The Kierkegaardian Mind

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Kierkegaard's Experimenting Psychology

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Introduction

With his experimenting (experimentsende) psychology, Kierkegaard develops an alternative to eighteenth-century rational, empirical and transcendental psychologies, which aims to preserve the subjective nature of first-person experience while adhering to the scientific requirements of objectivity and universal validity. It is an idealist psychology whose method includes identifying instantiations of psychological forms in order to exemplify the psychological experience of particular existential types. These instantiations and exemplars – experiments – may be found in actual life, history, myth, and literature or might be constructed by Kierkegaard or his pseudonyms. Kierkegaard uses the term ‘experimenting’ to qualify ‘psychology’ in the subtitle of Repetition, and part of the subtitle of ‘Guilty? Not Guilty?’ in Stages on Life’s Way is ‘A Psychological Experiment.’ He refers to experiments and experimentation in association with psychological concepts throughout his authorship from On the Concept of Irony to The Sickness unto Death. To understand Kierkegaard’s notion of experimenting psychology, and to appreciate its originality and power, we need to see how it fits into the history of the development of psychology as a science. This requires us to identify the relevant features of eighteenth-century German psychology and the trajectory psychology takes in nineteenth-century Denmark. We will then trace a parallel between Kierkegaard’s approach to psychology and Ludwig Binswanger’s existential psychotherapy in order to solve a problem that otherwise vitiates post-Kantian psychology. But first we will sketch some of the features of Kierkegaard’s experimenting psychology and existential anthropology.

Experimenting psychology and existential anthropology

Kierkegaard does not develop a systematic psychology – indeed he resists dispassionate, objective, systematized reflection on the psyche in favour of a personalized approach. His experimenting psychology is far removed from the empirical method of what came to be known as experimental psychology and is equally removed from eighteenth-century German empirical and rational psychology. It owes more to the use of observation, self-reflection, and literary characterization found in the work of Friedrich Schlegel and F. C. Sibbern and might better be called an art – though Kierkegaard refers to it as a science (Videnskab) (CA, 51/SKS 4, 356). It
also engages with themes in Kant and post-Kantian German Idealism, especially the notions of subjectivity, freedom, and self-consciousness.

Kierkegaard requires of the psychological observer that he has ‘a poetic originality in his soul so as to be able at once to create both the totality and the invariable from what in the individual is always partially and variably present’ (CA, 55/SKS 4, 359–60). He draws on the principle unum noris omnes (if you know one, you know all), where the one you know is yourself (CA, 79n/SKS 4, 382n). However, the one you know must be an ‘existing subjective individual’ and ‘a real [virkelig] human being’ (CUP 1, 571–2/SKS 7, 519; translation modified). This is to rule out purely abstract self-knowledge or extrapolation from dispassionate, systematic thought as bases for psychological insight. Kierkegaard’s art of experimenting psychology uses self-observation, recollection, and imagination to identify exemplars, which instantiate general features of the fundamental ontology of ‘the existing individual.’ His approach is not to identify universal laws, nor to infer regularities, of human behaviour. Nor is it primarily focused on psychopathologies – although he has been referred to as a ‘physician of the soul’ (Podmore 2009) and his analysis of despair was thought by Ludwig Binswanger (1958: 297) to define schizophrenia ‘with the keen insight of genius.’ More accurate is Alastair Hannay’s (1998: 110) description of the project in The Sickness unto Death as a ‘pathology of selfhood.’ Kierkegaard’s experimenting psychology illustrates features of existential anthropology, whether pathological or not, which apply in principle to all human beings.

Kierkegaard’s psychology seeks an objective understanding grounded in self-understanding (Nordentoft 1978: 2–3). Self-understanding comes not primarily from introspection, which had already been thoroughly criticized by Kant as a reliable method (Kitcher 1990: 11), but from broader self-observation and recollection (Evans 1990: locations 526–33). Its objectivity does not consist in impartial observation or double-blind testing against a control group. Rather, its objectivity consists in its accurate analysis of the fundamental ontology that conditions all existing human beings. It starts with observation, which is followed up by the ‘original thinking through of that which has been observed’ (Nordentoft 1978: 1). The perspicacity of the observation is proportional to the degree of engagement of the observer:

An inquisitively interested observer sees a great deal, a scientifically interested observer is worthy of respect, a concerned interested observer sees what others do not see, but a mad [sindssvag] observer perhaps sees the most of all; his observations are sharper and more persevering, just as certain animals have sharper senses than do human beings. But, of course, his observations must be verified.

