

Rohan Sikand

Nietzsche/Kierkegaard Comparison Essay

2019

Philosophy

### **Nietzsche *contra* Kierkegaard**

Often cited as the most influential philosophers of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard use strong claims to prove their drastically different beliefs. Both are considered precursors to the existentialist movement-meaning they believe in the existence of human as free will. Upset with the views of previous philosophers on the definition of human, Kierkegaard examined a new view on what it means to be a human. Before the 19th century, Georg Hegel, a philosopher from Germany, proposed that human existence is defined by the examination of historical records. Further, he believed that history can be used to define and influence our present actions. For example, he quotes the historical analysis of ancient Greece to define what a community is and Rome to see what constitutes honor. Hegel's rather jumbled ideology of human existence was widely accepted among European citizens during this time. However, Kierkegaard did not agree with Hegel in the use of historical records to interpret human existence. Rather, Kierkegaard argued for a more subjective ideology presenting that what constitutes the existence of a human is its actions and therefore choices - free choices that is. Apart from the decision of birth, choices thereafter are entirely free and subjective.

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## **God**

*Fear and Trembling* offers a glimpse into Kierkegaard's theory of the divine. In it, he takes as a model Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) and attempts to reconcile the "teleological suspension of the ethical" (problem 1 of 3 addressed in the text). Essentially, Kierkegaard is investigating the question: Abraham's ethical duties to his son be put aside for a divine command? The "ethical duties" are those that humans can understand given the laws of nature and politics—he spells out this category by introducing three "tragic heroes," such as Agamemnon, Brutus, and Jephthah whose heroic actions can be understood in any universe by all spectators. However, there are some actions, such as Abraham's attempted murder of his son, which are "unspeakable," i.e. cannot be understood in the human realm but only by a divine being, namely God. This is the crux of Kierkegaard's view on God: man's relation to God is known only to him and cannot be communicated to nor understood by others. As Kierkegaard declared in his *Post-Script*, "truth is subjective," and this is true for the individual and his relationship with "absolute truth," i.e. God.

On the contrary, Nietzsche is more ambiguous about his thoughts on God. In *The Gay Science* he declares "God is dead." But this is not some form of atheism. In fact, in that text, Nietzsche reflects that both classical paganism (Plato, Aristotle, etc) and Medieval Christianity pointed to the "divine" to solve all of the great unknown mysterious of philosophy—what is the first cause?

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Why is there good on earth? Why is man's constitution the way it is? All of these questions could basically be deferred by answering with the "unmoved mover" (Aristotle's "god"/first cause) or the Christian God. Yet the Enlightenment's strict devotion to reason has led mankind, according to Nietzsche, to kill god off as an option to rationalize this world.

### **Human Behavior**

In problem 3 of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard seems to suggest that the "good life" can still be achieved when man sins, so long as is forgiven. Personal context is required. Kierkegaard has this secret-lover named Regina Olson, and he is wondering if he can still love her while being married to a different spouse. He thinks he can by "infinitely resigning" and believing in the "virtue of the absurd." The idea is that you do some absurd act like cheating with the hope that you will be forgiven AND you will get the girl. However, what sounds like an apology and a personal confession is a profound statement about human nature. Man is a fallen creature who necessarily sins; yet this will not stop him from living the "good life" and finding happiness in it.

Going back to Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, there are two important doctrines he presents concerning the behavior of man and his role in the cosmos: *amor fati* ("love of fate") and eternal reoccurrence. *Amor fati* is this idea that you should love what life gives you—so much so that you "wish only to be a yes-sayer." Perhaps this means always be positive; though I think there's

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more to it, such as taking your negative days and turning them into joyful ones. The other big idea is “eternal reoccurrence.” Here, Nietzsche imagines a demon sniffing down your neck telling you that you will re-live your life over and over again—every day, second, and sigh you make. He hopes that this will inspire man to love himself and what he is doing in his life, and to think about the individual’s purpose of living.

### **Breaking from tradition: Existentialism**

Soren Kierkegaard and Freidrich Nietzsche hold unique positions in the history of western philosophy. Rather than contributing to epistemology, metaphysics, or ontology, these two men broke from tradition and returned to questions of first principles in a radical fashion—thus ushering in “existentialism.” Each philosopher created their own values, especially concerning God and human behavior. Undoubtedly, the ideologies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have shaped modern philosophy and world culture, unmatched by any other contemporary philosopher.