

## Philosophy in Review



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**Bruce H. Kirmmse, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David D. Possen, Joel D. S. Rasmussen, & Vanessa Rumble, eds.** *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks: Volume 10, Journals NB31-NB36*. Princeton University Press 2018. 704 pp. \$150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691178981).

(For reviews of the first nine volumes of *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, see *Philosophy in Review* 30.2, 105–108; 31.2, 107–10; 32.6, 485–488; 36.2, 63–66; 36.5, 204–209 and 39.1, 8–11.)

Volume 10 of *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* includes the last journals that Kierkegaard kept. These journals are the final six of the *NB* series, which he began in 1846 after he finished *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Before starting the *NB* journals Kierkegaard filled up 25 other notebooks in a rather haphazard fashion, without much concern for ordering and dating the contents. For the 36 *NB* journals he was more systematic, numbering and dating the covers of the journals, so we at least know when he began writing in each of them. The starting dates for the 6 journals collected in this volume are:

- NB 31: 16 August 1854
- NB 32: 11 October 1854
- NB 33: 9 November 1854
- NB 34: 24 November 1854
- NB 35: 3 December 1854
- NB 36: 13 December 1854

The editors of this volume note that '[i]t is not known with certainty when Kierkegaard stopped writing in *Journal NB36*; it is the only *NB* journal in which the bound volume was not completely filled' (652). They speculate that the final entries in this final journal were likely written prior to 28 December 1854, 'after which the journal was no longer used' (652). Kierkegaard lived almost another full year after this date, dying on 11 November 1855, but he never returned to his journals in that last year, so in terms of his journals at least this volume contains Kierkegaard's last words.

One theme that Kierkegaard returns to again and again in all of his journals throughout his life is the idea that Christianity has ceased to exist, even though in Denmark and the rest of 'Christendom' everyone is by default a Christian. In the final *NB* journals there's a notable crescendo in the frequency and the stridency of this argument, to the point that eventually it drowns out almost every other topic and seems to transform the journals almost entirely into a catalogue of complaints about the many misdeeds of official Christianity. In the final pages of *NB 36* Kierkegaard is contemplating making this attack on Christendom public, and if the editors of this volume are right about when he stopped writing in *NB 36* the timing corresponds precisely to when he launched his public attack on the Danish State Church. Since Kierkegaard seems to want to use his final journals almost entirely to practice his many arguments that Christianity had ceased to exist, it does make sense that he stopped writing in his journals when he decided to make those arguments public. When he began to perform that show in public, so to speak, it seems like he no longer needed to use his journals as a private rehearsal space, so he abruptly stopped writing in them.

That's one way to understand these final journals: as primarily a first draft of the 'attack upon Christendom' project that consumed the final year of Kierkegaard's life. However I want to suggest that there is something else going on in these journals that is far more interesting and also far more relevant to Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Throughout all of Kierkegaard's journals there are moments of self-pity, bitterness, anger and resentment that are somewhat nihilistic, but these occasional moments of pessimism seem like aberrations because the overall character of Kierkegaard's thought remains affirmative, creative, and optimistic. But something different takes place in these final journals, especially in the last three of them. Suddenly nihilism becomes the general rule rather than the exception. To be more specific, there are two sustained nihilistic arguments in Kierkegaard's final 3 journals that completely displace everything affirmative in his thought:

- (1) Beginning in NB 34, and continuing in NB 35 and 36, Kierkegaard argues at length for anti-natalism. In a total of 35 different journal entries he argues that birth is always a calamity and the entire human race should be extinguished. Here are a few examples:

What constantly occupies 'the human being' is to get this world made into a fine world, to get away from God's criminalist view that it lieth in wickedness, that for him it is a felonious existence.... To this end Xnty—which therefore immediately bars the way to propagation.... So even if someone became Xn and died unmarried, he is still a criminal, for his existence through propagation was a crime. (341)