Verification is by means of confirming those observations in oneself. They can be verified by either recollecting their truth from one’s own experience or repeating their truth in one’s own experience, through inward appropriation. Observations can be falsified by finding a contradiction between what the observer says and how the observer exists ‘qua human being’ (CUP 1, 304/SKS 7, 276). Observations can also be falsified by finding a contradiction in the mood, between what is appropriate to the object and what is presented, as for example ‘when sin is brought into aesthetics, the mood becomes either light-minded or melancholy,’ whereas its proper mood is ‘earnestness’ (CA, 14–5/SKS 4, 322).

Kierkegaard’s psychology is dialectical and must be conducted in a proper mood and be subject to the category of appropriation (CA, 14n/SKS 4, 322n), where to appropriate is to make something truly one’s own, in heartfelt inwardness (cf. CUP 1, 21, 203, 242/SKS 7, 29, 186, 220;
Kierkegaard’s experimenting psychology

CI, 328/SKS 1, 356). Because of the dynamic nature of mental phenomena, the psychological observer needs to have ‘a life-view’ and ‘a life-development’ (EPW, 64–5/SKS 1, 20–1) as stable bases for viewing mental phenomena dialectically and seeing how they fit into a totality. These are also requisites for the poet or novelist. Psychology, poetry, and religion are contiguous domains, as is suggested in the subsection of ‘Guilty? Not Guilty?’ called ‘the Last Frontier between the Esthetic and the Religious Lies in the Psychological’ (SLW, 446/SKS 6, 412).

Kierkegaard’s art of experimenting psychology often involves the imaginary construction of existential types, such as the aesthete, the ethicist, the Christian, the ironist, and the humorist.1 At other times the exemplar is found in actual life, as in the case of Adolf Adler, in whom Kierkegaard finds an exemplar of the contemporary confusion of religious and secular categories (BA, 91–2/SKS 15, 248–9). Actual existing figures always contain something accidental, so are not as open to ‘the pure ideality of possibility’ as poetically created exemplars (BA, 91/SKS 15, 248), yet even his imaginary constructions are ultimately grounded in Kierkegaard knowing himself as a real existing individual. Each of the imaginary constructions constitutes the instantiation of an existential type and can be used as an exemplar towards which we can comport ourselves in our own life projects. Kierkegaard typically removes himself from authoritative authorship of these exemplary characters by presenting them in texts by pseudonyms. He also shows us pseudonyms who create their own exemplary characters in order to observe their dialectical developments, as, for example, Constantine Constantius does with the Young Man in Repetition or Frater Taciturnus does with Quidam in ‘Guilty? Not guilty?’ This indirect communication is to facilitate the activity of the reader in relating herself to herself, guided by the exemplars, as part of the process of becoming a self. The creation of exemplary existential types resembles Friedrich Schlegel’s series of biographical sketches of great men, including Voltaire, Herder, Goethe, and Lessing, which Schlegel called ‘characteristics,’ in which he sought a unifying pattern that both individuates the men and makes their lives exemplary (Crowe 2010: 70). Schlegel, however, presented these biographical sketches directly, unlike Kierkegaard, who presents his existential exemplars indirectly in order to hold up a mirror to the reader as an existing individual.2

Kierkegaard’s works also show us instantiations of particular moods, to demonstrate how these have the potential to disclose something fundamental about coming-into-existence as a self or spirit. He shows how existential irony discloses that consciousness is not stuck in immediate perception, sensation, and cognition, but can become self-reflexive, as a step on the path to becoming a self. He shows how boredom discloses that the individual is a temporal being, who can take time that seems bereft of meaning either as an occasion to seek distraction or as a spiritual trial. Anxiety opens up the possibility of self-consciousness, firstly in the sense of awkward self-awareness, by disclosing that one exists for another and that one has the freedom (and responsibility) to choose to act on the basis of being oneself or on the basis of the expectations of others. Kierkegaard also shows how despair discloses that one is ultimately dependent, in becoming self/spirit, on the power that established one’s self – that is, we are not self-sufficient self-creators, as some German Idealists and Romantics believed. In the case of all these ambiguous moods, no particular determinate outcome is guaranteed; they are all potential moments in which to exercise freedom, and so, various outcomes are possible depending on the choices made. Dialectical skill is therefore required of the psychologist to follow the possible developments on the basis of different existential choices.

