

Kierkegaard's Philosophical Anthropology
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The theory of the synthetic self in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* is widely acknowledged to be a suggestive and powerful *psychological* account of the self-representation of human conscious self-awareness. On Kierkegaard's view, the self is a reflectively aware or self-relating dynamic unity of dimensions of openness and fixity, that must represent or "name" itself to itself, in order to orient itself to itself and to the world in which it acts.

But is this theory of conscious self-representation a theory of human nature, or does it imply a theory of human nature, as well? One might plausibly think so. After all, to say that a human is the sort of being that represents itself to itself, that seeks to find a way to characterize itself in the light of its flexibility and openness and the fixity of its past and limitations, is to say that a human is a certain sort of *thing* with a certain sort of nature. And yet, when we try to fit Kierkegaard into the standard alternatives for philosophical anthropology—Platonic soul idealist, mind-body dualist, materialist, soul-body integrationist, and so forth—no option seems to provide a good fit.

The text of the famously enigmatic passage of *Sickness Unto Death* encourages, in at least one way, the thought that there is a theory of human nature lurking beneath Kierkegaard's psychological account. As part of explaining the concept of the relational "third as a negative unity," Kierkegaard explicitly refers to the "relation between psychical and the physical" as a minimal relation that is united by self-relation of the self. Does this mean that Kierkegaard acknowledges some basic soul-body dichotomy that is nevertheless unified by some third entity, the self or spirit?

Kierkegaard's theory is famously associated with at least one anti-theory of human nature, the *pour-soi/en-soi* theory of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. On a charitable reading, Sartre's theory is at the very least an undisclosed *homage* to Kierkegaard, if not an uncredited borrowing (though Sartre's translator Hazel Barnes noticed the affinity between Kierkegaard's synthetic self and Sartre's). In Sartre's reading, the idea that human consciousness represents itself is at root a theory of freedom, and as such rules out the possibility of a pre-given human nature. While there is a human *condition*, the condition specified by the problem of free self-definition, the question of what each human individual is can be answered only by free and creative self-representation. Sartre's Kierkegaardian account of consciousness suggests not merely that there is no Kierkegaardian theory of human nature, it implicitly argues that there should not be one.

On the other hand, several points of evidence suggest that we should look for a Kierkegaardian theory of human nature. First, we might insist on the plausible principle already invoked that a theory of psychology presupposes or implies a theory of human nature. Despite Sartre's denials of the Cartesian *res cogitans*, or characterizations of consciousness as nihilations, old Aristotelian concerns that agencies and properties must inhere in a substance are difficult to dismiss. Second, Kierkegaard emphasizes that reflective self-awareness provides the ground for human superiority over animals. While Kierkegaard takes this point to be a psychological fact, he asserts that it provides the basis for conceiving of human being

as spirit. This appears to be a comparison of human nature to animal nature. Third, Sartre's clearest departure from Kierkegaard—his Nietzschean-inspired atheism—is closely linked to Sartre's rejection of human nature, as his famous paper-cutter analogy demonstrates. Following Nietzsche against the philosophes and Kant, Sartre argues that there is no human nature because there is no creating God to preconceive it and bring it into existence in individual human beings. Kierkegaard's clear linkage of self and God, including his idea that despair is eradicated only by grounding the self in God, suggests that there is an objective reality at the root of human consciousness—a nature—that reflects the positive will and intention of God.

Following out these clues, I argue that there is a Kierkegaardian philosophical anthropology that accommodates human free self-representation and that simultaneously grounds comparison between human beings and animals. Taking a cue from the Kierkegaardian views of Catholic novelist and semiotician Walker Percy, I will show that Kierkegaard's theory of human nature is broadly consistent with Aristotelian hylomorphism.

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