This world, the selfishness of this entire existence, is concentrated and culminates in the propagation of the race, a selfishness that (as I have shown elsewhere), if it cannot create (which is the right reserved to God's majesty), then at least wants to: give life. God does not want this selfishness; he wants it stopped—therefore Xnty immediately bars the way. God's kingdom is not of this world; the Xn is a stranger and foreigner. (343)

The New Testament clearly rests on the view: to love God is to hate oneself, and love of God is hostility toward humanity. Thus, indeed, the entirely accurate view of Xnty held by the paganism of the times, that it is hostility toward humanity. (438)

[T]he appearance of Xt was directed specifically at putting a stop to the race. (444)

The anti-natalism that Kierkegaard defends here is more often associated with Schopenhauer; but Kierkegaard's version of the argument is actually much more extreme than Schopenhauer's—a point that Kierkegaard himself acknowledges in an extended discussion of Schopenhauer (140-141). Schopenhauer, he argues in this section, '*is not a thoroughgoing pessimist.*' Kierkegaard took the argument for pessimism much further. While Schopenhauer argues that human existence is an error, Kierkegaard argues that it is a crime.

A lie is concentrated at precisely this point concerning the propagation of the race; if sin came into the world in this way, a lie was also set vigorously into motion on the same occasion.... It is because of this lie that the child is filled full of all this: that it's a wonderful world, that the purpose of life is to be happy, to enjoy, etc. etc., which of course the child is indeed naturally disposed to believe (Schopenhauer is thus correct in saying that each person is born with the illusion that the aim of this life is to be happy), but which is also connected to the fact that the parents—were they to explain that the world is evil, that the purpose of life is to suffer, item that a child's life has its origin in the satisfaction of lust, etc.—would of course face embarrassment if it occurred to the child to ask, 'Why then, do I exist?' (384-385)

[I]t is completely impossible for a child to grasp the *punctum saliens* in Xnty: original sin, and were the child capable of understanding it, the parents would appear in an extremely strange light. (421)

Xnty is pessimism. (156)

Xnty is utter pessimism. (173)

- (2) In Kierkegaard's final journal, NB 36, there are several entries in which he makes plans for his own martyrdom. There's no way of knowing what connection there is between the ideas and arguments expressed in these journal entries and Kierkegaard's own death, which occurred less than a year later, so this is not an argument about what caused Kierkegaard's death—that can never be known with certainty, and it's not relevant to Kierkegaard's philosophy anyway. However it is undeniable that Kierkegaard argued in NB 36 for the superiority of a martyr's death and an 'early exit' from human life, which—according to the anti-natalism argument that dominates NB 34 and 35—is fundamentally a crime anyway. Here are some examples:

Xnty rests on the notion that martyrdom has value in and of itself, absolute value. (93)

I want to engage with my contemporaries... I do not want to engage with them in a straightforward fashion—I want to be sacrificed. (76)

#### The True Extraordinaries, Those of the First Class

They do not feel happy enough in this world to want to settle down in it. No, they are travelers, on a mission, hurry away again, home, as soon as possible. Then, when they notice that the end approaches, when—having brought about the greatest possible effect in the shortest possible time—they have just about completed their mission: then they push a little button that only they know about—then their lives have a catastrophic effect, and in that way they are thrust out of the world. Here, from beginning to end, everything is heterogeneity: to exit this world catastrophically is the greatest heterogeneity in comparison with a steady, calm life and a quiet death. (426)

#### To Bring About a Catastrophe

However afraid people would be of me if they found out, however strange it would seem to them: it is certain that what has occupied me in recent times has been whether God in fact wants me to stake everything on bringing about a catastrophe, on getting arrested, convicted—if possible, executed. (435)

I think the extremely nihilistic character of these 2 arguments has been generally overlooked because they are presented in the language of theology and religion, which leads readers to treat them as articles of faith that should be respected and passed over in silence rather than philosophical theories that should be argued and interrogated. Thus they are dismissed as just more examples of Kierkegaard's very extreme version of Christianity. But the fact that Kierkegaard presents these nihilistic declarations as if they were natural requirements of Christianity is just another example of him using 'Christianity' as a synonym for 'subjective truth.'

