

Neurotheology and Free Will in Kierkegaardian Existentialism

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Introduction

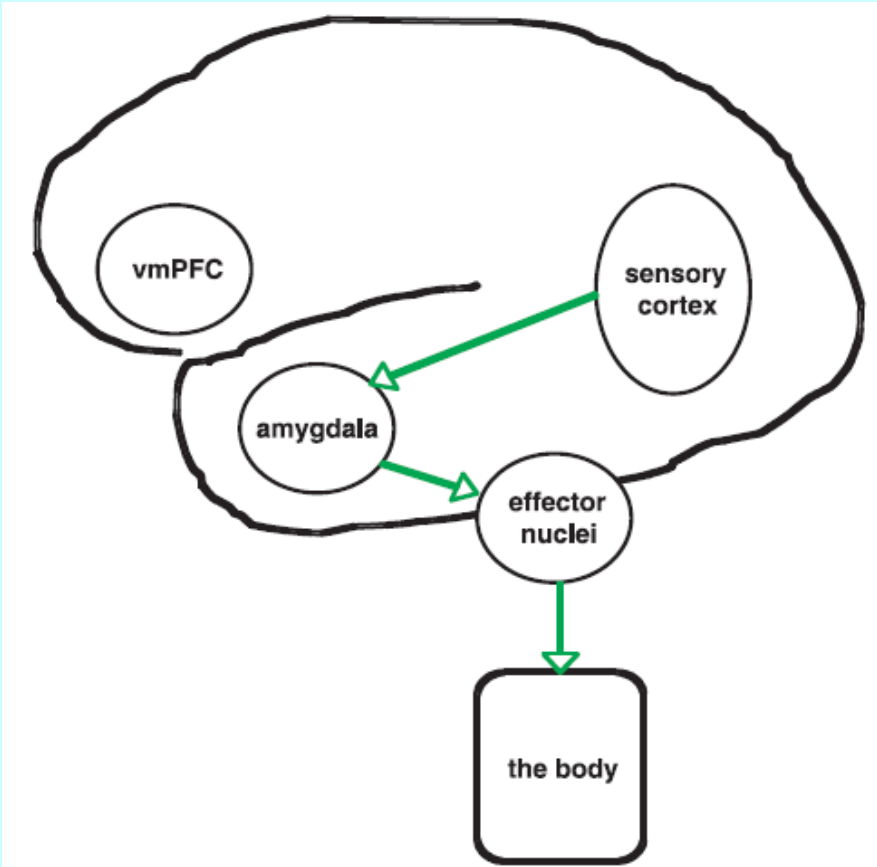
Applying Neurotheology

Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard considered the **relationships between philosophical and theological thought and early advancements in psychology** that occurred during his lifetime. Although Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings pose interpretative challenges, his **journals reveal a complex understanding of volition** that underpins many of Kierkegaard’s contributions to philosophy and theology. Given Kierkegaard’s engagement with psychology, the **emerging interdisciplinary field of neurotheology** provides a unique framework for reconceptualizing Kierkegaard’s ideas in the context of neuroscientific and psychological research.

Neurotheology scholarship **seeks to facilitate a productive dialogue between the neurosciences and religious studies** (Newberg, 2010). However, most existing neurotheology research has been produced by neuroscientists (Harper, 2019). Therefore, numerous opportunities exist for religious studies scholars to critically engage with topics in neurotheology.

Methods and Thesis

In this project, I apply a methodological approach based on neurotheology to analyze Kierkegaardian free will, engaging with specific findings in cognitive neuroscience and psychology. I argue that **Kierkegaard’s perspective regarding free will can be viewed as compatible with contemporary decision-making research**, reaffirming the enduring viability of Kierkegaardian thought.



Above: Regions implicated in the somatic marker hypothesis (Naqvi, Shiv, and Bechara, 2006).

Analytical Foundations

Neuroscience and Philosophies of Free Will

Less than 40 years ago, Benjamin Libet conducted pioneering neuroimaging studies into decision-making, finding that brain areas involved in movement became active 200 milliseconds before participants made a conscious decision to move. Despite Libet’s reluctance to make broader claims about free will from his research (Libet, 1999), these findings prompted **key questions about decision-making in the brain and the influence of conscious and unconscious processes**.

More recent neuroscientific research into decision-making has discovered two complex neural networks that facilitate volitional processes, enabling researchers to identify how specific factors, including emotion, impact decision-making. The brain’s **“valuation” system** plays a vital role in the **preconscious** decision-making process, allowing for the evaluation and ranking of different options based on their value and possible benefits. The **“choice” system** then facilitates the **conscious** components of decision-making, enabling critical thinking and producing the conscious experience of making a choice (Breedlove and Watson, 2018).

