**Breaking Out of Immanence: A Comparative Philosophical Analysis of Søren Kierkegaard’s Influence on Theodor W. Adorno**



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**Declaration**

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

**Abstract**

This thesis traces Søren Kierkegaard’s influence on the philosophical, critical resistance of Theodor W. Adorno’s critical theory. Beginning with Adorno’s earliest intellectual development and engagement with Kierkegaard, Chapters One to Three provide an interpretation of Adorno’s early critique of Kierkegaard (*Construction*). Chapter Three concludes by arguing that there is more evidence of Adorno’s affinity with Kierkegaard in this early period than has previously been suggested. Chapter Four provides one example of this argument in detail, showing that *Construction* already contains substantive evidence of Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard anticipates his own critique of Hegelian identity theory and negative dialectic; crucially, this critique is not just an abstract debate, but one which pertains to Adorno’s overall analysis of society. Accordingly, Chapter Five addresses Adorno’s concrete, critical analysis of the society which gives rise to the need for negative dialectic. Specifically, it does so by comparing Kierkegaard and Adorno’s conceptions of despair and unfreedom, whilst simultaneously tracing their shared sense of the decline of subjectivity. Chapters Six and Seven, which concern Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno’s praxis of resistance, argue that it was specifically the *late* Kierkegaard who was most significant for Adorno. To this end, Chapter Six argues the case for the distinctiveness of the late Kierkegaard in Adorno’s interpretation, underlining that the former’s awareness of the need for intervention, alongside his refusal to prescribe a programme of action and engage in collective forms of protest, made him particularly relevant to the challenges of powerlessness in late-capitalist modernity. Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by suggesting that, for Adorno, the late Kierkegaard represented an early model for his own distinctive praxis of resistance. Like Adorno, the late Kierkegaard’s resistance is negative, involving the task of awakening others to the intolerable character of their society by cultivating certain cognitive and non-cognitive responses through one’s comportment.

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**Works and Correspondence by Søren Kierkegaard**

Works by Kierkegaard are abbreviated in the following way:

JP *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vols. 1-7, eds. trans. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, with G. Malantschuk, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, (1967-78).

KW *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vols. 1-26, eds. trans. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1978-1998):

FT *Fear and Trembling*

SL *Stages on Life’s Way*

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

WL *Works of Love*

SUD *The Sickness unto Death*

PC *Practice in Christianity*

JFY *Judge For Yourself*

TMLW *The Moment and Late Writings*

LD *Letters and Documents*, tr. H. Rosenmeier.

**Works, Lectures and Correspondence by Theodor W. Adorno**

AE *Against Epistemology,* trans. Willis Domingo. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

C *“*Critique” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* trans. Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 281-288.

DE *Dialectic* *of Enlightenment*, (with Max Horkheimer), trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

DMWTP “*Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture* ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* trans. Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 295-306.

EAA *“*Education After Auschwitz” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* trans. Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 191-204.

HF *History and Freedom*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

HTS *Hegel: Three Studies,* trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

INTCM “Introduction” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* trans. Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 3-4.

JOA *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will. London: Routledge, 2003.

KCOA *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic,* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989.

KDOL “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love*”, Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung / Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 8:3, 1939, pp. 413-429.

KOM “Kierkegaard Once More”, trans. Jensen Suther, *Telos* 174, 2016, pp. 57-74.

LND *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.

MCP *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

MM *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, London: Verso, 2005.

MTTP “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 259-278.

ND *Negative Dialectics,* trans. E.B Ashton. London: Continuum, 2005.

NTL I *Notes to Literature Volume One,* trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

NTL II *Notes to Literature Volume Two,* trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

OAD *Ontology and Dialectic*s, trans. Nicholas Walker. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

ODS ”Opinion Delusion Society” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 105-122.

PMP *Problems of Moral Philosophy,* trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

PETS *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society,* trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

R ”Resignation” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 289-294.

SO ”On Subject and Object” In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 245-258.

SOC ”Society” In *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner. London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 267-275.

TAAB *Theodor W. Adorno and Alban Berg: Correspondence 1925-1935*, trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.

TAAG “Ist die Soziologie eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen?”, (Radio Debate with Arnold Gehlen) In Friedmann Grienz, *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen: Auflösung einiger Deutungsprobleme*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975, pp. 224–251.

TAHB “Educationfor maturity and responsibility” (conversation with Hellmut Becker), trans. Robert French et al. *History of the Human Sciences* 12:3, 1999, pp. 21-34.

TASK *Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer: Correspondence 1923-1966.* trans. Susan Reynolds and Michael Winkler. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.

TAWB *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: Correspondence 1928-1940.* trans. Nicholas Walker, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

TNM *Towards a New Manifesto*, (conversation with Max Horkheimer), trans. Rodney Livingstone. London: Verso, 2019.

WAIT “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno”, trans. Gerhard Richter. *Monatshefte*, 94:1, 2002, pp. 10-23.

WEK “Wahl, Études Kierkegaardiennes” (Review), *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8: 1–2, 1940, pp. 232–235.

In instances where no English translation is available, I have cited the German edition of Adorno’s collected works, abbreviated as follows:

GS Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970–1986.

On occasion, I have amended the English translation of Adorno’s work and have noted where this occurs. In the case of *Negative Dialectics*, Dennis Redmond translation has proved to be particularly helpful as an alternative translation. Although unpublished in hardcopy and unpaginated, it can be found here: www.academia.edu/39707967/Negative\_Dialectics. When referring to quotes from Kierkegaard’s writings which Adorno has cited, I have provided the contemporary English Hong and Hong translation alongside the page reference to Adorno’s original citation as it appears in the English translation of *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*.

It would be remiss of any work concerning Kierkegaard not to include a preliminary remark on the author’s strategy in relation to his pseudonyms. This thesis is no exception. Unlike Adorno in *Construction*, I intend to remain faithful to Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship. That being so, I will avoid conflating the writers of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship with those writings that Kierkegaard penned under his own name when speaking about their respective positions. At the same time, I think it is perfectly viable to speak of “Kierkegaard” and the “Kierkegaardian” view; but this cannot and should not be elicited through his pseudonyms alone.

# Introduction

The intellectual relationship between Kierkegaard and Adorno has been the object of scholarly debate for some decades now. Many of these debates have been marked by a distinct kind of intensity.[[1]](#footnote-2) Particularly on the side of scholars whose interest and sympathies lie primarily with Kierkegaard, discussions of Adorno’s interpretation have frequently been impassioned and even enraged. Almost always referring to Adorno’s *Habilitation* thesis, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (from here on *Construction*), Kierkegaard scholars protest, with more than some justification, that Adorno’s Kierkegaard bears no resemblance to the real Kierkegaard. From their perspective, Adorno more often than not has little of relevance to say about Kierkegaard simply because he misses the target of his commentary altogether. Occasionally, there are passing references to points of contact. But mostly there is concurrence with Merold Westphal’s assessment that Adorno wrote “the most irresponsible book ever written on Kierkegaard”, and that this renders anything else he might have to say on the subject irrelevant.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Meanwhile, in the case of those scholars whose interest lies primarily with Adorno, up until the last decade, there has mostly only been superficial engagement with the possibility of uncovering sustained connections between Kierkegaard and Adorno. This lack of interest stems from (at least) three places. Firstly, from the fact that *Construction* is ostensibly, and in reality, a work which is extremely critical of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Secondly, concomitant with the judgement of the Kierkegaard scholarship, it is often hard to see exactly where the “real” Kierkegaard fits into Adorno’s critique. Thirdly, because Adorno’s major engagement with Kierkegaard, *Construction*, was written at a time when Adorno was very young, and his own philosophical voice was still to be found. As Max Pensky puts it, *Construction* should best be considered “a creative transposition of [Walter] Benjamin’s methodology”, rather than a work of the mature Adorno.[[3]](#footnote-4) This combination of factors has meant that, beyond a few notable exceptions (principally, Hermann Deuser’s 1980 work *Dialektische Theologie*), little energy has been expended on exploring the extent of Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno’s critical theory.[[4]](#footnote-5)

In the past decade, at least on the side of Adorno studies, this situation has changed. Specifically, there have been three book-length studies which have engaged with the Kierkegaard-Adorno relationship in varying degrees of detail on the terrain of Adornian critical theory directly: Marcia Morgan’s *Kierkegaard and Critical Theory* (2013), Asaf Angermann’s *Beschädigte Ironie: Kierkegaard, Adorno und die negative Dialektik kritischer Subjektivität* (2014) and Peter Gordon’s *Adorno and Existence* (2016).[[5]](#footnote-6) Morgan’s book is the outlier of the three, insofar as she discusses *Construction* over two chapters, but does not dedicate more than a few paragraphs to the potential connections that can be found between the two thinkers. Whilst she concludes (citing Deuser) that Adorno is unthinkable without Kierkegaard, her work is primarily concerned with showing that *Construction* is an “all encompassing rejection” of Kierkegaard, Adorno’s critique is ultimately incoherent and unsuccessful.[[6]](#footnote-7) As she puts it, Adorno has one of the weakest content based arguments of Kierkegaard’s thought and strays far from “the more credible translations and interpretations of the Collected Works of Kierkegaard we have today”.[[7]](#footnote-8) Thus, for Morgan, whilst Adorno was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard, *Construction* only aids us in bringing to light connections because it is an early expression of Adorno’s thought and methodology. In Morgan’s view, these are not connections which Adorno transparently concedes in *Construction*, because *Construction,* Morgan concludes,is not “about” Kierkegaard.[[8]](#footnote-9)

In contrast to this approach, Asaf Angermann’s study, *Beschädigte Ironie: Kierkegaard, Adorno und die negative Dialektik kritischer Subjektivität* (in English: *Damaged Irony: Kierkegaard, Adorno, and the Negative Dialectic of Critical Subjectivity*), is concerned solely with the thematic philosophical overlap between Kierkegaard and Adorno and does not consider historical or philological concerns about influence. Specifically, Angermann’s study is a self-contained account of the shared origin of Kierkegaard’s irony and Adorno's negative dialectic as respective responses to Hegel’s project of reconciliation. In light of this background, Angermann shows how, particularly at the level of subjectivity theory, Kierkegaard’s concept of incommensurability and Adorno’s notion of the non-identical share a close conceptual proximity. Ultimately, Angermann sides with Adorno when he takes the project of “damaged irony” to its furthest extreme, recognising that with the neutralising effects of late capitalism, the very possibility of the appearance of the difference that irony relies on is at stake.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Finally, the most recent book of the three and the one with which I engage consistently throughout this thesis is Peter Gordon’s *Adorno and Existence*. In this work, Gordon undertakes what is primarily a historical study of the influence of Kierkegaard (and, to a lesser extent, Husserl and Heidegger) on Adorno. Gordon proposes that these figures for Adorno were representatives of “the philosophy of bourgeois interiority”.[[10]](#footnote-11) Despite all being subjected to extensive critiques by Adorno, Gordon’s argument is that these critiques were also redemptive. That is to say, as part of his method of immanent critique, Adorno sought to extract moments of truth from these philosophies, whilst simultaneously aiming to demolish their overall integrity. What these “moments of truth” are exactly, is the fruit of Gordon’s study. Two of the chapters in the book are dedicated to Kierkegaard, and the most novel aspects of the book relate to Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno. In the first chapter, Gordon deals with *Construction*, challenging Morgan’s view that it is a work which constitutes an all-encompassing rejection of Kierkegaard. Instead, he suggests that at certain points in the text there is a “barely disguised bond of sympathy”, where Adorno situates Kierkegaard as an opponent of reification and notes his awareness of the effects of advanced capitalism at a time when it was still in the early stages of its development.[[11]](#footnote-12) This bond of sympathy, Gordon goes on to note, was only strengthened further seven years later by Adorno, upon the occasion of his giving a lecture entitled “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love”. In that text, “[t]he critical and even polemical spirit of the *Habilitationsschrift* was mostly gone, and so too was the image of Kierkegaard as a bourgeois thinker of impotent interiority”.[[12]](#footnote-13) In the fifth and final chapter of the book, entitled “Kierkegaard’s Return”, Gordon weaves a narrative which draws on Adorno’s final lecture on Kierkegaard, given in 1963, “Kierkegaard Once More”. Gordon argues that this is an articulation of Adorno’s “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard, which can only be understood by recognising the “crucial” point that for Adorno, “negative dialectics turns toward materialism only by passing *through* the subject and *not* by simply annulling its power”.[[13]](#footnote-14) He concludes that for Adorno, in contrast to the critique in *Construction*, “Kierkegaard now stood as the rebel against the “official” ambition of bourgeois philosophy to reconcile subject and object, interiority and exteriority, self and world” and could even be understood as “an early harbinger of the negative dialectic”.[[14]](#footnote-15) As the apex of his argument and the conclusion of his book, Gordon connects Kierkegaard’s influence to Adorno’s development of a secular and materialist “inverse theology”. Gordon suggests that this inverse theology proves to be an important tool in animating critical resistance as a leverage against the unfree world in which we exist. According to Gordon, for Adorno this same fundamental critical impulse is anticipated in Kierkegaard’s opposition to the world in the name of divine transcendence.

In the context of these contributions, and considering the breadth of the present scholarship on the Kierkegaard-Adorno relationship, where does my thesis fit in? Overall, the thesis continues in the fundamental spirit of Gordon’s study, developing and extending the case for the historical influence of Kierkegaard on Adorno’s philosophical development. As I outline in more detail in the summary below, however, there are a number of significant points where I diverge from his predominant historical narrative in relation to Adorno’s intellectual affinity with Kierkegaard. Briefly, the two major departures relate firstly to the extent to which Adorno found affinity with Kierkegaard only later in his life, and secondly, to my emphasis on the significance specifically of the late Kierkegaard for Adorno. Whilst I advance the case for historical and philosophical connections between Kierkegaard and Adorno throughout the thesis, both explicit and implicit in the latter’s texts, the most novel contribution in this regard relates to Adorno’s praxis of resistance and the protest made against Christendom by the late Kierkegaard. Grounded in Adorno’s affirmative comments in “Kierkegaard Once More”, but drawing connections which reach beyond Adorno’s explicit remarks, I bring attention to the surprising depth of affinity between the late Kierkegaard and Adorno. As a consequence, I am able to draw out, to an unprecedented extent, the full depth of Adorno’s suggestion in “Kierkegaard Once More” that Kierkegaard retains a powerful relevance for those who resist in late-capitalist modernity today.

The philosophical thread which I unravel throughout this thesis concerns Adorno’s understanding of the subject’s relationship with objective society as it appears through his critique and appropriation of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. To this end, I begin by expounding the details of Adorno’s disavowal of Kierkegaard’s philosophy in *Construction* on the grounds that it entails a metaphysically impossible disassociation with the objective, external world. From this unpromising start, however, the rest of the thesis (Chapters Four to Seven), consists of an exploration of the various ways that, for Adorno, Kierkegaard’s philosophy *does* in factcontain a myriad of insights which can be put to work in understanding subjectivity in its relationship with objective society. The culmination of this account (overlapping with the historical argument that I have already mentioned), relates specifically to the value of the late Kierkegaard’s anticipation of ideas which Adorno subsequently found relevant for the challenge of resistance as a subject. That is, as resistant to an ever more imposing, systematically unfree objective society. Further details of this argument can be found in the chapter-by-chapter overview below.

Finally, it is also worth underlining the specific approach that I have taken throughout the thesis, which remains attentive to the Kierkegaard texts which Adorno extracted and appropriated moments of truth from. At different points, I underline both where Adorno parts most stringently with the “real” Kierkegaard, as well as where he remains closest to the spirit of the text (as I argue is particularly the case in his reading of the late Kierkegaard). I hope that this approach allows me to retain a certain amount of critical distance from Adorno’s interpretation, whilst simultaneously enabling me to bring to light new and insightful connections. These connections go beyond the scope of present historical reconstructions, which have focused largely on Adorno’s critique on its own terms.

Having outlined the distinctive approach of the thesis and the broad historical and philosophical currents which underpin it, before moving into the main body of my argument, it will be helpful first to provide a chronological overview of the contents that will follow. In Chapters One to Three, I begin by providing an interpretation of Adorno’s intellectual development and engagement with Kierkegaard. In Chapter One, I recount the historical context of Adorno’s earliest engagements with Kierkegaard, prior to the writing of *Construction*. In so doing, I re-emphasise what has sometimes been overlooked, namely that when Adorno came to write his *Habilitationschrift*, Kierkegaard was already a distinctive intellectual figure in Adorno’s consciousness and one whom he had grappled with extensively in dialogue with Siegfried Kracauer. The significance of this is that it lends credence to the idea that when he came to write (what would become) *Construction*, Adorno was not coming to Kierkegaard entirely anew and *only* with a view to him as a prop for his own philosophical concerns, or *only* as a cipher for Walter Benjamin.

In Chapters Two and Three, I then proceed to provide a summary and interpretation of the key themes and arguments in *Construction*. I do so with two aims in mind. Firstly, to ground the thesis in an understanding that, on Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard’s thought is in a number of important ways irreconcilable with his own. Adorno’s principal objection in this regard is that Kierkegaard’s dialectic is subject centred, inward and “objectless”. Accordingly, Kierkegaard’s self is founded on its disassociation from social, historical, and material reality, which Adorno considers a metaphysical impossibility. The consequence of this lack of mediation between subject and objective world is that Kierkegaard’s dialectic and as a result, his concept of the self, ends up abstract and indeterminate, as well as foreclosing any possibility of achieving reconciliation with the material world. Finally, Adorno claims that the last move in Kierkegaard’s irreconcilable dialectic is to dispense with concepts altogether, and with them any semblance of relation to the objective world. This occurs in what Adorno views as Kierkegaard’s sacrifice of the self and rationality, culminating in his embrace of the absurd, the absolute paradox of faith. For Adorno, these amount to attempts to totally sunder the absolutely “spiritual” self from its finite, material, and historical context. Crucially, my claim is that the fundamentals of Adorno’s judgement on Kierkegaard’s overall authorship do not change in this regard. Indeed, the basis for each of these critical claims on Adorno’s part can be found in “Kierkegaard Once More”. The first aim of Chapters Two and Three is therefore to assert that any study of Adorno’s intellectual relationship with Kierkegaard must proceed by recognising that he was not a Kierkegaardian in any straightforward sense. The second aim, however, which I emphasise in the latter half of Chapter Three, is to show that Adorno’s negative, critical reading of Kierkegaard does not tell the whole story. This argument both continues and disputes Peter Gordon’s recent narrative for understanding Adorno’s intellectual relationship with Kierkegaard. It continues it, insofar as I agree with Gordon that there is evidence throughout Adorno’s work that the latter saw profound critical potential in Kierkegaard’s thought. I go further than Gordon, however, in suggesting that there is already more substantial evidence of the strength of Adorno’s affinity with Kierkegaard in *Construction* and in Adorno’s early correspondence than his narrative suggests, with its emphasis on the late transformation of Adorno’s view.

In Chapter Four, I give an example of this argument in detail, showing how in *Construction* there is already good evidence of Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard contributes to the critique of Hegelian identity theory and anticipates the possibility of a new, negative form of dialectic, a view which Gordon only attributes to the ‘mature’ Adorno. Specifically, I do so by showing how Adorno considers Kierkegaard’s alternative dialectical model, qualitative dialectic, to be an “expressly formulated” and effective critique of Hegelian idealism.[[15]](#footnote-16) In this dialectic, according to Adorno, Kierkegaard emphasises the ineluctable role of the finite, existing individual in thinking; the rejection of the necessarily progressive systematic character of dialectic and the preservation of the particular. Crucially, this has significance in showing the dialectical irony that Adorno perceives in Kierkegaard’s thought. On the one hand, as I show in Chapters Two and Three, Kierkegaard tries to completely deny the importance of the subject’s mediated relationship with the material, objective world. On the other, however, in underlining the way in which our thought is conditioned by our status as finite, embodied, contingent individuals, he emphasises the mediation of material objectivity on the subject in this respect “more strongly than Hegel”.[[16]](#footnote-17) I close Chapter Four by noting that this discussion is far from an abstract debate about dialectic for Adorno, but imperative in informing his approach to keeping alive the possibility of resistance in a systematically unfree social whole.

Having outlined Kierkegaard’s contribution to the development of Adorno’s negative dialectic, in Chapter Five I turn to the more concrete, critical analysis of society that motivates Adorno in deeming such a dialectic necessary. This is achieved principally through an examination of Adorno’s idea of the wrong life and his associated concept of unfreedom, exploring Kierkegaard’s influence on these ideas via his concept of despair. This analysis helps to bring into relief Adorno’s view of a distorted and systematically unfree “administered” world. As a crucial part of this analysis, I focus particularly on the aspects of the development of our systematic unfreedom as a piece with a view of history as “the rise and fall of the individual”.[[17]](#footnote-18) That is to say, I focus on Adorno’s view that (late-capitalist) modernity and administered society ushers in the demise of the individual subject in its self-reflective, spontaneous and imaginative capacities; individuals are reduced to thoughtless and fungible copies of the other. In pursuing this interpretation, I refer to Kierkegaard’s analysis and anticipation of this trend in *The Sickness Unto Death* and compare this with Adorno’s own affirmative remarks about Kierkegaard in relation to the diminishment of the individual. Finally, I conclude by underlining the point that Adorno cannot put Kierkegaard’s concepts (like despair) to work without socialising and secularising his thought. I argue this with reference to Peter Gordon, who demonstrates how Adorno acknowledges the critical purchase of Kierkegaard’s theological concept of transcendence and the manner in which it leads Kierkegaard (unconsciously) to view the world as a despairing, living hell to be negated. As a materialist, Adorno cannot affirm such transcendence, but instead, by way of ideas found in Benjamin and Kafka, develops the idea of an “inverse theology”, a materialist way of viewing the world, through our this-worldly suffering, from the “standpoint of redemption”.[[18]](#footnote-19)

In Chapters Six and Seven, I explore what Adorno considers to be the point at which Kierkegaard comes closest to consciously enacting this absolute negativity and criticism towards the world, in his late polemical writings against Christendom. In these two chapters, I break new ground, arguing in detail that it was not just Kierkegaard *in general* who became of principle significance to Adorno, but specifically the *late* Kierkegaard who actualises his latent critical potential and emerges from interiority. I go on to suggest that the late Kierkegaard engages in an individual mode of resistance which shares considerable affinities with Adorno’s own praxis of resistance.

In Chapter Six, I state the initial case for Adorno’s view that the polemical writings of the late Kierkegaard represent a turning point in which Kierkegaard emerges out of interiority, moving “from the doctrine of existence to intervention”.[[19]](#footnote-20) Specifically, I show how on Adorno’s reading, the late Kierkegaard became increasingly radical in his view of the world’s lovelessness, achieving a new level of intensity in his opposition to the world, such that his late writings represent a break in his previous authorship. Most significantly for Adorno, Kierkegaard develops a newfound awareness of the extent to which the objective organisation of society, what Kierkegaard called “externalities”, systematically inhibit individuals in achieving the inwardness required for the practice of Christian love to be realised. This view is concomitant with much of the contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship, who agree that Kierkegaard’s focus on externals represents a crucial discontinuity in Kierkegaard’s late writings, as distinct from his earlier authorship. Finally, I establish that when Kierkegaard undertakes this direct critique, the accompanying resistance cannot be pursued via conventional politics or a collective protest movement but is restricted principally to individuals. This perspective, which I argue Adorno shares, gives rise to the discussion with which I conclude Chapter Six, relating to what I call Adorno’s Gordian knot of resistance. In short, this is the idea that individuals must both continually recognise their objective powerlessness and the limits of their situation, without allowing this to stupefy them into total inaction and/or indifference to the world.

In Chapter Seven, I then provide an exposition of what this individual resistance and intervention looks like for the late Kierkegaard and Adorno. I begin by noting that for both thinkers, such is the extremity of their respective views about the malaise that they oppose, that in the present moment there can be no sense of affirmation or a positive proposal for a programme for action. Rather, what both thinkers turn their efforts towards is the cultivation of certain cognitive and non-cognitive responses in individuals, hoping that this will bring about a certain level of ‘awakening’ within them. The main body of the chapter explores the late Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective endeavours to cultivate these cognitive and non-cognitive responses in others. Following this, and after underlining the crucial partition between them – Kierkegaard’s theological content and appeal to divine transcendence – I demonstrate the key areas of overlap between the two thinkers in their respective attempts to cultivate resistance towards the status quo. I conclude by arguing that the late Kierkegaard becomes a model for Adorno’s own critical praxis of resistance because, through his writings and activities, he anticipates and articulates a version of praxis as comportment, through one’s general way of being. Resisting as an individual, the late Kierkegaard encapsulates both the need for a certain kind of (powerless) detachment and distance from the world, whilst at the same time, refusing to allow this detachment to morph into indifference or inactivity by not sympathising with others and or not working, insofar as one can, to try and change the situation. This model of individual praxis, I suggest, is representative of Adorno’s attempt to navigate the aforementioned Gordian knot which he thinks those who want to resist are faced with today.

# Chapter 1 “Kierkegaardianly Banging On” and the Creation of Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic

This chapter, which consists of two main parts, is the first of three concerned primarily with Adorno’s early philosophical relationship with Kierkegaard (1920-1933). In the first part of the chapter, I begin by giving an in-depth account of Adorno’s earliest engagement with Kierkegaard in the period prior to the writing of the dissertation which would become *Kierkegaard:* *Construction of the Aesthetic*. As part of this discussion, I note the often-overlooked Kierkegaardian inspired influence of Siegfried Kracauer in this early period. Kracauer helps to forge Kierkegaard as a figure in Adorno’s mind who was not simply to be rejected, but who had valuable insights, including as a counterweight to the German idealist tradition. I argue that this context is important because it can help to show how Kierkegaard is not merely a figure whom Adorno chose to write about in order to fulfil the requirements for his *Habilitation* or as a cipher for other influences, but someone who was already a distinctive philosophical figure in Adorno’s mind. In the second part of the chapter, I turn to the text of *Construction* itself. After introducing the circumstances which led to Adorno writing his *Habilitation* on Kierkegaard, I explore the unusual against the graininterpretive strategy which Adorno employs as central to his critique of Kierkegaard in *Construction*. In the final part of the chapter, I conclude by considering some of the most important influences on the text, focusing particularly on Walter Benjamin and György Lukács, but also underlining Siegfried Kracauer’s continued presence in the text. In the chapter overall, I aim to give a wider context to Kierkegaard’s place as a distinctive thinker in Adorno’s intellectual development, beyond the unusual position of his writings in the against the grain strategy of *Construction*. Whilst the real Kierkegaard often seems at best a secondary consideration in the latter text, I suggest that the Kierkegaardian context of Adorno’s intellectual development should encourage us to remain alive to the real possibility that his positive influence can still be discerned there.

## 1.1 Kierkegaardian Beginnings

Although the process of writing and research between 1929 and 1930 for Adorno’s *Habillitationschrift* (what would become *Construction*)would stand out as Adorno’s most obsessive and sustained study of Kierkegaard’s writings, this period was by no means Adorno’s first engagement with Kierkegaard’s thought.[[20]](#footnote-21) In fact, Kierkegaard was one of the first philosophical influences that Adorno became exposed to whilst still at the *Gymnasium*. The intensiveness of his early study was such that Siegfried Kracauer was led to comment:

 If Teddie ever decides to make a declaration of love so as to escape from the sinful state of bachelorhood…he will be sure to phrase it so obscurely that the young lady concerned…will be unable to understand what he is saying unless she has read the complete works of Kierkegaard.[[21]](#footnote-22)

Kracauer was in a good position to make such a remark. Whilst it is well known that he conducted weekly readings of Kant’s *Critiques* with the adolescent Adorno, who was fourteen years his junior, it is less often noted that the pair went on to read the works of both Hegel and Kierkegaard.[[22]](#footnote-23) The meetings were of profound formative significance. Adorno would later observe in a 1964 tribute to Kracauer that he would not be “exaggerating in the slightest” to say that he owed more to Kracauer as a result of those early forays than he ever did to any academic teacher.[[23]](#footnote-24) In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Kierkegaard remained ever present as a distinct philosophical force in Adorno’s consciousness throughout the 1920s, up to writing of his *Habilitation*. In 1925, during Adorno’s first meeting with György Lukács, the subject of Kierkegaard arose and occupied a significant portion of their three-hour discussion, with Adorno seemingly expressing dismay at the “violent polemic” that Lukács directed towards Kierkegaard.[[24]](#footnote-25) In 1926, Adorno makes clear his explicit and abiding reflection on Kierkegaardian themes during this period in a letter to the composer Alban Berg, writing: “I have been Kierkegaardianly banging on…for years”.[[25]](#footnote-26)

Kracauer as teacher had introduced Adorno to Kierkegaard as the foremost critic of idealism, as in different respects a counterweight to Kant and Hegel. In fact, Kracauer’s influence as one of Adorno closest philosophical interlocuters throughout the majority of the 1920s already points us indirectly towards Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno. Kracauer was an enthusiastic reader of Kierkegaard and a resolutely anti-systematic thinker who had appropriated the latter’s stages of existence into his own work.[[26]](#footnote-27) Pointing to one aspect which informs his own interest in Kierkegaard, Adorno wrote of Kracauer in 1964 that:

 his thinking holds fast to the idea that what ought to be thought cannot be thought; his thinking selects this negative idea as its substance. It is this, and not a true theological need, that bound him to Kierkegaard and existential philosophy.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Throughout the 1920s, Adorno and Kracauer maintained a dialogue which circled around their shared affinity with Kierkegaard and the possibility of Kierkegaard’s contribution to philosophical criticism.[[28]](#footnote-29) This is reflected in perhaps the most explicitly anti-Kierkegaardian remark Adorno ever wrote, written in a letter to Kracauer on the 25th July 1930, a few days before he would undergo a breakdown as a result of months of intense work on his *Habilitation*:

 I am beginning to wish the whole of Kierkegaard would go to hell and the devil whose advocate he played…What has happened to *our Kierkegaard*? The longer I work on it, the more uncomfortable I feel; he was an intolerable ideologue even in his own opinion, and in spite of all his tales of woe and acts of penitence, in spite of Regine and the arrow in the flesh, he was fundamentally complacent at every moment– it bears very, very little examination.[[29]](#footnote-30)

What is notable amongst other things here is that Adorno speaks of “our Kierkegaard”, noting his evident disappointment that whatever he and Kracauer had deemed redeemable in Kierkegaard seemed to be lost, at least *in that moment* of extreme pessimism (the extremity of which is perhaps best understood in light of the breakdown that followed it). This remark, despite the vicious character of the criticism that surrounds it, underlines the distinctive and significant place that Kierkegaard had as a philosophical influence in Adorno’s beginnings as a philosopher. It is with this background in mind that Adorno’s choice of Kierkegaard as the subject of his *Habilitation* should be understood. Kierkegaard should not be viewed as a figure about whom Adorno first thought seriously merely in the writing of his *Habilitation*.Nor should the subject of Kierkegaard only be seen as cipher for Adorno’s tacit engagement with Walter Benjamin. Rather, for Adorno, Kierkegaard was a distinctive philosophical voice, who, as a critic of idealism in his own right, needed to be reflected upon, critiqued and appropriated. Adorno had been doing just this since the very beginnings of his adolescent philosophical development.

