

## Kierkegaard's Discovery of the Degrees of Freedom in Human Action

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### ABSTRACT

*Kierkegaard's view on human action is based on indeterminist foundations, approaching individual behavior as choice, alternatives of action as well as degrees of freedom in the present and for the future. Determinism ex post – indeterminism ex ante. His rejection of Hegelian macro determinism and teleology anticipates 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution in the social sciences, namely game theory.*

**Keywords:** *Kierkegaard's alternatives of action, degrees of freedom, voluntarism in the present and for the future, von Wright.*

### INTRODUCTION

Soren Kierkegaard is today looked upon with concepts from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How do we establish that a philosopher is “similar” to another thinker? Kierkegaard is classified with J.P. Sartre, which is very misleading, given Sartre's endorsement of a certain type of Communism. Kierkegaard is put together with F. Nietzsche, which is simply erroneous, given the latter's determinism: “eternal recurrent”.

So, what or whom is Kierkegaard similar to? Where to place him: existentialism, Christianity. Indeterminism, skepticism, etc.?

It would perhaps be impossible to write the history of human thought without labels for movements or schools, but one must be cautious about lumping scholars together. Kierkegaard has nothing in common with Sartre's endorsement of Soviet Union. And one may even question whether “existentialism” says much about the Dane, as it is a vague label for scholars and authors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Kierkegaard found no school of philosophy or theology and had not memorable students to elaborate his ideas. He was the perfect loner with one distinctive mark, the rejection of Hegelianism, right or left. What is original with Kierkegaard is not his highly emotional Christianity or his peculiar relationship with the opposite sex, especially his failed engagement to Regine Olsen. Instead, his importance to

Western philosophy is to be found in three tenets, to be discussed below:

- The Idea of Individual Choice;
- The Asymmetry between the Past and the Future;
- The distinction between Objectivity and Subjectivity.

### KIERKEGAARD'S TEXTS

Born in 1813, Kierkegaard enjoyed only a short period of hectic publishing, between 1843 and 1855, when death stopped him/ His texts include lengthy books and shorter booklets or pamphlets besides lots of occasional newspaper publishing and personal correspondence as well as a diary. Using pseudonyms often has raised the problem of who is speaking in the books or booklets.

Sometimes this may be confusing, as the text is sometimes a dialogue for and against the position that the pseudonym is presenting. In general, Kierkegaard is not easy reading, as he tends to enter into long discussion for and against an argument. Here, I will focus upon the following texts: Either – Or (1843) and Unpublished Unscientific Manuscript (1846), where his three most important tenets, in my view, are presented.

In the other books or booklets, one may find several interesting discussions, for instance about dread, fear and trembling as well as the separation between religion as institution against

religion as faith. But his high ranking among philosophers stems from these three tenets.

### DECISION, ALTERNATIVES OF ACTION AND DEGREES OF FREEDOM

In political economy, one encounters very often the concept of the alternatives of action. In fact, policy analysis is often the enquiry into the set of alternatives in a policy area, spelling out the consequences of each alternative as well as their pros and cons. In the natural sciences, one does not find something similar to this framework of enquiry into action alternatives or possibilities.

The more alternatives of action there are, the higher the degrees of freedom in behavior. Real alternatives of action entails degree of freedom, i.e. action must be unforced or voluntary. When there is only one course of action, the behavior is deterministic. Indeterminism is the admission of alternatives of action, or degrees of freedom.

In game theory, these concepts form the foundation for the theory of choice, or rational decision-making. The theory of *choice* is a micro approach to individual behavior that is completely at odds with macro deterministic approaches to social systems. Here, we have the opposition between Kierkegaard and Hegel.

In political theory, the problem of free will in individual behavior created lots of confusion, up until Kierkegaard. In the ancient philosophies like Epicurism and Stoicism, determinism was the main line, but elements of free will had to be recognized, creating lots of confusion. During the medieval period, the question of the freedom of individual behavior was intensely debated on a religious ground of the condition for redemption, i.e. simple predestination against double predestination. Erasmus of Rotterdam became famous for his defense of free will against Luther and Calvin.

In modern secular political philosophy, the adherents of determinism are many: Hobbes, Spinoza, Holbach, Helvetius, etc. Kant tried a double solution "two kingdoms", reserving determinism for nature and indeterminism for human behavior. The macro philosophies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are all deterministic, like Schopenhauer, Hegel and Marx. Even voluntaristic Nietzsche endorsed determinism.