In relationship with the valuation system, neuroscientists have recognized **emotions as a major influence on preconscious decision-making** processes. The **somatic marker hypothesis** suggests that the physiological markers of emotion, such as neurochemical activity and sensory feedback in certain brain regions, help to guide decisions (Bechara and Damasio, 2005).

Free Will and Psychology in Kierkegaardian Thought

Kierkegaard’s perspectives regarding free will and psychology find ample expression in his philosophical and spiritual writings. However, **Kierkegaard’s journals offer the most unambiguous explanations of his nuanced understanding of decision-making and psychology**:

- 1835: Kierkegaard expresses dual interests in the **natural sciences and theology**, describing a desire to “clarify and solve the riddle of life.”
- 1844: **“Psychology is what we need, and above all a sound knowledge of human life** and sympathy for its interests. This is a task to be solved before there can be any question of completing a Christian view of life.”
- 1846: “Consider the problem of freedom and necessity. Let the physiologist begin to explain all that stuff about how the circulation of the blood influences such and such, and how pressure on the nerves has this or that effect, etc. **In the end he cannot explain that freedom is an illusion.**”
- 1851: “In my view the matter [of free will] can be simply illustrated as follows: **Take a balance, even the most accurate gold balance—when used for only a week it already has a history**. The owner knows this history, for instance that it has a bias in one direction or the other, and so on. This historical feature then continually accompanies its use. **So with the will. It has a history, a continuous history.**”