Kierkegaard’s experimenting psychology fits with other sciences and in particular with his anthropology. He takes the proper object of psychology to be the coming-into-existence of the self, so that the fundamental ontology of the existing human being must be taken into account
in order to understand the nature and limits of psychology. Unlike Kant and the rational psychologists, Kierkegaard does not think human beings are essentially thinking beings. Kierkegaard, perhaps following Schelling, takes human beings to be part of nature and always in the process of coming into being (Assiter 2015: 66–7). The human self or spirit, according to Kierkegaard, emerges in a process of dynamic self-relation, in which it strives to become ‘a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity’ (SUD, 13/SKS 11, 129). Furthermore, the human being is ‘a synthesis of psyche and body sustained by spirit’ (CA, 48/SKS 4, 354). Ultimately, Kierkegaard’s anthropology includes the idea that this dynamic synthesis must relate itself not only to itself, but also ‘to that which established the entire relation’ (SUD, 13/SKS 11, 129) – God. This theological component built into Kierkegaard’s anthropology also includes the idea that human beings are sinners and that sin is a form of error. Because of this, human beings live in ‘untruth’ and are prone to self-deception. The psychologist, then, needs to be aware of this propensity – both in the subject and object of observation.

Kierkegaard makes some explicit remarks about the relations among various academic disciplines, which are related to his views on the faculty-based conception of mind derived from eighteenth-century philosophical psychology, especially in the work of Christian Wolff, Johannes Nikolaus Tetens, and Immanuel Kant. For example, Kierkegaard regards the faculty of imagination as ‘the capacity instar omnium [for all capacities], because it is ’the medium for the process of infinitizing’ and ’the possibility of any and all reflection, and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the intensity of the self’ (SUD, 31/SKS 11, 147).

Kierkegaard thinks that a science of psychology must operate within certain limits. But, contra Kant, he thinks psychology is not limited to transcendental deductions about the conditions of possibility of cognition, sensation, and perception. Its limits are determined by: (1) its specific objects; (2) the discourses, sciences, or spheres of existence that seek to take those as their objects; (3) the relations between psychology and the other sciences that seek to understand the same object; (4) the relationship between observer and observed; (5) the nature of the psychologist as an existing human being; and (6) the fundamental ontology of the self or spirit.

As an example of the limits set by the object of observation and other sciences with the same object, let us take psychology when its object is anxiety about sin. It is bounded on one side by the science of dogmatics (which deals by authority with what is true about sin) and on another side by the science of ethics (which deals, in an ideal way, with how it is right and wrong to act). Ultimately, all three sciences fail to take sin itself as their proper object, because sin exists as a possibility for a free individual and only comes into being in the moment of choice, whereas sciences typically deal with persistent states of being (CA, 21/SKS 4, 329). Sin is the proper object of a sermon rather than any science (CA, 15/SKS 4, 323). On the other hand, psychology can properly deal with the effects of the idea of sin on the human psyche. The primary effect is to make people anxious, so anxiety is the proper object of the science of psychology when it attempts to deal (indirectly) with sin (CA, 14/SKS 4, 321). Anxiety is a category of reflection (EO 1, 155/SKS 2, 154), and an ambiguous mood, which, at least initially, lacks a determinate intentional object (CA, 42/SKS 4, 348). This lack of a determinate intentional object distinguishes it from fear (SKS K4, 348).

However, psychology in other contexts, when it pays attention to different objects, is bounded by other sciences or spheres of existence. When it takes guilt as its object, psychology operates in the space between aesthetics and religion (SLW, 446/SKS 6, 412). When it takes despair as its object, it operates on the margins of Christian faith for the purpose of ‘upbuilding’ and ‘awakening’ (SUD, iii/SKS 11, 115). In every context it is a science that, ‘just as much as poetry and art, presupposes a mood in the creator as well as in the observer’ (CA, 14n/SKS 4, 322n). Just
what is the appropriate mood for the observer in the science of psychology? It is a mood that preserves inviolate the phenomenon it observes, by allowing the phenomenon to disclose itself rather than mastering the phenomenon by fitting it to a preconceived concept (CI, 9/SKS 1, 71). This point is made in the negative, when the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis observes that if sin is dealt with in psychology, the mood becomes that of persistent observation,’ but thereby the ‘concept becomes a different concept, for sin becomes a state. However, sin is not a state. Its idea is that its concept is continually annulled’ (CA, 15/SKS 4, 323). In this requirement of psychology, Kierkegaard distinguishes his approach from both Hegelian speculative philosophy, which seeks ultimate mastery of the phenomenon in an absolute science, and Kant, for whom all phenomena are squeezed into predetermined categories of experience.

Because mental phenomena are rarely states, but more often transitory events, and because they cannot be analyzed into perfectly discrete objects to be laid out in taxonomic tables for scientific inspection, their rigorous observation requires that the observer enter into the appropriate mood, so that the observer can follow empathetically the psychological motions of the observed. In the case of the psychologist who is observing the effect of sin on the psyche, the appropriate mood is ‘a discovering anxiety’ (CA, 15/SKS 4, 323). This enables the psychologist to understand the phenomenon under investigation by means of empathy, but it is also appropriate to the (indirect) study of sin because it reflects the proper degree of earnestness. Moreover, the psychologist who investigates sin in a mood of anxiety ‘is in anxiety over the portrayal that [he himself] brings forth’ (CA, 15/SKS 4, 323). Vigilius Haufniensis defines anxiety as ‘a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy’ (CA, 42/SKS 4, 348). The psychologist who examines the psychological effects of sin with a discovering anxiety, then, simultaneously maintains empathetic awareness and critical distance, while also being anxious about her own potential freedom to sin or err.