## 1.2 The Challenge of Habilitating and The Origins of *Construction*

There is of course a context that creates the need for this account of Adorno’s sustained interest in Kierkegaard as a distinctive philosophical voice in the years prior to writing his *Habiliation*. Such an account serves to counter two potential claims. The first claim is that Adorno’s choice of Kierkegaard as a topic for his *Habilitation* was one that was suitable at the time, but one in which he actually had very little sustained interest. The second claim is that when Adorno came to write his *Habilitation*, he had no interest in Kierkegaard as a distinct philosophical voice and so although his *Habilitation* is nominally about “Kierkegaard”, in truth Kierkegaard serves merely as a cipher for Adorno’s other philosophical interests.[[30]](#footnote-31)

There are a number of reasons why the first claim might be attractive, relating primarily to the context in which Adorno’s *Habilitation* on Kierkegaard came about. In the same period during the early to mid-1920s when Adorno was engaged in impassioned conversations with Kracauer about Kierkegaard, his official academic studies were of a quite different character. In 1924, Adorno wrote what was (measured by the standard of his later writing) a conventional doctoral dissertation on Husserl. In style and content, it did not significantly depart from the currents in academic philosophy in Frankfurt at the time, defending a form of transcendent idealism heavily influenced by his supervisor, the Neo-Kantian Hans Cornelius.[[31]](#footnote-32) In the first part of 1926, Adorno made a first attempt at a *Habilitation*, on a subject entirely unrelated to Kierkegaard. This first *Habilitation* wasentitled *The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Theory of the Psyche*. It was both supervised by Cornelius and greatly influenced by his thought. Its form and content were similarly conventional. As Rolf Wiggershaus notes, Adorno wrote the thesis “without any great pleasure, and forced everything into the procrustean bed of Cornelius's epistemology”.[[32]](#footnote-33) This time, rather than Husserl, that epistemology was explored in relation to Freud’s theory of the unconscious. As Wiggershaus also notes, it is clear that this was a piece written with strategic considerations in mind. Adorno needed to pass the *Habiliation* and did not trust himself to use a genuine piece of work for this purpose.[[33]](#footnote-34) However, this approach, did not prove successful. If anything, he seemed to go too far in the other direction. In November 1927, Cornelius read the complete draft presented to him, but judged it too similar to his own work, lacking the necessary innovation and originality.[[34]](#footnote-35) As a result, he advised Adorno to withdraw it, and with that, eighteen months’ work was dispensed with.

A short time passed, and Adorno was again considering undertaking another *Habiliation*. Since Cornelius had retired and his chair in philosophy taken over by the phenomenologist Max Scheler, he had originally considered the latter as a new supervisor. There were divergences in their theoretical approach, but given the options in Frankfurt, there seemed little other choice.[[35]](#footnote-36) Again however, this prospect was denied when Scheler unexpectedly died during his first term. Scheler’s replacement in the chair in philosophy was the radical existentialist theologian Paul Tillich. As Wiggershaus points out, whilst they might at first have seemed an odd pairing, Tillich’s arrival provided an “opportunity for Adorno to bring the theologically inspired materialism of his friends to bear, not just on music, but on philosophy as well, and to make the academic world accessible to it.”[[36]](#footnote-37) Whilst Tillich’s work was primarily theological in a way that was ultimately unsatisfactory to Adorno, it had a distinctive Marxist and humanist flavour to it. He had appropriated Kierkegaardian themes in his work too. It was in this context, alongside the fact that he had little choice otherwise, that Adorno requested Tillich supervise his project, which the latter accepted. Sometime between the end of 1929 and the beginning of 1930, Adorno embarked on research for the text that would eventually become his first published work of philosophy.[[37]](#footnote-38)

It took just over a year to complete this second thesis ready for examination. Adorno immersed himself in this work, and, if it was not the first time he had read and engaged with Kierkegaard’s thought, it was certainly more intensive than anything he had done previously.[[38]](#footnote-39) Indeed, Adorno’s study was so intensive that in the summer of 1930 it led to the breakdown which I refer to above. The speed with which he completed this otherwise daunting task was surely in part because this thesis, unlike the *Habiliation* under Cornelius, was to Adorno’s minda genuine work of his own, one which he could craft without being confined by the potential reaction of his examiners. As he wrote to Alban Berg in January 1931:

 The book…is this time quite unconnected to its official function and purely a philosophical matter of my own intention, and I think that it is, *despite* having to serve as a *Habilitation* thesis, truly of some worth and something new and original.[[39]](#footnote-40)

Even whilst working on the text in its early iteration as a *Habiliation* thesis, Adorno would refer to it as his “*Kierkegaardbuch*”. In February 1931, he finally habilitated successfully. His examiners on that occasion were his supervisor Tillich and Max Horkheimer, the latter who had only become a professor in the preceding year. In March 1933, just two years later, appearing in a very different form after substantial revisions, the thesis was published as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic.*[[40]](#footnote-41) Appropriately, it was dedicated to the man who, at least a decade before had first sparked Adorno’s enthusiasm in Kierkegaard and to whom he had written of “our Kierkegaard” a few years previous: Siegfried Kracauer.

## 1.3 A Constellation of Influences: The Creation of *Construction*

Thus far, I have traced the series of events that led to the publication of *Construction* in 1933. I have argued that whilst the book that appeared at the end of that period was complex (to say the least) in relation to its treatment of Kierkegaard, it is clear that Kierkegaard played an important role in Adorno’s early philosophical formation. As a consequence, I think we should be wary of suggesting that just because Adorno’s claims in *Construction* have “less to do with Kierkegaard and more with the desire to read something else into and against Kierkegaard” (as Marcia Morgan suggests), that therefore Kierkegaard is not present in the text at all.[[41]](#footnote-42) Instead, for reasons that I will outline in the chapters below, I suggest that the strength of Kierkegaard’s early philosophical influence on Adorno was such that even when he primarily critiques Kierkegaard “against his intention”, Adorno’s affinity with Kierkegaard still shines through at crucial moments.[[42]](#footnote-43) Even whilst Adorno aims to read something into and against Kierkegaard, the truth that he perceives in the latter’s work also makes an appearance (even if this is often more oblique).

However, the need to make this argument still makes little sense without a deeper understanding of the complex method of *Construction* and the full range of influences that Adorno brought to bear on that text. It is to these matters which I now turn. From its earliest iteration as a *Habiliation* thesis, the form and method of the critique which Adorno employs in *Construction* make itan incredibly difficult and complex text. Even those who found themselves sympathetic to Adorno’s task admitted finding it hard going, as Adorno himself remarked to Kracauer in a letter of 1930:

 Horkheimer has read the whole of the fourth chapter and is delighted, but nevertheless finds it tremendously difficult…I can’t help that; it is intrinsic to the matter – I have revealed the mythical/demonic character of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence, and if it can’t be translated into Suebo-Marxian I can’t do anything about it.[[43]](#footnote-44)

These difficulties in interpretation are compounded by a number of factors. The first is the form of the text. As Paul Tillich wrote in his examiner’s report, the argument is “is spun out essentially without breaks from one end to the other”, it is “not topological, but fabric-like”.[[44]](#footnote-45) Although there are discrete section headings at the top of each page which give some direction as to the different themes discussed within each chapter, the only breaks in otherwise continuous blocks of text appear where new chapters begin.[[45]](#footnote-46) Equally, the argument’s “fabric-like” character means that there is no sense of the case against Kierkegaard building from A to B. Instead, Adorno circles the object of his critique, entering from different angles, approaching from one direction, moving on and then picking up the earlier theme at a later point.[[46]](#footnote-47) The result is as frenetic as it is dissonant. This anti-systematic approach to presentation and argumentation had its origin in Adorno’s earliest mentors, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin.

It was Kracauer and Benjamin who had also most influenced Adorno’s unusual and equally difficult to interpret approach to reading and critiquing Kierkegaard in *Construction*.[[47]](#footnote-48) In *Construction*, Adorno does not attempt to reconstruct Kierkegaard’s philosophy in the conventional manner, but rather critiques it by reading it against the grain. Beginning by dispensing entirely of the various literary methods and pseudonyms which Kierkegaard uses, Adorno interprets Kierkegaard’s writings as a coherent and unified system which is to be deconstructed. His method of deconstruction, informed both by Kracauer and Benjamin, is to cite quotations from Kierkegaard’s oeuvre (often images, parables and metaphors), lifting them outside of their original context in order to fragment the coherent and systematised text as a whole.[[48]](#footnote-49) These fragments are then reinterpreted in order to draw out the latent “truth” of Kierkegaard’s texts, which can only appear against Kierkegaard’s intention once the unified whole has been dissolved. In the same moment as he attempts to demonstrate the incoherence of Kierkegaard’s texts and concept of existence as a whole, he draws out and tries to preserve the moments of truth within Kierkegaard’s thought. Adorno’s method can thus be described as one of redemptive criticism.

Crucially, these moments of truth which Adorno draws out are predominantly *not* those which Kierkegaard himself intended to find. As I will discuss below, for example, Adorno claims that Kierkegaard’s texts show the truth of the aesthetic sphere of existence, the very sphere which Kierkegaard himself repudiates in favour of the religious. Viewed in this light, it has been said that whilst *Construction* is nominally “about Kierkegaard”, at the same time, in a different sense, it is not at all about Kierkegaard.[[49]](#footnote-50) Whilst I largely agree with this assessment, I think there a number of points in *Construction* where Adorno can be seen to deviate from it, which I point towards in the chapters that follow.

With a better grasp on the unusual methodology that Adorno deploys, it is possible to understand how he could write that the subject of *Construction*: “stands, in a certain sense, between Lukács and Benjamin and tries to use them to correct each other – not, of course, to undertake a ‘synthesis’, which is patently ridiculous.”[[50]](#footnote-51) This comment illustrates effectively how although Kierkegaard was indeed the nominal central subject of the work, Adorno’s own philosophical concerns weighed heavily on the content of the book. As Adorno wrote in the preface to his critique of Husserl, and which could be applied to Kierkegaard and *Construction*: “Husserl’s philosophy is the occasion and not the point of this book.”[[51]](#footnote-52) Kierkegaard’s writings often serve principally in *Construction* as the occasion for the application of Adorno’s “correction” of Lukács and Benjamin, and vice versa. I will now consider some of the ways in which this is so.

Walter Benjamin’s influence on *Construction* was so strong that, at the extreme end, it could be described as plagiarism. In a letter to Benjamin, the Jewish philosopher Gershom Scholem dismissed *Construction* as a book that “combines a sublime plagiarism of your thought with an uncommon chutzpah, and it will ultimately not mean much for a future, objective appraisal of Kierkegaard.”[[52]](#footnote-53) Even though Benjamin himself did not share this negative response, he agreed that there was profound overlap in their work, writing affirmatively to Adorno that “it is true that there is still something like a shared work after all”.[[53]](#footnote-54) In that same letter, he gives a helpful overview of the aspects he most admires in this “shared work”:

 Whether I turn to your presentation of baroque motif in Kierkegaard, to the ground-breaking analysis of the “intérieur”, to the marvellous quotations which you supply from the philosopher’s technical treasure trove of allegories, to the exposition of Kierkegaard’s economic circumstances, to the interpretation of inwardness as citadel or of spiritualism as the ultimate defining limit of spiritism – I am constantly struck in all of this by the wealth of insight, as well as by the penetrating character of your evaluation.[[54]](#footnote-55)

Inevitably, a number of these motifs are those upon which Benjamin has been the strongest influence. I have already noted Benjamin’s influence on Adorno’s use of Kierkegaard’s “marvellous quotations”, placed outside of their context in order to reveal latent truth content. This method has its origin in Benjamin’s book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (from here on, *Trauerspiel*), published in 1928. It is in this text that Benjamin develops the idea of the allegorical principle of knowledge, to which he alludes in the passage above. This approach subsequently inspires Adorno’s examination of the seemingly innocuous metaphors, images and indeed allegories in Kierkegaard’s work, leading him to draw significance from them, against Kierkegaard’s intention.[[55]](#footnote-56) Even beyond this, however, *Construction* is replete with Benjaminian references.[[56]](#footnote-57) Adorno’s discussion of Kierkegaard as a baroque thinker, which takes place over a number of pages, is utterly indebted to the *Trauerspiel*, to the extent that were it to be representative of the entire book, Scholem’s claim to plagiarism would be a legitimate one.[[57]](#footnote-58) Elsewhere, early on in the book, Adorno compares and contrasts Kierkegaard, the “Baudelairian dandy” and the *flaneur* of the metropolis, with Kierkegaard coming off the worse. [[58]](#footnote-59) These motifs resonate strongly too with another of Benjamin’s works, *The Arcades Project*, which had greatly inspired Adorno when Benjamin had first embarked on the idea in 1929. Finally, at various points throughout *Construction*, Adorno invokes the concept of natural-history, broadly concerned with the question of how nature and history intersect with one another. This was a leitmotifof the *Trauerspiel* and indeed Adorno’s resolution of the problem of the dialectic between nature and history leans heavily on Benjamin’s idea of allegory.[[59]](#footnote-60)

The other crucial figure in Adorno’s answer to the question of nature and history was also a foremost influence on *Construction*, namely: György Lukács. Although far from explicit, the relation of nature and history is one of the key grounds for what Adorno’s describes above in his correction of Lukács by Benjamin in *Construction* (with Kierkegaard’s work the ostensible subject for this discussion).[[60]](#footnote-61) Beyond this however, Lukács’s concepts provide the arsenal for a number of Adorno’s key criticisms of Kierkegaard. Specifically, as Susan Buck-Morss notes, in contrast to Adorno’s first *Habiliation*, in which no ideology critique is present, in *Construction* Adorno first incorporates the ideas of “reification”, “commodity structure” and “fetishism”.[[61]](#footnote-62) It is Lukács who was a particular influence on Adorno’s invocation of these ideas, (particularly the former) which are crucial in enabling Adorno to undertake a Marxist critique of Kierkegaard’s bourgeois philosophy from the context in which it arose. Thus, Lukács’ influence can be discerned in Adorno’s focus on Kierkegaard’s detachment from economic processes, his relation to the reified world, and the sociology of inwardness that Adorno presents as a counter to Kierkegaard’s own inwardness. Ironically, many of these criticisms of Kierkegaard were the same ones which Lukács had levelled at Kierkegaard when they had first met all those years ago, and which Adorno had hardly been enthusiastic about. The well-known*intérieur* section, which I discuss below, perfectly illustrates Lukács and Benjamin’s shared influence on *Construction*. Whilst the fundamental method of the criticism is that of the allegorical principle of knowledge informed by Benjamin, Adorno’s application of the *intérieur* as an insulation from the horror of the alienated and reified world is, alongside the class analysis of Kierkegaard’s capacity to shelter from the world, indebted in part to Lukács’ influence.

Even from this relatively brief overview, it is easy to see how both Benjamin and Lukács had a great bearing on the form and content of *Construction*. Equally, having noted the depth of their influence and the extent to which the study is directed towards an application of their thought, rather than of Kierkegaard’s, (including by Adorno’s own admission) it is also clear why *Construction* is viewed really as a critique and appropriation of their thought. Nonetheless, with Adorno’s Kierkegaardian beginnings in mind, it should also be noted that it is perhaps not coincidental that Benjamin and Lukács were themselves influenced in different ways by Kierkegaard. That is to say, their influence is far from mutually exclusive with Adorno’s interest in the appropriation and development of Kierkegaardian themes.[[62]](#footnote-63) Kierkegaard’s thought has its place within the network of influences that inform the substance of *Construction*.[[63]](#footnote-64)

## 1.4 Conclusion

This chapter consisted of two parts. In the first part, I gave an in-depth account of Adorno’s earliest engagement with Kierkegaard in the period prior to the writing of *Construction*. As part of this discussion, I noted the often-overlooked Kierkegaardian influence of Siegfried Kracauer in this early period. Kracauer helped to forge Kierkegaard as a figure in Adorno’s mind who was not simply to be rejected, but who had valuable insights, including as a counterweight to the German idealist tradition. I argued that this context is particularly important because it can help to show how Kierkegaard is not merely a figure who Adorno chose to write about in order to fulfil the requirements for his *Habilitation* or as a cipher for other philosophical influences, but someone who was already a distinctive philosophical figure in Adorno’s mind. In the second part of the chapter, I turned more directly to the text of *Construction* itself. After introducing the circumstances which led to Adorno writing his *Habilitation* on Kierkegaard, I then explored the unusual against the graininterpretive strategy which Adorno employs as central to his critique of Kierkegaard in *Construction*. In the final part of the chapter, I concluded by considering some of the most important influences on the text, focusing in particular on Walter Benjamin and György Lukács, but also underlining Siegfried Kracauer’s continued presence in the text. In the chapter overall, I have aimed to give a wider context to Kierkegaard’s place as a distinctive thinker in Adorno’s intellectual development, beyond the unusual position of his writings in the against the grain strategy of *Construction*. Whilst the real Kierkegaard often seems at best a secondary consideration in this text, I suggest that the Kierkegaardian context of Adorno’s intellectual development should encourage us to remain alive to the real possibility that his positive influence can still be discerned there. Accordingly, in the chapters that follow, I endeavour to show why we should in fact keep Kierkegaard’s distinct philosophical influence in mind *alongside* the evidently varied and complex constellation of influences that inform the creation of *Construction*.

# Chapter 2 Understanding *Construction*: Inwardness and Intermittence in Adorno’s Reading of Kierkegaard

Having now introduced the historical context of *Construction*, as well as given an indication of the complex network of influences which inform the text, in the next two chapters I will provide a synopsis and interpretation of *Construction*’s key themes. This will prove helpful in gaining an understanding of Kierkegaard’s lifelong influence on Adorno in a number of ways. The first of these is that ultimately, even if his engagement with Kierkegaard in *Construction* is a qualified one, it is still Adorno’s most sustained critical analysis of the thinker. Secondly and relatedly, *Construction* therefore also provides an important sense of what Adorno finds objectionable in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Whilst, as I will show, Adorno’s analysis of Kierkegaard develops over time, the fundamentals of the critique found in *Construction* (specifically pertaining to Kierkegaard’s inwardness, his refusal to engage with the objective world and his ultimately irrational embrace of faith) are in one way or another maintained through his life. Thirdly, a more detailed summary and interpretation of *Construction* will provide an opportunity to highlight the moments within the text which, I argue, have been largely passed over in the scholarship. Specifically in this respect, I refer to the points at which Adorno expresses, albeit often obliquely, his affinity with aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought which do not appear against the latter’s intention. The culmination of this argument will appear at the end of Chapter Three, where I argue that in *Construction*,Adornois much closer to his mature (and much more explicitly affirmative) view of Kierkegaard than has previously been suggested.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I examine the main themes of the first part of Adorno’s argument as it appears in *Construction*. I begin in §2.1 by introducing Adorno’s controversial method of reading Kierkegaard, specifically referencing his decision to dispense of the literary functions of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, as well as exploring Adorno’s against the grain method more generally as it appears in his own words. Following this, in §2.2 to §2.2.5, I then turn to the foundation of Adorno’s critique, his analysis of what he sees as Kierkegaard’s objectless and inward dialectic. This entails both Adorno’s tracing of the historical and socio-economic origins of Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with inwardness, as well as his critique aiming to show that Kierkegaard’s dialectic is inward and asocial, a position which he takes to be incoherent and ultimately metaphysically impossible. This metaphysical impossibility is brought into particular relief in the following sections (§2.3 to §2.3.5), which concern Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self. There, I show how, on Adorno’s reading, the concept of existence distinguishes Kierkegaard from Martin Heidegger, whilst Kierkegaard intends his related concept of the self to distinguish his philosophy from the German idealist tradition. Because of the irrational inward dialectic which these concepts are founded on, Adorno concludes that they both dissolve into abstraction. In fact, Kierkegaard ends up with an abstract and indeterminate concept of the self which, ironically, recapitulates the same idealism that he tries to escape. Having traced Adorno’s view of the incoherence of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self, in §2.4 to §2.4.5, I conclude the chapter by exploring Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence. On Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard’s spheres occupy an unusual place in his philosophy as the only point at which he attempts to thematise the place of the subject in the external, objective and material world. Accordingly, Adorno goes on to argue that whilst Kierkegaard ends up treating abstract concepts as material reality in the spheres (and thus they ultimately collapse into contradiction), they are also the only point at where Kierkegaard interprets the self in material terms. I conclude by suggesting that here Adorno actually ends up endorsing this latter aspect, which he thinks functions as compelling critique of Hegel’s claim to the possibility of thinking infinite knowledge, amongst other things.

Having now outlined the broad plan for the chapter, I will begin by providing a brief indication of the contours of Adorno’s argument in his own words, as well as indicating my approach to the selection of material in the next two chapters. Only a dedicated treatment of *Construction* is able to fully reflect the particularities of Adorno’s labyrinth-like argumentative style and pictorial rhetoric. Whilst I will not be able to provide a comprehensive account of each and every argument provided in the book, in the two chapters which follow I will explore its content by highlighting the central themes within it.[[64]](#footnote-65) I do so by broadly following Adorno’s argument in the order that it appears in the text itself.[[65]](#footnote-66)

The course of this argument, as is clear from Adorno’s own summary of *Construction*, extends well beyond the book’s nominal subject of the aesthetic:

 The aim of the book is criticism and interpretation of the concept of the aesthetic in the context of the system of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. On the one hand it rejects the assumption that Kierkegaard is a ‘poet’, and on the other his own verdict on the ‘sphere of the aesthetic’. His doctrine that ‘subjectivity is truth’ is called into question. This leads to the main theses: Kierkegaard’s ‘inwardness’ has its definite place in history and society. Its model is the bourgeois interieur in which historical and ‘mythical’ features merge. His concept of existence has its origins in the idea of an ‘objectless inwardness’. Through ‘freedom’ this interiority attempts in vain to posit transcendence out of itself. The whole of Kierkegaard’s ‘existence’ reveals itself as despair in the sense of the ‘sickness unto death’. In his doctrine of the stages Kierkegaard’s idealist foundation is merely covered by his theological purpose. The ‘paradox’ proves to be a mythical sacrifice, performed on the autonomous spirit itself. Beyond the deceptive theology of paradoxical existence Kierkegaard’s actual elements of truth have migrated to precisely that realm of ‘aesthetic’ images which he repudiates.[[66]](#footnote-67)

With that overview as a succinct summary, in Adorno’s words, of what is to come, I will now enter into the aforementioned labyrinth of Adorno’s early thought, beginning with Adorno’s rejection of Kierkegaard’s literary status and claim to being a poet.

## 2.1 Beyond Pseudonymity: Adorno’s Interpretive Strategy

Kierkegaard is well known for his use of literary devices and the creation of literary characters as a way of communicating philosophical positions. In many of his writings, Kierkegaard distances himself from the texts he writes by ascribing pseudonyms to the authorship of certain texts. Each pseudonym has an internal consistency and typically corresponds – albeit not always explicitly – with one or more of Kierkegaard’s theory of the stages or spheres of existence: the aesthetic (the lowest sphere), followed by the ethical and ending in the religious (as the highest sphere). The pseudonyms are designed in order to disorientate the reader, leaving them to make sense of the different masks which Kierkegaard presents as part of his strategy of indirect communication. The intention in doing this is to launch the reader into a passionately engaged decision about the positions presented in the text, something which an “objective” presentation of Kierkegaard’s position through direct communication would be unable to achieve.

In beginning *Construction*, as he does in the summary of the book above, Adorno repudiates this literary strategy and announces his intention to ignore it: “the first concern of the construction of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is to distinguish it from poetry.”[[67]](#footnote-68) Adorno thinks that the pseudonymous authorship and Kierkegaard’s emphasis on philosophy as “subjective” has contributed to an unjustified aversion towards analysing Kierkegaard’s philosophy against “the standard of the real”.[[68]](#footnote-69) When Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms are treated by his interpreters as isolated, fictional creations, this becomes an excuse to exclude Kierkegaard’s philosophy from “complete definition…through the totality of the fully developed system”.[[69]](#footnote-70) For this reason, Adorno instead intends to reject Kierkegaard’s claim to poetry. Renouncing the place of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms as “the constitutive element of his philosophy” Adorno instead aims to assess the “coherence” of their organisation “as a group”. [[70]](#footnote-71) In other words, consciously working against Kierkegaard’s own intention, Adorno endeavours to analyse his pseudonymous works together, reading a philosophical framework out of this group, before subjecting this framework to philosophical criticism. By contrast, traditional interpretations, which “unreflectively accept the claim of particular pseudonyms” miss the mark, precisely because, treating them as poetry, they forego the possibility of exposing them to philosophical scrutiny.[[71]](#footnote-72)

Fairly self-evidently, this method is extremely controversial, and the implications of Adorno’s unusual interpretive strategy immediately become apparent. Evaluating the pseudonyms outside of their intended literary function, Adorno turns to measuring up the form and content of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic writings according to the aforementioned “standard of the real” (i.e., whether and to what extent the content of his pseudonymous work bears any relation to objective reality). By this standard, Adorno finds the pseudonyms utterly wanting. As he puts it, they are “abstract figures” who are “not living bodies in whose incomparable existence intention is densely embedded”.[[72]](#footnote-73) Instead, the aesthetic figures constructed in Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms are of a “formulaic character” and “strictly illustrations of his philosophical categories”.[[73]](#footnote-74) Exposing Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms to philosophical critique rather than taking them at face value, it becomes clear to Adorno how far they bear any correspondence with the objective content of reality: “He who…steadfastly challenged the identity of thought and being, casually lets existence be governed by thought in the aesthetic object.”[[74]](#footnote-75) In other words, Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms do not correspond in any substantive sense with phenomena which can be found in objective reality. Rather, their origin is Kierkegaard’s “own speculative intention and traitorous literalness”, and they are only coherent insofar as they fit within Kierkegaard’s wider schema.[[75]](#footnote-76)

At this early stage, Adorno links this approach to interpretation to an emphasis on reading metaphors and images which appear in Kierkegaard’s intention; an approach which is influenced, as I note above, by Walter Benjamin. Accordingly, Adorno writes that Kierkegaard’s metaphors and images, “are to be called back out of the imagery to their authentic reality.”[[76]](#footnote-77) When taken out of Kierkegaard’s context, these metaphors “gain their own autonomy” and demonstrate the untruth of what Adorno claims is Kierkegaard’s schema, particularly his spheres of existence, demonstrating how they fail to correspond in any substantive way with concrete historical reality.[[77]](#footnote-78) This view that the aesthetic images hold the interpretive key to understanding the truth of Kierkegaard’s philosophy informs Adorno’s controversial decision to read *Construction* against the grain and leads to the focus of his study on Kierkegaard’s aesthetic writings, rather than the conventional centrepieces of Kierkegaard’s thought, the proto-existentialist themes and theological writings.[[78]](#footnote-79)

## 2.2 Adorno’s Critique of Kierkegaard’s “Objectless Inwardness”

From his first denunciation of the artificial character of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic pseudonyms, Adorno’s critique is centred around the idea that Kierkegaard’s philosophy in various ways fails to engage properly with the society, history, and concrete material conditions of the external, objective world.[[79]](#footnote-80) Two chapters of *Construction* are dedicated to an analysis and explication of Kierkegaard’s idea of inwardness, which really represents the foundation of everything else which follows in Adorno’s critique. Given this importance, in the following sub-sections (§2.2.1 to §2.2.5) I explore the different facets of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s idea of inwardness. In §2.2.1, I discuss what Adorno sees as the historical and socio-economics origins of Kierkegaard’s attachment to philosophical inwardness. Specifically, this entails the view that Kierkegaard is drawn to philosophical inwardness by virtue of his status as a *rentier* who is both insulated from the reality of economic processes and competition, whilst simultaneously feeling powerless in the face of its increasing all-pervasiveness. Between §2.2.2 and §2.2.4, I then turn to Adorno’s exposition of the philosophical inwardness that he claims arises from these historical conditions. In §2.2.2, I introduce the basis of Adorno’s claim that Kierkegaard’s dialectic is “objectless” and “inward”, connecting this to the concept of mediation, a central idea in Adorno that our thought cannot be rational without a mutually transformative subject-object dialectic. Having outlined the contours of Adorno’s basic concern about Kierkegaard’s attempt to insulate himself from the objective world in an “objectless” dialectic, in §2.2.3, I then turn to explore Adorno’s view that such insulation is an impossibility. In light of this impossibility, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard is forced to introduce the concept of “Situation”, which he deploys as a means of containing and being able to make sense of the presence of objective history in his dialectic. This effort is somewhat successful, insofar as he is able to interpret the external world as “inner history” but, ultimately, Kierkegaard cannot hold back the historical tide. The more depraved and overpowering objective history becomes, the more it appears in Kierkegaard’s “Situation”. Because of this, Kierkegaard is forced to criticise some aspects of the external world, and Adorno credits him here with certain critical insights. However, he ultimately concludes that Kierkegaard’s critique is cut short by his delusional belief that he can transcend and transform the world of things through appeals to transcendent spirituality. In §2.2.4, I explore Adorno’s illustration of this belief through an analysis of the image of the bourgeois *intérieur*. Drawing on Benjamin’s idea that innocuous images hold the interpretive key to philosophical criticism, Adorno concludes that the image of the *intérieur* which appears in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is representative of the illusion that inwardness creates, where alienated things from the objective world appear as natural and eternal.

