of the leading poststructuralist theorists, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) has long maintained an interest in Kierkegaard's writings. His most intensive encounter with Kierkegaard appears in his late work, _Donner la Mort_ from 1992.145 The third chapter of this book contains a rich analysis of the notion of sacrifice as illustrated by the analysis of Abraham and Isaac in _Fear and Trembling_. Here Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard about the ultimate incomprehensibility of the absolute and the divine, which transcends the normal sphere of ethics. This mystery of the divine other nonetheless enjoins one to act, and this is action with "fear and trembling" since one has no way to understand or justify one's actions.

The influential psychologist Jacques Lacan (1901–81) also makes use of some important Kierkegaardian themes.149 In a handful of texts he examines Kierkegaard's concept of repetition, comparing it to the same concept in Freud.144 In one of his seminars, after an account of "The Unconscious and Repetition," Lacan warmly recommends Kierkegaard's book to his auditors as follows: "I would ask you to re-read Kierkegaard's essay on Repetition, so dazzling in its clairvoyance and ironic play, so truly Mozartian in the way, so reminiscent of Don Giovanni, it abolishes the mirages of love."146 For Lacan, this concept in the context of psychology concerns how one is condemned to repeat certain behavioral patterns that one has learned from early on. In this context he talks about Kierkegaard's account of hereditary sin from _The Concept of Anxiety_. Each of us repeats or appropriates the sin of Adam in his or her own way. There is no exact repetition but rather always an element of difference since each person sins in his or her own unique manner. So also for Lacan the father, for example, establishes forms of behavior which the children repeat in different ways in their own lives. In another seminar Lacan appeals to Kierkegaard's distinction between recollection and repetition, again in comparison with Freud. He writes:

Freud distinguishes two completely different structurations of human experience—one which, along with Kierkegaard, I called ancient, based on reminiscence, presupposing agreement, harmony between man and the world of his objects, which means that he recognizes them, because in some way, he has always known them—and, on the contrary, the conquest, the structuration of the world through the effort of labor, along the path of repetition.146

While Lacan is not interested in a detailed exegesis of Kierkegaard's texts, he clearly makes active use of a handful of Kierkegaardian concepts which he puts into his own psychoanalytic context.

Another Francophone philosopher to be captivated by Kierkegaard's account in _Fear and Trembling_ is the Lithuanian-born Emmanuel Lévinas (1905–95).  

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The philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) refers to Kierkegaard's concept of repetition, which he compares with some of Nietzsche's concepts, such as the eternal return.

Finally, Deleuze returns to Kierkegaard's concept of repetition, which he compares with some of Nietzsche's concepts, such as the eternal return.

Deleuze also alludes to Kierkegaard's couple of times. He writes:

"In Difference and Repetition..."
of the Nachlaß for understanding Kierkegaard's thought. This chapter is thus one of the earliest to treat the journals as an independent subject of investigation. Here Blanchot touches on a number of themes regarding both the author, such as the pseudonyms, the theory of communication, the Kierkegaardian dialectic, and Kierkegaard's biography. With regard to the latter, Blanchot does not really get beyond the well-known clichés about Regine and Kierkegaard's relationship to his father.

Blanchot returns to some of these biographical elements in L'Espace littéraire from 1955. He takes up Kafka's interest in the story Kierkegaard's engagement, due to the former's own failed love story: "Kafka's story and the story of Kierkegaard's engagement have been compared, by Kafka himself among others. But the conflict is different. Kierkegaard can renounce Regine; he can renounce the ethical. Access to the religious level is not thereby compromised; rather it is made possible." The decision to discontinue the engagement is interpreted as an act of sacrifice and compared to the Abraham and Isaac story as a test of faith. In a chapter on suicide and death, Blanchot refers in passing to Kierkegaard's title, The Sickness unto Death.

In 1977 Sylviane Agacinski (b. 1945) published her influential work Aparté. Conceptions et morts de Sören Kierkegaard. One of the main figures in feminist readings of Kierkegaard, Agacinski argues that Kierkegaard's mother, about whom he says nothing in his journals or published writings, represents an other, something apart. She is the secret to the authorship that Kierkegaard wishes never to be revealed. This interesting and creative reading does not purport the matter by means of source-work research, which could potentially strengthen the argument substantially if indeed source-work evidence for it could be unearthed. This work was supplemented with a new one in 1996 under the title Critique de l'égocentrisme: l'événement de l'autre.