The nature of consciousness is of course a primary concern for any science of psychology, including Kierkegaard’s. For Kant (see 1998: 246–8), consciousness conceived as ‘the unity of apperception’ is a necessary condition of all experience. Moreover, it is a necessary precondi- tion of Kant’s (1998: 246–7) transcendental deduction – by means of which he deduces the conditions of possibility of all experience – and it must take the form of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness plays an equally indispensable role for Descartes, Leibniz, and Fichte, and is also of the highest importance to the post-Kantian Idealists and Romantics, even as they reject the foundational role it was given by Kant and Fichte (Frank 2004: 53).

For Kierkegaard, consciousness and self-consciousness are not given or presupposed but are to be achieved. He conceives of consciousness as ‘an inherently first-person, agent-bound, reflexive subjective state’ (Stokes 2014: 55) and distinguishes it from ‘immedicacy’ – or what we might think of as mere sentience or sensory awareness. Nor is consciousness simply the folding back upon itself of immediacy in ‘reflection.’ In his unpublished work Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est, Kierkegaard introduces the idea of consciousness as the medium in which sensory input from reality (Virkelighed) meets the ideality of language – but these are contradictory elements: ‘the moment I make a statement about reality, contradiction is present, for what I say is ideality’ (JC, 168/SKS 15, 55). Consciousness actively relates reality to ideality and becomes a third element in the relation without solving the contradiction (JC, 169/SKS 15, 57). Here Kierkegaard uses a pun on the Danish word for interest (interesse) and its Latin meaning ‘being-between.’ ‘Reflection is disinterested. Consciousness, however, is the relation and thereby is interest, a duality that is perfectly and with pregnant double meaning expressed in the word interest (interesse [being between])’ (JC, 170/SKS 15, 57). If we take the interestedness of consciousness to be ‘the subjective, affective correlate’ of self-awareness, then consciousness
can be a matter of degree (Stokes 2014: 59) – the more interest, the more consciousness. Similarly, the ‘more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will the more self’. A person who has no will at all is also not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also’ (SUD, 29/SKS 11, 145). Self-consciousness is achieved when we take our consciousness as an object for our consciousness. But each individual’s consciousness, hence self-consciousness, is utterly unique. ‘The most concrete content that consciousness can have is consciousness of itself, of the individual himself’ (CA, 143/SKS 4, 443). Kierkegaard’s account of self-consciousness, then, constitutes a rejection of what Manfred Frank (2004: 68) refers to as ‘the reflection-model of self-consciousness,’ which runs from Descartes through Kant to Fichte, and with which the post-Kantian Idealists and Romantics grapple.5

Kierkegaard’s psychology addresses the themes of consciousness, subjectivity, and freedom, which are at the centre of his German predecessors’ philosophical psychology. But we need to look a bit more broadly at that context in order to understand where he is coming from when he develops his experimenting psychology.

**Transcendental psychology and reflection philosophy**

German psychology in the eighteenth century was dominated by the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Wolff divided the discipline into rational and empirical psychology (Teo 2005: 53). Rational psychology was taken to be an a priori science, which ‘deduces the essential properties of the soul that contain the sufficient reason for whatever actually occurs in the soul or can occur in it’ (Kitcher 1990: 12). Both parts of Wolff’s division were then subject to critique by Kant, who criticized the notion of rational psychology in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and the notion of empirical psychology in his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Kant concluded on the basis of these critiques that a science of psychology, as conceived by his predecessors, is impossible. He sought to avoid the problems of rational and empirical psychology by using pure reason to deduce the conditions of the possibility of experience – in his *transcendental psychology*. The transcendental deduction is a legitimate use of reason, unlike the rational psychologists’ ‘paralogisms’ (Kant 1998: 411). Once the transcendental deduction has identified all and only those features of the mind required for experience, empirical psychology can resume within well-defined limits, as a phenomenology of experiences.

Kant’s transcendental deduction identifies features of the mind that are required for cognition, sensation, and perception. In order to understand, sense, or perceive something, the mind has to organize sensory inputs under concepts, then synthesize the information in a unifying consciousness. This unifying function Kant (1998: 232) calls ‘the transcendental unity of apperception.’ The unity of apperception is the single, identical subject of all experience and thereby constitutes one of the main pillars of the mind. Another concern, for Kant, is how the mind represents objects, using the categories of experience.