## 2.2.1 Kierkegaard as *Rentier*: Linking Inwardness to History

Adorno makes clear early on that what he perceives as Kierkegaard’s philosophy of inwardness can only be understood properly through a sociological, economic and class analysis of Kierkegaard’s own perspective:

 every insight into Kierkegaard is to be wrung out of his own context…Kierkegaard the person cannot simply be banished from his work in the style of an objective philosophy, which Kierkegaard unrelentingly, and not without good cause, fought.[[80]](#footnote-81)

At first glance, it might appear paradoxical to try and understand inwardness – an idea which seems at odds with the objective and social domain – as part of a sociological analysis. Nonetheless, Adorno thinks that it is only through an examination of Kierkegaard’s life as “an intellectual, living on private income, shut in on himself”, that his emphasis on inwardness and the absence of objective historical conditions from his thought can be understood.[[81]](#footnote-82) As the quotation suggests, Adorno’s critique originates in the fact that Kierkegaard was able to live for the majority of his life as a *rentier*, as a beneficiary of the inheritance which he received from his father. Adorno considers these circumstances crucial for understanding the privileged position of Kierkegaard’s thought:

 Kierkegaard falls to the mercy of his own historical situation...Within commodious limits the *rentier* is economically independent…[y]et the limits of this economic position are evident: excluded from economic production, the *rentier* does not accumulate capital…nor is he able to exploit economically the intellectual labor of isolated ‘literary work’[[82]](#footnote-83)

Kierkegaard benefits from his position as a bourgeois *rentier* within the capitalist system precisely because he is excluded from its economic processes, insofar as he does not need to work for regular income. Adorno thinks that on the one hand, this leads him at times to adopt: “the naivete of a class perspective that refuses to comprehend socio-economic relationships”, which in turn encourages Kierkegaard to conclude that: “[t]he concrete self is…identical with the bourgeois self”.[[83]](#footnote-84) On the other hand, however, since Kierkegaard is not “dependent on borrowed capital, not required to sell his labour power” he is afforded an unusual kind of “open view”.[[84]](#footnote-85) This entails, in other words, that he is able to go beyond a totally unreflective embeddedness within the economic system and the social whole and, through this privileged position, arrive at a critical stance in relation to it. Overall, Adorno emphasises the short-sightedness of Kierkegaard’s analysis, whose:

 polemical-retrospective attitude toward an overwhelming capitalist external world is, in terms of its impulse, private. The external world is condemned precisely as “the external world” rather than the specifically capitalist world.[[85]](#footnote-86)

At the same time, it is not totally devoid of truth. Kierkegaard develops an unusual awareness of the dangers of “the external world” and the “economic competition that made his type extinct”.[[86]](#footnote-87) As someone who does not benefit from the productive forces of the capitalist world and is powerless in the face of them, Adorno specifically claims that Kierkegaard develops a “hatred of reification”.[[87]](#footnote-88)

This idea of reification plays a particularly central role in Adorno’s early thought, and he refers to it throughout *Construction*. Deriving primarily from the influence of György Lukács, reification is a social condition which arises as a result of the increasing permeation of the logic of commodity exchange upon all aspects of life in capitalist society.[[88]](#footnote-89) In the logic of commodity exchange, each phenomenon is ascribed with an abstract value. This process of abstraction is itself an instance of reification: each phenomenon’s *qualities* are abstracted away from, in order to facilitate their entrance into exchange relations, through which the capitalist economy functions. Lukács’ (and subsequently Adorno’s) point is that this logic of commodification has come to permeate all aspects of life, including outside of its apparently self-contained economic context. In this context then, reification refers to the social condition in which objects and experiences are treated by consciousness as delimited, thing-like and static, thereby losing their real plenitude and complexity. In other words, they are treated instrumentally and abstractly, as though they were commodities.

Now, by no means does Adorno think that Kierkegaard’s “hatred” of reification extends to anything like this level of analysis. Nonetheless, he does think that Kierkegaard intuitively identifies reification, in however vague a sense, as the fruit of the capitalist world. He opposes it because, as Adorno quotes Marx: “only the powerful capitalist…‘feels at ease and strengthened’ for he understands ‘self-estrangement’ as his ‘own power”.[[89]](#footnote-90) Being a *rentier*, Kierkegaard consequently occupies a curious position as both powerless and economically independent. In this position, Adorno concludes, Kierkegaard resolves to flee “from reification” by withdrawing “into ‘inwardness’”.[[90]](#footnote-91)

Accordingly, in this sociological account of Kierkegaard’s inwardness, Adorno draws on Kierkegaard’s historical and socio-economic circumstances in order to explain *why* the latter arrives at the kind of philosophy (emphasising inwardness and subjectivity rather than history and objectivity) that he does.[[91]](#footnote-92) But this in itself does not provide us with a philosophical analysis of the reasons why Adorno comes to view Kierkegaard’s philosophy as one of “inwardness”. It is therefore to this analysis which I now turn.

## 2.2.2 Introducing Kierkegaard’s Inward and Objectless Dialectic

Before I turn directly to Adorno’s criticism of what he calls Kierkegaard’s “inward” and “objectless” dialectic, it is first helpful to provide some more context in relation to the central reasons why the claim that a philosophy is inward and objectless might be a critical one for Adorno. Arising out of his confrontation and appropriation of Hegel’s thought (in dialogue with a number of Hegelian-influenced sources, including Marx and Lukács), Adorno takes the view that without an active, multi-directional, dynamic and mutually transformative interaction between the thinking subject and the object world, thought cannot be rational. Invoking a Hegelian term, he calls this mutual transformation “mediation”.[[92]](#footnote-93) As Brian O’Connor explains, for Adorno, the subject “mediates the object through concepts and the object mediates the subject by determining the content of the subject’s concepts”.[[93]](#footnote-94) The charge levelled at Kierkegaard by Adorno throughout *Construction* is precisely that his philosophy actively fails to enter into this process of mutual interaction in which the subject comes to understand and conceptualise the objective, material world which surrounds it, and of which it is inextricably a part.

Instead, Adorno claims that the central “dialectical” movement of Kierkegaard’s thought is a movement which “subjectivity completes both out of itself and in itself to regain ‘meaning’”.[[94]](#footnote-95) Remaining solely within the subject in this way, it “cannot be conceived as a subject/object dialectic since material objectivity nowhere becomes commensurable with inwardness”.[[95]](#footnote-96) Hence, Adorno is able to describe Kierkegaard’s dialectic as “objectless” and, consistent with his view of the importance of subject’s mediated relationship with its object, irrational. Explaining the precise character of Kierkegaard’s non-engagement, Adorno compares Kierkegaard with Fichte. Where the latter’s dialectic “springs and develops out of the centre of subjective spontaneity, in Kierkegaard the “I” is thrown back onto itself by the superior power of otherness”.[[96]](#footnote-97) In other words, Kierkegaard’s dialectic never enters into concrete objective history. Instead, his dialectic is conceived “exclusively according to the schema of internality.”[[97]](#footnote-98) For Kierkegaard,

 [t]he world of things is…neither part of the subject nor independent [of consciousness]…In itself this world remains random and totally indeterminate…there is only an isolated subjectivity, surrounded by a dark otherness.[[98]](#footnote-99)

It is this analysis which underpins Adorno’s claim that Kierkegaard’s inwardness is “objectless”. Inwardness functions, according to Adorno, as a “romantic island where the individual undertakes to shelter his ‘meaning’ from the historical flood”.[[99]](#footnote-100)

Evidently however, it will take more than the mere assertion of inwardness to protect Kierkegaard from the reality of objective history. If the external world is a dark, contingent otherness, “bound to no positive ontic content”, then how can Kierkegaard make sense of the presence of an objective history which will inevitably need to be accounted for?[[100]](#footnote-101) In the first place, Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard anathematises objective history, using “the category of the ‘person’ and the person’s inner history to exclude external history from the context of his thought”.[[101]](#footnote-102) But this is still not enough to stem the oncoming tide. However much Kierkegaard might try to exclude it and emphasise the idea of “inner history”, “he is continually confronted by history as it in truth is”.[[102]](#footnote-103) In order to make sense of these instances where the person comes into contact with specific historical content and his doctrine of inner history is threatened, Adorno claims that Kierkegaard introduces the concept of “Situation”, which is “the refuge of the subject as it is overwhelmed by objectivity”.[[103]](#footnote-104)

## 2.2.3 Kierkegaard’s “Situation”

A twofold dynamic is ongoing in Kierkegaard’s “Situation”. Firstly, as the concept which Kierkegaard calls upon when his inwardness is “overwhelmed” and “confronted by history”, it is the place where objective history appears strongest. It is here where the Kierkegaardian subject comes closest to admitting the existence of objective historical contents. At the same time, however, “Situation” is also the place where Kierkegaard attempts to contain history by subordinating it to the subject: “Only at particular instants do person and history come into contact. At these moments…the historical dimension shrivels”.[[104]](#footnote-105) In order best to describe this twofold dynamic, I will address each component in turn, beginning with the appearance of objective history.

In “Situation”, Adorno claims that Kierkegaard goes beyond a totally unqualified and absolute detachment from the external world, as he inevitably must (since such detachment is a metaphysical impossibility).[[105]](#footnote-106) Nonetheless, the appearance of the external world is heavily subordinated to the subject, accordingly, “historical actuality appears as reflection”.[[106]](#footnote-107) Whilst Kierkegaard’s subject consciously attempts to exclude objective history, this attempt is futile: “The harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself from the heteronomous, indeterminate or simply mean world, the more clearly the external world expresses itself, mediately, in subjectivity”.[[107]](#footnote-108) It is at this point that Kierkegaard develops the aforementioned hatred of reification which Adorno identifies in his sociology of inwardness. This hatred is Kierkegaard’s response “to the painful intrusion of reality into the objectless interior”, which in turn motivates the development of “a negative philosophy of history” that is “reminiscent of neo-Platonic, gnostic doctrine”.[[108]](#footnote-109)

Kierkegaard’s response is so strong, in fact, that it provokes one of the more redemptive moments of Adorno’s criticism in *Construction*. In “Situation”, Adorno writes, Kierkegaard “recognized the distress of incipient high-capitalism”, acknowledged “the relation of reification and the commodity form in a metaphor that need only be taken literally to correspond with Marxist theories” and his concepts reveal “knowledge of the reification of social life, the alienation of the individual from a world that comes into focus as mere commodity”.[[109]](#footnote-110) Adorno even notes that in the late writings in the *Instant* [Øieblikket in Danish], Kierkegaard “absorbs the actual social condition”. In these writings: “there is a materialist explosive present…the either/or of inwardness must, once shaken by the impact of the subsistent, reverse as fundamentally into its antithesis as Kierkegaard asserts the thesis.”[[110]](#footnote-111) This passage underlines the double-character to Kierkegaard’s inwardness. In “Situation”, the external world “becomes effectively real only in its depravity”, as Kierkegaard withdraws from it. [[111]](#footnote-112) But the depravity (reification, alienation, the commodification of the subject) is still present to Kierkegaard. It for this reason that Adorno is able to conclude that it is “in the ‘situation’ that…[Kierkegaard’s] dialectic makes its way out of a closed immanence”.[[112]](#footnote-113)

Inevitably, however, the breakthrough is limited. This limitation is represented by the second element of the dynamic in “Situation”. Whilst there are “historical, real elements” present in “Situation” (Kierkegaard’s acknowledgement of humanity’s alienated, reified condition) and these are to some extent critically reflected on, the same elements ultimately remain “isolated and subordinated to the individual”.[[113]](#footnote-114) The effect of this subordination is that however much Kierkegaard recognises (mediated through subjectivity) the truth of his social situation, the inward subject can never “reach its objective correlate”.[[114]](#footnote-115) The reason for this, in Adorno’s view, is that Kierkegaard’s philosophy never aspires to a mediated and mutually transformative dialectic with this objective correlate. However much historical elements might appear in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, they will always appear arbitrarily, abstractly, and indeterminately.[[115]](#footnote-116)

When Kierkegaard’s inwardness is overwhelmed by the presence of objective history, he deals with this by asserting Christian spirituality’s ability to overcome that same history by bypassing it, thus bringing “rescue from the extremity of reification”.[[116]](#footnote-117) This is achieved precisely by an emphasis on the qualitative difference between spiritualism and the external world. “Truth” for Kierkegaard, “does not have the character of a thing”. Rather, “the divine glance” falls on “alienated things…human relations and humanity itself” and in so doing “releases them from their enchantment”.[[117]](#footnote-118) Thus Kierkegaard attempts to still the storm of history by asserting, through supposedly spiritual inwardness, the ability to become distant from it. In reality, however, all he does is reproduce the very condition that he sought to get away from: alienation. Thus Adorno writes that the “depraved present” is revealed as Kierkegaard’s “own origin”.[[118]](#footnote-119) Not only this, but instead of seeing his own alienation as a product of the bourgeois society he inhabits, Kierkegaard gives it, in Susan Buck-Morss’ words, “philosophical sanction by raising it to the level of an ontological principle” (under the guise of inwardness).[[119]](#footnote-120) Ironically, in the end, the respective situations of the alienated individual immersed in the logic of economic processes and the withdrawn alienation of the inward subject reflect the same fundamental condition, since in Kierkegaard’s philosophy: “knowing subject can no more reach its objective correlative than, in a society dominated by exchange-value, things are ‘immediately’ accessible to the person”.[[120]](#footnote-121) Thus Adorno concludes that it is in “Situation” that “in the language of idealism…Kierkegaard pursues the indifferentiation [*Indifferenz*] of subject and object”.[[121]](#footnote-122)

## 2.2.4 Kierkegaard’s *Intérieur*

Most famously, Adorno illustrates the predicament of “Situation” through a description of the bourgeois *intérieur* which he claims Kierkegaard inhabits, drawing together the latter’s historical situation with an analysis of imagery that appears in his philosophy. The *intérieur* appears originally in Kierkegaard’s work, at least on Adorno’s account: “as a metaphor for the nexus of his fundamental concepts”.[[122]](#footnote-123) Unsurprisingly, however, Adorno does not allow it to remain a metaphor. Instead, he sees it as defining “an image in which – against Kierkegaard’s intention – social and historical material is sedimented”.[[123]](#footnote-124)

It is not difficult to envisage how Adorno’s interpretation proceeds at this point. In historical terms, the bourgeois *intérieur* is the name for the spacious apartment of the 19th century *rentier*. The *rentier* inhabits his *intérieur*, sitting at home reflecting, withdrawn from the world (in contrast to the Parisian *flaneur*, who at least wanders the streets intermingling with an empirical social whole at a superficial level). This forms the starting point for Adorno’s interpretation. Kierkegaard is attracted to the image of the *intérieur* because – as in Kierkegaard’s historical life as a *rentier* – it is in the *intérieur* that Kierkegaard thinks he can withdraw and escape from the reified and alienated social whole that he abhors. Indeed, Adorno suggests that the metaphor of the *intérieur* can explain the entire dynamic of the “Situation”, including the way in which elements of objective history are isolated and subordinated to the subject, in order to make it containable: “the *intérieur* is the incarnate imago of the Kierkegaard’s philosophical ‘point’: everything truly external has shrunken to a point”.[[124]](#footnote-125)

The specific aspect of the contents of the *intérieur* which Adorno draws on to describe this subject dominated dynamic is that of the “window mirror”, which is “a characteristic furnishing of spacious nineteenth-century apartment”.[[125]](#footnote-126) The function of the window mirror is to project what is outside – a row of apartment buildings *into* the otherwise isolated living room. In this way, the subject inside the *intérieur* is given the illusion of a relation to this outside, whilst in reality their interior space still dominates the overall scene and indeed limits the boundaries of anything external that can be seen. Thus, the “window mirror” is representative of the solitary “private person”, separated from economic processes and what is “cast into the apartment” is “only the semblance of things”.[[126]](#footnote-127) As Peter Gordon puts it, when the Kierkegaardian subject looks beyond itself, it “discovers only a repetition of its own solitude”.[[127]](#footnote-128) Thus, “[m]irror and mourning belong together”, since the former is a symbol of the melancholic “imprisonment of mere spirit in itself”, locked into its own condition by virtue of the isolation it cannot overcome.[[128]](#footnote-129)

As well as analysing the figure of the window mirror, Adorno draws attention to specific objects within the apartment in Kierkegaard’s metaphor. A similar dynamic to the one described above in “Situation” is followed here. In the *intérieur*, objects are “mere decoration, alienated from the purposes they represent, deprived of their own use-value”.[[129]](#footnote-130) This decorative, indeterminate and ultimately illusory character is “historically-economically produced by the alienation of thing from use-value”.[[130]](#footnote-131) Just as in “Situation”, however much the subject attempts to remove itself from economic processes, the influence of objective history asserts itself through these “commodities and their historical essence” which overwhelm the self “within its own domain”.[[131]](#footnote-132)

However, here again Kierkegaard’s inwardness brings rescue from the reality and extremity of history. In the apartment, “things do not remain alien” but rather “mute things speak as ‘symbols’.”[[132]](#footnote-133) This transformation gets to the heart of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard. What Adorno claims here is that, as in “Situation”, Kierkegaard takes real historical elements which would otherwise reveal the truth of the objective social condition and imbues them with a subjective meaning. The examples Adorno gives: “the flower as that of organic life…the orient as…the homeland of yearning; the image of the sea as that of eternity itself”.[[133]](#footnote-134) In this process, historical objects become arranged to appear as “unchangeable nature”.[[134]](#footnote-135) Thus Kierkegaard covers over the true objective-historical origin of the objects and eternalises their alienated condition as “second nature”.[[135]](#footnote-136)

Adorno’s claim that Kierkegaard imbues meaning on objects relates to another important theme in *Construction*, which is a rebuke of the existential question of the “meaning” of life.[[136]](#footnote-137) What Adorno would later write of Samuel Beckett’s critique of existentialism in *Endgame*, was formulated first as a response to Kierkegaard: “under the name of [Heidegger’s] "thrownness" and later of "absurdity" [existentialist philosophy] transforms meaningless itself into meaning”.[[137]](#footnote-138) The same process of transformation occurs in the *intérieur*. The lesson which Adorno derives from this is that the subject cannot escape historical life by making an eternal idea out of the historical and thereby giving meaning to the meaningless, as Kierkegaard does. Instead, the subject must come to recognise that the existential question of “meaning” is itself meaningless. Hence, Adorno concludes that the “peculiar puzzle” of the *intérieur* must instead be solved through philosophical criticism, which “seeks the real origin of… [Kierkegaard’s] idealistic inwardness in the historical”, rather than in accepting his imposition of “transcendent” meaning.[[138]](#footnote-139)

## 2.2.5 Summary: Adorno’s Critique of Kierkegaard’s Objectless Inwardness

Over the past four sections, I have explored the different facets of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s idea of inwardness. In §2.2.1, I discussed what Adorno sees as the historical and socio-economic origins of Kierkegaard’s attachment to philosophical inwardness. Specifically, this entailed the view that Kierkegaard is drawn to philosophical inwardness by virtue of his status as a *rentier* who is both insulated from the reality of economic processes and competition, whilst simultaneously feeling powerless in the face of its increasing all-pervasiveness. Between §2.2.2 and §2.2.4, I then turned to Adorno’s exposition of the philosophical inwardness which he claims arises from these historical conditions. In §2.2.2, I introduced the basis for Adorno’s claim that Kierkegaard’s dialectic is “objectless” and “inward”, connecting this to the concept of mediation, a central idea in Adorno that our thought cannot be rational without a mutually transformative subject-object dialectic. Having outlined the contours of Adorno’s basic worry about Kierkegaard’s attempt to insulate himself from the objective world in an “objectless” dialectic, in §2.2.3, I then turned to explore Adorno’s view that such insulation is an impossibility. In light of this impossibility, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard is forced to introduce the concept of “Situation”, which he deploys as a means of containing and being able to make sense of the presence of objective history in his dialectic. This effort is somewhat successful, insofar as he is able to interpret the external world as “inner history”, but ultimately, Kierkegaard cannot hold back the historical tide. The more depraved and overpowering objective history becomes, the more it appears in Kierkegaard’s “Situation”. Because of this, Kierkegaard is forced to criticise some aspects of the external world, and Adorno credits him here with certain critical insights. Nonetheless, he ultimately concludes that Kierkegaard’s critique is cut short by his delusional belief that he can transcend and transform the world of things through appeals to transcendent spirituality. In §2.2.4, I then explored Adorno’s illustration of this belief through an analysis of the image of the bourgeois *intérieur*. Drawing on Benjamin’s idea that innocuous images hold the interpretive key to philosophical criticism, Adorno concludes that the image of the *intérieur* which appears in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, is representative of the illusion which inwardness creates, where alienated things from the objective world appear as natural and eternal.

## 2.3 Kierkegaard’s Concept of Existence and the Self

Having explored the key elements of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s idea of inwardness, in the following sections (§2.3.1 to §2.3.5), I turn to examine Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self. This is significant for two main reasons. Firstly, Adorno’s analysis of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self brings into further relief the philosophical incoherence which Adorno claims is the result of Kierkegaard’s inward isolation from the objective world. Secondly, Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self is particularly significant because it is in this part of his critique that Adorno outlines important aspects of his reading of Kierkegaard’s proximity and distance from two key figures in the history of philosophy: Martin Heidegger and G.W.F Hegel. For different reasons, these figures were of immense importance to Adorno’s philosophical development. The interpretation will therefore proceed as follows. In §2.3.1, I begin by showing how Adorno takes care to distinguish Kierkegaard’s concept of existence from that of his supposed 20th century successor Heidegger, to the former’s (relative) credit. The crucial distinction concerns the source of meaning and truth and the subject’s capacity to obtain this truth. On Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard views meaning and truth as something which is ultimately transcendent, and which the subject is unable to express in concepts. By contrast, Adorno accuses Heidegger of imbuing immanent existence in itself with meaning, as part of his positive project of fundamental ontology; a view which Adorno stresses is incompatible with Kierkegaard’s thought. In §2.3.2, I introduce Adorno’s central claim that Kierkegaard’s concept of existence is, ironically, a recapitulation of the German idealist tradition which he sought to distinguish himself from. As part of this discussion, I provide a brief explanation of Adorno’s idea of identity, which constitutes an important part of his critique of Hegel’s idealism. Whilst it is Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard ultimately ends up reproducing a species of this idealism, section §2.3.3 begins by noting that Adorno does acknowledge there is a critical moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s work where the latter recognises the untruth of the aforementioned idea of identity, specifically the identity of thought and being. The section continues, however, by showing that Adorno’s view is that Kierkegaard ultimately goes too far in the opposite direction, ending up excluding the possibility of the interpretation of reality and of a rational, mediated relationship between subject and objective world. Finally, in §2.3.4, I conclude by briefly discussing Adorno’s view of the culmination of Kierkegaard’s repudiation of the idea of a subject-object dialectic, which is the latter’s abstract concept of the spiritual self. Without any objective content to define itself against, Adorno’s concludes that Kierkegaard’s self is forced to reproduce a (ironically more extreme) variant of the subject-driven idealism which he rebels against.

## 2.3.1 Kierkegaard’s Search for (Transcendent) Meaning: Distinctions with Heidegger

As I indicated in the introduction, Adorno proceeds in the first part of this next stage of his critique by taking on the specifics of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence in relation to its corresponding search for meaning. Whilst the rudiments of the effort to transform meaninglessness into meaning are the same, Adorno begins by underlining the crucial differences between Kierkegaard and his supposed successors, particularly Heidegger: “For Kierkegaard, the question of the ‘meaning’ of existence is not that of what existence properly is, but rather what gives existence – meaningless in itself – a meaning.”[[139]](#footnote-140) “Meaning”, for Kierkegaard, is found in the “the unquestionable ‘infinity’ that transcends existence”.[[140]](#footnote-141) By contrast, for Heidegger, the search for meaning is conducted through the interpretation of existence *qua* existence, rather than through something which transcends existence altogether.[[141]](#footnote-142)

For this reason amongst others, Adorno suggests Kierkegaard’s thought has been entirely misrepresented as existential-ontological. This is the case firstly because he suggests that Kierkegaard would reject Heidegger’s search for the “being of beings” as objectifying, since the subject plays no active part in this effort, becoming indifferent and abstracted away in the task of establishing ontology.[[142]](#footnote-143) Secondly, as a result of his differing assessment on the transcendent origin of meaning (and his subsequent refusal to objectify that meaning), Kierkegaard would reject Heidegger’s pursuit of the possibility of positive fundamental ontology. Whilst Kierkegaard pursues ontology *in a sense*, he pursues it only negatively: “Under the category of negativity, of ‘uncertainty’, truth is separated from any ontological project of the person, to whom ontology belongs only paradoxically”.[[143]](#footnote-144) How can ontology belong to someone paradoxically? The answer lies in the manner in which the person is granted transcendent meaning: “Spirituality is not being whose meaning is to be released ontologically, but a function that locks meaning within itself”.[[144]](#footnote-145) That is to say, on Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard, the truth, as any content, cannot be predicated, since this would be to “objectivate” it. Instead: “[t]ruth’s transcendence is produced instead through the negation of immanent subjectivity, through the infinite contradiction.”[[145]](#footnote-146) Rather than the infinite and transcendent truth being made expressible as positive ontology, in Kierkegaard’s philosophy it remains “locked” within the subject who, in inwardness, embraces the “imageless” and conceptually inexpressible paradox of faith.[[146]](#footnote-147) Accordingly, because of his negative ontology and aversion to “objectivation”, Kierkegaard “binds existence and ontology in order ultimately to divide them”, in a manner wholly incompatible with Heidegger’s positive ontology.[[147]](#footnote-148)

## 2.3.2 Kierkegaard’s Concept of Existence and The Claim to Identity

Having distinguished the crucial elements of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the transcendent source of “meaning” from Heidegger’s positive ontological project, Adorno clears the ground for confronting Kierkegaard’s concept of existence head on. Since, on this reading, the centre of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence is the self, it is primarily a critique of Kierkegaard’s concept of the self with which Adorno is concerned.

Adorno’s basic criticism of Kierkegaard’s concept of the self is that it is abstract and indeed can ultimately be shown to be idealist in origin. In fact, the claim that Kierkegaard falls back into the idealism which he is trying to depart from is a consistently strong theme throughout the second half of *Construction*. This is a very clear example of Adorno’s against the grain approach to criticism. Kierkegaard’s original emphasis on subjective existence and the existing individual was intended precisely as a rejoinder to the German idealist tradition’s (specifically Hegel), perceived abstraction and conflation of concepts over lived existence. I will return to this important claim about Kierkegaard’s idealist origin shortly. But it is equally important to make clear from the outset that Adorno does not view Kierkegaard’s critique of idealism as entirely impotent and irrelevant:

 Kierkegaard *recognizes the fraud* of the material ontology of the late expositional sections of the Hegelian system – the Hegelian construction of the status quo as meaningful: the identity of the real and the reasonable volatilizes ontology by spreading it out over the whole of existence…[Kierkegaard] therefore revises the process of post-Kantian idealism: he *surrenders the claim of identity*.[[148]](#footnote-149)

At this early juncture, giving an outline of what Adorno means here by “the claim of identity” will be helpful, since the problems that arise from this claim form an important part of the thesis as a whole.[[149]](#footnote-150) Adorno uses the term “identity” in a wide range of contexts.[[150]](#footnote-151) For example, in late-capitalist modernity, the experience of the subject in relation to the objective world is one which is marked by what he calls “identity thinking”. I have already indirectly mentioned one instance of this “identity thinking”, in discussing the idea of reification in §2.2.1. There, I noted how, as a by-product of the all-pervasiveness of the logic of commodification, Adorno thinks that objects and experiences are increasingly perceived through “reified” consciousness as havingfixed and limited identities, appearing as “thing-like”. This is an example of identity thinking, insofar as it involves the subject’s abstracting away from the reality of its object and denying its dynamic, rich and inexhaustible “open” character. Instead, the subject asserts (in this case, the object’s “thing-likeness”), a manipulable and containable identity upon the object. This constitutes the broadest understanding of Adorno’s conception of the idea of identity and identity thinking, at least insofar as it manifests itself most explicitly within social relations.

As we have seen already in his analysis of Kierkegaard’s inwardness, Adorno’s view is that philosophy is profoundly entangled as a part of the development of history and socio-economic relations. Insofar as philosophy reflects these conditions, Adorno thinks that it is incumbent upon philosophers to resist the tendency towards any variation of this identity thinking, in whatever context it might appear. Accordingly, he thinks that philosophy must remain continuously aware of the effort to preserve the rich, open, and irreducible character of objects. But this is only possible if we are able to articulate a theory of experience which is open and responsive to objects as they are encountered, without distortion, manipulation, or anticipation on the part of the subject. Philosophy has typically failed to achieve this, and has instead succumbed to versions of “identity thinking” which, he writes:

 says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents and what, accordingly, it is not itself. The more relentlessly our identarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the [true] identity of the object.[[151]](#footnote-152)

It is this failure to give priority to the object which underpins Adorno’s foremost critique of German idealism as identity thinking. Specifically, Adorno claims instead that this idealism develops a subject-driven theory of experience. That is to say, idealists propose that experience involves the subject’s *identity* with the objectand understands the object as, in some way, *an expression of the consciousness of the subject*. These claims, Adorno suggests, undermine the independence and priority of the object, and lead to the imposition of the subject’s order upon the object, precisely undermining the aforementioned openness towards the object and robbing it of its rich and irreducible character. Instead, Adorno aims to preserve the independence and priority of the object, all the while remaining aware that it is only through the subject*,* an ineluctable and active part of the act of thinking, that we are able to conceptualise objects at all.

As Adorno himself notes, however: “we cannot think without identifying”.[[152]](#footnote-153) Thought of any kind inevitably and necessarily tends towards determining the characteristics of the object. Thus, it becomes particularly important to distinguish between non-coercive and coercive forms of thinking about identity. That is, between a kind of non-coercive thinking which, in Brian O’Connor’s words “attempts to close the gap between it and the object, without the authority of preconceived categories…[and] seeks to bring the object nearer by understanding the object *on the object’s terms*” and the kind of coercive thinking which Adorno finds in capitalist modernity and subject-driven German idealism.[[153]](#footnote-154)

Hegel, who is referred to in *Construction* as asserting a “claim to identity”, represents for Adorno a potent mix of non-coercive and coercive identity thinking. In Adorno’s view, Hegel is crucial in the formation of the *non-coercive* form of thinking identity. On Adorno’s reading, in the preface to his *Phenomenology*, Hegel institutes the very idea of the dialectic as the subject’s attempt to articulate a dynamic objectivity.[[154]](#footnote-155) However, Adorno claims that Hegel betrays this original insight when he “equates reason and reality and subject and object”, and he falls into a coercive kind of identity thinking.[[155]](#footnote-156) When Hegel claims that the real is rational, specifically within the context of his unfolding system, Adorno argues that he ends up preconceiving this identity as an outcome, suggesting that “what exists” has an objective tendency towards the good. [[156]](#footnote-157) In doing this, he prejudices the order of experience and thus fails to preserve genuine openness towards the object. It is on this basis that Adorno argues that Hegel thus succumbs to “the claim to identity” and affirms “the status quo as meaningful”.[[157]](#footnote-158) I will return to this critique of Hegel in Chapter Four, but for now, there should at least be some sense about what Adorno means when he refers critically to “identity” and “identity thinking”.

## 2.3.3 Kierkegaard’s Concept of Existence: Idealism by Another Name?

Coming back to *Construction*,it is this very claim to identity which Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard gives up and thereby “revises the whole process of post-Kantian idealism”.[[158]](#footnote-159) Adorno clearly affirms what he understands to be Kierkegaard’s critique of coercive identity thinking in Hegel; Kierkegaard recognises the “fraud” of Hegel’s identity of real and the rational within the system. Nonetheless, Adorno is also wholly unconvinced by Kierkegaard’s positive effort to go beyond idealism in light of his abandonment of the identity thesis. It is this effort which he goes to work on in his critique of Adorno’s concept of existence and the self.