The phenomenologist Michel Henry (1922-2002) was also profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard. In particular, Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual and subjectivity was defining for Henry's work. His book C'est moi la vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme from 1966 shows signs of a Kierkegaardian conception of Christianity. Here he outlines the subjective nature of Christian belief in contrast to forms of objective knowing. He further explores a number of

paradoxes of Christianity. Henry also makes use of Kierkegaard's account of the Fall and anxiety in his Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair from 2000.

VII. French Kierkegaard Scholarship Today

Kierkegaard studies in France have developed into a specialist field over the last few decades. In contrast to the French existentialists or postmodernists, who used Kierkegaard as a springboard in the service of a different intellectual program, the main profiles in actual French Kierkegaard scholarship have much of their intellectual identity bound up in Kierkegaard himself. While these scholars are not so well known internationally as the existentialists and postmodernists, they are, generally speaking, more thorough and careful readers of Kierkegaard's texts. They are in general more interested in understanding what Kierkegaard wrote than in appropriating his thought for another cause.

Through a series of works dating back to the 1960, Jacques Colette has been one of the leading Kierkegaard experts in France. In 1964 appeared his introductory text Kierkegaard. La difficile d'être chrétien. Présentation et choix de textes. Four years later he published his Kierkegaard, Christien incognito. While his early work focused primarily on the religious dimension of Kierkegaard's writings, Colette's later work took up Kierkegaard's philosophy. In 1972 appeared his Histoire et absolu, essai sur Kierkegaard, which examines the relation between human existence and religious faith. Here Colette treats primarily the Proscript as well as the other main pseudonymous works, including The Concept of Anxiety, The Sickness unto Death, and the Fragments. Finally, in 1994 he published his Kierkegaard et la non-philosophie.

The works of Nelly Vaillanex (d. 2005) have also played an important role in the French Kierkegaard research. Her most notable contributions include L'Atente de la foi from 1967 and L'Unique devant Dieu from 1974. Also worthy of note is her two-volume Essai Kierkegaard from 1979, which was a dissertation at the Sorbonne.

Another important figure in more recent Kierkegaard studies is Henri-Bernard Vergote (1931-96). The main representative of Quellenforschung in France, Vergote published his first main work in 1982 under the title Sens et répétition: essai sur

182 Blanchot, L'Espace littéraire, p. 57; The Space of Literature, p. 61.
published his work on Kierkegaard's ethics, Kierkegaard: Existence et éthique. This book also explores many of Kierkegaard's most difficult concepts such as indirect communication, the paradox, and passion. Clair has recently returned to his interests in Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms in his monograph from 2005, Kierkegaard et autour. Another prolific author in the Francophone literature is David Brézis (b. 1947). Since the beginning of the 1990s he has produced a series of important works on Kierkegaard's thought. In 1991 appeared his Temps et présence: essai sur la conceptualité kierkegaardienne. Brézis is one of the main Francophone writers interested in the constellation of problems surrounding Kierkegaard and femininism. In 1999 he published Kierkegaard et les figures de la paternité, which was followed in 2001 by Kierkegaard et le féminin. Most recently Brézis has published a work on Kierkegaard's theory of subjectivity under the title Kierkegaard ou la subjectivité en miroir.

Also of interest are a series of volumes of proceedings from the various conferences and seminars, which have taken place with some regularity over the past several decades. The forerunner of these more recent conferences was the aforementioned event organized by UNESCO in 1963, Kierkegaard vivant, which included figures such as Heidegger, Sartre, Jaspers, and Marcel. From September 8 to 15, 1966, there took place in Copenhagen a conference, entitled “Kierkegaard et la Philosophie Contemporaine,” which featured a number of Danish and foreign participants. The proceedings of this conference, which was hosted by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, were printed in the Danish Yearbook of Philosophy in 1971. In 1997 the journal Kairós published a special issue with the proceedings from a joint Danish-French colloquium on Kierkegaard that took place in Toulouse from November 15 to 16, 1995. Jacques Caron edited a volume of proceedings from a conference entitled Kierkegaard aujourd'hui, which took place at the Sorbonne in 1996. From November 26 to 27, 1999, the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen hosted a Francophone seminar in Copenhagen.