Kant (1998: 225) identifies three capacities or faculties of mind, ‘which contain the conditions of possibility of all experience and cannot themselves be derived from any other faculty of the mind.’ These are sense, imagination, and apperception. These three capacities for all possible experience are ‘subjective sources of cognition,’ each of which ‘can be considered empirically . . . or [as] foundations a priori that make this empirical use itself possible’ (Kant 1998: 236). In empirical consciousness they ground our perception, association and reproduction, and recognition, respectively (Kant 1998: 236).
Kant’s transcendental psychology is embedded within his larger project to reconcile the causally deterministic realm explored by empirical science and the realm of reason, where he thinks freedom dwells. His solution is to confine science to a description of the world of appearances, or representations — that is, to phenomena as they are manifest to our consciousness — without drawing any conclusions about the way the world actually is.

This solution, according to at least some of the post-Kantian German Idealists, is flawed. Hegel, for example, in his early work Faith and Knowledge, accuses Kant of subjectivism, that is ‘the position that the truth about objects is just the truth of our conceptual scheme, without our categories being actually exemplified by the real things in themselves’ (Schulting 2017: 344). Moreover, Hegel criticizes Kant for adhering to ‘reflection philosophy,’ which remains stuck in its reflective oppositions (mind/world, form/content, a priori/a posteriori, subject/object, unity/manifold, reality/ideality, finitude/infinitude, etc.), while failing to reflect on these reflective oppositions’ (Schulting 2017: 347). Kierkegaard, as we have seen, takes actively relating to reflective oppositions like these to be constitutive of selfhood.

The problem of ‘reflection philosophy,’ especially as it bears on the understanding of consciousness, is central to post-Kantian Idealist and Romantic psychology. Johann Gottlieb Fichte is ‘the first to have shown conclusively that from Descartes, via German Rationalism and British Empiricism, up to Kant, self-consciousness was misconceived of as the result of an act of reflection by which a second-order act bent back upon a first-order act that is identical to itself’ (Frank 2004: 53). In other words, if self-consciousness is attained by reflecting upon ourselves, how can the observing self (subject) be identical to the observed self (object)? The subject/object split creates a difference between these two ‘selves.’ Fichte’s solution is to posit a pre-reflective unitary self, which is spontaneously free (unlimited, infinite). He then seeks to use this self-conscious ‘I’ as the starting point from which to derive all valid propositions about ‘objective necessity and limitation (finitude),’ which in turn is taken to be a transcendental condition for the possibility of the ‘I’ (Breazale 2018). Fichte thereby oscillates between ungrounded positing of the ‘I’ and transcendental deduction of its conditions of possibility. The German Romantics also confront the problem of self-consciousness conceived of as self-reflection. However, unlike Fichte they do not take self-consciousness to be a foundational principle of philosophy, and instead found self-consciousness on either transcendent Being or a non-conceptual form of consciousness such as feeling or intuition (Frank 2004: 53).

As we have seen, Kierkegaard avoids these abstract speculations on the nature and origin of self-consciousness. Instead he grounds self-consciousness in the concrete existence of the individual and gives a development account both of coming-into-existence as a self and of becoming self-conscious through moods, emotions, recollections, and actively relating the real and the ideal — including by reduplicating exemplars. In addition, Kierkegaard provides an anthropological framework through which to understand what it is to be, or become, an existing individual.

Eighteenth-century Danish psychology

J. N. Tetens, the Danish mathematician and philosopher, introduced a tripartite division of the psyche into understanding (Verstand), feeling (Gefühl), and willing (Willen), which became orthodoxy for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German faculty psychology and the systematic basis for Kant’s critical philosophy (Teo 2005: 43). Tetens also emphasized the importance of empirical, controlled experiments in establishing psychology as a natural science (SKS K7, 2). He thought that psychology should be based on observation, starting with introspective self-observation and ending with metaphysical synthesis (Teo 2005: 43).
F. C. Sibbern developed Tetens’ tripartite division by means of his notion of ‘collaterals.’ This is the idea that thinking, feeling, and willing don’t happen in isolation, but occur together (see Malantschuk 1980: 162–76). He also developed Tetens’ philosophy of personality (SKS K7, 2), in which thinking, feeling, and willing are of equal value as expressions of life and which ‘constitute the psychological basis of his principle of subjectivity’ (Koch 2016: 236). This adumbrates Kierkegaard’s notion that the self is performative, an act of relating oneself to one’s multiple constitutive relata.