The basis of Adorno’s criticism is that whereas Hegel insists on the rational identity of thought and material being, Kierkegaard ends up going too far in the opposite direction in his critique of this identity. Rather than asserting the identity of thought and being, Kierkegaard asserts their absolute opposition, starkly contrasting: “the particular consciousness of the individual person, as concrete, with the contingency of external experience”.[[159]](#footnote-160) That is to say, there is no relation between the two, no “identity” of any kind at all. As I note above however, Adorno still thinks that weneed some kind of (non-coercive) identity in order to determine the characteristics of the object: to be able to think at all. If existence, as we have seen, is contingent and indeterminate and the concrete subject utterly incommensurate with this existence, what is Kierkegaard to do? With nowhere to turn, having sundered any substantive relation between the subject and material being, Adorno concludes that the Kierkegaardian self is forced to “find” determinacy from inside itself. He describes this process as follows in his 1963 essay “Kierkegaard Once More”:

 Rebelling against the coercion of identity [*Identitätszwang*] and the unity with which the subject enslaves the not-I, he [Kierkegaard] was chained to that subject, which has no other way of determining itself as essential than through unity, identity with itself.[[160]](#footnote-161)

Repeating a variant of his earlier criticism, Adorno notes (in his view, correctly) that Kierkegaard recognises the impossibility of identity between subject and object, thought and being, in an alienated and reified objective world. However, he then deludes himself in thinking that the meaning which could not be found objectively could instead be found in the isolation of self. As Adorno puts it (more obliquely), in *Construction*, for Kierkegaard:

 [t]he individual becomes…the bearer of a material meaning that the philosophy of identity was unable to realize in contingent sensuous material…Hegel is turned inside out: world history is for Hegel what the individual is for Kierkegaard.[[161]](#footnote-162)

Since Kierkegaard detaches the subject entirely from objective reality, which is the only possible source of its determination, his self is inevitably wholly abstract, indeterminate and lacking in content:

 The self, the hoard of all concretion, contracts in its singularity in such a fashion that nothing more can be predicated of it: it reverses into the most extreme abstractness; the claim that only the individual knows what the individual is amounts to no more than a circumlocution for its final unknowability.[[162]](#footnote-163)

## 2.3.4 Kierkegaard’s Abstract Concept of The Self

It is at this point that Adorno turns to Kierkegaard’s definition of the self in *The Sickness Unto Death*: “Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation”.[[163]](#footnote-164) Adorno uses this definition to show that Kierkegaard ends up falling into (an even more extreme variant of) the subject-driven idealism of which he accuses Hegel. As I noted above, Adorno observes that because of the Kierkegaardian self’s inability to make itself determinate in relation to objective content, it is forced to determine itself “as essential…through unity, identity with itself”.[[164]](#footnote-165) It is precisely this process which Adorno thinks Kierkegaard describes in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Rather than finding an unjustified meaningful identity in relation to the objective world, as Adorno claims of Hegel, Kierkegaard instead finds illusory meaning by identifying and producing it internally within the self: “Kierkegaard’s self is the system, dimensionlessly concentrated in the ‘point’”.[[165]](#footnote-166) All of existence rises out of this self, which appears in Kierkegaard’s philosophy as a “primordial and productive unity” which “spontaneously produces the duality of nature and supranatural” and thereby raises itself “unnoticed to the status of creator”.[[166]](#footnote-167)

It is this “posited and positing” unity which ultimately leads to the downfall of Kierkegaard’s entire movement of existence. In this movement, the self is supposed to transition from the condition of objectless inwardness, away from the reified and contingent world and reach “its pinnacle when spirit emerges pure and undisguised” in the self.[[167]](#footnote-168) Kierkegaard calls the result of this spiritualisation of the self the condition of “transparentness”. Adorno, however, thinks that in reality this “movement” is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is an illusion that the inward subject creates for itself. Existence does not arise out of the self but only appears as part of a concrete objective historical dialectic and inevitably: “[t]he unity that produces the relation pulls Kierkegaard’s self back into the same nature that transparentness vis a vis the positing power was to have purged from it”.[[168]](#footnote-169) Rather than reaching any condition of spiritual “transparentness”, Kierkegaard’s selfalways remains embedded within its true finite, natural and historical context. What the self sees as transparentness is in fact “a reflection [of itself], just as in the images of the ‘intérieur’”.[[169]](#footnote-170)

This also helps explain why for Adorno Kierkegaard’s concept of the spiritual self is so utterly abstract, and his concept of existence so indeterminate: “Spirit, separated from nature, disdains imagery.”[[170]](#footnote-171) The very thing that would allow the possibility of a concrete and determinate self, objective history, is omitted from having an active part in Kierkegaard’s thought. But just as in the *intérieur*, however, despite Kierkegaard’s attempt to bring subject and objective world to the point of indifference, the self still absorbs elements of what could be its only possible content (i.e. the external world), though entirely contingently and indeterminately.[[171]](#footnote-172) In other words, Kierkegaard’s “spiritual” self ends up blindly absorbing external nature, as its only possible content, the same nature which it had originally aimed to rise up out of. Kierkegaard’s spiritualism “reverses” into “mere nature”.[[172]](#footnote-173)

## 2.3.5 Summary: Kierkegaard’s Concept of Existence and the Self

In the preceding sections, I have explored Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self. Specifically within this, I focused on Adorno’s analysis of these concepts in their proximity and distance with Heidegger, Hegel and the wider German idealist tradition. In §2.3.1, I began by showing how Adorno takes care to distinguish Kierkegaard’s concept of existence from that of his supposed 20th century successor Heidegger, to the former’s (relative) credit. The crucial distinction concerns the source of meaning and truth and the subject’s capacity to obtain this truth. On Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard views meaning and truth as something which is ultimately transcendent, and which the subject is unable to express in concepts. By contrast, Adorno accuses Heidegger of imbuing immanent existence in itself with meaning, as part of his positive project of fundamental ontology; a view which Adorno stresses is incompatible with Kierkegaard’s thought. In §2.3.2, I introduced Adorno’s central claim that Kierkegaard’s concept of existence is, ironically, a recapitulation of the German idealist tradition which he sought to distinguish himself from. As part of this discussion, I provide a brief explanation of Adorno’s idea of identity, which constitutes an important part of his critique of Hegel’s idealism. Whilst it is Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard ultimately ends up reproducing a species of this idealism, section §2.3.3 began by noting that Adorno does acknowledge the presence of a critical moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s work, in which the latter recognises the untruth of the aforementioned idea of identity, specifically the identity of thought and being. As the section continues, however, I suggested that Adorno’s view is that ultimately Kierkegaard goes too far in the opposite direction, ending up excluding the possibility of the interpretation of reality and of a rational, mediated relationship between subject and objective world. Finally, in §2.3.4, I concluded by briefly discussing Adorno’s view of the culmination of Kierkegaard’s repudiation of the idea of a subject-object dialectic, which is the latter’s abstract concept of the spiritual self. Without any objective content to define itself against, Adorno concludes that Kierkegaard’s self is forced to reproduce an (ironically more extreme) variant of the subject-driven idealism which he rebels against.

## 2.4 Kierkegaard’s Spheres of Existence

Having criticised Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and his accompanying concept of the self for its abstract and indeterminate character, Adorno then turns to a critique of Kierkegaard’s spheres or stages of existence. The result is one of the more interesting chapters in *Construction*, one which contains further insights into Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard’s complex philosophical relationship with Hegel. For Adorno, the spheres incorporate Kierkegaard’s tacit appropriation of Hegel, his failed attempt to renounce and overcome Hegel, as well as, at least at one point, a compelling critique of Hegel.

Accordingly, in the sections that follow, I address these themes in turn. In §2.4.1, I introduce the spheres and indicate the points at which Adorno claims Kierkegaard appropriates and renounces Hegel in the dialectic of these spheres. I also underline the significance of the spheres for Adorno as the unique point in Kierkegaard’s philosophy where he actively attempts to thematise the appearance of objective, external and material existence. This has the consequence that the spheres take on a twofold character. In the three sections that follow, I address this twofold character. In §2.4.2, I explore the first moment, tracing Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard “hypostatises” the spheres. Kierkegaard explains the movement of the subject between spheres through the idea of the qualitative leap, which Adorno claims he conceives as the polemical alternative to Hegel’s idea of dialectical transition through the subject’s gradual adjustment of its concepts through a mediated relationship with the objective world. However, Adorno suggests that this alternative utterly fails precisely because it omits any possibility of continuity or interaction between the subject and the objective phenomenal contents of the spheres. Instead, he claims that Kierkegaard asserts movement, and in this putative “transition” the content of one sphere is entirely replaced by the other, whilst, in reality, they remain in total contradiction and opposition to one another. In order to account for the objective content of the spheres, (and this is where “hypostatisation” comes in) Kierkegaard instead imposes abstract universal concepts which bear no relation to the actual status of the individual whose existence they are meant to represent. In §2.4.3, I then turn to the second moment, in which, in contrast to the first, Adorno claims that Kierkegaard’s self is forced to interpret itself materially. Here, I introduce Adorno’s view that the spheres operate on a “dual model”. Whilst in the movement between the spheres all continuity is lost (because there is no mediation between them), in the dialectic immanent to the spheres, Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard’s model is closer to the Hegelian one and objective phenomena appear within it; these phenomena also mediate between the spheres (in spite of the wider logic of the leap). In §2.4.4, I then conclude by making the brief case that, in discussing this second model, Adorno in fact refers to Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the ineluctable role of the finite, existing individual in conditioning our thinking. For Adorno, this is the point at which, in the midst of his otherwise incoherent and fragmented dialectic, Kierkegaard acknowledges the presence of material objectivity as part of a compelling critique of Hegel.

## 2.4.1 Introducing Adorno’s Reading of Kierkegaard’s Spheres of Existence

In tracing Adorno’s critique thus far, I have shown that his overarching argument proposes that Kierkegaard’s philosophy in general is marked by an inwardness which is representative of Kierkegaard’s attempt to disassociate himself from society, history, and objective reality. Adorno thinks that the consequences of this disassociation materialise at all points in Kierkegaard’s thought. For example, as I showed in the preceding sections, Adorno suggests that the same disassociation forces Kierkegaard to construct an abstract and indeterminate concept of existence and the self. Consistent with this reading, Adorno now turns to discuss another important concept in Kierkegaard’s philosophy: his spheres (or stages) of existence. These spheres of existence, Adorno suggests, are introduced by Kierkegaard as a way of intentionally thematising the appearance of the objective, material and external contents of existence, something which, up until this point, has been absent in his overall concept of existence.

There are three spheres of existence for Kierkegaard: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. These spheres function as a phenomenology of subjective life and a hierarchy is built into them: the lowest sphere of existence is the aesthetic, the ethical is the middle sphere and the culmination of subjective existence is the religious sphere. The spheres explicitly and implicitly appear throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship and, broadly speaking, his writings aim to launch their readers into recognising the place of their own existence within these spheres. Needless to say, Kierkegaard ultimately aims to guide his readers into a position where they understand that their freedom can only be realised by a wholehearted embrace of the existence depicted in the religious sphere.

On Adorno’s interpretation, the composition of Kierkegaard’s spheres is both an appropriation of “Hegelian systematics” and a polemical renunciation of Hegel.[[173]](#footnote-174) On the one hand, in terms of the way that the spheres represent an appropriation of Hegel, Adorno suggests that both their hierarchical structure and their broadly teleological thrust originates in Hegel’s philosophy. By this, he proposes that they are in some ways analogous with the development of Hegel’s dialectical movement; in the spheres Kierkegaard traces the subject’s progression from immediacy in the aesthetic to more determinate ethical life by means of reflection.[[174]](#footnote-175) On this reading, even if Kierkegaard accuses Hegelian philosophy of conflating the categories of thought and existence (accusing the former of reducing the latter to abstraction), he still preserves both the system’s “Hegelian rhythmics” and “dialectical structure”.[[175]](#footnote-176) On the other hand, as I noted in the introduction, Adorno also thinks that the spheres ultimately constitute a decisive break and renunciation with Hegel’s philosophy. Whilst the spheres contradict each other in their content, these contradictions are not “sublated by the concept” and consequently, do not result in a more determinate unity of the aforementioned contradictory spheres, as would occur in Hegel’s analogous dialectical progression.[[176]](#footnote-177) Rather, the contradictions remain present “as a sign of the brittleness of an existence from which ontological meaning is hidden”.[[177]](#footnote-178) In making this comment, Adorno refers to Kierkegaard’s repudiation of Hegel’s claim to the identity of thought and material being, which I discussed in §2.3.3.

Having outlined the contours of Adorno’s interpretation of Kierkegaard’s spheres, particularly in relation their appropriation and repudiation of Hegel, I will now turn to what Adorno views as the twofold character of Adorno’s spheres. For Adorno, this twofold character arises as a direct of result of the fact that the spheres represent Kierkegaard’s only intentional endeavour to account for the determination and content of objective existence, something which is otherwise lacking in his concept of existence. He describes the twofold character as follows:

 the doctrine of the spheres is both less and more than a material realization of the ‘project’ of existence. It is less: because the doctrine does not maintain itself in pure actuality, but bears witness to the compulsion toward hypostatization precisely there where Kierkegaard supposes it has been excluded. It is more: because subjectivity, forced for once to interpret itself materially and not simply to sink into itself [as in the doctrine of the self]…ends up making statements about the existent such are never achieved by Kierkegaard’s doctrine of existence.[[178]](#footnote-179)

In summary, then, for Adorno, Kierkegaard’s spheres signify both his “compulsion towards hypostatization” (his tendency to treat abstract concepts as though they were identical with concrete material existence) and, at the same time, the spheres are the only place where Kierkegaard’s self is “forced for once to interpret itself materially”. In what remains of this chapter, I will explore this twofold dynamic, beginning with Kierkegaard’s compulsion towards abstraction or “hypostatisation” in the spheres.

## 2.4.2 Kierkegaard’s Hypostatisation of the Spheres

As I have underlined already, for Adorno, the spheres of existence represent Kierkegaard’s thematisation of the place of subjective existence in objective, external reality. These spheres represent states of being which Kierkegaard conceives of hierarchically to some extent. In basic terms, this means that the individual can live an aesthetic, ethical or religious existence and can move between the spheres during their life. As I indicated above, throughout his writings, Kierkegaard ultimately tries to direct his readers towards an embrace of the life depicted in the religious sphere. It is in relation to this question about how individuals move between the spheres that Adorno orients his critique.

In beginning this critique, Adorno suggests that, for Kierkegaard, movement between the contradictory spheres occurs through the leap, which signifies a qualitative change of state in existence. Adorno notes that whilst Kierkegaard proposes the leap as a polemical renunciation of Hegelian philosophy, the actual idea of the “qualitative leap” originates in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.[[179]](#footnote-180) Despite this origin, Adorno underlines that this does not mean that there are not key and crucial distinctions which lie between their respective approaches to the leap. Specifically, in fact, it is in Kierkegaard’s deployment of the leap that Adorno identifies the aforementioned pivotal moment where he renounces Hegel’s philosophy most stringently. As I indicated above, according to Adorno, this distinction lies in the fact that in moving between the spheres through the leap, in contrast to transition in Hegel’s philosophical system, the two contradictory spheres “do not undergo synthesis”.[[180]](#footnote-181) In fact, in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, Adorno claims to find no evidence for transition other than Kierkegaard’s brute assertion that the leap takes place in existence. Similarly, there is no “continuity in the process” where the self is meant to move between the spheres.[[181]](#footnote-182) Adorno therefore claims that the spheres do not result in “an integral, fully rounded system”, which is what the spheres (on the basis of his reconstruction and their purported Hegelian origin) are in truth meant to function as.[[182]](#footnote-183) This lack of any sign of continuity between the spheres leaves the different components of Kierkegaard’s “system” totally alienated from one another. Accordingly, Adorno therefore concludes that Kierkegaard’s spheres are representative of an altogether incoherent and fragmented “totality of ruins”.[[183]](#footnote-184) As in the earlier analysis of the concept of the self, this fragmentation can ultimately be traced back to Kierkegaard’s objectless inwardness, his failure to achieve any mediated relationship with the objective world. Kierkegaard’s self is “withdrawn into…total immanence”, and exalted “as its own judge”, since it has no measure other than itself.[[184]](#footnote-185) Lacking any determinate relationship with the objective world, this failure is reflected in the collapse of the spheres (which, after all, are meant to represent the subject’s place within the objective, external world) into meaninglessness contradiction.

It is here that we get to the heart of Adorno’s charge that Kierkegaard has a compulsion to hypostatization, or the act of abstracting away from material reality. Unable to deduce the subjective spheres of existence out of objective reality, Adorno concludes that Kierkegaard is forced to posit them “next to each other” rather “like Platonic ideas”.[[185]](#footnote-186) Despite being intended as Kierkegaard’s concrete existential alternative to Hegelian abstraction, in reality the spheres function as the “most universal concepts” and are posited in a vain attempt to “order” the “multifarious contents” of existence.[[186]](#footnote-187) The image that Adorno uses to describe the function of the spheres in this regard is that of “fixed stars”, appearing to the isolated subject as “a frozen and distant eternity”.[[187]](#footnote-188) This appearance as distant and abstract does not lead Kierkegaard to the conclusion that he has failed to construct a coherent and rational account of subjective existence, however. Rather, appearing as “alien”, they are interpreted as:

 meaning conferring powers that define their own course…They direct the individual’s fate the more completely the stranger they become…the more hidden their human origin, the more…that abstraction progresses in them.[[188]](#footnote-189)

In their abstraction, the spheres serve as confirmation for Kierkegaard of the finite subject’s distance from positive truth and meaning, whilst simultaneously also appearing as the only source of meaning. On this reading, the spheres are Kierkegaard’s “attempt to situate ontology beyond the subjective dynamic” (in contrast to Hegel) and instead “in the realm of ideas that rule existence as abstractions”.[[189]](#footnote-190) In other words, as per §2.3.3, Adorno claims that the spheres originate in Kierkegaard’s idea of the only source of meaning: the transcendent. Accordingly, the spheres will always appear abstract, insofar as the aforementioned transcendent meaning is both imageless and therefore impossible to be articulated conceptually.

Despite this apparently damning assessment of the incomprehension and fragmented character of the spheres, Adorno still gives Kierkegaard credit at some level for his awareness of the “inaccessibility of [positive] ontology”, noting that it is this insight which motivates him to differentiate the spheres.[[190]](#footnote-191) Crucially, according to Adorno, Kierkegaard recognises that the “totality of the infinite is closed to contingent human consciousness” and, as a result, “distinctions must be made”, since the same consciousness will always inhabit a finite and inherently limited perspective.[[191]](#footnote-192) It is at this point, (as I discuss in detail in Chapter Four) that Adorno makes a point of underlining that Kierkegaard’s thought does have some insight into the limits of Hegel’s suggestion that infinite knowledge can ultimately be obtained in thought.[[192]](#footnote-193)

All the same, despite the fact that Kierkegaard “legitimately challenges subjectivity’s claim to posit ontology…[through] the principle of identity”, he is obviously unconvinced by Kierkegaard’s alternative as it manifests itself in the spheres.[[193]](#footnote-194) This effort, he suggests, dispenses with any possibility of a rational understanding of the objective world. Summing up this simultaneous critique of Hegel and Kierkegaard, Adorno writes:

 Both philosophers remain idealists: Hegel by the conceptual definition of life as meaningful, ‘rational’, Kierkegaard by negating Hegel’s claim and tearing ‘meaning’ away from existence with the same insistence that Hegel forces them together.[[194]](#footnote-195)

In both cases, whether claiming “meaning” arises from outside of existence or from within it, Adorno thinks this “meaning”, *in reality* arises out of the same impulse which gives rise to what I describe as “subject-driven” philosophy, the kind which Adorno ascribes to the German idealist tradition. Recognising the value of Kierkegaard’s criticism of idealism, whilst condemning his solution as a different species of the same idealism, Adorno therefore concludes that the debate between Hegel and Kierkegaard cannot be concluded on “idealist terrain”, but only on the question of achieving historical concretion.[[195]](#footnote-196) On this score, Hegel emerges victorious in Adorno’s view, as should now be clear. This is because Hegel, unlike Kierkegaard, does initiate the basis for subject-object dialectic and thus ultimately the possibility of a rational process of knowledge in which the subject comes to conceptualise the world around it. By contrast, Kierkegaard commits the deepest error insofar as he “absorbs” meaning into the self and the distant, abstract and empty spheres, thereby “surrendering philosophy’s central claim to truth – the interpretation of reality”.[[196]](#footnote-197)

## 2.4.3 Beyond the Leap? Introducing the Return of Objectivity in Kierkegaard

In the previous section, I discussed the way in which, on Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard ends up treating abstractions as though they were representative of concrete, material existence. In this section, I will explore the second of the two claims which Adorno makes about the spheres: that within them, there is a moment of truth where Kierkegaard’s subjectivity is “forced for once to interpret itself materially” and “ends up making statements about the existent such are never achieved by Kierkegaard’s doctrine of existence”.[[197]](#footnote-198)

According to Adorno, this second aspect originates out of the first. As I have shown already in the first part, Adorno thinks that whilst the spheres are supposed to correspond with the objective, material phenomena of concrete existence, in reality, they do not. Instead, the content of the spheres derives not from the phenomena, but from what Adorno takes to be Kierkegaard’s notion of abstract transcendence. Again, Adorno ultimately thinks that the source of this abstraction can ultimately be traced back to Kierkegaard’s refusal to recognise the possibility of conceptually mediated dialectic with the objective, material world. The very same problem of abstraction rears its head again in the context of movement between the spheres. In this “movement”, the concepts change, but this is not borne out in reality.[[198]](#footnote-199) In the act of the leap, the spheres take the place of one another in their entirety, without coming into contact. Furthermore, the movement occurs irrespective of the experience of the individual person who is supposed to be the subject of the spheres: “one takes the place of the other regardless of the individual’s experience of faith”.[[199]](#footnote-200) Put in different terms, “the subject is…the stage on which spheres disappear and others are revealed…Kierkegaard’s dialectic transcends the person for whom it was planned”.[[200]](#footnote-201) At this point, what Adorno describes seems very far from any sort of interpretation in which the spheres reveal material content. But this is not all he has to say about Kierkegaard’s spheres.

Developing his analysis, Adorno claims that the spheres operate “on a dual model”.[[201]](#footnote-202) On the one hand, movement between the spheres – from one sphere to the other – occurs according to the leap. Where defined as the leap, as “the absolutely different and the paradox”, Adorno writes: “there can be no room for the authentic dialectic”.[[202]](#footnote-203) In the leap, any possibility of determination between subject and object and thus genuine movement between the spheres is foreclosed. This is because the supposed “movement” occurs without being “demonstrable in any act of consciousness”.[[203]](#footnote-204) As in Adorno’s image of the spheres as fixed stars, the leap between the spheres is “paradoxical in itself and other-worldly” and movement becomes “an act of election”, in the face of which the subject is transcended, ineffectual and helpless.[[204]](#footnote-205) This is the case precisely because, on this model, there is no possibility of mediation between subject and objective world.

## 2.4.4 The Return of Objectivity in Kierkegaard’s Dialectic

By contrast, in the second part of the “dual model”,the dialectic *internal to the spheres* themselves corresponds more closely with Hegel’s dialectic. Despite the abstraction away from the phenomena in the process of moving between the spheres, within the spheres, objective content is still present. It is appropriate that this content should arise here, since, for Adorno, as we have already seen, it is only on the Hegelian model that historical concretion is achieved. Thus, even if in the dialectic of the leap between the spheres there is an unmediated replacement of the content of one sphere by another, within the spheres the “self-reversing phenomenon is itself effective”.[[205]](#footnote-206) That is to say, because objective phenomena appear within the immanence of each sphere, the possibility of their mediation between spheres remains open. Only as a result of the immanent dialectic of each sphere, which broadly corresponds to the Hegelian model, is the mediation of objective content between spheres able to take place. This occurs *in spite of* the wider logic of the leap which is actually meant to constitute movement between the spheres and which, as Adorno argues, denies the possibility of mediation. It is only because of the “self-reversing phenomena”, (the presence of objective content in the spheres) that Kierkegaard’s dialectic is “rescued from the abyss of theological irrationality”.[[206]](#footnote-207) Were the spheres only defined by the logic of the leap, the subject would have been assuredly consigned to total irrationality as Adorno outlines it above.

Adorno draws together this dual model of the dialectic under Kierkegaard’s term “qualitative dialectic”. Qualitative dialectic takes in both the appearance of objective phenomena within the spheres and the undialectical leap between them. This is the case despite the fact that Adorno sees “qualitative dialectic” as intended to defame “Hegelian mediation”.[[207]](#footnote-208) It makes it all the more ironic, Adorno notes, therefore, that it is a kind of mediation which “comes to the aid of Kierkegaard’s concern for the concrete.”[[208]](#footnote-209) With the qualitative dialectic as a dual model which attempts to balance the mediation of objective phenomena within the spheres with their absolute separation according to the intended model: “inconsistency is therefore inscribed…[in this dialectical model] by the law of its own origin.”[[209]](#footnote-210) It is this that gives qualitative dialectic its intermittent quality. Whilst the objective phenomena within the spheres may be “dialectically motivated”, the dialectic is fractured by the leap between the spheres, by a movement which, as we have seen, is totally undialectical.[[210]](#footnote-211) Thus the qualitative dialectic as a whole is forced “to begin anew in each sphere; its continuity is fractured”.[[211]](#footnote-212)

Based on the evidence I have presented so far, it might appear as though this is just another instance of Adorno’s demonstration of the fragmented abstraction of Kierkegaard’s dialectic. Alternately, the passages could be read as merely representative of Adorno’s view of the point at which the “self reversing” phenomena mediate between the spheres, against Kierkegaard’s intention. However, I think that neither of these conclusions would tell the whole story. Rather, as I will argue below, in this part of his critique of the spheres, Adorno refers to specific aspects of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelian idealism in his aforementioned qualitative dialectic. Although there can be little doubt that Adorno disavows much of the content of Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic (as made clear in his explicit criticism of it), I nonetheless think in *Construction* he also recognises the truth of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel in this dialectic.

Fundamentally, as I have shown throughout this interpretation of *Construction* so far, whilst Adorno is critical of both Kierkegaard and Hegel in different ways, he seems to have much more of inclination and sympathy towards many of the ideas which appear in the latter’s philosophy. In critiquing Kierkegaard, Adorno frequently appeals to ideas which have Hegelian lineage. For example, in his continual criticism of Kierkegaard for failing to construct a dialectic in which the subject is receptive to and mediated by the objective world, Adorno invokes the process of subject-object dialectic, which as I have already indicated, has its roots in Hegel. Relatedly, as I noted in §2.4.2, Adorno thinks that it is only Hegel and not Kierkegaard who achieves historical concretion in his dialectic. In these moments, it is clear that Hegel exerts an enormous influence on Adorno, an influence which would be maintained throughout Adorno’s life. At the same time, however, Adorno is also clear at different points in *Construction* that his affinity with aspects of Hegel’s approach to dialectic is far from unqualified.

Up until this point, however, whilst Adorno has indicated Kierkegaard’s opposition to certain aspects of Hegel’s philosophy (including his claim to identity), there has been little sense that Adorno sides with Kierkegaard and against Hegel on any point. In the final part of Adorno’s critique of the spheres, however, (specifically the section entitled “Intermittence”) where he claims objective content returns to Kierkegaard’s dialectic, I suggest that Adorno does make a decisive step in affirming the validity of *a moment* in Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel. Indeed, as I outline in more detail in Chapter Four, I see this as a key passage in which Kierkegaard and Hegel are pitted against each other in Adorno’s early attempt to outline the rudiments of what would become his negative dialectic and critique of identity theory. As I address this section in much more detail in Chapter Four, I will only summarise the key points of Adorno’s analysis here.

In short, whilst Adorno appropriates key aspects of Hegel’s dialectical approach in his thought, it is clear that he has reservations about the way in which, as part of his philosophy system, Hegel extends the claim of reason. Specifically, he has concerns about the extent to which Hegel argues thought will ultimately be able to grasp knowledge infinitely and without qualification. My claim, amongst others which I outline in more detail in Chapter Four, is that Adorno argues in the “Intermittence” section that Kierkegaard’s concept of the subject as it appears in the qualitative dialectic, provides a compelling critique of Hegel’s claim to infinite knowledge.

I have already noted that, according to Adorno, Kierkegaard recognises that the “totality of the infinite is closed to contingent human consciousness” and, as a result, “distinctions must be made”.[[212]](#footnote-213) In the “Intermittence” section, however, Adorno extends this claim by providing a number of quotes from Kierkegaard’s authorship, whilst at the same time noting that Kierkegaard intends the qualitative dialectic as an “expressly formulated…critique of idealist continuity”.[[213]](#footnote-214) Crucially in this section, Adorno identifies legitimate points within the qualitative dialectic which he subsequently incorporates into his own, mature negative dialectic. The most important of these, as well as the one which is most distinctively Kierkegaardian, is Adorno’s acknowledgement that when we think, we cannot help but think as existing individuals, from an ineluctably finite, contingent horizon. This is significant in terms of the critique of Hegel, insofar as it disrupts his claim to the possibility of the absolute identity of thought and being, and more fundamentally, the aforementioned “continuity” of his rationally unfolding system.

From this perspective we can why Adorno frames this moment in the qualitative dialectic as the return of objectivity within Kierkegaard’s spheres in the context of *Construction*. The reason for this is that it is the moment where, in contrast to most of the rest of his philosophical dialectic according to Adorno, Kierkegaard precisely gives proper due to the presence of material objectivity. In this case, to our ineluctable finite, embodied and contingent horizon, and the effect that this has in conditioning our thought and foreclosing the possibility of infinite knowledge. Hence, in the context of *Construction*, Adorno is able to write that this moment of truth signifies: “the reestablishment of the body in the rhythm of absolute spirituality”.[[214]](#footnote-215) On the one hand, it is the re-establishment of the presence of objectivity in the “absolute spirituality” which, against Kierkegaard’s intention, Adorno claims he pursues. On the other hand, it is also a potent criticism of Hegel’s philosophy of absolute spirit in the midst of Kierkegaard’s otherwise broken and fragmented dialectic.

