

KIERKEGAARD AND NIETZSCHE: CONTRASTS AND COMPARISONS

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Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche both felt that life is irrational. They were ‘problem’ thinkers who chose not to follow the systematic approach to philosophy as their predecessors did. In this regard, they stood on common ground. Both realized that no system of philosophy operates in isolation of its creator’s inherent prejudices. Any subjective viewpoint is biased; hence, objectivity is impossible in any moral paradigm.

Further, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were obsessed with the current state of affairs in the world. They both recognized that God no longer exists in religion’s present-day incarnations. In contemporary western society men and women go about their daily lives in a manner irreverent of the possibility that there is an all-powerful God governing their affairs, yet surprisingly, they proclaim their devotion to God when questioned.

Both philosophers found great fault in this lapse of moral authenticity and saw it as an affront upon the soul of man—something that holds us back from our true spiritual potential. However, in their attempts to resolve this moral illness Nietzsche and Kierkegaard could hardly be more divergent in their quest for a cure. The very foundations of their moral constitutions were built upon conflicting ideologies: Kierkegaard’s in Christianity and Nietzsche’s in individualism and autonomy.

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Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard saw the problem of religious downfall as an opportunity for renewal in Christian beliefs, a chance to embrace the New Testament's original teachings and return to a dynamic and living faith. In his critique of modern-day religious expansion, he claimed the very dominance of Christianity over his country showed that it is not "*the way of the few*." In his *Attack Upon "Christendom,"* Kierkegaard writes,

In the New Testament the Saviour of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, represents the situation thus: The way that leadeth unto life is straightened, the gate narrow—few be they that find it! Now, on the contrary, to speak only of Denmark, we are all Christians, the way is as broad as it can possibly be, the broadest in Denmark, since it is the way in which we are all walking, besides being in all respects as convenient, as comfortable as possible; and the gate is as wide as it possibly can be, wider surely a gate cannot be than that through which we are all going en masse.

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Kierkegaard's country and religion were morally bankrupt. When societal forces pressure the proclamation of belief in a dominant ethic, it is no longer a religious affirmation, but is transformed into mere adherence to a social norm.

As a direct consequence of this widespread moral decline, Kierkegaard stressed the subjective truth over the objective truth. While he did believe in the objective truth of Christian theism, he emphasized its *personal* power—to existentially transform the individual through devotion to a single commitment. This became the panacea for restoring human salvation—individual self-fulfillment through absolute faith in conviction. Kierkegaard called for a leap of faith: to strive for the attainment of a *purely* Christian life.

Reason has no place in faith, as God is beyond reason. Kierkegaard rejected both the rationalist tradition and systematic philosophies because they used abstract concepts that had nothing to do with everyday experience. Devotion to a single external principle allows one's self-identity to remain firm and unwavering in a fluid and unstable environment. Without this external pillar of strength Kierkegaard believed man would be trapped in a state of despair, with no firm basis for the construction of self-identity.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche's solution was an antithesis to Kierkegaard's faith in a single external principle. While both discouraged adherence to the dominant ethos, Nietzsche demanded a renunciation of all established values. As its replacement, he proposed a new paradigm of

thought with human creativity at its centre—the creation of a new naturalistic origin in values.

Nietzsche realized that our society is becoming increasingly anthropocentric. From his early days as a student of philology, the science of language, he noted that moral conceptions of good and evil were inextricably linked to our social origins, containing inherent prejudice against certain character traits that encourage independent thought. Nietzsche saw two morality types, the master and the slave, that were based on early class differences and worked to perpetuate the existence of those classes. From this insight Nietzsche conceived the *Obermensch*, or *Overman*, a man whose values are independent from societal conceptions of good and evil. Nietzsche introduced the *Overman* in *The Will to Power* as follows:

The genius who can embrace 'becoming,' who acknowledges the death of all external values, could become an *Obermensch* ('overman' or 'superman'). Such an overman would be a this-world antithesis to God and would affirm life without any resentment. The overman would be to humans as humans are to apes. But, most important, the overman would be the one who acknowledges and celebrates the *will to power*.

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Nietzsche directly challenged prevailing ethics and called for the abdication of this “master-slave” mentality. He viewed Christianity as an extension of this master-slave mentality, the religion of “a weak and decadent people.” God is a concept of our own creation. No longer can we base our religious and moral beliefs on the idea of a divine, omnipotent being.

In contrast to Christianity, the ideal of the *Overman* demands personal introspection and a complete abandonment of prior-held convictions. Nietzsche’s ideal, the “will to power,” was a constant overcoming—growth for its own sake. Nietzsche spoke of power and growth as the driving force of nature. His *Overman* was the real-world manifestation of this ideal, an antithesis to God. Nietzsche describes him again in the following excerpt:

The acme of power is embodied in the perfectly self-possessed man who has no fear of other men, of himself, or of death and whose simple personality, unaided by any props, changes the lives of those who meet him and even imposes itself on the minds of those who encounter him.

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Anything not in a state of growth reverts to a state of decay. The emphasis on power and sheer force of will was a key factor in Nietzsche’s divergence from Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

The Roots of Divergence

Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard agreed on the irrational nature of life, the moral decline of society, and the corruption of religion. Though they both emphasized the subjective nature of morality, they disagreed completely on what this means in practice. This is largely precipitated by Nietzsche's complete disillusionment with religion in contrast to Kierkegaard's continued faith in the existence of God.

Through Kierkegaard's conception of morality, the commitment to principle becomes a necessary part of the individual. Kierkegaard would argue that this is necessary to possess a stable identity. Nietzsche, however, would argue that such commitment creates dependence: loss of the commitment would constitute a loss of identity. Further according to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard's views stunt personal growth and stand in opposition to the will to power. Kierkegaard's philosophy clings to an idea beyond its range of usefulness, inhibiting the individual's potential.

Nietzsche believes convictions should be like habits—a temporary mechanism that can be discarded when no longer needed. The “death of God” brought about directly by people's loss of faith means end of an era of unconditional commitments and the birth of a time when brief habits are allowed. To Nietzsche, true freedom is the freedom to grow.

Nietzsche's driving force was the *will to power*; Kierkegaard would stand in direct opposition to this principle. Had Nietzsche's conception of morality become widely accepted, it would seem destined to bring about moral anarchy even more quickly than the existent, if superficial, morality.

Though Kierkegaard would identify with Nietzsche's parable of the madman as illustrative of Denmark's moral decay, he would never go so far as to advocate the complete destruction of its existing moral foundations. If society has lost its faith, the only way to cure this illness would be a direct challenge for people to recover and reaffirm their belief in the New Testament God.

Our Present Course

We face a crossroads at the dawn of the 21st century. The rapid advances and widespread successes of modern science force us to examine the same questions posed by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. As the domain of science grows ever more rapidly in explaining the features and behaviors of the empirical world, there is no need for appeal to God or any other transcendental reality. Is a return to Christian worldview objectively possible? In the absence of a religious model to explain the universe, can those who do

not possess such a faith in God construct their own moral standards to fill the void? This issue poses an imminent crossroads, reaffirming the importance of both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in modern-day society..

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