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*Arne Grøn, René Rosfort,
K. Brian Söderquist (Eds.)*

KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL APPROACH



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In the wake of World War I, existential thinking changed the intellectual landscape. Kierkegaard's influence can hardly be overestimated. Although existential thinking comes in various forms, they all draw on a concept of human existence that originates with Kierkegaard. This anthology examines Kierkegaard's existential approach and its importance for the renewed interest in existentialism.

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Edited by
Arne Grøn, René Rosfort and K. Brian Söderquist

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Kierkegaard Studies

Edited on behalf of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre

by Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart and Karl Verstrynge in cooperation with Peter Šajda

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Foreword

Kierkegaard's texts are and remain texts for reflection. They provide their reader a unique possibility to ask fundamental questions about what it means to be human. These are questions that connect people across social, cultural, and religious divides. Thus, the importance of Kierkegaard's thinking is not just a matter of applying it thematically, but it also requires the reader to take his or her own context into account while thinking with Kierkegaard. This is most apparent when the study of Kierkegaard's texts is allowed to challenge or support other ways of asking existential questions. These include not only philosophical and theological approaches to existence, but also aesthetic approaches as well as those of the human, social, and natural sciences.

The Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre (SKC) at the University of Copenhagen was established as a Centre of Excellence in January 1994 with a five year grant from the Danish National Research Foundation. The aim of SKC was originally described as an ellipse, consisting of interdisciplinary interpretations of Kierkegaard's thought on the one hand, and, on the other, philological research with the objective of establishing a new critical and annotated edition of Kierkegaard's authorship under the title *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS). The final version of the digital edition of SKS was launched in 2007. Work on the 55 volumes of SKS was completed in 2012 with the last volume published in 2013, the bicentennial year of Kierkegaard's birth. This critical and annotated edition of Kierkegaard's works, which includes his published works as well as his journals, notebooks, and papers, makes the complexity of Kierkegaard's authorship apparent and allows for new perspectives on his thought.

A new textual foundation is not merely a privilege, but also carries with it an obligation to put this new foundation to use. The task of SKC is therefore to use the new edition to reformulate basic categories and problem areas in Kierkegaard studies and to discuss their current importance.

Recent years have seen a renewed interest not only in existentialism, but also in existential questions, as well as key figures in existential thinking. This is perhaps not a coincidence. The intellectual debate is today dominated by a quest for scientific and pragmatic answers to what it means to be human. Reflective disciplines like theology, philosophy, and literary studies are experiencing a growing pressure to deliver workable solutions to societal and personal problems. The contemporary emphasis on science and pragmatism resembles—and can be seen as a return to—the fervent scientific enthusiasm that followed in the wake of the twentieth century, and the interest in existential thinking that made its entry on the intellectual scene after World War I was a critical reaction

to this quest for unambiguous solutions to human problems. Although existential thinking comes in various forms, all these forms share a skepticism toward substantial definitions of what it means to be human, and they all draw on a concept of human existence that Kierkegaard was one of the first to articulate and investigate. The contemporary interest in existential thinking can arguably be seen as a similar critical reaction to the prevalent scientific and pragmatic approaches to human existence.

Kierkegaard played a major role in shaping the heyday of existentialism and existential thinking from the 1920s to the beginning of 1960s, and he is still considered to be one of the founding fathers of existential thinking. Despite this honorary title, systematic investigations of Kierkegaard's existential approach remain sparse. SKC has therefore dedicated three of its annual conferences to reconsidering Kierkegaard's existential approach and its importance for the contemporary interest in existential thinking. The first conference was held in Copenhagen in 2015 under the title "SKC Annual Conference 2015: Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Existential Approach," and most of the contributions in this anthology were first presented at this conference.¹ The SKC Annual Conferences 2016 and 2017 will continue to investigate aspects of Kierkegaard's existential approach.

The 13 chapters of this anthology deal with various aspects of Kierkegaard's existential approach. Its reception is examined in the works of influential philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas, as well as in lesser known philosophers from the interwar period, such as Jean Wahl, Lev Shestov, Rachel Besspaloff, and Benjamin Fondane. Other chapters reconsider central existential concepts, such as "anxiety," "existence," "imagination," and "despair." Finally, there are chapters that deal with Kierkegaard's relevance for central issues in contemporary philosophy, including "naturalism," "self-constitution," and "bioethics."

We hope that the various attempts to reconsider Kierkegaard's existential approach offered in this book will encourage the reader to return to Kierkegaard's texts with new questions that, in her or his own reading of the texts, can beget further questions. This open community of shared questions is a critical aspect of our individual readings of Kierkegaard's work and thought.