Sibbern, like Kierkegaard, thought that philosophy should be focused on existence rather than abstract thought (Kirmmse 1996: 217). He thought that human life is subject to a dialectical development, where the ‘final goal is the full and complete development of the human being as a moral and spiritual being, that is, as a person’ (Koch 2016: 234). Sibbern also emphasized the necessity of personal appropriation of truth and the individual’s inner emotional connection with the universal life source (Koch 2016: 239–41).

Sibbern had introduced psychology as the core subject in the philosophy curriculum at the University of Copenhagen, where his textbook on psychology was used in the examen philosophicum (Pind 2014: 18). Kierkegaard probably had Sibbern as a teacher in the foundations of psychology course and there are traces of many of Sibbern’s most distinctive ideas in Kierkegaard’s psychology. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard’s psychology is more dynamic than Sibbern’s, which attempts to treat emotions merely collaterally rather than dialectically and existentially (Nordentoft 1978: 4).

Both Kierkegaard and Sibbern were very influential for the next generation of Denmark’s philosophical psychologists, Harald Høffding and Kristian Kroman. Both Høffding and Kroman turned to philosophy after reading Kierkegaard at university, though both reacted against his theology and idealism and took a positivistic turn (Pind 2009: 34–7). However, when Høffding turned his attention to psychology in 1874, he returned to Kierkegaard for his critique of the British associationists (Pind 2009: 35–6). In Kierkegaard he ‘came to see the importance of a thought which had lain behind Kierkegaard’s philosophizing and had much earlier been deliberately emphasized by Kant, namely the idea of the assembling and unifying character of human consciousness’ (Høffding 1928: 69).

Høffding distinguishes between ‘active’ and ‘inactive’ psychology. The latter he takes to be characteristic of British associationist psychology, in which mental associations are supposed to follow mechanically from one another. While Høffding thinks this outlook helped liberate psychology from metaphysics, it is also limited because it views mental elements in isolation. To be understood properly, mental events need to be seen in context. The idea of a ‘relational law’ among mental events was so important to Høffding that he claimed it was ‘the guiding idea of his psychology’ (Pind 2009: 36). In this we find echoes of Sibbern’s collateral thinking and Kierkegaard’s self as dialectically active self-relating.

Høffding (1891: 1) views psychology as ‘a pure science of experience,’ though he is aware of the problems of introspection as a means of accessing experience – for the reasons Kant had already given, viz. that thoughts and feelings are not steady, abiding, or discrete (Høffding 1891: 16–7). Høffding maintains a strict distinction between inner and outer experience and, like Kierkegaard, gives methodological preference in psychology to observation of inner experience. He thinks that physiological approaches to psychology cannot take us very far in understanding mental phenomena, as physiology really only deals with ‘reflex actions’ (Høffding 1891: 10). The feeling of pain, on the other hand, is a phenomenon that belongs to inner experience and is directly accessible only to consciousness (Høffding 1891: 11). Psychology deals with thoughts, feelings, and sensations, which belong to inner experience; all psychological approaches, therefore, have to take inner experience as their starting point, even physiological psychology insofar
as it deals with mental phenomena. However, despite the fact that inner and outer experience are quite distinct as experiences, that fact alone is insufficient to conclude that they have as their objects different substances or principles (Høffding 1891: 12–3).

For Høffding (1891: 14) psychology should be a science ‘without a soul,’ since it should make no presuppositions about the metaphysical status of that upon which inner experience is founded. He therefore excludes from psychology both materialism and spiritualism, opting instead for a phenomenological method (Høffding 1891: 15).

Høffding (1891: 16) follows Descartes and Kant in regarding time as ‘the form of mental phenomena’ – just as space is the form of material phenomena. This is a source of the problem for introspection as a method since inner experience won’t stand still to be observed. So, again like Kierkegaard, Høffding (1891: 17–8) prefers recollection as a method for accessing inner phenomena, since it enables different currents of observation to be unified in retrospect.

Individual observation of inner experience, however, is subjective. Yet psychology aspires to be an objective science. Observations not only between different individuals, but within and by the same individual, can vary. This can be offset to some extent by comparing observations across time and trying to take account of subjective bias, but this is an imperfect method to arrive at what is universal (Høffding 1891: 18–9). We can do a certain amount by means of classification and analysis, but we should not leap from identifying a species of mental life to attributing causal powers to it, since classification is often done on the basis of observing a prominent characteristic, rather than rigorously analysing ‘the individual elements and the laws of their connection and interaction,’ especially in the context of classifying faculties of mind (Høffding 1891: 19). In any case, we should not confuse these observations with explanations or theories: ‘The mere observation and description of [mental products], therefore, are of value as a basis only’ (Høffding 1891: 20). The subjectivity of psychological observation needs to be ‘supplemented by physiological and historical (sociological) inquiries, or, as we may say . . . subjective psychology must be supplemented by objective’ (Høffding 1891: 24). However, objective psychology ‘always rests on an inference by analogy’; when as objective psychologists ‘what we think we discover of mental life outside our own consciousness, we reproduce in ourselves by means of a sympathy closely connected with analogy. But these analogies may afford indispensable correctives to our subjective observation’ (Høffding 1891: 24).