## 2.4.5 Summary: Kierkegaard’s Spheres of Existence

In the preceding sections, I unravelled the various aspects of Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence. In §2.4.1, I introduced the spheres and indicated the points at which Adorno claims Kierkegaard appropriates and renounces Hegel in the dialectic of these spheres. I also underlined the significance of the spheres for Adorno as the unique point in Kierkegaard’s philosophy where he actively attempts to thematise the appearance of objective, external and material existence. This has the consequence that the spheres take on a twofold character. In the three sections that follow, I addressed this twofold character. In §2.4.2, I explored the first of these moments, tracing Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard “hypostatises” the spheres. Kierkegaard explains the movement of the subject between spheres through the idea of the qualitative leap, which Adorno claims he conceives as the polemical alternative to Hegel’s idea of dialectical transition through the subject’s gradual adjustment of its concepts through a mediated relationship with the objective world. However, Adorno suggests that this alternative utterly fails precisely because it omits any possibility of continuity or interaction between the subject and the objective phenomenal contents of the spheres. Instead, he claims that Kierkegaard asserts movement, and in this putative “transition” the content of one sphere is entirely replaced by the other, whilst they remain in total contradiction and opposition to one another. In order to account for the objective content of the spheres, (and this is where “hypostatisation” comes in) Kierkegaard instead imposes abstract universal concepts which bear no relation to the actual status of the individual whose existence they are meant to represent. In §2.4.3, I turned to the second moment, in which Adorno claims that Kierkegaard’s self is forced to interpret itself materially. Here, I introduce Adorno’s view that the spheres operate on a “dual model”. Whilst in the movement between the spheres all continuity is lost (because there is no mediation between them), in the dialectic immanent to the spheres, Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard’s model is closer to the Hegelian one and objective phenomena appear within it; these phenomena also mediate between the spheres (in spite of the wider logic of the leap). In §2.4.4, I then concluded by making the brief case that, in discussing this second model, Adorno in fact refers to Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the ineluctable role of the finite, existing individual in conditioning our thinking. For Adorno, this is the point at which, in the midst of his otherwise incoherent and fragmented dialectic, Kierkegaard acknowledges the presence of material objectivity as part of a compelling critique of Hegel.

## 2.5 Conclusion

 In this chapter, I examined the main themes of the first part of Adorno’s argument as it appears in *Construction*. I began in §2.1 by introducing Adorno’s controversial method of reading Kierkegaard, specifically his reference to his explicit decision to dispense of the literary functions of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, but also exploring Adorno’s against the grain method more generally as it appears in his own words. Following this, in §2.2 to §2.2.5, I then turned to the foundation of Adorno’s critique, his analysis of what he sees as Kierkegaard’s objectless and inward dialectic. This entailed both Adorno’s tracing of the historical and socio-economic origins of Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with inwardness, as well as his critique which aims to show that Kierkegaard’s dialectic is inward and asocial, a position which he takes to be incoherent and ultimately metaphysically impossible. This metaphysical impossibility is brought into particular relief in the following sections (§2.3 to §2.3.5), which concerned Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self. There, I showed how, on Adorno’s reading, the concept of existence distinguishes Kierkegaard from Martin Heidegger, whilst Kierkegaard’s related concept of the self is intended to distinguish his philosophy from the German idealist tradition. Because of the irrational inward dialectic which these concepts are founded on, Adorno concludes that they both dissolve into abstraction. Instead, Kierkegaard ends up with an abstract and indeterminate concept of the self which, ironically, recapitulates the same idealism that he tries to escape. After tracing Adorno’s view of the incoherence of Kierkegaard’s concept of existence and the self, in §2.4 to §2.4.5, I concluded the chapter by exploring Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence. On Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard’s spheres occupy an unusual place in his philosophy as the only point at which he attempts to thematise the place of the subject in the external, objective and material world. Accordingly, Adorno goes on to argue that whilst Kierkegaard ends up treating abstract concepts as material reality in the spheres (and thus they ultimately collapse into contradiction), they are also the only point at which where Kierkegaard interprets the self in material terms. I concluded by suggesting that here Adorno actually ends up endorsing this latter aspect, which he thinks functions as a compelling critique of Hegel’s claim to the possibility of thinking infinite knowledge, amongst other things.

# Chapter 3 Understanding *Construction* and Beyond: Sacrifice, Redemption and The Development of Adorno’s Reading of Kierkegaard

This chapter consists of two parts. In the first part, I complete the thematic interpretation of *Construction* which I began in Chapter Two. In this part, I address two themes in particular. Firstly, Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard’s paradoxical attempt to transcend the dialectic of despair which he constructs through the sacrifice of entirety of the finite contents within that dialectic. The second theme which I explore is Adorno’s attempt in the final chapter of *Construction* to construct the aesthetic out of Kierkegaard’s work, against Kierkegaard’s intention, in order to show that the very sphere of life which Kierkegaard derided was, in truth, imperative in achieving the redemption which he sought. Having concluded the thematic interpretation of *Construction*, in the second part of the chapter, I then consider the current scholarly reception of *Construction*, focusing specifically on the development of Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard from his early lifeonwards. Here, I engage primarily with the sole text that traces this development in detail, Peter Gordon’s *Adorno and Existence*. Whilst agreeing with the fundamental spirit of Gordon’s narrative that Adorno emphasises the affirmative aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought far more in the later texts which he writes on Kierkegaard, I part with this narrative at a number of key points. Consequently, I go on to suggest that for a number of reasons there is evidence that at the time of writing *Construction* Adorno already perceived more of a dialectical tension between affirmative and critical insight in Kierkegaard’s work than Gordon’s narrative suggests. Before I proceed with this argument, however, I will first complete the interpretation of *Construction* which I began in the previous chapter.

## 3.1 Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Despair and The Sacrifice of Reason

In the following sections, I trace what constitutes the final part of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s thought, before he attempts to conduct an aesthetic redemption of Kierkegaard, against the latter’s intention. In §3.1.1, I begin by noting that, at the end of Chapter Two, I suggested that whilst Adorno identifies a key moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s dialectic, this is not enough to redeem the dialectic overall. Despite objective contents appearing in the qualitative dialectic, they appear *only* in the context of a notion of *selfhood* as material. Crucially, Adorno suggests there is still no sense of a sustained dialectic between subject and objective world. Consequently, Kierkegaard’s self is doomed to repetition and irrationality, renouncing any claim to the possibility of realising the socio-historical transformation of the world. Adorno concludes that in the spheres, Kierkegaard ends up constructing a dialectic of despair. I then show in §3.1.2 that Adorno thinks Kierkegaard, as a consequence, tries to escape this despair by achieving transcendence in the religious sphere through the sacrifice of the finite self and, with it, all of the finite contents of the aforementioned ‘worldly’ spheres. Inevitably, however, Adorno concludes that this is also a doomed effort. The “absolutely different” transcendence which Kierkegaard claims to reach, in fact just involves the negation of reason and reflection altogether. Accordingly, Adorno concludes that Kierkegaard’s transcendence is completely indeterminate and utterly detached from reality: a reflexive, failed attempt on Kierkegaard’s part to escape the objective world.

## 3.1.1 Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Despair

I ended Chapter Two by exploring Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence. Specifically, I closed by noting that whilst Adorno is overwhelmingly critical of Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence, he does recognise that within them, Kierkegaard does interpret the self, however briefly, in material terms. Despite the brief moment of truth in which Kierkegaard acknowledges the subject in its objective context, this is not enough to salvage the function of Kierkegaard’s dialectic overall and set him on the path to a substantive and sustained subject-object dialectic. The reason for this is that whilst the presence of objectivity appears in Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the self in the spheres, it appears *only* within the context of the self, understood as a constitutive part of selfhood (finite, embodied and conditioned).

At no point, however, does Kierkegaard interpret objectivity in terms of an objective *world*, in relation to which the subject comes to understand and revise its concepts. This is important, of course, because, as I have emphasised throughout this interpretation, Adorno thinks this form of dialectic is required for the possibility of rational thought. Furthermore, in the context of his critical theory, Adorno ultimately aims at the socio-historical transformation and emancipation of the objective world. Needless to say, for this to be achieved, a sustained dialectic with that world would be required. Since Kierkegaard fails on this account, and objectivity appears only within the context of the isolated self, Adorno writes that: “its empty figure, the rhythm of mere time, without any other expression than that of itself, is the voiceless intervention of reconciliation”.[[215]](#footnote-216)

In light of this inability to sustain a coherent subject-object dialectic in his philosophy, Adorno concludes that Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic and the dialectic of the spheres are “on the one hand, torn apart in the ‘leap’ and, on the other, susceptible of repetition”.[[216]](#footnote-217) In other words, on the one hand, Kierkegaard endorses a totally undialectical leap which is entirely antithetical to rational thought and cannot be traced in consciousness, whilst on the other hand, where objective material does appear, it appears only in the context of the isolated self (hence its repetitious character). Conceived in its entirety, therefore, Adorno views Kierkegaard’s philosophy as an unremitting failure in its attempt to construct an alternative dialectic that goes beyond Hegel’s idealism. Rather, the leap and circling repetition amount to nothing other than utter despair. In more concrete terms, Adorno’s therefore views Kierkegaard’s dialectic of despair as amounting to an affirmation of irrationality and (as isolated inwardness), a foreclosure of the possibility of socio-historical emancipation.

## 3.1.2 Kierkegaard’s Sacrifice of Reason

However, Adorno claims that the failure of Kierkegaard’s dialectic within the world is not the endpoint of his thinking. Rather this endpoint arises within Kierkegaard’s religious sphere, which Adorno conceives as Kierkegaard’s attempt to rise out of the aforementioned despair which his dialectic of the spheres amounts to. That is to say, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard rises out of the dialectic of despair by sacrificing all of the content contained within it, a sacrifice which Adorno thinks in effect entails the effacement of the finite self altogether.

Consistent with the general development of his argument up until this point, Adorno suggests that this sacrifice is another feature of Kierkegaard’s purported idealism. He argues this as follows. Like other idealist philosophies, which Adorno argues are “self-imprisoned” and ultimately subject-driven, Kierkegaard attempts to break out of this systematic self-enclosure by developing “an exclusive category…intended to mollify the rigidity of this imprisonment.”[[217]](#footnote-218) As I have shown already, Adorno reads Kierkegaard as a systematic philosopher who tacitly creates a self-contained, subject-driven and “closed” system in the form of the spheres as his conceptual framework for understanding the world. Like Hegel and Marx, who Adorno also thinks of as figures who have systematised the world in order to understand it, Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard subordinates his system under an overarching concept or category which consumes and carries the totality of contents which stand under it.[[218]](#footnote-219) The exclusive category which Kierkegaard alights on is the sacrifice of consciousness by virtue of the paradox of faith.

On this reading then, Adorno comments that “Kierkegaard’s dialectic swings between the negation of consciousness [its sacrifice] and its unchallenged authority [in the spheres]”.[[219]](#footnote-220) If in the aesthetic and ethical spheres, the content of external reality still appears (however indeterminately), Adorno’s claim is that the final movement in Kierkegaard’s religious sphere is the negation and sacrifice of “the system as a whole and…all phenomena that fall within the system”.[[220]](#footnote-221) In other words, it is the sacrifice of any trace of the content of finite selfhood and knowledge altogether: “the final category of the destruction of the natural”.[[221]](#footnote-222)

The sacrifice is undertaken with the motivation to obtain a spiritual transcendence which is absolutely different to the existence which Kierkegaard constructs: “The model of this sacrifice is paradoxy: a movement in thought, in order, sacrificed, to draw toward itself the ‘strictly different’, its absolute contrary”.[[222]](#footnote-223) In this respect, Kierkegaard’s movement mimics what Adorno sees as the idealist endeavour to arrive at a spiritual freedom which distinguishes itself from coercive nature.[[223]](#footnote-224) Adorno evidences this by pointing to what he claims is Kierkegaard’s “cult of sacrifice” and mythologisation of Christianity.[[224]](#footnote-225) The content of Christian doctrine is ignored and “the fetishistic autonomization of the sacrifice” is prioritised instead.[[225]](#footnote-226) Adorno’s central argument in this respect is his suggestion that Kierkegaard interprets Christ’s death “not so much as an act of reconciliation as a propitiating sacrifice”.[[226]](#footnote-227) Consequently, Kierkegaard’s Christianity in reality constitutes form of heretical Gnosticism. This is the case because, according to Adorno, everything in Kierkegaard’s theology turns on the sacrifice of finite nature for the sake of reaching an absolutely different transcendence. Everything is directed, in other words, towards reaching an esoteric transcendence utterly opposed to the finite, material world.

Adorno’s final blow to Kierkegaard’s category of sacrifice is his claim that this sacrifice does not even result in its aim of reaching the “absolutely different” transcendence. In the previous chapter (§2.3.4), I showed how, for Adorno, Kierkegaard’s concept of the self is in fact a subject-driven idealist concept, one in which all of existence (nature and spirit) is posited by the self. This movement concluded, according to Adorno, in the idea that the self becomes identical with pure spiritual “transparentness”. However, it now becomes clear that in order to reach the final stage of this spiritual transparentness and the deepest form of inwardness, the self is required to sacrifice the aforementioned existence that it posits, including itself. The reason for this, Adorno suggests, is Kierkegaard’s conclusion that the self can only arrive at the “absolutely different”, that which thought cannot think, through self-negation. As Peter Šajda puts it, “God is to be attained by the collapse of thought”.[[227]](#footnote-228)

Recapitulating the basis of his earlier assessment of Kierkegaard’s concept of the self, Adorno concludes that the sacrifice in the paradox of faith is itself merely a return to the “graceless immanence of the course of nature”.[[228]](#footnote-229) The reason for this is that the “spiritual” self which Kierkegaard claims to obtain was always in reality a *natural* self. The “transparentness” which this self arrives at was in truth always a wholly indeterminate, abstract self-posited concept, with no basis in existence. Accordingly, then, the sacrifice of this transparent self will simply produce the same result:

 the image of eternity…fades into the most extreme abstractness; natural life is sacrificed, and the sacrifice that occurs remains bound to natural (be it even spiritual) life, unable to posit determinate transcendence.[[229]](#footnote-230)

Transcendence remains abstract, distant, and indeterminate precisely because it is merely an echo of the natural self, trapped in objectless interiority. No transcendence is achieved, only the final sundering of any possibility of mediated, conceptual relation with the objective, material world. Indeed, Adorno ultimately thinks that the sacrifice is the sundering of any form of reflection all together. Drawing significance from Kierkegaard’s description of the paradox as the religious starting point which is a “resolution” rather than “conclusion”, he notes that the former excludes the possibility of doubt.[[230]](#footnote-231)

In concluding, Adorno once again compares what he sees as the respective idealist projects of Kierkegaard and Hegel, suggesting that they both eventually sink into forms of irrationality, despite the divergent paths which they take in arriving at this position:

 Reason, which in Hegel as infinite reason produces actuality out of itself, is in Kierkegaard, again as infinite reason, the negation of all finite knowledge: if the former is mythical by its claim to universal sovereignty, the latter becomes mythical through universal annihilation.[[231]](#footnote-232)

Thus, on Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard’s sacrifice utterly fails in its effort to extract the self from the immanent dialectic of despairing finite life. Instead, by refusing the possibility of transforming this finite world through dialectical reason, Kierkegaard concludes by desperately trying to posit an abstract notion of transcendence as a means of negating and escaping the aforementioned despairing finite life. As I have shown, however, for Adorno, this is a reflexive and irrational gesture which has no basis in reality. Instead, in attempting to transcend natural and finite life, Kierkegaard ironically reproduces its logic within the violent idea of sacrifice.

## 3.1.3 Summary: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Despair and The Sacrifice of Reason

In the preceding sections, I have traced what constitutes the final part of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s thought, before I then turn to Adorno’s aesthetic redemption of Kierkegaard’s thought, against the latter’s intention in the following section. In §3.1.1, I began by noting that, at the end of Chapter Two, I suggested that whilst Adorno identifies a key moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s dialectic, this is not enough to redeem the dialectic overall. Despite objective contents appearing in the qualitative dialectic, they appear *only* in the context of a notion of *selfhood* as material. Crucially, Adorno suggests there is still no sense of a sustained dialectic between subject and objective world. Consequently, Kierkegaard’s self is doomed to repetition and irrationality, renouncing any claim to the possibility of realising the socio-historical transformation of the world. Adorno concludes that in the spheres, Kierkegaard ends up constructing a dialectic of despair. As a consequence, as I show in §3.1.2, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard tries to escape this despair by achieving transcendence in the religious sphere through the sacrifice of the finite self and, with it, all of the finite contents of the preceding spheres. Inevitably, however, Adorno concludes that this is also doomed to failure. The “absolutely different” transcendence which Kierkegaard claims to reach, in fact just involves the negation of reason and reflection altogether. In attempting to escape the world and overcome nature, Kierkegaard ends up merely reproducing its violent logic in his fetishisation of sacrifice. Accordingly, Adorno concludes that Kierkegaard’s transcendence is completely indeterminate and utterly detached from reality; a reflexive and failed attempt on Kierkegaard’s part to escape the objective world.

## 3.2 Adorno’s Redemption of the Aesthetic

Having conducted a demolition of what he considers Kierkegaard’s idealist system and transcendence of the system in the sacrifice of reason, Adorno turns in the final chapter of *Construction* to his redemption of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard’s work, against the latter’s intention. In many ways, this is the point in Adorno’s argument which bears the least relation to Kierkegaard’s thought. If the previous arguments maintain at least a tenuous connection to the arguments found in Kierkegaard’s writings, then in the final chapter Adorno parts most explicitly from Kierkegaard’s intentions in order to use his own aesthetic sphere (which Kierkegaard deemed the lowest), to show the untruth of his purported anti-natural and spiritual intention. Given that this is the case, I will provide a more abridged interpretation of this part of Adorno’s argument here, in contrast with earlier sections.

As I have just noted, in this final chapter, Adorno claims to redeem the truth in Kierkegaard’s philosophical work and salvage the latter’s fragmented and contradictory spiritual dialectic, against his intention, using ideas found in his aesthetic sphere. In order to do this, Adorno returns to the point which triggers Kierkegaard’s irrational sacrifice of finite existence in search of “absolutely different” transcendence. That is to say, Adorno returns to Kierkegaard’s dialectic of despair, where, in Adorno’s words: “Kierkegaard’s philosophy renders the true image of man: shattered, separated and condemned”.[[232]](#footnote-233) In reality, what Adorno thinks Kierkegaard unconsciously depicts here, in the conclusion of his dialectic of despair, is the truth of the reified world, as well as Kierkegaard’s own inward and alienated condition within this world. This is the same inward condition that leaves Kierkegaard “condemned” to accept the status-quo of that world, rather than keeping alive the possibility of its transformation.

Returning to this point where Kierkegaard alights, albeit unconsciously, upon the true condition of the world, rather than trying to escape it, as Kierkegaard does, Adorno instead invokes the relevance of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic sphere, the same sphere which Kierkegaard disavows. Specifically, Adorno tries to put the true image of humanity’s condition which appears in the climax of Kierkegaard’s dialectic of despair to work with motifs appearing in his aesthetic one. Mattias Martinson describes this procedure, by suggesting that Adorno performs “a translocation of the shattered and separated religious subject to the aesthetic sphere making it available for creative reflection.”[[233]](#footnote-234) Adorno describes this manoeuvre as follows, writing that the “[t]heological truth” which triggers Kierkegaard’s attempt to escape existence “crashes down to human level as aesthetic truth and reveals itself to man as a sign of hope.”[[234]](#footnote-235)

As I have noted throughout the thesis, but particularly in §3.1.2, by Adorno’s account, Kierkegaard aims to overcome “nature” and the depraved reality of the objective, external world by a reflexive attempt to escape the aforementioned reality and obtain spiritual transcendence which supposedly lies beyond nature. Now, by contrast, Adorno thinks that it is an ideological illusion that we can “escape” nature and the objective, external world. But at the same time, he is keenly aware that we should also endeavour not to remain uncritically embedded within that context which, as we have seen, he thinks is distorted, depraved and in despair. In other words, Adorno thinks there is a need for a critical leverage against this world, but a leverage which arises out of nature and yet does not remain uncritically embedded and identical with it.

There are a number of reasons that he arrives at the aesthetic sphere to achieve this task as a source of critical resistance against the “true image of humanity” as despairing which appears in Kierkegaard’s dialectic. Firstly, the aesthetic makes no claims to “transcend” nature. As Adorno writes, “This realm of images…is not eternal, but historical-dialectical; it does not lie in perfect transcendence beyond nature”.[[235]](#footnote-236) That is to say, works of art are the products of nature, insofar as they are finite and material and do not necessarily appeal to the possibility of a transcendence beyond nature. Secondly, Adorno is drawn to the aesthetic because, whilst making no claims to transcendence, he thinks that artworks have the capacity to transcend our merely natural context. In other words, he thinks that artworks can take on a utopian function. Crucially they do this not by an appeal to “imageless truth” (as in Kierkegaard’s notion of transcendence), but by promising “paradoxically unreachable truth in opposition to its semblance.[[236]](#footnote-237) When Adorno says this, he refers again to the idea that images which appear in the aesthetic do not make any claim to *really* existing in some transcendent beyond. They are precisely “unreachable” and “semblance” (or illusion) as created images. Nonetheless, as illusion, they still serve an important function for subjects embedded within the objective world. For Adorno, this is because he thinks that we can reflect on these images and draw inspiration from them in our efforts to change *this* finite world. Aesthetic images, he concludes, have the capacity to present a utopian and unreachable “illusory unity”, a unity which Adorno suggests disperses the “light of hope…over things to which it belongs”.[[237]](#footnote-238)

In summary then, reversing Kierkegaard’s intention, Adorno suggests that the only real possibility of overcoming the despair which Kierkegaard (unconsciously) depicts lies not in an appeal to a transcendence beyond nature, but in the very aesthetic sphere which Kierkegaard disavows. Indeed, in presenting the case above for the utopian function of the aesthetic, Adorno employs passages from Kierkegaard’s aesthetic writings (the substance of which the “religious” Kierkegaard rejects) as a way of showing the untruth of Kierkegaard’s dominant intention.[[238]](#footnote-239) For Adorno, the only means of “escaping” the depravity of reality is by squarely focusing on its removal and transformation. As part of this effort, Adorno thinks we must not cling to the hope of spirituality which overcomes nature, but instead find hope in the aesthetic, which arises out of nature, whilst at the same time providing us with a utopian image of the possibility of its reconfiguration. Hence, in the final section of *Construction*, Adorno writes that his critical project appears “in spite of Kierkegaard’s dominant intentions and those of the systematic structure”.[[239]](#footnote-240) Beyond the superficial appearance of its theological context, in truth, he concludes that *Construction*:

has nothing in common with the totality of his ‘religious’ sphere, though at most perhaps something with his [aesthetic conception of] ‘faith’, which he rebuts in *Fear and Trembling*: ‘a faith that seeks its object on the most distant horizon’”.[[240]](#footnote-241)

## 3.2.1 Summary: Adorno’s Redemption of the Aesthetic

In this brief final section, I have discussed the basic outline of Adorno’s redemption of the aesthetic, his subversion of Kierkegaard’s disavowal of the aesthetic sphere. Accordingly, I have shown how, after demolishing what he considers to be Kierkegaard’s system and attempted transcendence of the system in the sacrifice of reason, Adorno attempts to rehabilitate the claim of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic sphere. Specifically, Adorno claims that it is only in the ideas that are consistent with Kierkegaard’s aesthetic writings, rather than those of his predominant religious intention, that the possibility of transforming finite existence remains open. Unlike Kierkegaard’s claim to a spirituality which overcomes nature, the images of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic sphere are powerful for Adorno precisely because, arising in nature and undeniably illusory, they *do not* promise the existence of a transcendent beyond. Instead, they provide us with images of a reconfigured natural context beyond that in which we are already embedded. As Adorno concludes, on this basis and indeed based on the rest of his argument in *Construction*, he is not ultimately concerned with the “totality” of Kierkegaard’s religious sphere or with his idea of faith.

## 3.3 Conclusion: Despair, Sacrifice and the Redemption of the Aesthetic

In the first part of this chapter, I have completed the interpretation and summary of *Construction* that I began in Chapter Two. Whilst I concluded that chapter by observing that Adorno identifies a key moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s dialectic, in §3.1.1, I show that this is not enough to salvage his dialectic overall. Rather, for Adorno, what purports (for him) to be Kierkegaard’s systematic dialectic of the spheres is doomed to repetition and irrationality, renouncing any claim to the possibility of realising the socio-historical transformation of the world. As such, it constitutes a dialectic of despair. In §3.1.2, I then moved on to discuss what Adorno considers the final movement of Kierkegaard’s religious sphere, the latter’s attempt to escape this despair by sacrificing the finite self and, with it, all of the finite contents of the preceding spheres. For Adorno, this negation of the self in search of an “absolutely different” transcendence, in fact merely involves the negation of reason and reflection altogether. In attempting to escape the world and overcome nature, Kierkegaard ends up merely reproducing its violent logic in his fetishisation of sacrifice. Accordingly, Adorno concludes that Kierkegaard’s transcendence is completely indeterminate and utterly detached from reality; a reflexive and failed attempt on Kierkegaard’s part to escape the objective world. In contrast to this approach, as I argue in §3.2, Adorno subverts Kierkegaard’s disavowal of the aesthetic sphere and proposes instead that it is precisely in the images of the aesthetic that hope, not for the escape, but for the transformation of the objective world, can be found. The reason for this, Adorno suggests, is that the aesthetic does not ideologically promise belief in a transcendent beyond, but, arising out of nature, points to the possibility of the same nature’s reconfiguration. As Adorno concludes, on this basis and indeed based on the rest of his argument in *Construction*, he is not ultimately concerned with the “totality” of Kierkegaard’s religious sphere or with his idea of faith.

## 3.4 Adorno’s Reading of Kierkegaard: from *Construction* to “Kierkegaard Once More”

In summarising and interpreting *Construction* in Chapter Two and in the first half of this chapter, I have endeavoured to provide an in-depth account of the central arguments which motivate Adorno’s earliest and most extensive criticism of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. In the course of this account, I have emphasised the importance of Adorno’s interpretative strategy as integral to his critique, underlining the ways in which this leads him to a number of unconventional conclusions about the form and function of Kierkegaard’s thought. Moreover, I have also endeavoured to demonstrate the ways in which Adorno reads Kierkegaard’s relationship with German idealism, and especially Hegel, as a complex mixture of appropriation and renunciation. Whilst Adorno thinks Kierkegaard is largely unsuccessful in his renunciation, I have brought attention to a number of points where Adorno seems to credit Kierkegaard for his insight into Hegel’s shortcomings. Equally, in §2.2.3, I noted that in discussing Kierkegaard’s “Situation”, Adorno gives qualified praise to Kierkegaard for his awareness of reification and the adverse effects of capitalism. Having set the scene in describing the fundamentals of Adorno’s earliest critique of Kierkegaard (many of which I think remain unchanged throughout his life), from here on in I will refer mainly to the text in relation to the development of Adorno’s mature view of Kierkegaard.

As I will argue, this mature interpretation is much more fruitful in the context of tracing Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno, because, in these later writings, Adorno is much more explicit about his affinity with Kierkegaard. In what remains of this chapter, I will explain the reasons why this is the case. Specifically, in what follows, I will consider the extent to which Adorno’s view as it appears in *Construction* changes when compared with his later view, expressed centrally through the two pieces he wrote later on Kierkegaard. Since it is only Peter Gordon in *Adorno and Existence* who addresses this question in any great detail, I will refer primarily in my analysis to his text.[[241]](#footnote-242)

Although Gordon goes beyond simply seeing *Construction* as mere polemic (he identifies a “barely disguised bond of sympathy” between Adorno and Kierkegaard), the overarching narrative of his book is that from the beginning to the end of his life Adorno underwent a significant transformation in his approach to Kierkegaard.[[242]](#footnote-243) As he writes:

 If Adorno had once felt inclined to dismiss the Dane as little more than an ideologue for bourgeois interiority and saw in Kierkegaard’s disdain for the aesthetic a materialist sign of a disavowed social truth, he now discerned a genuinely dialectical tension in Kierkegaard’s work between affirmative and critical insight.[[243]](#footnote-244)

In the twosub-sections that follow (§3.4.1 and §3.4.2), I dispute certain elements of this narrative. Specifically, although I agree with Gordon’s view that there was undoubtedly a shift and a change of emphasis in Adorno’s view in relation to Kierkegaard throughout his life, I think “the dialectical tension between affirmative and critical insight” is already present in Adorno’s earliest analysis of Kierkegaard in *Construction*. Accordingly, I will now address each of Gordon’s arguments in relation to Adorno’s two later pieces on Kierkegaard, “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love” and “Kierkegaard Once More”. In doing so, I will bring attention to the points where I think there are fundamental continuities (as well as distinctions) between these writings and *Construction*.

## 3.4.1 “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love” (1940)

“On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love” (from here on, KDOL), originally appeared as a lecture in 1940 and it immediately stands out for its focus on one of Kierkegaard’s signed religious writings, his 1847 *Works of Love*, a book which receives no attention at all in *Construction*. As Gordon rightly notes, there is undoubtedly a shift in the mood of this text. In contrast to *Construction*, the “critical and even polemical spirit” towards Kierkegaard had “mostly gone”, as had the emphasis on Kierkegaard as a representative of bourgeois “impotent interiority”.[[244]](#footnote-245) The impetus for Adorno’s apparent “revaluation of Kierkegaard’s critical potential”, Gordon suggests, was his new focus on “the theological qualities his earlier analysis had ignored”.[[245]](#footnote-246)

In opening his argument for a fundamental shift in Adorno’s view, Gordon proposes that in KDOL, Adorno newly emphasises Kierkegaard’s warning against Christianity and views history as “bound to Christianity, but only in an inverted fashion. The Hegelian idea of history as the self-realization of spirit was turned upside down”.[[246]](#footnote-247) In *Construction*, however, Adorno already cites a passage from Kierkegaard’s late religious writings to precisely this effect, describing Kierkegaard’s “negative philosophy of history”, where history is understood as the opposite of a process moving towards the identity of the real and the rational.[[247]](#footnote-248) Similarly, in another passage which Adorno quotes from Kierkegaard’s religious writings, the intention is clearly to show how Kierkegaard views history as the demise of true Christianity: “the image of history becomes that of radical evil, whose power he admits insofar as he rages against it.”[[248]](#footnote-249) Already in *Construction*, Adorno recognises that Kierkegaard warns his readers against what now passes for “Christianity” and links this to a view of history in which the self is drawn further and further from the truth.

This view of history and the accompanying rebellion against the distortion of religion, Gordon argues, leads Adorno now to see Kierkegaard in KDOL alongside those critics of cultural modernity like Karl Kraus who see the “criticism of progress and civilisation” as the “criticism of reification of man”.[[249]](#footnote-250) However, already in 1929, four years before the publication of *Construction*, Adorno had written to the composer Alban Berg noting that he was “increasingly realizing” that Kraus would be “inconceivable without Kierkegaard”.[[250]](#footnote-251) Equally, as Gordon himself notes, in *Construction*, Adorno had already credited Kierkegaard with recognising “the distress of high incipient capitalism” and noted “the relation of reification and the commodity form” (albeit in his own language).[[251]](#footnote-252) Indeed, it is in responding to the “depravity” and “distress” of the historical situation that Kierkegaard comes to “knowledge of the reification of social life” and that his “dialectic makes its way out of closed immanence” in Kierkegaard’s late writings.[[252]](#footnote-253) Where the crucial difference may exist is that in the 1940 lecture, in contrast to *Construction*,Adorno places less emphasis on Kierkegaard’s strongest insights into reification appearing against his intention.[[253]](#footnote-254) Even granting this, it still seems as though there is less of a distinction than there might first appear between Adorno’s position in *Construction* and KDOL.