151 Kierkegaard et la Philosophie Contemporaine, special number of Danish Yearbook of Philosophy, vol. 8, Copenhagen: Munksgaard 1971.
152 Kierkegaard et la Philosophie Contemporaine, special number of Danish Yearbook of Philosophy, vol. 8, Copenhagen: Munksgaard 1971.
Three of the lectures from that seminar, given by Jacques Lafarge, Jacques Colette, and François Bousquet were subsequently published in the Centre’s Kierkegaard Studies. Yearbook in 2000. In 2005 there was an international colloquium, which took place at the Maison du Danemark in Paris. This event was organized by the French Kierkegaard Society and had as its theme “Kierkegaard et la critique du religieux.”

Another part of the French philosophical landscape is a number of both scholarly and semi-popular intellectual journals and magazines. As the interest in Kierkegaard has increased, these journals have occasionally dedicated a special issue to him. The journal Le Table Rondé dedicated an issue to Kierkegaard in 1955 on the one hundredth anniversary of his death. This issue contained some excerpts from Kierkegaard’s journals and several articles of secondary literature. In 1963, the centennial year of Kierkegaard’s birth, a special number of the Lausanne-based journal Revue de théologie et de philosophie was dedicated to Kierkegaard. This issue included the two aforementioned articles by Ricoeur as well as three other pieces. In 1979 the journal Les Études Philosophiques published a special issue dedicated to Kierkegaard. This work contains eight articles dedicated to Kierkegaard, three of which are authored by Danish scholars. The journal Obliques published another special issue in 1981. It includes articles from leading French and Danish Kierkegaard scholars such as Henri-Bernard Vergote, André Clair,Henning Fenger, and Gregor Malantschuk. In 1989 there appeared a special issue of Les Cahiers de Philosophie, entitled Kierkegaard: vingt-cinq études. This collection features both new and reprinted material from Danish and French scholars. In 2006 a special issue of the journal Nordique was dedicated to Kierkegaard’s religious thinking. Most recently in 2007 the popular Magazine Littéraire published a special issue on Kierkegaard. Although this journal contains articles from recognized Kierkegaard scholars such as Jacques Colette and Jacques Lafarge, it regrettably continues to perpetuate the long-standing myth of Kierkegaard as a dandy.

The most recent major development in French Kierkegaard studies is the publication in 2007 of the first volume of Kierkegaard’s journals and notebooks in French, Journaux et cahiers de notes. Journaux AA-DD. This volume is the first of an ambitious and long-planned French edition of Kierkegaard’s Nachlaß, based on the new Danish edition, Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter, produced by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre. This new French translation is the collaborative work of Else-Marie Jacquet-Tisseau and Anne-Marie Finnemann. This edition will doubtless help to open up the new Danish edition to the Francophone world, where it has until now made little impact.

Kierkegaard studies in France represents one of the major traditions of reception, rivaling the German and Anglophone reception. In contrast to those other traditions, Kierkegaard has played a significant role in the work of many mainstream French philosophers and thinkers to this day. While there was a time when one could say this about the German reception, that period is for the most part long gone (although Kierkegaard remains important for some contemporary German philosophers such as Michael Theunissen). Kierkegaard has never been a welcome figure in mainstream Anglophone philosophy, where he has long been marginalized. Thus, one can say that Kierkegaard’s writings are still very much alive in France, as they continue to inspire new generations of French thinkers.

In addition to this creative use of Kierkegaard’s writings by productive French thinkers, as has been seen, there has also developed in recent years a specialized secondary literature dedicated to Kierkegaard in the Francophone world. This literature can be favorably compared with that found in other countries, such as Germany or the U.S.A., where there are strong and established traditions of Kierkegaard studies. However, in contrast to other traditions of Kierkegaard reception, where there has been a degree of international cooperation, the French reception has been more inward-looking, preferring to be in dialogue with other French scholars instead of extending their work to include German, Anglophone, or Danish scholarship. It is to be hoped that in the coming years with the growth of globalization that the French researchers will become better integrated into the larger international community of Kierkegaard scholars. The French world of Kierkegaard studies has much to teach the rest of the world, and it would itself be profoundly enriched in turn by better contacts, particularly to the Danish, German, and Anglophone research.