A more rigorous way to ensure objectivity, according to Høffding (1891: 21), is experimentation. Høffding and Kroman had been instrumental in opening the way for Alfred Lehmann to establish a laboratory for experimental psychology at the University of Copenhagen. Høffding had written a letter to Wilhelm Wundt, asking that he accept Lehmann into his experimental psychology laboratory in Leipzig and later kept up a correspondence with Lehmann in Leipzig. He and Kroman supported Lehmann’s application for a position at the University of Copenhagen and for funding to establish a laboratory on his return from Leipzig. Despite a personal falling out over a scientific disagreement, in which Lehmann purported to disprove experimentally Høffding’s theory of ‘unmediated recognition,’ Høffding continued to support Lehmann professionally. This ultimately resulted in the establishment of a master’s degree in applied and theoretical psychology at the University of Copenhagen in 1918, and in the recognition of the University of Copenhagen as a pioneering centre of experimental psychology (Pind 2009).

**Existential psychotherapy and fundamental ontology**

The combination of Høffding’s positivism and Lehmann’s experimental psychology proved fatal for Kierkegaard’s experimenting psychology, at least in Copenhagen. However, his work remained inspirational for others. Elements of his work were taken up directly by existential
psychotherapists such as Ludwig Binswanger, Rollo May, Carl Rogers and Irvin Yalom (Stewart 2011a), and indirectly thanks to Kierkegaard’s influence on philosophers such as Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre (Stewart 2011b).

We will restrict ourselves here to a consideration of some parallels between Kierkegaard’s experimenting psychology and Binswanger’s method of psychotherapy, which potentially avoid what Foucault (1994: 318–22) calls ‘the empirico-transcendental doublet.’ This is a methodological flaw in the human sciences, analogous to the ‘paralogisms’ Kant found in rational psychology. Foucault traces the problem to Kant’s ‘contamination’ of transcendental deduction – on the basis of pure reason – with his anthropology, which outlines the empirical limits of human knowledge. Our self-knowledge entails viciously circular reasoning when we seek its conditions of possibility in the limits ‘discovered’ by the very empirical investigations those limits make possible. That is, the same conditions or limits that are discovered by the empirical human sciences are also those that condition the discoveries. It is a fatal methodological flaw in much of the post-Kantian psychology, whose history we have traced above.

Binswanger’s method, like Kierkegaard’s, avoids vicious circularity because it starts with the idea of human existence as an open process of coming-into-being through free, self-relating activity rather than as limited by fixed, transcendental conditions of possibility. It steers a middle way between the transcendental and the empirical by making human being ‘neither a transcendental structure nor a concrete particular, but the instantiation of the first in the second’ (Han-Pile 2016: 7). In order for this approach to avoid the pitfalls of the empirico-transcendental doublet, ‘the particular cases of [human-being] examined in existential analysis have to be regarded as exemplary’ (Han-Pile 2016: 7). It does this by taking existential instances (case studies) to be exemplary in disclosing ways of being-in-the-world, towards which the observer or reader are free to comport themselves. Kierkegaard takes this potential comportment to be the dialectical element in both observation and coming-to-be a self. Binswanger starts with existence, which ‘is not human life empirically understood, let alone an empirical fact about an entity . . . but the self-interpreting activity that is both presupposed by and expressed in all forms of Dasein’s comportment’ (Han-Pile 2016: 7). This is very similar to Kierkegaard’s notion of understanding the self as a self-relating activity.

In his case studies, Binswanger begins with observations of the patient’s history, behaviour, and communication. He then applies an existential analysis, before concluding with a psychopathological-clinical analysis. The existential analysis consists in identifying the patient as an instantiation of a mode of being-in-the-world. This includes an account of how the patient comports herself towards the elements that make up that mode of being-in-the-world. The analysis also shows how the patient exemplifies, in her comportment, the conditions of possibility of her being-in-the-world. The psychopathological-clinical analysis consists in applying the categories of psychoanalysis and clinical psychiatry to the existential analysis, with a view to therapeutic treatment.

In his case studies of Ellen West and Lola Voss, Binswanger finds that they have narrowed their possible modes of being-in-the-world by taking one aspect (anxiety) in the world and intensifying it until it becomes a fixed dimension (dread) of their world. This process Binswanger (1963b: 284) calls ‘mundanization [Verweltlichung].’ This is the ‘process in which the Dasein is abandoning itself in its actual, free potentiality of being itself, and is giving itself over to a specific world-design’ (Binswanger 1963b: 284). From the point of view of the psychological observer, the patient as an exemplar discloses not only the limits of her specific world-design but also other possible ways of being-in-the-world, both the possibility she instantiates and the possibilities she abrogates.