At the same time, however, it should be acknowledged that Adorno goes further than anything he argues in *Construction* when he writes that Kierkegaard is almost uniquely prescient in recognising the changes in human experience that were beginning to appear in the 19th century. Kierkegaard gives a prophetic account of “the substitution of spontaneous thinking by “reflectory” adaptation taking place in connection with modern forms of mass information.”[[254]](#footnote-255) Equally, Adorno’s claim that Kierkegaard’s criticism of the mass meetings of 1848 foreshadowed the mass meetings of 1930s Germany finds no parallel in *Construction*. Both of these additions, however, may originate as much in developments in Adorno’s thinking on the diminishment of human experience in late capitalism and as a response to historical events in Germany, as much as they are representative of a change in Adorno’s view on Kierkegaard.

There are two more final, connected remarks that Gordon makes in relation to Adorno’s shifting perspective in KDOL. The first concerns Adorno’s newfound antagonism between Kierkegaard and existential philosophy and the second concerns Kierkegaard’s concept of possibility. Recognising in *Construction* that Adorno already distinguishes Kierkegaard’s thought from existentialist ontology, Gordon suggests that it is only in 1940 that Adorno comes to view Kierkegaard not only as distinct, but actually antagonistic towards existentialist philosophy. This antagonism, he argues, derives primarily from Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard’s “embrace of the absurdity of Christian truth against worldly knowledge”, represented the capacity to think against “mere existence and against the empirically given”.[[255]](#footnote-256) As Adorno puts it in KDOL, in the “name of hope”, Kierkegaard “becomes the foe of seriousness itself, of the absorption by practical aims which is not suspended by the thought of what is possible”.[[256]](#footnote-257) This opposition to seriousness, Adorno goes on: “could very well be used against Kierkegaard's present successors, the German existential philosophers, particularly against Heidegger.”[[257]](#footnote-258)

However, this may not necessarily represent a significant change in Adorno’s view. A strikingly similar line of argument, if more oblique, had already appeared seven years earlier in *Construction*. There, Adorno remarks that Kierkegaard “occasionally” defends “the ‘aesthetic’ against…‘religious’ earnestness”.[[258]](#footnote-259) On such occasions, Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard “acknowledges the limitation of existential and religious ‘earnestness’” and makes “room for sympathies with materialist authors”.[[259]](#footnote-260) This sympathy, and Kierkegaard’s opposition to existential seriousness or earnestness, Adorno insists, “cannot be adequately explained by enmity towards Hegel or by the general structure of Kierkegaard’s ‘dialectical’ thought”, because it is “opposed to his predominant intention”.[[260]](#footnote-261) This is despite the fact that in the passage Adorno quotes as evidence of this, Kierkegaard is attacking a false religious “earnestness” with the evident intention of defending true Christianity against it.[[261]](#footnote-262)

What has stayed the same and what has substantially changed between *Construction* and KDOL, then? Firstly, it is notable that in both *Construction* and KDOL the same fundamental point is provided as evidence of Kierkegaard’s antipathy to the German existentialist philosophers. In both writings, Adorno identifies a particular aspect of Kierkegaard’s thought, signalling that it is antithetical to existentialist themes. He then supports this by citing passages from Kierkegaard’s writings which are clearly intended to be defences of genuine Christianity against worldliness. The key difference between the two texts is that in KDOL, Adorno views Kierkegaard’s antipathy to existentialist earnestness as arising out of his theologically motivated opposition to “worldliness”, rather than through an aesthetic theme which apparently appears against Kierkegaard’s religious intention. In effect, however, the evidence that Adorno already provides in *Construction* points to this conclusion. This continuity in Adorno’s fundamental argument and yet, at the same time, the key difference in his later attribution to Kierkegaard’s (now intended) religious motivation suggests that the change in Adorno’s view between *Construction* and KDOL is much closer than it might first appear. Taking Adorno at his word, the difference lies between his first judgement that the moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s writings is an “aesthetic” moment which appears against the intention of Kierkegaard’s religious writings, which then becomes an insight which Adorno recognises as part of Kierkegaard’s religious intention.

In *Construction*, Adorno had proposed that the redeemable aspects within Kierkegaard’s religious sphere were those which in reality overlapped with his aesthetic sphere and appeared against the dominant intention of the former.[[262]](#footnote-263) The theological content worth saving in Kierkegaard’s writings was his “aesthetic” religiousness which moves against the predominant intention of Kierkegaard’s religious sphere and his overall schema. The idea that Kierkegaard’s religious sphere contains both affirmative and critical insights for Adorno is carried over into the argument in KDOL. The difference in the 1940 piece, however, is that the affirmative aspects lose the nomenclature of “aesthetic” religiousness which appears beyond Kierkegaard’s intention. Seen in this light, what Adorno argues (at least on this point) in both *Construction* and KDOL is remarkably similar. Namely, that there is truth content in Kierkegaard’s religious sphere, but this truth content can only ultimately gain true critical leverage when isolated and reconfigured in a materialist context, outside of the wider schema of Kierkegaard’s overall philosophy.[[263]](#footnote-264)

If in KDOL, Adorno explicitly praises Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the importance of thinking against “mere existence”, locating this in his theological opposition to worldliness, he also does the same for Kierkegaard’s concept of possibility. For the first time in KDOL, Adorno explicitly associates this idea of possibility in Kierkegaard with “the paradox Eternal, the Christian *absurdum*”, which is to be maintained against mere existence.[[264]](#footnote-265) He goes on to write that Kierkegaard “cannot even imagine that one could breathe for one moment without the consciousness of possibility…without hope of the transfiguration of the world.”[[265]](#footnote-266) In this respect, I think Gordon is undoubtedly right that there is no part of Adorno’s interpretation in *Construction* which stands up to comparison with the strength of these comments. They undoubtedly represent one of the newfound aspects of Adorno’s affinity with Kierkegaard. All that said, the potential insight in Kierkegaard’s religiously motivated concept of possibility, or the idea that Kierkegaard cannot breathe without possibility is not entirely absent from *Construction*. In truth, this latter comment derives not from *Works of Love*, but from a passage in *The Sickness Unto Death*,which Adorno cites in *Construction*: “To pray is also to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing”.[[266]](#footnote-267) Although Adorno does not advance any developed analysis of this passage, (beyond obliquely signalling that it is a moment of truth), its presence in *Construction* is a harbinger of what would later become Adorno’s explicit view.[[267]](#footnote-268)

In this section, I have argued that whilst I fundamentally agree that Adorno’s approach to Kierkegaard changes in KDOL and that this undoubtedly signals a new phase in his interpretation, the shift in Adorno’s view in *Construction* and KDOL is not as broad and as wide-ranging as Gordon suggests. There are a number of points, I suggest, where apparently new aspects of KDOL appear *in nuce* in *Construction*, highlighting Adorno’s early view of Kierkegaard’s critical potential. Specifically, I began by noting that in *Construction* Adorno already credits Kierkegaard with having warned against Christianity in its present form, connecting this to the negative philosophy of history which Adorno suggests appears in Kierkegaard’s late polemical writings. Similarly, Adorno’s thesis that Kierkegaard had an unusual critical awareness of the effects of capitalism and specifically the social condition of reification is already fundamentally present in *Construction*. Moreover, already four years prior to writing *Construction*, Adorno had compared Kierkegaard with Karl Kraus, the latter whom he greatly admired. Such remarks indicate Adorno’s awareness of Kierkegaard’s incisive critical eye, even at an extremely early stage.

At the same time, I also draw attention to the similarities between *Construction* and KDOL in relation to Kierkegaard’s opposition to existentialist seriousness or earnestness. In the first place, this demonstrates that in *Construction*, Adorno already thinks that there are aspects of Kierkegaard’s religious thought which bring him into conflict with 20th century German existentialist philosophers. Beyond this, however, it also represents an instance where Adorno had in practice already recognised the insight in Kierkegaard’s religious writings, but attributes this to an aesthetic moment of truth against Kierkegaard’s wider religious intention, an interpretive strategy which he largely dispenses with in KDOL. All this considered, I do agree with Gordon however that Adorno found a new willingness to acknowledge Kierkegaard’s critical insight and particularly his anticipation of adverse tendencies in late capitalist modernity. Furthermore, I concluded by noting that Adorno displays a newfound awareness of the critical potential of Kierkegaard’s religiously motivated concept of possibility as the ability to think against the status quo, even if this insight is (very briefly) anticipated in *Construction*.

## **3.4.2** “Kierkegaard Once More” (1963)

Another twenty years had passed and, entering the final decade of his life, Adorno turned to Kierkegaard once again. Originally appearing as a lecture in 1963, “Kierkegaard Once More” (from here on KOM), it was subsequently published in the same year in *Neue deutsche Hefte* and then again in 1966 as a supplement to a new edition of *Construction*. As I did with KDOL, I will address Gordon’s remarks on the development of Adorno’s view in turn, considering the different ways in which Adorno’s interpretation parts from *Construction* in KOM and where it remains fundamentally the same.

Adorno frames the dialectic of KOM through the distinction he creates between what in Kierkegaard’s philosophy has “triumphed” and what has been “defeated”. He prefaces these comments by noting that Kierkegaard himself would not have wanted to triumph: “[h]is uncompromising conception of transcendence would have precluded the victory of truth “within-the-world”...The *ecclesia triumphans* was to him garbage”.[[268]](#footnote-269) But he insists that Kierkegaard has triumphed all the same, against his own intention, as it were, and this victory has appeared out of the “untruth burgeoning in…[his] thought”.[[269]](#footnote-270) This triumph is represented by dialectical theology, which “in its entirety was what succeeded Kierkegaard” and Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, who “emancipated the Kierkegaardian concept of existence from…religious stages A and B and inverted into an anthropological ontology”.[[270]](#footnote-271) By this, Adorno means that both Heidegger and Jaspers reject both the negative, immanent Socratic version of religion (Religiousness A), which is Kierkegaard’s preliminary stage to the embrace of the transcendent absurd, (Religiousness B).

For Gordon, this framing is further evidence of Adorno’s “emerging belief” of the need to take care in distinguishing Kierkegaard from the so-called existentialists of the 20th century.[[271]](#footnote-272) Furthermore, (and this undoubtedly comes out more clearly and strongly in KOM than anywhere previously), that Adorno viewed modern existentialism as the history of Kierkegaard’s “betrayal rather than his fulfilment”.[[272]](#footnote-273) All the same, we should not neglect to note that Adorno already makes this fundamental distinction in *Construction*. Already there, he contrasts Kierkegaard’s concept of existence with Heidegger’s, noting that the former’s concept “does not coincide with mere existence, but with an existence that, dynamic in itself, obtains a transcendent meaning that is supposedly qualitatively different from existence.”[[273]](#footnote-274) Furthermore, crucially, he argues that what has made possible the “misrepresentation” of Kierkegaard’s philosophy as “existential-ontological”, is ignorance of the fact that Kierkegaard’s theological motives lead him to bind “existence and ontology in order ultimately to divide them”.[[274]](#footnote-275) In other words, already in *Construction*,Adorno acknowledges that there is a certain betrayal of Kierkegaard’s intentions by the 20th century existentialists when they annul the distinction between existence and transcendent truth which drives Kierkegaard’s negativity.

Moreover, in KOM, Adorno acknowledges that this religious negativity leads Kierkegaard to condemn “accommodation to mediocre institutions of self-perpetuating life”.[[275]](#footnote-276) Adorno notes that in Kierkegaard’s late polemical writings, he opposes the bourgeois institution of marriage and that he proposed the religious sphere as the suspension of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling*. In KOM, Adorno is clear that this is the truthof Kierkegaard which is missed by his apparent successors: “his fangs have been cracked by his devotees”.[[276]](#footnote-277) Nothing quite as dramatic or explicit as this contrast appears in *Construction*. Nonetheless, noting that both aesthetic and religious existence appear as “exceptions” which stands outside ethical life, Adorno writes that Kierkegaard: “ultimately included the ethical universality of marriage in reification” and “expounded Christianity as strictly opposed to marriage”.[[277]](#footnote-278) Specifically, Adorno warns us against taking “the sting out of his polemic: its disdain for stable, middle-class life.[[278]](#footnote-279) In this spirit, he goes on to write therefore that:

 the traditional, theological interpretation of Kierkegaard is more correct than the psychologically informed interpretation when…[the former] poses paradoxy as the highest theme and not the immanence of a “spiritual life”.[[279]](#footnote-280)

The crucial difference is that in contrast to the “psychologically informed interpretation”, (i.e. Heidegger and Jaspers’ interpretation), the theological interpretation ultimately maintains the moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s religious negation of universal “ethical”, “reified” life, whereas the “immanent” interpretation omits the negative radicality which opposes this.[[280]](#footnote-281) What Gordon writes of Adorno’s analysis of Kierkegaard’s individual in KOM, that *in its truth* it represents “not bourgeois conformity but rather an early protest against the incipient reification and an effacement of all difference”, is already contained, albeit far less developed, in *Construction*.[[281]](#footnote-282) Indeed, aesthetic and religious existence are already seen here as containing a moment of critical potential in both being “exceptions” which attempt to emancipate themselves from the anonymity and indifference which Kierkegaard already recognised ethical life to be. On the contrary, Kierkegaard’s successors allow his untruth to “triumph” when they remove religiousness from his work and thereby nullify its critical potential.

A final area of disagreement with Gordon relates to his claim that it was only after *Construction*, and specifically in KOM, that Adorno came to see Kierkegaard as anticipating “the Frankfurt school’s own critique of identity theory” and as “an early harbinger of the negative dialectic”.[[282]](#footnote-283) The key passage from KOM, amongst others, is Adorno’s claim that in Kierkegaard’s “concept of the subject, as that of existence, that non-identical real spirited away by the conception of the pure subject as Spirit in idealism, breaks through.”[[283]](#footnote-284) I will not dwell on this and related claims in any great detail here, since I address them extensively in the next chapter. Nevertheless, I conclude that Adorno already presents all of the claims made about Kierkegaard’s critique of identity and his anticipation of negative dialectic in the “Intermittence” section of *Construction*. In fact, this represents the point at which my view of the development of Adorno’s interpretation of Kierkegaard diverges most significantly from Gordon’s.

By far the most important distinction between *Construction* and KOM, one which Gordon rightly identifies, is that in his final text on Kierkegaard, Adorno now saw the former as standing “alongside Marx as an early partisan of…resistance” against the high capitalism of their era.[[284]](#footnote-285) As Gordon frames it, in Kierkegaard’s theological refusal to reconcile himself with the world, Adorno found kinship with his own view that in the unfree social whole of late capitalist modernity, a reconciliation between subject and society was “not just unrealized but quite possibly unrealizable”.[[285]](#footnote-286) As such, it is imperative for Adorno to resist the systematic integration, the compulsory reconciliation of individuals into the unfree social whole. In KOM, Adorno undoubtedly reaches a new stage in terms of the strength of his view of Kierkegaard’s theological resistance as anticipatory of our contemporary need to refuse this compulsion.

I would go further than Gordon, however, by suggesting that it is specifically a radicalisation in Adorno’s view about the *late* Kierkegaard in his polemical protest against Christendom, which instigates the newfound association of the latter with resistance. This specific affinity with the late Kierkegaard is foreshadowed in *Construction* at a number of points. For example, Adorno writes in *Construction* that “[i]n the final essays”, Kierkegaard “absorbs the actual social condition”.[[286]](#footnote-287) In KOM, he concludes that Kierkegaard “emerged from interiority”, whilst in *Construction*, he suggests that Kierkegaard’s “dialectic makes its way out of immanence” in the late writings.[[287]](#footnote-288) Finally, whilst in *Construction*, the “polemical character” of Kierkegaard’s critique is characteristic of an “offensive” [*Angriff*] motivated by the “painful intrusion of reality into the objectless interior”, in KOM, the power of Kierkegaard’s “protest” occurs when “catching fire in the dry air of the Kierkegaardian interiority”.[[288]](#footnote-289)

All that said, none of these comments in *Construction* compare with Adorno’s admiration in KOM for the late Kierkegaard’s theologically motivated opposition to the world. Crucially, this opposition leads the late Kierkegaard to active critical interventions against the institutions of Christendom (and hence, for Adorno, it is only here that Kierkegaard emerges from interiority). It is this admiration which leads Adorno to conclude KOM in the following terms:

 If as totality and system, the whole was to him the absolute deception, then he
took on the whole in which he himself was stuck just like everyone else…After Kierkegaard there can no longer be friendship with the world, because by affirming the world as it is, it eternalizes the bad in it and precludes it from becoming what would be loved.[[289]](#footnote-290)

In this section, I explored the aspects of continuity and difference between *Construction* and KOM. Continuing the line of thinking which I began in §3.3.1, I suggested that a number of the aspects which Gordon proposes are representative of significant shifts in Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard are in fact less significant than they might first appear. I began by showing that already in *Construction*, Adorno distinguishes (as Gordon recognises) Kierkegaard from proponents of existential ontology. Moreover, however, I also showed that he also criticises the German existentialist interpretations, which emphasise the “immanence” of spiritual life, for omitting the moment of critical truth in Kierkegaard’s theological opposition to bourgeois “ethical” life. Following this, I then indicated that my most significant disagreement with Gordon’s narrative arises in relation to Adorno only arriving at an awareness of the value of Kierkegaard’s critique of identity theory and as a harbinger of negative dialectic in KOM. Whilst I will present this argument in its full detail in the next chapter, I indicated that my conclusion is that Adorno already presents the basis of this argument in the “Intermittence” section of *Construction*. Finally, I concluded by noting however that I fundamentally agree with Gordon in saying that Adorno goes further than ever before in acknowledging Kierkegaard as a figure of critical resistance in KOM. Specifically, I suggest that this occurs in the development of his view about the force and significance of the late Kierkegaard’s polemical attack on Christendom as the moment in which Adorno thinks he actualises his critical potential.

## 3.5 The Case for Continuity in Adorno’s Reading of Kierkegaard

In the preceding two sub-sections, I have argued that whilst I agree with Peter Gordon’s narrative that there were certain aspects of Adorno’s reception of Kierkegaard where he undoubtedly underwent significant changes in his view about the latter’s critical potential, I suggested that Adorno’s awareness of dialectical tension in Kierkegaard’s work between affirmative and critical insight was present, if altogether more oblique, from *Construction* onwards.

To this end, I considered each of Gordon’s arguments in relation to the development of Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard in turn, comparing the similarities and differences between *Construction* and the two later texts on Kierkegaard, KDOL and KOM. Arising from this comparison, I brought attention to a number of points in *Construction* (and in one instance, his correspondence)where Adorno acknowledges the presence of Kierkegaard’s critical potential. These points, I argue, should lead us to reassess the present narrative about the extent to which Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard actually shifted over the years. At the same time, whilst I think there is more evidence for Adorno’s early affirmative view of Kierkegaard than Gordon acknowledges, I agree in many ways with the fundamental spirit of his argument that Adorno increasingly came to view (and certainly became happy to express more explicitly), the critical value in Kierkegaard’s religious opposition to the world. Specifically, I argue that Adorno develops particularly in his view about the resistance of the late Kierkegaard, who not only acknowledges the reality of the external social situation, but actively opposes it in his polemical writings.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to arguing for Adorno’s early awareness of critical *and* affirmative dialectical tension in Kierkegaard is his unusual interpretative strategy in *Construction*. This interpretative strategy often leads him to attribute moments of affirmative insight in Kierkegaard’s writings to moments of aesthetic or materialist truth which appear against Kierkegaard’s predominant religious intention. Nonetheless, as I have shown in the preceding pages, there are a number of points where Adorno claims moments of truth appear against Kierkegaard’s intention which are notable for closely mirroring arguments he subsequently claims (i.e., post-*Construction*) are affirmative insights within Kierkegaard’s intention. In these instances, of course, it could be argued that Adorno’s view of the critical potential in Kierkegaard’s works radically changes in the seven years between the publication of *Construction* and KDOL. On this reading, Adorno comes to the realisation that what he ascribes to unintended aesthetic truth is in reality a genuinely critical moment in Kierkegaard’s religious writings.

My suggestion to the contrary, however, is that having considered the depth and the extent of the similarity between the arguments, there are certain points in *Construction* whereAdorno emphasises the supposed overlap of “aesthetic” moments of truth in Kierkegaard’s religious intentions in order to preserve the coherence of his overall argument and critique against Kierkegaard’s intention. These are the same aspects which he later attributes to Kierkegaard’s intention and to his theological writings. Here, I do not wish to fall into the trap of arguing that Adorno’s strategy of reading Kierkegaard’s philosophy against the grain in *Construction* was merely an exercise in what Marcia Morgan describes as a “mechanical restructuring for political ends”.[[290]](#footnote-291) This “tactical approach”, she rightly suggests, “would go against everything Adorno stands for”.[[291]](#footnote-292) That is to say, as a whole, I do think Adorno is entirely sincere in his interpretative strategy and in his view that aesthetic and material truth could be read out of Kierkegaard’s work against his intention. This is evident from Adorno’s consistent use of aesthetic pseudonyms in Kierkegaard’s authorship against what he sees as the aspects of Kierkegaard’s predominant inward, spiritual and religious intention which are most objectionable.

Nonetheless, I do think that there are certain moments where Adorno obscures legitimate points of contact between his own thought and Kierkegaard’s. Morgan concludes elsewhere that the claims that Adorno makes in *Construction* are driven primarily by “the desire to read something else into and against Kierkegaard”.[[292]](#footnote-293) In this respect, she suggests that the critical tenor of Adorno’s argument in *Construction* has a wider purpose. This purpose was to use the critique of Kierkegaard as a means of undermining those who claimed to be his successors. Adorno’s intention in this regard is expressly clear in a letter to Kracauer of July 1930. He writes that in *Construction* (or the dissertation, as it was then): “Not much of either Heidegger or ‘dialectical theology’ should go unchallenged – but that is no more than it deserves.”.[[293]](#footnote-294) In other words, there were pressing, overtly political concerns at play in Adorno’s undertaking of a thoroughgoing critique of Kierkegaard. For this reason, as a writer still developing a truly distinctive philosophical voice, it was also in the young Adorno’s interests to obscure certain points of contact between himself and Kierkegaard. Moreover, and more importantly, I suggest that it was precisely *because* Adorno was keen to maintain the coherence of his strategy of reading Kierkegaard against the grain, that the affinities between them appear only obliquely in *Construction*. In preserving this coherence, Adorno was required to present his genuine affinities with Kierkegaard’s thought as aberrations which appear in the latter’s writings against his intention.

## 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter comprised of two parts. In the first part, I continued the interpretation of the main arguments of *Construction* which I had begun in Chapter Two. I addressed two themes in particular. Firstly, Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard’s paradoxical attempt to transcend the dialectic of despair which he constructs through the sacrifice of the entire finite contents within that dialectic. Secondly, Adorno’s attempt in the final chapter of *Construction* to construct the aesthetic out of Kierkegaard’s work, against his intention, in order to show that the very sphere of life which Kierkegaard derided was in fact critical to achieving the redemption which he sought. In the second part of the chapter, I then considered the present scholarly reception of *Construction*, specifically in relation to the development of Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard from his early lifeonwards. In this regard, I engaged primarily with the sole text that traces this development in detail, Peter Gordon’s *Adorno and Existence*. Whilst agreeing with the fundamental spirit of his argument that Adorno came to emphasise the affirmative aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought far more in KDOL and KOM, particularly in relation to the critical value of Kierkegaard’s religious opposition to the world, I also dissented from Gordon’s narrative at a number of points. Specifically, I proposed that Adorno had already indicated affirmative views in *Construction* close to those which Gordon suggests he only adopts later. Moreover, I also pointed to the overlap between arguments which appear in *Construction* as aesthetic truth against Kierkegaard’s intention and which Adorno then subsequently claims as part of Kierkegaard’s critical insight. This closeness, I suggested, was a result of Adorno’s strategic obscuring of points of contact between his own thought and Kierkegaard’s, in order to preserve the coherence of his overall argument and his thoroughgoing critique against Kierkegaard’s intention. Overall, I therefore argued that Adorno already perceived more of a dialectical tension between affirmative and critical insight in Kierkegaard’s work than Gordon’s narrative suggests.

# Chapter 4 Kierkegaard and The Idea of Negative Dialectic

In this thesis so far, the central argument that I have proposed is that at the time of writing *Construction*, Adorno already had more affinity with Kierkegaard than has previously been suggested. In this chapter, I will advance this claim with reference specifically to the development of Adorno’s analysis of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel’s identity theory and his accompanying conclusion that Kierkegaard arrives, in embryonic form, at the idea of negative dialectic. The chapter consists of two parts and proceeds as follows. In the first part, I provide an exposition of Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic which, as his alternative to the Hegelian dialectic, is identified by Adorno as the source of Kierkegaard’s most important insights. This part thereby provides an insight into the ideas which Adorno draws on, whilst at the same time underlining the very different context in which Kierkegaard writes. In the second part, I draw attention to three distinct but interrelated moments of truth which Adorno identifies in *Construction* as present in Kierkegaard’s thought. Namely, the ineluctable role of the finite, existing individual in thinking (§4.2.2); the rejection of the necessarily progressive, systematic character of dialectic (§4.2.3); and the preservation of the particular (4.2.4). Each of these moments of truth is accompanied by passages from Adorno’s mature work, in particular his *Negative Dialectics*, in order to demonstrate how they feature as part of Adorno’s mature critique of identity theory and his idea of negative dialectic.

In arguing for this connection, I concur with Peter Gordon’s claim that Adorno saw Kierkegaard’s thought as “an early harbinger of the negative dialectic” and as anticipating “the Frankfurt school’s own critique of identity theory”.[[294]](#footnote-295) At the same time, I advance this thesis in new directions, principally by disagreeing with Gordon’s narrative that Adorno only arrived at this conclusion as part of a “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard.[[295]](#footnote-296) On the contrary, I suggest that there is evidence in *Construction* that he had formed this affinity from an early stage. Consistent with this argument, the final section of the chapter considers the evidence that Gordon provides for Adorno’s “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard, arguing that there is nothing, at least directly pertaining to the negative dialectic, which does not appear in more oblique form in *Construction*. Finally, I close by suggesting that this chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the thesis, concluding that for Adorno negative dialectic is principally not an abstract dispute about dialectic, but intimately related to his analysis of a systematically unfree society and the basis for our resistance against it.

## 4.1 Kierkegaard’s Qualitative Dialectic

In Chapter Two, I proposed that one part of *Construction* which is of particular importance and has been consistently overlooked is the Intermittence [*Intermittenz*] section.[[296]](#footnote-297) Specifically, I suggested that in this section Adorno makes a number of claims that point towards his early affinity with aspects of Kierkegaard’s critique of identity thinking and, relatedly, of the Hegelian dialectic. If Adorno proposes that Kierkegaard anticipates aspects of the negative dialectic and the critique of identity theory, then, based on what he writes in the “Intermittence” section, he thinks that the central evidence for this can be found in examining Kierkegaard’s idea of qualitative dialectic. As I noted in Chapter Two, qualitative dialectic is what Adorno takes to be Kierkegaard’s alternative to Hegel’s dialectical model. As Adorno puts it, qualitative dialectic is “expressly formulated as a critique of idealist continuity”, and in contrast to the Hegelian dialectic “is not adequately defined by the logical form of contradiction, by logical reversal”.[[297]](#footnote-298) Everything that appears in the “Intermittence” section arises from Adorno’s reading of this alternative dialectical model. Thus, the idea of qualitative dialectic forms an important part of understanding how Adorno comes to view Kierkegaard’s work as anticipatory of his own negative dialectic and critique of identity theory. Given this importance, before turning directly to Adorno’s own exposition of qualitative dialectic and its relation to the development of his mature thought, I first want to indicate the fundamentals of the idea of qualitative dialectic as it appears in Kierkegaard’s work, on Kierkegaard’s terms. Doing so will lay the groundwork for understanding why Adorno was drawn to the idea of qualitative dialectic, as well as helping to make sense of his framing of the qualitative dialectic as Kierkegaard’s alternative to Hegel’s dialectic.

The idea of qualitative dialectic is principally developed in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, written by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus.[[298]](#footnote-299) The central concern of that text is the question of how to bring about a mode of thinking that will lead the existing individual to arrive at the subjectivity and inwardness necessary in order to embrace genuine Christianity. To achieve this requires becoming concerned with one’s individual relationship with (what is taken to be) truth. In Climacus’ words, it requires that the individual, “as existing is essentially interested in his own thinking, is existing in it”.[[299]](#footnote-300) The “qualitative dialectic” is the name for the new form of dialectic which helps to cultivate this interest and the accompanying subjectivity and inwardness.[[300]](#footnote-301) It functions as a preliminary step towards Christianity, leading the individual to the point “where the absolute object of faith and worship is”.[[301]](#footnote-302)

The dialectic comprises of two elements.[[302]](#footnote-303) Firstly, instead of being a dialectic of mediation (like the Hegelian dialectic), it emphasises the separation and differentiation of categories. As I shall show, this emphasis on separation has important ramifications for how the qualitative dialectic approaches a number of questions, in particular those relating to existence and movement. Secondly and relatedly, the qualitative dialectic emphasises the need to think within existence and with relation to existence. By thinking in this way, individuals become able to relate their existential possibilities to themselves and to their existence. In order to explore the full workings of the qualitative dialectic, I will now explain each of these two elements in greater detail.

## 4.1.1 Qualitative Dialectic as Separation and Distinction

To understand why Kierkegaard thinks there is a need for a new form of dialectic which separates and distinguishes between categories, it is first necessary to understand to what this dialectic is a response. In *Postscript*, qualitative dialectics is presented in sharp contrast with what Climacus takes to be the prevalent form of thought in modernity (and specifically Christendom), namely so-called “abstract” and “world-historical dialectics”.[[303]](#footnote-304) This latter form of dialectics, according to Climacus, confuses and conflates fundamental categories, and thus promotes and perpetuates misunderstanding. Although Climacus views this conflation as a phenomenon which afflicts the whole of Christendom, he makes clear that it is Hegelian philosophy (and its appropriation in Christendom) which represents the epitome of this conflation of categories.[[304]](#footnote-305) The central complaint levelled at Hegel is that he conflates categories of thought and existence, which has encouraged the suppression of the distinctive and qualitative character of the latter. As Climacus writes, implicitly criticising Hegel: “If…a logical system is to be constructed, special care must be taken not to incorporate anything that is subject to the dialectic of existence”.[[305]](#footnote-306) The qualitative dialectic endeavours to do this by keeping “the spheres sharply separate from each other… lest everything become one” in an effort to underline the qualitative character of the sphere of existence, that which cannot be reduced to an aspect of thought.[[306]](#footnote-307) In short, Climacus accuses Hegelian philosophy of having not taken care in precisely this regard. Instead, he suggests that Hegel constructs a logical system of thought and surreptitiously incorporates existential elements within it, conflating the categories to the point that (subjective) existence and the role of the existing individual in thinking are forgotten.