In all of his journals Kierkegaard used the letter 'X' to signify Christianity, Christ, or any variation thereof, as you've no doubt noticed in the journal entries cited above (for example 'Xt' for Christ; 'Xn' for Christian; 'Xnty' for Christianity, 'Xndom' for Christendom, etc.). One of the great values of Kierkegaard's journals is that they make it clear that this X really was a variable in Kierkegaard's thought: a placeholder that could stand for anything. When Xnty is understood in this

way everything that Kierkegaard writes about Christianity no longer has any necessary connection to religion. In the journals the X of Xnty is instantiated in 2 very different ways:

- (1) As a collection of ideals for a truly authentic human existence—standards for how to live which are so demanding and idealized that perhaps they can never be fully realized.
- (2) As a particular kind of nihilism which argues against all human relationships and all other attempts to create meaning in life, and even against life itself.

The first instantiation of X is dominant throughout the earlier journals, although there are occasional glimpses of the second instantiation; but in Kierkegaard's final 6 journals—especially the last three—the first instantiation quickly fades from view and the second instantiation takes over.

Obviously Kierkegaard is universally recognized as one of the founding theorists of existentialism, and one of the most persistent and troubling criticisms of existentialism has always been the claim that it is actually just a particularly confused and verbose form of nihilism. Every author in the existentialist tradition has faced this criticism, and every one of them has been extremely annoyed by it because they all claim to be doing just the opposite: providing a cure for nihilism. I believe that one of the great philosophical contributions of Kierkegaard's final journals is that they demonstrate how easy it is for existentialism to become precisely the disease that it claims to cure.

Perhaps more than any other author in the existentialist tradition Kierkegaard argued for the legitimacy and even the primacy of 'subjective truth' in human existence—a concept that he perhaps most famously defined in 1835 (*Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks Volume 1: Journals AA – DD* (eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Söderquist, Princeton University Press 2007) 19-21) when he was 22 years old:

[T]he thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. And what use would it be in this respect if I were to discover a so-called objective truth.... What use would it be if truth were to stand there before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I acknowledged it or not, inducing an anxious shiver rather than trusting devotion?... That's what I lacked for leading a *completely human life* and not just a life of *knowledge*, to avoid basing my mind's development on—yes, on something that people call objective—something which at any rate isn't my own, and to base it instead on something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence.

Subjective truth is a powerful idea that can create meaning and value in human existence regardless of one's external circumstances, and it is an absolutely central principle of existentialism that all values have no independent, objective existence and therefore must be created. But subjective truth is also completely amenable to nihilism, since nihilism too is nothing but a collection of values. These final journals demonstrate very effectively what critics of existentialism have long maintained: that it is a very dangerous thing to create your own values, and that when you do there is nothing to prevent you from creating values that are utterly nihilistic.

The argument that I've made about Kierkegaard's nihilism in these final journals may sound like an indictment of him as a person, but that is not at all my intention. That would be a biographical project which doesn't interest me, and it also wouldn't be appropriate for a philosophy journal. It is certainly worth noting, however, that this is one of the great ironies of the history of philosophy: that someone who is often credited with creating existentialism was capable of descending so completely

into nihilism. This illustrates the insidious danger of nihilism for existentialism, or for any other philosophy which maintains that values are subjective.

'Go big, or go home,' seems like a very apt description of Kierkegaard's thought over the course of his lifetime. Very early in his life, at age 22, he formulated an idea of subjective truth that was a radical rebuttal to philosophy's unquestioning worship of objectivity, and that idea became a founding principle of 19th and 20th century existentialism; then at the end of his life, at age 42, he used that same concept of subjective truth to justify embracing a truly epic version of nihilism that glorified anti-natalism and martyrdom, and called for the extinction of the entire human race. Kierkegaard did not think small thoughts, and for this we should be grateful because there is much to be learned from both his insights and his mistakes. I think this is the best reason to read these final journals: to learn from the mistakes they contain.

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