Binswanger’s existential anthropology, then, resembles Kierkegaard’s insofar as it regards being-in-the-world as a process of self-interpreting activity, in which one of the poles is
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freedom/necessity. Moreover, both agree that being human is a dialectical process and that, in undertaking a scientific, psychological investigation, we ought not to forget ourselves in the process (Binswanger 1963b: 169–71).

There are many detailed parallels between Kierkegaard's experimenting psychology and Binswanger's Daseinsanalyse (cf. Basso 2011: 29–54). For example, in his study of Lola Voss, Binswanger discusses the relationship between anxiety, 'the sudden,' and discontinuity in communication, just as Kierkegaard discusses their relationship, mediated by the notions of 'the demonic' and 'inclosing reserve,' in The Concept of Anxiety (CA, 129–32/SKS 4, 430–3). Binswanger (1963b: 300) also discusses, in terms very similar to Kierkegaard's, how the process of 'mundanization' as 'displacement of . . . responsibility and guilt onto an outside “fate” . . . has to be paid for with the loss of freedom and compulsive entanglement in the net of external circumstances' (cf. CA, 97/SKS 4, 400). Both place great emphasis on the role of freedom in coming-to-be as a self (Binswanger 1963a: 167). Both also emphasize the salvific role of love in connecting us to others in a way that opens us radically to existential possibilities, in contrast to the way demonic forces foreclose such possibilities. Love has the capacity to grant insight on the basis of non-judgmental acceptance of, and care for, others, and so plays an important role in the art of understanding others.

However, we can't pursue these detailed parallels further. The main task was to show how Kierkegaard's experimenting psychology and Binswanger's Daseinsanalyse potentially solve the problem of the empirico-transcendental doublet, which has remained a problem in post-Kantian psychology, thereby demonstrating the continuing relevance of Kierkegaard's experimenting psychology.

Related topics

'Imagination and belief,' Eleanor Helms; 'Consciousness, self, and reflection,' Patrick Stokes.

Notes

1 In Kierkegaard's Writings, Howard and Edna Hong often translate 'Experimenter' as 'imaginary constructions.' Cf. the translation of 'psychologiske Experimenter og uvirkelige Constructioner' as 'imaginary psychological constructions and unreal fabrications' instead of 'psychological experiments and unreal constructions' (SLW, 191/SKS 6, 178–9).

2 Cf. 'Solche Werke sind Spiegel: wenn ein Affe hinein guckt, kann kein Apostel heraus sehen' [Such works are mirrors: when an ape looks in, no apostle can look out]. LICHTENBERG (SLW, 8/SKS 6, 16).

3 This means of distinguishing anxiety and fear is also offered by Kant (cf. 2007: 357). Note, however, that for Kant anxiety is also distinguished from fear by intensity, that is more by quantitative than qualitative means.

4 Observation for Kierkegaard can include self-observation, but the latter is distinct from what Kant and the eighteenth-century empirical psychologists called 'introspection.' Introspection was taken to be a reliable source of real-time data by means of looking inside oneself as mental events occur. Kierkegaard is as sceptical as Kant about the reliability of this type of introspection. Instead, his method requires critical recollection (cf. Evans 1990: locations 526–33).

5 Contra Frank (2004: 53), we should note that Kierkegaard does not found self-consciousness 'on transcendent Being, a prior non-conceptual consciousness (feeling).'</n
Exemplification is a three place relationship, not a two place one. It involves not just a set of examples and a rule but also a person for whom the examples are supposed to exemplify the rule (quoted in Han-Pile 2016: 15–6).

9 ‘Dasein’ – literally ‘being there’ – is used as a technical term by Heidegger to displace the subject/object opposition found in metaphysical conceptions of the human/world relationship. Dasein is not a subject over against an objective world. Rather, subject and object are mutually constitutive as being-in-the-world. The concept of Dasein is instrumental in enabling Binswanger’s alternative to the empirico-transcendental doublet, and arguably has its roots in Kierkegaard’s views on the self as a self-relating activity.

References


Kierkegaard’s experimenting psychology


Further reading


This book’s analysis of moral agency in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard discloses important aspects of their moral psychology as well as the importance of Schelling for Kierkegaard’s theory of agency.


This book gives an accessible overview of Kierkegaard as a psychologist, paying attention to his analysis of sex and sexuality, moods, narcissism, repetition compulsion, melancholia, anxiety, and despair, as well as relating his philosophical psychology to that of Schelling and Heidegger.