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by Katalin Nun

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III. Secondary Literature on Kierkegaard’s Reception in France


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Index of Persons

Aalders, Willem (1870–1945), Dutch theologian, 279.
Aall, Anton (1867–1943), Norwegian professor of philosophy, 155, 156, 160.
Aastrup, K.L., 41.
Adler, Adolph Peter (1812–69), Danish philosopher and theologian, 330.
Adorno, Theodor W. (1903–69), German philosopher, 89, 90, 91, 162, 362–8, 376, 386.
Agacinski, Sylvaine, 454.
Ahlgren, Stig (1910–96), Swedish translator of Kierkegaard, 175.
Ahlman, Erik (1892–1952), Finnish philosopher, 205.
Alberthsson, Eirikur, 222.
Aldworth, A.S., 250.
Allen, E.L., 247, 248, 249.
Alma, A., 280.
Andersen, Hans Christian (1805–75), Danish poet, novelist and writer of fairy tales, 3, 45, 68, 92, 162.
Andersen, Lars Erslev, 88.
Andersen, Vilhelm (1864–1953), Danish literary scholar, 8, 49.
Andrensen, Victor (1920–2000), Danish journalist, 82.
Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), Scholastic philosopher, 59.
Appeldoorn, Johan (1861–1945), Dutch theologian, 278.
Aquinas, Thomas (ca. 1225–74), Scholastic philosopher and theologian, 283, 371, 378, 432, 433, 443.
Aristotle, 354.
Arnason, Gunnar, 226, 227.
Arnason, Kristjan, 227, 228.
Arnason, Vilhjálmur, 225, 227, 228.

Athanasius (ca. 295–373), Patrician author, bishop of Alexandria, 22, 36.
Augustine of Hippo (354–430), church father, 22, 36, 343.
Baggesen, Jens (1764–1826), Danish poet, 203.
Bain, John A., 248, 249.
Bakhtin, Mikhail (1895–1975), Russian philosopher and literary critic, 260.
Balbhar, Hans Urs von (1905–88), Swiss Catholic theologian, 378.
Barfod, Hans Peter (1834–92), Danish jurist and newspaper editor, editor Kierkegaard’s Efterladte Paver, 10, 11, 12, 24, 26, 28, 156, 163.
Barger, Hendrikus, 276.
Baron von Hugel, Friedrich (1852–1925), Austrian Catholic writer, 244, 245.
Barth, Karl (1886–1968), Swiss Protestant theologian, 34, 39, 51, 225, 238, 243–9 passim, 252, 264, 279, 334–9, 342, 373, 374, 376, 386, 427.
Barthes, Roland (1915–80), French philosopher and critic, 89.
Bäth, Albert (dates unknown), German Protestant pastor and theologian, 21, 274, 275, 314–6, 319, 321, 324, 331, 386.
Beck, Andreas (1816–71), Danish Protestant pastor and theologian, 310, 311, 313, 386.
Beck, Johann Tobias (1804–78), German Protestant theologian, 314, 316.
Beck, Steen, 279.
Behrendt, Paul, 90.
Contents

List of Contributors vii
Preface ix
Acknowledgements xiii
List of Abbreviations xv

PART I NORTHERN EUROPE

Denmark:
The Permanent Reception—150 Years of Reading Kierkegaard
Steen Tillberg 3

Norway:
"You Have No Truth Onboard!" Kierkegaard's Influences on Norway
Thor Arvid Dybørd 121

Sweden:
Kierkegaard's Reception in Swedish Philosophy, Theology, and
Contemporary Literary Theory
Sanna Hjerström-Lappalainen and Lars-Erik Hjerström-Lappalainen 173

Finland:
The Reception of Kierkegaard in Finland
Sami Kyttäinen 197

Iceland:
"Neglect and Misunderstanding": The Reception of Kierkegaard in Iceland
Víðar Ingimars 219

PART II WESTERN EUROPE

Great Britain:
From "Prophet of the Now" to Postmodern Ironist (and after)
George Pattison 237
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