To that end, one of the central criticisms which Climacus repeatedly returns to is the claim that Hegel unjustifiably incorporates movement, which is exclusively an attribute of existence, into his logical system. As Climacus explains it, Hegel’s system claims to begin with the “most abstract” presuppositionless beginning and progresses from here to eventually arriving at concrete, objective knowledge through the elimination of contradictions between opposing concepts.[[307]](#footnote-308) On Climacus’ reading, Hegelian philosophy achieves this progression by negating the differences between these concepts and positing a *mediation*, which he understands to be a bringing together of the previously oppositional concepts in a new concept.

The principal problem that Climacus has with this is the notion of a *movement* immanent to a logical system (*thought*). He insists that, on the contrary, movement is exclusively an attribute of existence, which is qualitatively different from thought. Accordingly, the motive power in Hegel’s logical system, mediation, cannot constitute genuine movement, but is “a mirage…Viewed abstractly, everything is and nothing becomes. Mediation cannot possibly find its place in abstraction, since it has *movement* as its presupposition.”[[308]](#footnote-309) Climacus’ refusal of mediation (and emphasis on the separation of categories) is therefore an endeavour to demonstrate that matters of existence are qualitatively distinct and different from any search for objective knowledge through the logical operation of concepts. To think existence requires a different dialectic which respects this qualitative distinction, understanding that movement occurs in actuality and not in the arena of thought. That is, movement occurs not in the result of logical procedure, but through the decision of the existing individual.[[309]](#footnote-310)

In this same spirit, Climacus introduces the qualitative dialectic with the aim that it will accurately reflect movement in *existence*, rather than in logic. Again, this emphasis is a riposte to what he sees as Hegel’s conflation of movement in existence with movement in logic. Consistent with his wider reading of Hegel, Climacus claimsthat transitions between concepts occur in the system necessarily, reflecting their origin as grounded in logic.[[310]](#footnote-311) Whilst there is no problem with the idea of necessity immanent to the sphere of reflection (for example, the idea that two negatives necessarily equal a positive), Climacus is at pains to point out that this “necessity must be treated by itself” as distinct from existence.[[311]](#footnote-312) Despite the appearance of movement, transitions in logic and necessity are in reality static, since they cannot *become*, but simply *are*.[[312]](#footnote-313)

By contrast, genuine movement, which is movement in existence, is qualitatively different and thus should be considered strictly different. The qualitative dialectic, as the dialectic of existence, should reflect this difference. It does so principally by Climacus’ underlining that nothing in existence (and thus in the qualitative dialectic) occurs necessarily. Whilst transitions in logic may follow necessarily and automatically, movement in existence does not. To ignore this distinction is to ignore that, when we think, we do so as existing human beings. As Climacus writes, refuting Hegel’s identity of thought and being:

 God does not think, he creates; God does not exist [*existere*], he is eternal. A human being thinks and exists, and existence [*Existents*] separates thinking and being, holds them apart from each other in succession.[[313]](#footnote-314)

Crucially, in existence, the process of reflection may be halted by the existing individual, who may never make the next movement into actuality. The qualitative dialectic’s separation of categories, particularly those of thought and existence, emphasises what is qualitatively different and that the latter must not be forgotten.

Ultimately, this conflation of categories and the failure to emphasise the qualitative distinctiveness of existence matters above all to Kierkegaard’s authorship (and to Climacus in *Postscript*) because it severely hinders the true understanding of Christianity. In modernity and specifically Danish Christendom, Climacus claims that Christian faith is treated as though it consists in proving an “objective truth”, which is reached by establishing proof in a collection of objective propositions. Christian faith is now considered a category of thought, of objective knowledge. By contrast Climacus emphasises that this misunderstands Christianity, which is a category of existence. Whilst he actively condemns institutional Christendom (specifically the clergy) for perpetuating this conflation of Christianity with what he calls “pagan-aesthetic” categories, Hegelian philosophy is once again singled out as a central culprit in contributing to this confusion.[[314]](#footnote-315) Because of the appropriation of Hegelian philosophy in Christendom, Climacus writes: “Christianity becomes an element, perhaps a supreme element, but essentially [an element of] speculation.”[[315]](#footnote-316)

On Climacus’ reading, to conceive of Christian faith in quantitative terms, as a category of thought like this, is to misunderstand Christianity. To do so is to miss the point of the qualitative, subjective and existential dimension which is intrinsic to faith. Christian truth is something with which one has an individual relationship. It is a matter of spirit, requiring individuals to appropriate this truth into their very way of being, transforming their life accordingly. That is to say, it is a difficult, weighty and deeply subjective task. To understand faith as the detached demonstration of objective truths is to abstract away completely from this difficulty. To the contrary, when understood on these terms, entering into faith entails what Climacus calls “a life of ease”: an automatic transition which is the result of having quantitively arrived at a collection of proofs.[[316]](#footnote-317) In this context, Climacus therefore emphasises again the distinction between movement in thought and movement in existence, writing that faith “does not occur by virtue of immanental thinking but is made by virtue of a resolution”.[[317]](#footnote-318) This resolution is not taken up in general quantitative terms, but by the existing individual who relates the life of faith to their own specific, subjective existence.

In this section, I have explored the fundamental reasons why Climacus thinks that there is a need for a new dialectic. In a general sense, the reason for the introduction of a new dialectic is in order to provide a contrast with the Hegelian influenced abstract and world-historical dialectics which predominate in Christendom. In contrast to these predominant ways of thinking, qualitative dialectic places special emphasis on maintaining distinctions between categories. Particularly, qualitative dialectic refuses the conflation or mediation between the categories of thought and existence and the underlying identity of thought and being, both of which Climacus takes to be hallmarks of Hegelian philosophy. Standing behind this emphasis on the separation of categories, particularly of thought and existence, is Climacus’ concern with the conflation of Christianity as an objective category of knowledge. Qualitative dialectic, on the contrary, is the endeavour to emphasise instead that Christianity is a category of existence, and thus something which each person should appropriate into their own particular, individual and subjective existence.

## 4.1.2 Thinking Within Existence and in Relation to Existence

Having now considered Climacus’ reasons for introducing the idea of qualitative dialectic and the importance of the separation of categories which is integral to it, I will now turn to the question of what this separation entails for Climacus. In other words, asking what it means for individuals to think in terms of qualitative dialectic. In this regard, there are two parts, which I will discuss in turn. These are, firstly, thinking within existence and secondly, thinking in relation to existence. The first part refers to our need to think within the conditions of our finite, conditioned status as existing individuals. The second part then considers how we might apply our infinite, existential possibilities within the context of our finite, conditioned status. Ultimately, again, all this is geared by Climacus towards bringing individuals to the point where they think about the eternal in and through their subjective existence, rather than abstracting away from it.

## 4.1.3 Thinking Within Existence

The entire notion of thinking within and in relation to existence is intimately related to the work of the qualitative dialectic in distinguishing between categories, particularly in order to emphasise the distinctiveness of subjective existence. In short, to think within existence is to remain attentive to the reality that whenever we think, we do so as an existing individual, from an irreducibly particular finite perspective. These finite limits inevitably condition our thinking. For example, we unavoidably occupy a particular point in time and are embedded within a specific social, historical, and cultural horizon. To think within existence is to acknowledge this reality and, accordingly, to avoid the temptation to abstract away from it and/or conflate it with thought. Accordingly, in *Postscript*, Climacus underlines the importance of remembering that the subject (the existing individual who does the thinking) “is existing, that existing is a becoming”, and therefore:

 the notion of truth as the identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction and truly only a longing on the part of creation, not because truth is not so, but because the knower is one who exists and thus as long as he exists, the truth cannot be so for him.[[318]](#footnote-319)

As long we are thinking within existence, questions of knowledge and truth should be approached with an awareness of the finite, incomplete and constantly changing horizon that we necessarily inhabit. Anything else is a denial of reality and therefore a “chimera”.

As before, Climacus’ principal concern in emphasising the need to think within existence is a response to Christendom. Specifically, he argues that when thinking about eternal truths (such as faith), people in Christendom who are informed by Hegelian philosophy fail to account for the fact that they think from *within* *existence*. Eternal truths become equated with a form of objective knowledge, as though individuals could grasp it in its infinite entirety (i.e. become identical with it). Describing this tendency, Climacus writes that:

 abstract thinking is *sub specie aeterni*, it disregards the concrete, the temporal, the becoming of existence, the predicament of the existing individual due to his being composed of the temporal and the eternal situated in existence.[[319]](#footnote-320)

Climacus’ point, however, is that the existing individual is not infinite, but precisely and necessarily also finite and therefore conditioned as described above. Within this context, no existing individual can grasp the truth in its entirety, as though they were identical with it, infinite and eternal like God. On the contrary, the existing individual is:

 composed of the infinite and the finite…situated in time, so that the joy of the eternal in him becomes unutterable because he is existing; it becomes a supreme drawing of breath that cannot take shape, because the existing person is existing.[[320]](#footnote-321)

In light of this, the challenge that Climacus instead puts down is the task of coming to know the eternal truth *in and through* existence, whilst accepting our finite situatedness as existing individuals. This paradoxical alignment of the finite and the infinite is arguably the task of Kierkegaard’s entire authorship; it is this task which motivates Climacus’ concept of thinking in relation to existence, to which I will now turn.

## 4.1.4 Thinking in Relation to Existence

If thinking within existence involves remaining ever conscious of our finite situatedness as existing individuals, then thinking in relation to existence involves putting this consciousness into practice. To think in relation to existence concerns the ability of the individual to relate their existential possibilities (the infinite) to their particular, subjective existence (the finite). When Climacus refers to these existential possibilities, he principally has in mind the group of categories which relate to individual religious existence: the infinite, eternal, religious and spirit. As I have reiterated already, Climacus thinks that in Christendom these categories have been confused or transformed into something other than they actually are. This confusion has devalued and diminished their force and difficulty. Principally, this is because Christianity has been uncoupled from subjective existence and turned into a category of objective knowledge, which Climacus calls a “pagan-aesthetic” category. By emphasising the relation of these categories once again to finite subjective existence, Climacus endeavours to restore their true force.

In order to achieve this, Climacus first introduces the idea of “totality categories”, which are closely related to his idea of “absolute *telos*”.[[321]](#footnote-322) For Climacus, absolute *telos* is, as David Law puts it: “the goal toward which the individual orientates and reforms his or her existence in order thereby to come into a relationship with an eternal happiness”.[[322]](#footnote-323) That is to say, the *telos* is the overarching existential possibility which frames and informs every single moment of an individual’s existence. Meanwhile, the totality categories are (in Law’s words): “the means by which the subjective thinker orientates her existence toward the absolute *telos* and measures whether she is relating herself absolutely to the absolute *telos*”.[[323]](#footnote-324) By emphasising these totality categories, the qualitative dialectic enables the individual to identify the absolute *telos* and crucially, distinguish it from relative ends.

The purpose of emphasising these totality categories relates to Climacus’ concerns about the devaluing and diminishment of religious existence in Christendom. This is because, unsurprisingly, Climacus associates the aforementioned religious categories with the totality categories. The religious categories – the infinite, eternal religious, and spirit – are all too frequently conflated with relative ends, rather than being an absolute concern which should permeate every aspect of an individual’s existence. Specifically, Climacus has in mind the way in which religious existence has morphed into a life of ease in Christendom, a relative concern amongst others, rather than the absolute which it should be. To be considered a Christian is merely to perform the external duty of attending church on Sunday, rather than entailing any deeper, existential transformation. Accordingly, by grouping the religious categories under the aegis of the totality categories, Climacus is reclaiming the radical, absolute implications which religiousness should have for individual existence.

But this is only the means of *identifying* the absolute *telos* through the use of totality categories. As I indicated at the beginning, qualitative dialectics is concerned with how an individual sustains a relationship to the absolute *telos* (i.e., their existential possibilities) in relation to their finite, subjective existence. The key to this for Climacus is *pathos*, which is the “action or the transformation of existence”.[[324]](#footnote-325) In relation to eternal happiness (the outcome of pursuing absolute *telos*), *pathos* entails a transformation in which “the existing person in existing changes everything in his existence in relation to that highest good”.[[325]](#footnote-326) In other words, pathos is antithetical to the easy existence which Climacus perceives in Christendom; rather, it is befitting of the way in which absolute ends should *absolutely* transform an individual and permeate every aspect of their existence.

Expanding upon how an existing individual relates themselves in this way to their absolute *telos*, Climacus identifies three elements which pathos entails in its “concrete difficulty”: renunciation, suffering and guilt-consciousness.[[326]](#footnote-327) In short, these are distinct, but each more intensive and complete expressions of the individual’s absolute relation to the absolute *telos*.[[327]](#footnote-328) For Climacus, these expressions represent crucial prerequisites for religiousness, and ultimately for the possibility of a genuine Christian existence. This is because they are concrete signs that an individual has acknowledged their finite, temporal subjective existence and actively endeavours to transform this existence absolutely in relation to the eternal.

What is distinctive about Christianity in particular is the accentuation which it places on the role of existence in coming to know the eternal; it is this which the qualitative dialectic ultimately leads up to.[[328]](#footnote-329) Specifically, in Christianity, existence is no longer seen as an impediment to knowing the eternal. Sustaining an individual relationship with the eternal does not involve going ‘behind’ existence in a Platonic sense. On the contrary, in Christianity, the eternal is now incarnate within finite existence and the individual’s relationship with it is achieved through a historical point of departure in existence. On this basis, existence therefore assumes a great importance, since it is *in and through existence* that the eternal is reached.

## 4.1.5 Summary: Kierkegaard’s Qualitative Dialectic

In this section, I have explored the idea of the qualitative dialectic in Kierkegaard’s authorship, focusing specifically on the idea as it appears in *Postscript*. I began by establishing the grounds that Climacus thinks give rise to the need for a new, qualitative dialectic, which emphasises the separation of categories. This emphasis arises as a response to Christendom’s Hegelian inspired tendency towards the conflation of categories, particularly those of thought and existence. I then moved on to explore the task of thinking in terms of qualitative dialectic. This comprised of two parts, thinking within existence and thinking in relation to existence. The first part concerns the need to think within our ineluctable status as finite, existing individuals and therefore within the limits that this entails. Having confronted this reality, the second part is then concerned with the task of appropriating our infinite, existential possibilities in relation to our finite, conditioned subjective existence. The contrast could not be clearer: if abstract dialectics “does not allow the difficulty of existence and of the existing person to come up”, then qualitative dialectic is the endeavour to confront these realities and think them through.[[329]](#footnote-330) As I have already suggested, in the wider context of Kierkegaard’s authorship, the purpose of introducing the qualitative dialectic is as preparatory work, in leading individuals to the kind of subjective thinking which will ultimately be required to think Christianly.

So why does any of this matter in relation to Adorno and the wider aims of this chapter? In the first place, exploring Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic on its own terms is helpful as an orientation point for the rest of the chapter. By beginning the chapter introducing these ideas in the context from which they derive, I have underlined the point that the philosophical context of the qualitative dialectic was quite alien and indeed often oppositional to Adorno’s own.[[330]](#footnote-331) At the same time, however, the ultimate aim of the chapter is to demonstrate Adorno’s appropriation of certain ideas (which he considers moments of truth) in Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic. Since Adorno’s discussion of these ideas is oblique to say the least, it is instructive to giving a sense of them as they appear in Kierkegaard’s texts before turning to Adorno’s rendering of their insight. It is to this which I will now turn.

## Tracing Kierkegaard in Adorno’s Negative Dialectic

## 4.2.1 The Beginnings of Negative Dialectic in *Construction*

As I have already intimated, in *Construction*, Adorno introduces the idea of qualitative dialectic in a section entitled “Intermittence”. In this section, he suggests that the qualitative dialectic is of particular importance because it runs contrary to (what he argues is) Kierkegaard’s dominant intention, as represented in his dialectic of the spheres. This dialectic is the central object of Adorno’s criticism of Kierkegaard and, as I showed in Chapters Two and Three, the basis for Adorno’s controversial claim that Kierkegaard falls back into the subject-driven idealism from which he originally endeavoured to distinguish himself.

On the contrary, Adorno insists that the qualitative dialectic should be “distinguished” from the “total dialectic” of the spheres.[[331]](#footnote-332) Approvingly, he notes that the qualitative dialectic, “is not adequately defined by the logical form of contradiction, by logical reversal” and, as Kierkegaard’s alternative to the Hegelian dialectical method, “is expressly formulated as a critique of idealist continuity”.[[332]](#footnote-333) As I read it, he tentatively suggests that the qualitative dialectic expresses the *embryonic* stages of a critique of idealism and an alternative to Hegel’s positive dialectic, something which, overall, Kierkegaard’s philosophy had failed to do.

In that context, it is clear that the word *embryonic* should be emphasised. By no means does Adorno wish to take on Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic in its entirety and simply supplant it into his own thought. Rather, the claim that I will develop in the following pages is that in *Construction* (and in correspondence of the same early period) Adorno saw critical potential in certain aspects of the qualitative dialectic. Specifically, in the ineluctable role of the finite subject, the critique of Hegel’s “positive” dialectic and the emphasis on the distinctiveness of existence. It is this claim that will form the basis of my overall argument that Adorno already views Kierkegaard’s thought in this early period as anticipatory of his critique of identity theory and with it, the possibility of a new, negative dialectic. Accordingly, I will now consider three distinct but interrelated aspects of Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic that Adorno draws attention to in *Construction*, aspects which he subsequently incorporates into his mature negative dialectic.

## 4.2.2 The Impossibility of Comprehending the Whole: Thinking as a Subject

The first of these is an idea which, as we have seen, is integral to the qualitative dialectic. Namely, the idea that subjects – those doing the thinking – inescapably inhabit a finite horizon and perspective, which they are conditioned by in different ways. Crucially, this ineluctable situatedness places constitutive limits on our ability to comprehend the whole. In *Construction*, Adorno associates this idea explicitly with the qualitative dialectic. It will go on to form an important pillar of his critique of identity theory and, relatedly, *contra* Hegel, the need for a new, negative dialectic.

As I noted in the section on Kierkegaard above, Hegel views the culmination of his philosophical dialectic and system to be absolute knowledge. To know absolutely is to have complete or unimpaired rational cognition of the world; to know without qualification, *infinitely*. This entails that the object perfectly corresponds with its concept and is fully instantiated within it. Hence, Adorno describes absolute knowing as the identity of “subject and object”.[[333]](#footnote-334) Not only this, but absolute knowing is alwaysspecific, referring to, for example, the structure of being and the realisation of freedom.

Importantly, for Hegel to arrive at this knowledge involves a process of refinement which begins with heavily qualified, partial, *finite* knowledge and progresses onwards and upwards, eventually arriving at this absolute knowledge, which is infinite; no longer partial or limited. The dialectic is therefore a process of revision which culminates when: “knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where knowledge finds itself, where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion”.[[334]](#footnote-335) In other words, this is the point where, in contrast to earlier stages, thought is no longer finite or incomplete, and consciousness is satisfied that it has a complete comprehension of the object. I will return to the process of revision in more detail in §4.2.3, but it is crucial to note that Adorno thinks this entails, in Brian O’Connor’s words, that “the object *must in the end* be fundamentally identical with some concept” and thus “the point at which concept and object do not coincide—can eventually be overcome”.[[335]](#footnote-336) When absolute knowledge is achieved, and objective reality is grasped completely through the medium of conceptual reflection, dialectics becomes, as Adorno sees it, “positive”, insofar as there is no longer any aspect of reality which is negative or finitely known to consciousness.[[336]](#footnote-337)

How then does this all relate to Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno? Returning to *Construction*, in outlining the critical moments in the qualitative dialectic, Adorno quotes the following passage from *Postscript*, which undermines the idea of being able to comprehend the whole:

 If existing cannot be thought, and the existing person is thinking nevertheless, what does this mean? It means that he thinks momentarily; he thinks before and he thinks afterward. His thinking cannot attain absolute continuity. Only in a fantastical way can an existing person continually be *sub specie aeternae*.[[337]](#footnote-338)

As I noted above, one of the key aspects of the qualitative dialectic is Kierkegaard’s emphasis on our ineluctable finite situatedness within existence and the importance of remaining constantly attentive to it in our thinking. As embodied subjects thinking in existence, we unavoidably occupy a particular point in time and are embedded within a specific social, historical, and cultural horizon. In this respect, our thought is irrevocably conditioned by our finitude. The consequence of this is that we will be unable to comprehend the whole, absolute knowledge, which is unlimited, unqualified infinite truth. As Climacus puts it: “the notion of truth as the identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction…because the knower is one who exists and thus as long as he exists, the truth cannot be so for him.”[[338]](#footnote-339) To suggest otherwise is to forget the ineluctable negativity which existing (and thinking) in time entails: “the negative is present in existence and present everywhere (because being there, existence, is continually in the process of becoming)”.[[339]](#footnote-340) Crucially, it is this idea which Climacus is referring to in the passage that Adorno quotes in *Construction*: namely, that it is not possible to think the whole in the way that Hegel suggests, without limit or qualification, because to be human is to think within the finite, conditioned limits of existence.

This same thought is the source of the initial negativity which motivates Adorno’s critique of identity theory and thus also his negative dialectics, which he introduces as follows:

 We are concerned here with a philosophical project that does not presuppose the identity of being and thought, nor does it culminate in that identity. Instead it will attempt to articulate the very opposite, namely the divergence of concept and thing, subject and object, and their unreconciled state.[[340]](#footnote-341)

If Hegel’s “positive” dialectic culminates in the absolute identity of object and concept, then Adorno’s negative dialectic is concerned with preserving and emphasising what he calls their *non-identity*. That is, the point at which concept and object, thought and being do not coincide, where reality exceeds rational cognition. In this way, Adorno’s dialectics are an endeavour to show the limits of the concept, of what has not been grasped (i.e., remains negative) in thought.

Adorno follows Kierkegaard’s insight by insisting that the initial “negativity” which undermines the identity of subject and object is that: “Potentially, though not actually, objectivity can be conceived without a subject…No matter how subject is defined, the existent being cannot be conjured away from it.”[[341]](#footnote-342) Here, Adorno recapitulates one of the central themes of Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic: to think is to think as an existing individual within a finite, embodied historical and temporal horizon. Crucially, it is not possible – in actuality – to think other than through this frame. Accordingly, the possibility of knowing absolutely in the sense described above is foreclosed.

This insistence on the existent subject as the ineluctable, constitutive starting point for thinking, (the “how”), which is qualitatively distinct from the object of thought (the “what”), subsequently becomes a key idea in Adorno’s dialectic:

 What is known through consciousness must be a something; mediation applies to something mediated. But subject, the epitome of mediation, is the ‘How’, and never, as contrasted to the object, the ‘What’ that is postulated by every conceivable idea for a concept of subject.[[342]](#footnote-343)

In fact, Jay Bernstein describes this distinction as “the most consistent element of Adorno’s critique of the concept”, encapsulating both parts of the orientation which Adorno ultimately adopts.[[343]](#footnote-344) On the one hand, it acknowledges the need for reason and cognition – for mediation – as one which is constitutionally embedded within the human condition. For every object to be an object, it requires rational assent and acknowledgement on the part of the subject. Crucially, however, it also captures the distinctly Kierkegaardian idea that the irrational, embodied ‘finite’ aspect of our being within actuality is constitutional and precedes the spontaneity of cognition. As Bernstein puts it: “anthropomorphic nature and attachment to practices in the light of contingent conditions…have as much a claim to be counted as (components of) ‘who we unavoidably are’ as any unavoidable rationality requirements”.[[344]](#footnote-345) By concluding this, Adorno therefore goes beyond the simple claim that identity theory is bad or irrational, but actually goes as far as saying that it is “*existentially* self-defeating”, since it implies revoking our constitutive embodiment and contingent conditioning: our status as embodied subjects.[[345]](#footnote-346)

## 4.2.3 Dialectics Outside of the System

The second critical moment of truth in the qualitative dialectic that Adorno refers to in *Construction* is Kierkegaard’s criticism of the necessarily progressive, developmental character of Hegel’s dialectic. As we saw earlier, one of the key components of the qualitative dialectic is its criticism of Hegelian “abstract dialectics” on the grounds that they conflate or confuse movement as a category of thought, rather than existence. In introducing the qualitative dialectic as an alternative dialectical model in *Construction*, Adorno quotes the following passage from *The Sickness Unto Death*, which ably summarises the crux of this objection:

 it would certainly be desirable if at some time a sober thinker would explain to what extent the purely logical, which is reminiscent of logic's first relation to grammar (two negatives affirm) and of mathematics—to what extent the logical has validity in the world of actuality, in the world of qualities, whether on the whole the dialectic of qualities is not something different, whether "transition" does not play another role here.[[346]](#footnote-347)

In this passage, Anti-Climacus rhetorically asks if a “sober thinker” (i.e., a Hegelian), can justify the apparent equivalence that they have made between thought and existence. Consistent with the criticisms that I explored above, his specific complaint is that a logically necessary movement – “two negatives affirm” – which he alleges is the basis for “movement” in Hegel’s dialectic, does not apply to movement in existence. Whilst Hegel’s system might claim to “move” through dialectical transitions, this “movement” has its basis in conceptual presuppositions, rather than real movement in existence. As we have seen, the qualitative dialectic, on the contrary, is an effort to keep the categories of logic and existence apart; to insist that movement *only* occurs in existence.

So, why does Adorno quote this passage in the context of the possibility of constructing an alternative dialectical model? Furthermore, with an eye to the aims of the chapter overall, how might this criticism of Hegel’s dialectic from Kierkegaard contribute to Adorno’s critique of identity theory and anticipate his own negative dialectic? In beginning to answer these questions, it is instructive to recall the following passage from *Negative Dialectics*, written three decades after *Construction*:

 [t]o equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in its purest form. What thus wins out in the inmost core of dialectics is the anti-dialectical principle: that traditional logic which…takes minus times minus for a plus. It was borrowed from that very mathematics to which Hegel reacts so idiosyncratically elsewhere.[[347]](#footnote-348)

The first thing to note about this is that it is strikingly similar to the passage from *The Sickness Unto Death* above. Like Anti-Climacus, albeit in his own language, Adorno is profoundly critical of the double negation: the idea, as Adorno describes it, of equating “the negation of negation with positivity”. Equally, Adorno’s criticism orients itself around the allegation that Hegel inappropriately applies “traditional logic” – that which is necessary or consequential – to thought. As we shall see, like Anti-Climacus, Adorno also takes the double negation to be the source of necessary, progressive movement in Hegel’s dialectic, a necessary movement which is unjustified, and which has its basis in satisfying the needs of Hegel’s overall system.

Hegel’s dialectic entails a movement which begins with finite, partial knowledge and, through a process of refinement and revision, progresses towards ever more complex and coherent ideas. The dialectic culminates in infinite, complete knowledge. Hegel terms this movement *experience*. Whilst Adorno ultimately disagrees with the progressive character and culmination of Hegel’s dialectic of experience, he thinks that Hegel arrives at something of immense importance in understanding knowledge as a dialectical process.[[348]](#footnote-349)

For Hegel, experience is a process of judgementon the part of consciousness. Judgement, in this case, means the placement of different elements of experience together under the categories of concept and object. At all points within experience, as Brian O’Connor notes: “concept and object will…be united in a judgement that expresses either partial or conclusive knowledge.”[[349]](#footnote-350) Conclusive, infinite knowledge is the point at which, in Hegel’s words: “Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion”.[[350]](#footnote-351) Now, as we have seen, whilst the dialectic culminates in this correspondence, it does not begin with this knowledge, but with incomplete or partial knowledge, revising and refining this in order to arrive at ever more complex and coherent ideas. The basis for this process is *negation*, which is above all what Adorno finds valuable in Hegel’s thought. To negate a concept is the process of analysing a judgement and recognising that it is in some way inadequate. In Hegel’s dialectic of experience, for example, consciousness recognises that there are contradictions within its own conception, that its concepts fail to correspond with its objects, and it is thereby forced to reject (negate) the judgement.

What Adorno finds most valuable about this process of negation is the way in which it requires the subject to be *open* and *adjust* itself to its object by acknowledging (and negating) complications that arise in its thought. As Adorno puts it: “It is up to dialectical cognition to pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing”.[[351]](#footnote-352) Adorno thinks that Hegel’s dialectic of experience effectively captures the way in which the subject comes to understand its environment, adjusting and transforming itself in response to it. This process of adjustment requires the subject to remain constantly open to experience and willing to revise its conceptual presuppositions accordingly.

Now for Adorno, this process of negation can be informative. That is, it informs us, negatively, about the various ways in which the object *fails* to fully instantiate its concept and that our concepts are in some way inadequate. Where Adorno disagrees with Hegel, however, is in the latter’s idea that negation is necessarily *productive*. For Hegel, the dialectic of experience is a process of *progressive* revision and readjustment. It is, as Gordon Finlayson puts it, a “dialectical ascent”.[[352]](#footnote-353) That is to say, for Hegel, when the contradictions within a concept are brought to light through the negating power of thought, consciousness is compelled to come up with a new conception of its object. This new concept does not arise from nowhere but is the culmination of an interconnected process of refinement and readjustment which takes into account the failures and contradictions in previous conceptions. Each new concept, as Finlayson writes: “involves not just a cancellation and a preservation of something that already obtains, but also the production of something *new, higher and better*”.[[353]](#footnote-354) That is to say, each new conception of the object is considered more determinate than the previous one. Eventually, as Hegel notes: “[t]he necessary progression and interconnection of the forms of the unreal consciousness…will bring to pass the completion of the series”.[[354]](#footnote-355) Through this dialectical process of revision and refinement, the contradictions in the conception of the object will eventually be negated until eventually consciousness will arrive at the *complete* conceptualisation of the object. It is to this process which both Kierkegaard and Adorno refer in varying degrees of detail when they discuss the idea of the double negation resulting in affirmation or positivity. It is in this sense that negation is conceived by both thinkers as the motive force of Hegel’s dialectic and system.

So why does Adorno oppose this movement? As we saw above, what Adorno most values in the dialectic of experience is what he sees as Hegel’s thematisation of the subject’s openness in adjusting itself and its conceptions to the object in experience. Crucially, it is this same openness which he thinks is prejudiced by Hegel’s systematically driven assumption that the dialectic is a progressive movement which will lead to the “completion of the series”. By contrast, for Adorno, as O’Connor puts it: “Genuine experience is openness to the object and holds no assumptions about how our experience of the object will conclude.”[[355]](#footnote-356) The claim that the subject’s negation of its inadequate conception of the object necessarily results in a more determinate conception, one that will bring us closer to the object, Adorno writes, “can only be upheld by one who presupposes positivity – as all-conceptuality – from the beginning”.[[356]](#footnote-357) That is to say, it can only be upheld, in Adorno’s view, alongside a systematic conception of dialectic as a progressive ascent towards the complete conceptualisation of the object by the subject.[[357]](#footnote-358) Consistent with what we have said already about the openness which Adorno most values in the dialectic, he writes that Hegel thereby “violates his own concept of the dialectic…by closing it off and making it the supreme unity, free of contradiction.”[[358]](#footnote-359) Instead, for Adorno, there should be no such systematic presupposition of all-conceptuality (what he calls “positivity”) in the culmination of the dialectic and no accompanying sense therefore of the dialectic as *necessarily* progressive and productive.