It appears that the strict determinism of e.g. Hobbes and Spinoza is contradicted in their own theoretical constructs. Thus, Hobbes claims that human beings are driven by their mundane motivation to a natural state of "omnium bellum

contra omnes". But then he posits a decision to create a grand contract for peace and moreover Hobbes says that there is a choice between monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. This choice is based on a deliberation by those making the covenant and it is resolved by Hobbes himself in favour of monarchy, on very shaky theoretical grounds. Is this determinism?

Similarly, the hard core determinist Spinoza enters several contradictions in his *Political Treatise*, where he moves from a Hobbesian state of nature, motivation driven by enlightened egoism, often brutal, to an extended deliberation about the choice of the best "dominion" or "commonwealth" with Hobbes. "Best state" here means peace and the welfare of citizens. Spinoza makes a lengthy enquiry into a number of crucial decisions about various forms of monarchy, of aristocracy and democracy, favouring the latter on principal-agent reasons. Determinism?

### "DETERMINISM" AND "INDETERMINISM"

Of course, the concept of determinism is ambiguous, as different connotations have been suggested. The term "indeterminism" is even more complex and perhaps incoherent.

In Collins English Dictionary, we find a standard definition of "determinism":

"Also called: necessitarianism

the philosophical doctrine that all events including human actions and choices are fully determined by preceding events and states of affairs, and so that freedom of choice is illusory."

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/determinism>

One finds several other definitions of this often employed term, as when in physics strict determinism is contrasted with probabilism, particle level indeterminism and chaos states. Here, I deal only with determinism in the sense above and "indeterminism" is the opposite theory, confined to human affairs.

### EITHER - OR

Here, we must bring forth Kierkegaard. His great achievement is to hand down the first comprehensive analysis of human deliberation and choice, in opposition to German metaphysics, right-wing or left-wing or Schopenhauer's grandiose pessimism.

The understanding of Kierkegaard's philosophy of action has been severely hampered by associating him with a French Marxist like J.P. Sartre as well as the tendency to analyze his life as an entire Freudian neurosis towards one woman (Garff, 1994). This is just not pertinent to the case. His first book – Either – Or (1843) – is one of the absolute masterpieces in Western philosophy, to be followed up with stunning books or booklets on the dimensions of choice: anxiety, remorse, fear, trembling, subjectivity-objectivity, etc. We make a few quotations from Either – Or:

Now in case a man were able to maintain himself upon the pinnacle of the instant of choice, in case he could cease to be a man, in case he were in his inmost nature only an airy thought, in case personality meant nothing more than to be a kobold, which takes part, indeed, in the movements but nevertheless remains unchanged ; in case such were the situation, it would be foolish to say that it might ever be too late for a man to choose, for in a deeper sense there could be no question of a choice. The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not choose it withers away in consumption. (Kierkegaard, 1944:138)

Here, Kierkegaard creates a solid foundation for the analysis of human behavior from the micro perspective, anticipating the perspective of 20<sup>th</sup> century game theory. He had visited Berlin several times, but there he found only macro metaphysics in the lectures of prominent Germans. His originality is high:

You will perceive also in what I have just been saying how essentially my view of choice differs from yours (if you can properly be said to have any view), for yours differs precisely in the fact that it prevents -cogitation involved in weighing the alternatives, not on account of the multiplicity of thoughts which attach themselves to every link in the chain, but rather because there is danger afoot, danger that the next instant it may not be equally in my power to choose, that something already has been lived which must be lived over again. For to think that for an instant one can keep one's personality a blank, or that strictly speaking one can break off and bring to a halt the course of the personal life, is a delusion. The personality is already interested in the choice before one chooses, and when the choice is postponed the personality chooses unconsciously.... (Kierkegaard, 1944: 138)

The emphasis upon choice has a tremendous theoretical force, with lots of implications that Kierkegaard studied in the next-coming books. We must ask what when the distinction either – or matters for human affairs. Kierkegaard replies: *the future*.

### ASYMMETRY BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

The doctrine of indeterminism or voluntarism is criticized for harbouring unscientific notions like “*causa sui*” or events that lack conditions completely. Let us quote from The Information Philosopher:

“The core idea of indeterminism is closely related to the idea of causality. Indeterminism for some philosophers is an event without a cause (the ancient *causa sui*. But we can have an adequate causality without strict determinism, the “hard” determinism which implies complete predictability of events and only one possible future. We can call this “adequate determinism.”

<http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/indeterminism.html>

In indeterminism revised, the focus is not upon “*causa sui*” but upon choice, alternative of action and degrees of freedom in individual decisions. This framework, elaborated in modern game theory, calls for a distinction between the past, which cannot be changed, and the present-future, where choice is feasible.