Arne Grøn and René Rosfort

¹ The anthology is not equivalent to a volume of conference proceedings. Apart from the fact that some of the essays were not presented at the conference, each contribution has first been significantly reworked and subsequently revised after two double-blind reviews.

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Reception

Mélissa Fox-Muraton

Philosophy of Existence in France in the 1930s

Abstract: Among the first to seriously introduce Kierkegaard's philosophy to the French reading public in the 1930s, Wahl, Besseloff, Shestov, and Fondane were also engaged in the debate about philosophy of existence. Critical of the existentialist philosophy developed in the 1940s beginning with Sartre, as well as of the existential philosophies promoted throughout Germany and France in the 1930s by Heidegger, Jaspers, and Marcel, Besseloff, Fondane, Shestov, and Wahl nevertheless all claim to remain faithful to "their" philosophy of existence, inspired by Kierkegaard. This essay will sketch out their understanding of what philosophy of existence is, through their positions and critiques of their contemporaries and successors.

While philosophy of existence was already a topic of vivid debate in the 1930s and at the beginning of the 1940s in intellectual circles in France, "existentialism" only became popularized in post-war France with Jean-Paul Sartre's inaugural conference *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (*Existentialism is a Humanism*) in 1945. Nevertheless, an earlier, if lesser known, wave of existential philosophy marked the French intellectual milieu in the 1930s. Promoted essentially by Jewish thinkers such as Jean Wahl, Rachel Besseloff, Benjamin Fondane and Lev Shestov,¹ the existential philosophy of interwar France is generally seen as a mere precursor of the existentialist movement. However, these thinkers were highly critical of the new "existentialism," not only because it transformed the philosophy of existence into an "-ism," but more fundamentally on the philosophical grounds that it failed to properly take into account the notion of subjectivity, reducing it to mere subjectivism. In so doing, existentialism not only moves away from Kierkegaard's more rigorous philosophical constructions of subjectivity, but also becomes unable to respond

1 We include Shestov among the French intellectuals, because, despite the fact that Shestov was a Russian immigrant, his work on Kierkegaard was done while he was living in Paris and came out in French translation (1936) before being published in Russian. In limiting our study to Shestov, Fondane, Wahl, and Besseloff, we make no claim to examine all of the trends in existential philosophy developed in the 1930s. These authors can be brought together as representatives of a common movement because they were all among the first to seriously introduce Kierkegaard's philosophy in France and simultaneously to question existential philosophy during the 1930s.

to the ethical and political questions with which existentialist philosophers sought to engage. Bespaloff, notably, remarks that “existentialism can only succeed in establishing an *aggressive solidarity* in a hostile or tamed world.”² Despite these critiques, she claims to remain faithful, until her death in 1949, to the philosophy of existence articulated in the 1930s.

This affirmation invites a serious consideration as to what constitutes the “philosophy of existence” as it was understood by these thinkers, and as distinct from later “existentialism” or from other philosophies of existence developed in France and Germany in the interwar period. Examining the works of Wahl, Bespaloff, Fondane, and Shestov, we will seek to define existential philosophy within the French-Jewish context of the 1930s. We will show how these thinkers—among the first to seriously introduce Kierkegaard’s works in France—draw on Kierkegaard’s philosophy in the elaboration of their own philosophical context. In many ways these early readers of Kierkegaard in France were closer to Kierkegaard’s own understanding of existential philosophy than were their followers—thus, a renewal of interest in these early French works on Kierkegaard could provide a fruitful means of reconsidering Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy.

I Defining Philosophy of Existence

In a 1946 article “La vogue de l’existentialisme,” Jean Wahl ironically offers a few simple “rules for distinguishing between existentialism and what it is not.” As he writes:

If you say: man is, in his world, a world limited by death and felt in anxiety, there is a comprehension of himself as essentially concerned (*soucieux*), curved toward his solitude, in the horizon of temporality, then you connect with Heidegger’s existentialism. If you say: man, as opposed to things in themselves, is for himself, always in movement and vainly striving toward a union between the in-itself and the for-itself, then you have Sartre’s existentialism. If you say: I am a thinking substance, as Descartes said, or: the real things are ideas, as Plato said; or: the “I” accompanies all of our representations, according to Kant’s expressions, then you are not an existentialist.³

According to these “rules,” Wahl, Bespaloff, Shestov, and Fondane were *not* existentialists—Wahl moreover begins his history of existentialism remarking that

² Rachel Bespaloff, “Lettres à Boris de Schlœzer (I),” in *Conférence*, ed. by Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, no. 16, 2003, p. 450. (All translations from French sources are the author’s.)

³ Jean Wahl, “La vogue de l’existentialisme,” *Poésie, pensée, perception*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy 1948, p. 177.