Neurotheology and Kierkegaardian Free Will

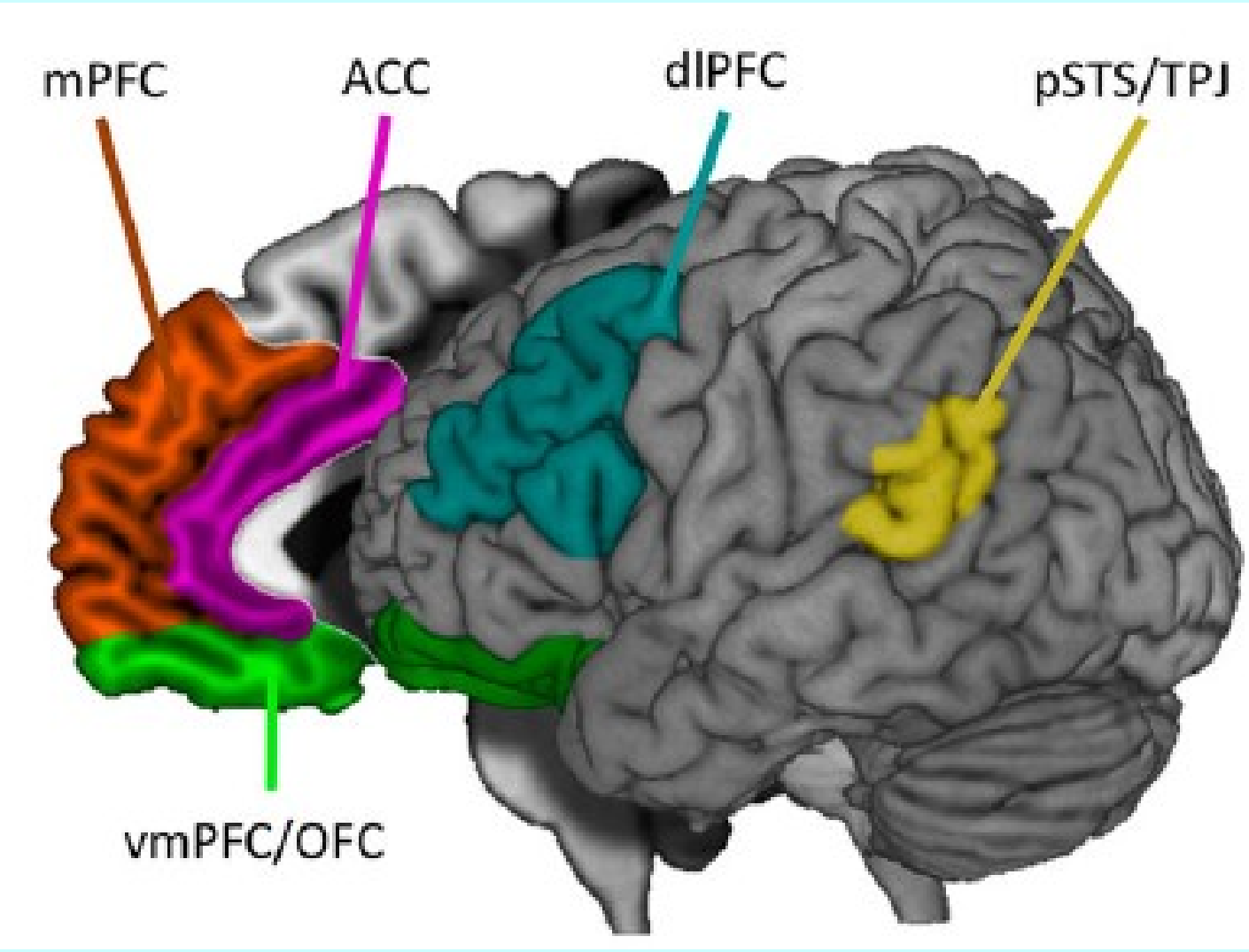
Emotion Regulation and Decision-Making

Beyond the carefully considered and psychologically-informed understanding of decision-making expressed by Kierkegaard in his journals, the concept of volition frequently articulated by Kierkegaard in his published works approaches free will from the standpoints of religion and ethics. Also, **Kierkegaard deviated from foundational Lutheran doctrine to formulate his own perspective regarding the philosophical reality and theological necessity of free will**.

Considering Kierkegaard’s grasp of the complex influences of subjective experience on decision-making, **he appears to have envisioned ways for an individual to mediate factors that affect the “balance” of her will, including emotional states**. For example, Paul Carron (2018) suggests that Kierkegaard’s *Christian Discourses* contain ideas that find close parallels in two contemporary emotion regulation strategies:

- Attentional deployment**: an individual determines where to focus her awareness within a given situation, therefore exercising some control over an experience’s emotional resonance
 - Cognitive reappraisal**: an individual assesses the meaning or significance of an experience by interpreting it in different ways
- Carron suggests that **Kierkegaard’s view of emotions and emotion regulation finds comparable expression in both his signed and pseudonymous writings**, and I would argue that Kierkegaard’s *Upbuilding Discourses* and *The Concept of Anxiety* provide other notable examples of this consistency.

In relationship with the somatic marker hypothesis, research has demonstrated that engaging in **emotion regulation techniques can mediate the impacts of emotional states on preconscious decision-making** (Heilman and Crisan, 2010; Kligyte et al., 2013).



Left: Brain regions and structures involved in the preconscious and conscious processes supporting decision-making (Yoder and Decety, 2017).

Below: An 1846 entry in Kierkegaard’s journals (Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen; Accessed via Google Arts & Culture).

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"Christian Heroism" and Differentiation of Self

In many of his works, including *Either/Or*, *Purity of Heart*, and *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard delineates his core conviction that living ethically, cultivating faith, and willing the Good must all coincide with an individual willing to be her true self. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard directly asserts that “Christian heroism” is “**to venture wholly to be oneself,**” and in Kierkegaard’s view this fulfillment of an authentic self-identity represents a necessary precondition for fuller awareness, decisiveness, and the realization of true freedom. Kierkegaard also **associates the strength of an individual’s volition with the degree to which she possesses self-awareness**. In Kierkegaard’s view, an individual’s will also relies on her **sense of self-sufficiency** in making decisions, and her **freedom from being guided by others’ opinions**.

Psychiatrist Murray Bowen’s **psychological model of differentiation of self** strikingly parallels aspects of Kierkegaard’s ideas:

- Intrapsychic self-differentiation** involves “the degree of fusion, or differentiation, between emotional and intellectual functioning”
- Interpersonal self-differentiation** reflects the extent to which an individual will tend to be emotionally dependent on those around her
- The **“solid self”** signifies the individual’s authentic identity, reflecting “clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles”
- The **“pseudo-self”** encompasses “a vast assortment of principles, beliefs, philosophies, and knowledge acquired because it is required or considered right by the group” (Bowen, 1976).

Future Directions

A neurotheological analysis of free will in Kierkegaardian thought reveals a **core compatibility between Kierkegaard’s ideas and current neuroscientific and psychological findings**. Given the crucial role of free will and choice within Kierkegaard’s writings, **these points of congruence between Kierkegaard’s views and contemporary findings support the enduring viability of Kierkegaard’s ideas**.

Beyond illustrating the innovative nature and continuing relevance of Kierkegaard’s work, this neurotheological analysis also demonstrates the wealth of opportunities that exist for religious studies scholars to critically reconceptualize philosophical and theological thought within the context of contemporary neuroscience. Given that “both neuroscience and religion are inextricably tied to a concept of the human mind” (Klemm, 2019), **the developing field of neurotheology provides a constructive framework for identifying and exploring the intersections that already exist between these scientific and humanistic disciplines**.

Conclusion