In Either – Or, Kierkegaard already anticipates this well-known distinction: between the present and the future from an action point of view:

As truly as there is a future, just so truly is there an either/or. (Kierkegaard, 1944: 146)

However, the famous Kierkegaard distinction is spelled out more sharply in his Journals/Notebooks, from which we render this quotation:

“It is really true what philosophy tells us, that life must be understood backwards. But with this, one forgets the second proposition, that it must be lived forwards. A proposition which, the more it is subjected to careful thought, the more it ends up concluding precisely that life at any given moment cannot really ever be fully understood; exactly because there is no single moment where time stops completely in order for me to take position [to do this]: going backwards.”

**NOTE:**Kierkegaard, *Journalen JJ:167* (1843), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*,

Copenhagen, 1997--, volume 18, page 306. <http://homepage.math.uiowa.edu/~jorgen/kierkegaardquotesource.html>

This distinction, first made by Kierkegaard has a strong bearing upon the solution of the paradox of determinism versus indeterminism. What he suggests is in reality some kind of *ex post determinism* and *ex ante indeterminism*, as a solution of the conundrum of causality and free will. For the past holds that one could not have acted differently, determinism, but for the future there are degrees of freedom when decision is voluntary, meaning a choice based upon deliberation.

The concept of causality covers laws and probabilities, where the concept of choice includes opportunities, mistakes, calculation and foresight. Von Wright equates this distinction with explanation versus understanding (von Wright, 2011). He argues that explanation as a covering law approach in the Hempel tradition is only appropriate for the natural sciences. In the human sciences, the relevant framework is understanding, focusing upon a decision "what to do". Von Wright's separation between law-like explanations on the one hand and rationality understanding has given rise to a large debate, paralleling that between determinism and indeterminism.

The von Wright thesis that one understands an individual action not by subsuming it under a law or statistical generalization but by placing the action in a situation with information and motivation, thus calculating what he ought to do rationally, hosts two weak points:

- Understanding "the thing to do" is nothing but standard game theory. As what an actor ought to do is to maximize his/her expected value, or perhaps minimize regret. Game theory covers a vast set of insight about what an actor ought to do – no originality for von Wright here.
- Assume we accept von Wright's emphasis upon intentions and the motive to perform an action that fulfills the decision criterion "what to do". We still need a Hempel generalization that connects the intention with the actual behaviour: Normally, an individual actor does in reality what he/she calculated "is the thing to do". This is a probabilistic generalization – a true truism.

When an individual chooses between the alternatives of action, are his/hers degrees of freedom objective or subjective? Kierkegaard

outlines a discussion of these two concepts that is highly modern in tone.

### OBJECTIVITY VERSUS SUBJECTIVITY

In the booklet *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), Kierkegaard debates the nature of faith in general and Christianity in particular. It falls outside of my interest here. But in a large book meant as addition, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard spells out how he looks upon the philosophical problem of subjectivity contra objectivity in a fashion that is original and worth examining.

One talks about objective knowledge or objective truth on the one hand and subjective insights or subjective attitudes on the other hand. Can one speak of subjective truth against objective truth? Perhaps objectivity is figment of the philosopher's imagination and subjectivity is the correct position, not only in relation wishes or preferences but also faith and all beliefs?

Kierkegaard develops a conceptual scheme for debating objectivity versus subjectivity:

**Table 1.** Kierkegaard's conceptual scheme

Objectivity	Subjectivity
Objective truth	Subjective truth
Outside	Inside
Approximation	Appropriation
Uncertainty	Emotions, Passion

Kierkegaard looks upon these dichotomies as a logical list on both sides, employing them to clarify what subjective Christianity would amount to. Objective Christianity does not exist. Here, Kierkegaard achieves a clear separation between belief and faith, often confused in both philosophy and theology. And his goal with these distinctions is to safeguard "*Frommlichkeit* und Dienst":

"But the speculative philosopher views things altogether differently. He believes but only

to a certain degree. He. puts his hand to the plow but quickly looks about for something to know. From a Christian perspective, it is hard to see how he could reach the highest good in this manner."

Kierkegaard's distinctions would hardly go down with the subjectivism of post-modernism, but sits well with modern game theory where information belongs to the right side and preferences to the left side.

### CONCLUSION

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Kierkegaard's theory of voluntarism, human choice ahead of the future, anticipates several insights of game theory. He succeeded in his ambition to break away from Hegelianism, dominant in Europe at that time, and its macro determinism, launching an approach to micro indeterminism. Kierkegaard's theology, developed in numerous books and booklets, spell out what the voluntarism entails for faith and Christian *credo*. But it is all metaphysics.

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**Citation:** Jan-Erik Lane, "Kierkegaard's Discovery of the Degrees of Freedom in Human Action". (2018). *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, 5(9), pp.17-21.

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