It is at this point that we can return to Anti-Climacus’ criticism, cited by Adorno in *Construction*. In citing this passage (and then later reproducing its substance in *Negative Dialectics*), Adorno recognises that, crucially, Kierkegaard understands that the progressive movement of Hegel’s dialectic functions on the basis of his conceptual presupposition. Whilst by no means concluding that Kierkegaard’s subjective qualitative dialectic provides a viable alternative, Adorno does credit Kierkegaard with criticising Hegel’s dialectic for becoming “consequential” and in effect driven by “the logical form of contradiction, by logical reversal”.[[359]](#footnote-360) By contrast, dialectical movement, which is meant to be responsive to reality, however construed cannot – must not – be driven by the conceptual presuppositions of Hegel’s architectonic, by consequential thinking. As Adorno puts it (in unusually Kierkegaardian language): “One cannot move from the logical movement of concepts to existence”.[[360]](#footnote-361)

## 4.2.4 Preservation of the Particular

The third moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic is intimately related to the first. I argued above that Adorno, through his engagement with Kierkegaard, is critical of Hegel’s concept of the subject. This is the idea that Hegel’s dialectic can only culminate in infinite knowledge, the absolute identity of subject and object, by “forgetting” that thought is always mediated by the inherent negativity of the situated, finite, contingently conditioned self. As such, thought always contains a moment of non-identity; it will always contain a moment which cannot be captured completely by conceptual determination. In this sub-section, I will show how Adorno takes this criticism in a different direction. Namely, how Hegel’s alleged failure to give a sufficiently concrete concept of the finite, contingently conditioned self leads to this same self being overrun in his dialectic of history. In *Construction*, Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic, with its thicker concept of the subject, resists this tendency.

As I noted above, in progressing towards complete knowledge, Hegel’s system incorporates the realisation of human freedom in history. This dialectic of history is intimately connected with and arises out of the dialectic of individual consciousness (or experience) which we have just explored. Just as the dialectic of experience *necessarily* culminates in complete, infinite knowledge, according to Adorno, the dialectic of history also *necessarily* culminates in the realisation of freedom. In the dialectic of experience, we saw how through a necessary process of refinement and revision, consciousness comes to ever more complex and sophisticated conceptions of its object until it reaches perfect correspondence. In a similar way, for Adorno, Hegel also conceives of history as a necessaryprocess of development which advances through different phases from unfree, undeveloped forms of social organisation, building on these to produce ever more sophisticated forms, eventually culminating in the realisation of freedom itself.

Instead of individual consciousness correcting and revises its inadequate conceptions, however, Hegel invokes the idea of *Geist*, or spirit, a collective mind which drives history in its progress towards the realisation of freedom. The necessary, rational compulsion for the realisation of progressively more sophisticated conceptions of freedom in history does not arise from the intentional projects of individuals, but through the extra-material force of *Geist*. It is only through *Geist* that history can be (retrospectively) understood as a continuous, teleological and, crucially, rational systematically *necessary* process towards the end of freedom. History thereby becomes a matter of metaphysics. As Adorno sees it, this characterisation of the realisation of freedom in history as problematic in a number of ways.

Principal amongst these is that, as Brian O’Connor describes it: “when Hegel conceives of *Geist* as history as a whole he is, in fact, expressing a conception of society as a whole that determines every part within it”.[[361]](#footnote-362) In the same way that contingent historical events become retrospectively understood as determined by the necessary, objective progress of *Geist*, so too subjects, particulars, are determined by the developments of the objective social totality. Adorno thereby suggests that there is an intrinsic link between Hegel’s metaphysical and social commitments, bound by his effort to bring systematisation to the whole.

In part because of a commitment to the historical-materialist, broadly Marxist tradition in which he is writing, Adorno expresses profound opposition to this conception. In this tradition, the forces of history are not understood as directed by *Geist*, but, as Marx interpreted them, by labour. By understanding history as the product of *Geist*, Adorno accuses Hegel of “transfiguring” history from “something produced by human beings, something fallible and conditioned, along with labor itself, which is the suffering of human beings, into something eternal and right”.[[362]](#footnote-363) Adorno’s question here, amongst others, is: where – in any meaningful, concrete sense – are actual, living individual subjects in all of this?

As Brian O’Connor puts it, history for Adorno is the “ongoing process of social antagonism between the needs of individuals and the needs of the social totality”.[[363]](#footnote-364) By conceiving of history as a process of realising freedom through necessity, directed by *Geist*, Adorno accuses Hegel of failing to sufficiently account for this antagonism. History is not *only* the result of objective social processes. Rather, it is also the product of “fallible”, “conditioned”, contingent and suffering individuals. Adorno’s utmost concern is that this material basis for history processes, consisting of actual, existing human beings is not forgotten, yet this is precisely what he accuses Hegel of doing. That is, *in the end*, Hegel entirely subordinates subjectivity to being a mere moment in the overarching necessary, rational movement of history, *Geist*.[[364]](#footnote-365)

For Adorno, the consequence is that, as David Sherman describes it, “subjectivity itself is so totally overrun that the individual can no longer be deemed an actual subject at all”.[[365]](#footnote-366) To think about subjectivity in this way is to risk removing the mediating role of individual subjects (as in the antagonism described above) from the historical process altogether. On this view, as Adorno sees it, individuals become abstractions, captive to the tides of the necessary movement of objective history. He describes this as follows in *Negative Dialectics*:

 The lack of concrete definition in the concept of subjectivity is exploited as the benefit of higher objectivity on the part of a subject cleansed of chance; this facilitates the identification of subject and object at the expense of the particular…the subject, the substrate of freedom, is so far detached from live human beings that its freedom in necessity can no longer profit them at all.[[366]](#footnote-367)

Just as Adorno accuses Hegel of effacing the role of the particular non-identical, finite self in the act of thinking by asserting its identity with the concept, so too in the dialectic of history, Adorno accuses Hegel of effacing the freedom of the particular, non-identical finite self in asserting the necessary movement of history in *Geist.* He claims, in effect, that in Hegel’s dialectic subjects become empty vessels constrained within rational, necessary processes (and hence, “cleansed of chance”). His point, on the contrary, is that such a dialectic could only emerge harmoniously through an inadequate, abstract definition of subjectivity. For Adorno, Hegel ultimately fails to do justice to existing subjects as irreducibly non-identical: materially embodied, contingently conditioned finite beings bound up within temporality who are always *more than* abstract, necessary vessels ofhistory.

In this context, we should recall Adorno’s view of history as the ongoing antagonism between the needs of individuals and those of the social totality. By re-incorporating the mediating role of actual, finite existing human beings, Adorno endeavours to incorporate what he thinks is missing from Hegel’s dialectic, namely, the concrete claims of individual subjects to express and to be an expression of something *other* than the rational, necessary movement of history. Adorno’s concern is that the idea of subjects who are ultimately reducible to rational necessity are subjects who lose their ability meaningfully to push back against their own suffering and subjugation in the face of (what is conceived as) a necessary social totality.[[367]](#footnote-368)

It is at this point that we can return to *Construction* in order to establish how Kierkegaard fits into this picture. As I argued in the first sub-section, Adorno is clearly sympathetic towards aspects of Kierkegaard’s concept of subjectivity, specifically in contrast to Hegel. Kierkegaard, unlike Hegel, recognises that subjects alwaysremain in some sense non-identical with thought. That is to say, in their constitution, subjects are not singularly rational beings through and through. Rather, they are always also finite, embodied and conditioned by idiosyncratic contingent factors. It is this analysis that informs Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard arrives at an altogether more concrete conception of subjectivity than Hegel. By emphasising the consistent non-identity of the subject in this way, Adorno intimates in *Construction* that Kierkegaard develops the basis for a critique of Hegel’s dialectic of freedom realised through necessity:

 In the place of Hegelian “mediation” between freedom and necessity, intermittence enters as a breath that pauses, concentrates and begins anew; it is a movement in place, not one of progress and continuity.[[368]](#footnote-369)

What Adorno (obliquely) suggests here is that through his emphasis on a ‘thicker’ concept of the subject and the distinction between thought and existence, Kierkegaard poses incisive questions of the functioning of Hegel’s dialectic of freedom and necessity. It is not hard to see how Adorno might arrive at this view. For example, as we saw above, Kierkegaard makes great pains to emphasise that there is a distinction between his qualitative dialectic and (Hegelian) abstract dialectic. In the former, which concerns existence, there is a sharp distinction: the process of reflection will not necessarily materialise in existence. That is to say, it may be halted by the finite, existing individual, who may never make the next move into actuality. By contrast, in abstract dialectics, there is an elision between the process of thought and its necessary culmination in existence, of which Kierkegaard is deeply critical. This is because the abstract dialectic fails to acknowledge the distinction between thought and existence, between the thought and action of the existing individual.

Adorno’s fundamental point is that when Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasises that there is no necessary transition from thought into existence, his basis for saying this is rooted in a proper consideration of all the material conditioning and contingent factors to which I refer above. It is these factors that distinguish the actually existing subject of the qualitative dialectic from the abstracted, rational ‘through and through’ subjects of Hegel’s dialectic. It is these factors that are constitutive of the subject as a finite, *actually existing* self. Indeed, it is these factors that will always impinge on the existing individual in seamlessly, necessarily transitioning from thought into actuality. In re-emphasising this, Adorno writes that Kierkegaard re-establishes “the body in the rhythm of absolute spirituality”.[[369]](#footnote-370)

The consequence of putting “live human beings” back into the dialectic where Hegel had ultimately “detached from” them is that Kierkegaard also re-establishes the prospect of a mediating role for individual subjectivity, which, as I noted above, Adorno thinks that Hegel’s dialectic ultimately denies.[[370]](#footnote-371) In fact, Kierkegaard makes the role of the existing, finite individual an imperative in the qualitative dialectic, something that Adorno acknowledges when he cites the following passage from *The Sickness Unto Death* as representative:

 Personhood is a synthesis of possibility and necessity. Its continued existence is like breathing (respiration), which is an inhaling and exhaling. The self of the determinist cannot breathe, for it is impossible to breathe necessity exclusively, because that would utterly suffocate a person’s self…To pray is also to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing.[[371]](#footnote-372)

As we saw above, throughout the qualitative dialectic, Kierkegaard repeatedly criticises the way in which, through the influence of Hegelian philosophy, faith has become conceived as an automatic, *necessary* transition which occurs as the result of having demonstrated certain objective propositions. This approach, he claims, turns faith into the “the semblance of a decision”, removing the all-important active place of the particular, actually existing individual in arriving at faith.[[372]](#footnote-373) In such circumstances, his concern is that the finite self, with its own particular existence, becomes an incidental factor. By contrast, in the qualitative dialectic, he emphasises the integral place of the subject in coming to faith not through necessity, but through a decision, encountered in the form of a possibility.

Clearly, Adorno has little interest in the religious pretext to Kierkegaard’s thought. Nonetheless, he still thinks that Kierkegaard hits upon something important – namely, the importance of preserving the concrete claims of the finite self, the subject, as distinct from the perceived abstractions of Hegel’s system. The lesson that Adorno draws from this is that Kierkegaard preserves in his concept of the subject the moment which was ultimately lost in Hegel’s dialectic: the claims of individual subjects to express and to be an expression of something *other* than the rational, necessary movement of history. When placed into the context of Adorno’s worries about the relation between Hegel’s systematisation of history and the systematisation of the social totality, this becomes crucial. What Kierkegaard preserves is nothing other than the mediating role of the subject, in the face of its complete, necessary determination by the objective social totality.

## 4.2.5 Summary: The Truth of Kierkegaard’s Qualitative Dialectic in *Construction*

As I have argued throughout this chapter, Adorno is unambiguous about his comprehension of Kierkegaard’s intention in the “Intermittence” section. That is, that the qualitative dialectic “is not adequately defined by the logical form of contradiction, by logical reversal” and, as an alternative to the Hegelian dialectical method, “is expressly formulated as a critique of idealist continuity”.[[373]](#footnote-374) These are both aspects for which he provides evidence, referencing texts from Kierkegaard’s authorship. Whilst Adorno does not think ultimately that Kierkegaard successfully develops the truth of his insights, he recognises Kierkegaard’s insight all the same. This is analogous in some respects to his approach to Hegel, insofar as Adorno also credits him with early insights into negativity, but which he thinks Hegel subsequently disavows.

In the preceding pages, I established the presence of three distinct, but interrelated, moments of truth that Adorno draws out of Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic. The first of these is Kierkegaard’s undermining of Hegel’s thesis of absolute identity through his emphasis on the ineluctable role of the finite, existing individual in thinking. The second is Kierkegaard’s rejection of the idea of the dialectic as system. Specifically, this entails a rejection of the idea of the necessarily *progressive* character of Hegel’s dialectic, as represented in the idea of double negation. For both thinkers, this reveals an implicit conflation of thought over existence. The third moment of truth, closely related to the first, is Kierkegaard’s assertion of the irreducible role of the particular, individual subject in the dialectic. What Adorno specifically elicits from this is the truth that the negative claim of the individual must always be preserved, rather than subordinated to the movement of the objective whole, as he alleges occurs in Hegel’s dialectic of history. In each case, I accompanied each of these moments of truth from *Construction* with insights from Adorno’s mature work, in particular his *Negative Dialectics*, thereby giving a sense of the lasting contribution which Kierkegaard makes with respect to Adorno’s critique of identity theory, indirectly providing the embryonic traces of the idea of negative dialectic. The final evidence for this can be found in Adorno’s correspondence with Siegfried Kracauer, where he explicitly associates Kierkegaard with the development of such an idea in his thought:

 your concept of material dialectics interests me very much because in my *Kierkegaard*, something quite similar to it appears under the name of “intermittent dialectics” – i.e. it is the kind that does not proceed in closed definitions of thought but is interrupted by a reality that does not fit into it and at the same time “catches its breath” within it (Kierkegaard’s expression) and arises refreshed every time.[[374]](#footnote-375)

Before moving on, it is important to acknowledge the important place of Walter Benjamin in all of this. In describing Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic as an “intermittent dialectic” and indeed in repeated references to the metaphor of respiration, Adorno is clearly alluding (as throughout *Construction*) to Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel*. In the opening pages of that text, Benjamin writes of “continual breathing in and out” as “the form of existence most proper to contemplation”, suggesting that philosophical thinking should be “intermittent”, reflecting the disruption of the object to the subject’s thought process.[[375]](#footnote-376) In this sense, the “Intermittence” section which has formed the basis of this chapter is evidently not only an isolated commentary on Kierkegaard, but an amalgamation of Kierkegaard and Benjamin’s critique of Hegel and identity theory and Kierkegaard and Benjamin’s shared view of the need for a different dialectic resulting from that critique. This conclusion is reflective of the intellectual affinity that Adorno identified between Kierkegaard and Benjamin, an affinity upon which he openly reflected: “‘dialectics at a standstill’- a name, incidentally, he [Benjamin] found without knowing that Kierkegaard's melancholy had long since conjured it up”.[[376]](#footnote-377)

The consequence of Adorno’s view about their affinity, however, is not that we should assume that this is all Benjamin’s influence under the name (and using the quotations) of Kierkegaard. Rather, consistent with the reconstruction I have provided, there is, in fact, a strong case that there is a clear kernel within the “Intermittence” section which is distinctively and consistently Kierkegaardian. The evidence for this kernel will only be strengthened in §4.3, the final section of the chapter, which demonstrates the marked continuity between the oblique comments and quotations I have discussed here and Adorno’s far more explicit late remarks, endorsing aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought.

## 4.3 Adorno’s Late Rapprochement with Kierkegaard

So far in this chapter, I have suggested that in *Construction*, Adorno already acknowledges a number of moments of truth in Kierkegaard’s thought. In fact, I go as far as to suggest that Adorno already saw in Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic, particularly in its criticism of Hegel, an early critique of identity theory and even the embryonic traces of what would become his negative dialectic. In this final section, I now endeavour to reinforce this argument, showing the almost unbroken continuity between what Adorno writes in the oblique language of *Construction* and what he states more explicitly, in the language of his mature thought, in his 1963 essay, KOM. Indeed, I argue that there is almost no element mentioned in that final essay which does not appear in more oblique form in *Construction*. In this respect, I therefore disagree with Peter Gordon’s claim that Adorno only arrived at a “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard in KOM and *only then* came to see Kierkegaard as anticipatory of the critique of identity theory and an early harbinger of negative dialectic.[[377]](#footnote-378) On the contrary, I think that we can trace this, as I have endeavoured to show throughout this chapter, to the very beginnings of Adorno’s engagement with Kierkegaard.

There are two closely related, key passages in KOM where Adorno suggests Kierkegaard lands critical blows to Hegel’s identity theory, and thereby indirectly points the way to negative dialectic.[[378]](#footnote-379) I will address these in turn, showing at the same time that their content can already be found, in essence, in *Construction*. The first of these is as follows:

 [i]n the Kierkegaardian concept of the subject, as that of existence, that non-identical real spirited away by the conception of the pure subject as Spirit in idealism, breaks through. In this sense, Kierkegaard, who vilified mediation, has emphasized a central one more strongly than Hegel, who doubtless recognized it: that of the I by the not-I.[[379]](#footnote-380)

The basis of this passage mirrors the first moment of truth that I explored in the “Intermittence” section of *Construction*. Namely, the idea that Kierkegaard maintains a sense of the irreducible negativity of the finite, existing, situated subject and thereby undermines Hegel’s claim to the absolute identity of subject and object. As we saw above, Adorno already suggests in *Construction* that Kierkegaard “expressly formulated” the qualitative dialectic as a “critique of idealist continuity”.[[380]](#footnote-381) He then follows this by citing a passage from *Postscript* inwhich Climacus speaks of the existing individual as thinking “momentarily”, precisely because an existing individual cannot think infinitely. This latter point is exactly what Adorno is referring to when he says that Kierkegaard emphasises the mediation “of the I by the not-I” more strongly than Hegel. That is, the idea that when we think as subjects (the I) this thought is always *mediated*, impinged upon by those finite, material contingencies (the not-I) that are constitutive of our subjectivity. This is what Kierkegaard refers to when he critiques “idealist continuity”, as Adorno suggests in *Construction*. Adorno’s point in both KOM and *Construction* is that Kierkegaard takes the “non-identical real” (the non-conceptual aspect which is built into subjectivity) altogether more seriously than Hegel when the former denies that the absolute identity of subject and object is possible within existence. The consequence of this is that the “non-identical real spirited away by the conception of the pure subject as Spirit in idealism, breaks through”.[[381]](#footnote-382) Or as Adorno put it three decades earlier, Kierkegaard re-establishes “the body in the rhythm of absolute spirituality”.[[382]](#footnote-383)

Adorno thinks that in disrupting Hegel’s concept of identity, Kierkegaard’s ‘thicker’, non-identical concept of subjectivity has wider implications for disrupting the seamless functioning of Hegel’s system. As I argued above, crucial amongst these is the preservation of the mediating role of the particular, individual subject against the universal whole. It is this which Adorno thinks is also “spirited away” in Hegel’s idea of “subject as Spirit [*Geist*]”. What Kierkegaard does, by contrast, is: “secures for the moment of the non-identical, in its concept but not its unfolding, greater due”, a moment which otherwise “disappears” in Hegel.[[383]](#footnote-384) In other words, Kierkegaard “secures” the irreducible role of the individual subject in the dialectic, emphasising its ultimate non-identity with conceptuality, something from which Adorno thinks that Hegel abstracts away. It is this achievement that leads Adorno to write approvingly that Kierkegaard “fought the reification of philosophy into a system, which tore it away from the experience of the individual and reduced it to a mere aspect”.[[384]](#footnote-385)

As we saw above, Adorno perceives the ultimate danger arising from this philosophical tendency to suppress individual experience is its migration into the historical and social domain. Indeed, this is ultimately what drives his concern in relation to Hegel’s conception of the development of history as the necessary realisation of freedom in the movement of *Geist*. Whilst Adorno makes no reference to Kierkegaard’s non-identical concept of the subject undermining Hegel’s dialectic of *Geist*’s movement in history as he seems to do in *Construction*, he nonetheless does note that Kierkegaard “would sooner sympathize with the condemned than with the victors, the more powerful battalions of world history”.[[385]](#footnote-386) The significance of this is what is already implied in *Construction* ­– namely, that by emphasising the irreducible place of the particular individual in the dialectic of history against the “necessary” movement of the universal whole, Kierkegaard emphasises the mediating claim of the actually existing individual in this history. That is to say, he restores the claim of the “condemned”, suffering individual in the place of a narrative of “progress and continuity”, as Adorno puts it in *Construction*.[[386]](#footnote-387)

Ultimately, then, my conclusion is that the substance of the sympathetic analysis that Adorno makes of Kierkegaard in KOM (the basis for the idea that he arrived at a “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard), is already present in *Construction*. As we have seen, there are clear and discernible continuities between the affirmative comments and citations which Adorno provides in the “Intermittence” section of *Construction* and his later remarks in KOM. Already in *Construction*, Adorno indicates, albeit in gnomic style, the force of Kierkegaard’s non-identical concept of the subject. It is in that concept, that Kierkegaard “expressly formulated…a critique of idealist continuity” and thereby re-established “the body in the rhythm of absolute spirituality”.[[387]](#footnote-388)

The crucial difference between *Construction* and KOM (at least in relation to Kierkegaard’s contribution to a critique of identity theory and the idea of negative dialectic) is not therefore that Adorno arrives at a newfound rapprochement with Kierkegaard. Rather, it is that only in the later text does he expresses this rapprochement with the (relative) clarity of his familiar mature language and style. In *Construction*, Adorno had not yet established his individual philosophical voice, as distinct from Walter Benjamin. Not only this, but consistent with what I suggested at the end of the previous chapter, that he had good strategic reasons to mask even qualified praise of Kierkegaard. All the same, my claim in this chapter has been that, through this fog, we can still discern the basis of Adorno’s *own* early analysis of the truth in Kierkegaard’s thought.

## 4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that from his first writings on Kierkegaard in *Construction* to his final essay in 1963, Adorno considers Kierkegaard to be important not only in developing a critique of Hegel’s identity theory, but also in his anticipation of the possibility of a new, negative form of dialectic. In the first part of the chapter, I provided an exposition of Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic, which, as his alternative to the Hegelian dialectic, is identified by Adorno as the source of Kierkegaard’s most important insights. This part thereby provides an insight into the ideas which Adorno draws on, whilst at the same time underlining the very different context in which Kierkegaard writes. In the second part, I draw attention to three distinct but interrelated moments of truth which Adorno identifies in *Construction* as present in Kierkegaard’s thought. In short, these are: the ineluctable role of the finite, existing individual in thinking; the rejection of the necessarily progressive, systematic character of dialectic; and the preservation of the particular. Each of these moments of truth is accompanied by passages from Adorno’s mature work, in particular his *Negative Dialectics*, in order to demonstrate how they feature as part of Adorno’s mature critique of identity theory and his idea of negative dialectic. In arguing for this connection, I thereby concur with Peter Gordon’s claim that Adorno saw Kierkegaard’s thought as “an early harbinger of the negative dialectic” and as anticipating “the Frankfurt school’s own critique of identity theory”.[[388]](#footnote-389) At the same time, I advance this thesis in new directions, principally by disagreeing with Gordon’s narrative that Adorno only arrived at this conclusion as part of a “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard.[[389]](#footnote-390) On the contrary, I suggest that there is evidence in *Construction* that he had formed this affinity from an early stage. Consistent with this argument, the final section of the chapter considers the evidence that Gordon provides for Adorno’s “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard, arguing that there is nothing there, at least directly pertaining to the negative dialectic, which does not appear in more oblique form in *Construction*.

Within this chapter, I have suggested that Adorno views his turn to negative dialectics and his accompanying opposition to Hegel’s “positive” dialectic and identity theory as more than an abstract philosophical concern. The reason for this, above all else, is that in Adorno’s view, the systematisation which the negative dialectic opposes is reflected in actual developments in history. As we saw above, Adorno ultimately sees Hegel’s system as driving history towards a situation in which societies as a whole determine every part within them, with the consequence that particularity and difference is suppressed. This is exactly how Adorno thinks societies are organised in modernity. That is to say, in such a way that each individual’s life is systematically directed towards their integrated harmonisation within the whole. Like Hegel’s system, however, this ‘harmonisation’ is only achieved by neglecting particular individual difference; it is in this sense a compulsive, false harmony.

The negative dialectic thereby becomes imperative in providing the basis for resistance to this situation.[[390]](#footnote-391) If modern societies systematically imposea false unification on individuals, then negative dialectics is an endeavour to demonstrate the truth that this is a compulsive relationship, rather than a free one. This is because, as we have seen, negative dialectics is geared towards bringing to light the *differences* and *contradictions* in society; the unreconciled “wrong state of things”.[[391]](#footnote-392) In this context, the preservation of the particular becomes especially important, because it is the suffering of the particular which is forgotten and suppressed in the imposition of unity by the social whole. When the individual becomes conscious of their suffering, which stands in contradiction to the social whole’s claim to cultivating a free and unified society, this is representative of the first step to resistance. Given this, the next chapter, (and ultimately the rest of this thesis), will be an exploration of this dynamic. That is to say, the next chapter will explore Adorno’s understanding of how this systematic unfreedom develops in history and culminates in modernity. Secondly, within this, it will explain how Adorno conceives of the suppression of the particular individual as an integral feature in this unfreedom, since it is only through the individual in the first place that the possibility of resistance remains alive.

# Chapter 5 Kierkegaard and Adorno on Despair and Unfreedom

Having traced Kierkegaard’s anticipation of key ideas in Adorno’s negative dialectic, in this chapter, I now turn to explore the conditions giving rise to the need for negative dialectic. In other words, the historical conditions that have led to a situation in which systematic unfreedom is presented as harmonious and the suffering of the individual suppressed. To this end, the chapter is concerned with the condition of unfreedom which Adorno thinks defines late-capitalist modernity in the 20th century. In what follows, I trace the philosophical and historical connections between Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective conceptions of despair and unfreedom. In the first two sections of the chapter, I explore Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective conceptions of despair and unfreedom in turn. By doing this, I aim to draw out not only continuities, but also differences in Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective philosophical approaches and aims. In the third section, I draw together these accounts by showing how Adorno appropriates and incorporates different aspects of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair within his own thought.

In the chapter overall, by presenting an account of Adorno’s appropriation of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair, I part with one-sided readings that suggest that the central truth that Adorno took from his interpretation of Kierkegaardian despair was the latter’s failure to conceptualise despair anywhere other than in inwardness.[[392]](#footnote-393) Instead, I follow the reading provided by Tom Whyman, who argues that we miss important aspects of Adorno’s concept of the wrong life when we overlook the concept’s Kierkegaardian heritage.[[393]](#footnote-394) At the same time, I develop and advance this account of Adorno’s Kierkegaardian heritage, showing the existence of new and different elements to those which have already been highlighted. Specifically, I trace new motifs that Adorno takes from *The Sickness Unto Death* (from here on SUD) and incorporates into his mature work, particularly in relation to the demise of individuality and its role in unfreedom, noting particularly affirmative remarks made by Adorno in KDOL. Finally, demonstrating the deep rootedness of Adorno’s early engagement with Kierkegaardian despair, I track Adorno’s appropriation of what he calls “objective despair” from its first appearance in *Construction* to *Negative Dialectics*. In this endeavour as a whole, I argue therefore that Kierkegaard should be considered as one important figure in the development of Adorno’s concept of unfreedom and despair.

## 5.1 Kierkegaard on Despair

## 5.1.1 What is it to be in despair?

The most comprehensive analysis of despair in Kierkegaard’s works appears in SUD, written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus and published in 1849, relatively late in Kierkegaard’s life. In SUD, Anti-Climacus describes the various stages of despair from its lowest unconscious form to its highest, most intensive conscious form. All these variants share the same source as their sickness: “if the self does not become itself, it is in despair”.[[394]](#footnote-395) What is it for a self to be itself? To be itself, the self must become aligned to the different realities of selfhood. At the beginning of SUD, Anti-Climacus describes these realities. Firstly, the self is a synthesis of opposites: “the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity.”[[395]](#footnote-396) This synthesis encapsulates the reality of being a particular self in existence. Secondly, the self is self-relating, “a relation that relates itself to itself”.[[396]](#footnote-397) Thirdly, the self must ultimately recognise God as its source and dependence: “a derived, established relation, a relation that relates to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another”.[[397]](#footnote-398) Failure to align these different dimensions to oneself amounts to despair. Crucially, all of the dimensions of selfhood described here relate to each other insofar as they all imply a relation with God. To be the synthesis which constitutes the self as *this* distinctive self is to be what it is to exist before God. To be able to be self-relating as a human is to have the possibility of existing before God. To realise one’s selfhood in this way is to realise one’s *humanity* and *freedom*.

The entire thematisation of despair in SUD is developed as the outcome of the self’s failure to recognise itself as a self before God. The title of the work is itself a nod to this: “Christianly understood, then, not even death is ‘the sickness unto death’”.[[398]](#footnote-399) Instead of physical illness being ‘unto death’, in light of the possibility of eternal life, the true sickness unto death is despair. To live in despair is to deny the possibility of eternal life: “If there is to be any question of a sickness unto death in the strictest sense, it must be a sickness of which the end is death and death is the end”.[[399]](#footnote-400) To put it another way, evoking images of eternal damnation, the sickness unto death is a despair leading to the inability to die, leaving the self instead trapped in a living death: “To be saved from this sickness by death is an impossibility, because the sickness and its torment—and the death—are precisely this inability to die”.[[400]](#footnote-401)

## 5.1.2 Movement Through Despair

As I have suggested, the central task ofSUD is to provide an exposition of the variants of despair. This account can be read in at least two different ways. Firstly, it can be read as a kind of dialectic of consciousness, as the self moves through the different levels of intensive despair and sin. In the text, Anti-Climacus traces the movement of the self from a despair which has no consciousness of God to a sinful despair in which the self is consciously before God. Secondly, and more simply, it can be understood as an exposition of the different forms of despair as they appear at varying levels of depth, human and religious. Whichever reading one takes up, I want to pay particular attention to the first part of the text which describes the self’s despair *prior to* having knowledge of itself as a self before God. That is to say, before the self conceives despair as sin. The reason for this is that it is this first part which is most relevant to Adorno’s appropriation of Kierkegaard’s thought.[[401]](#footnote-402)

Anti-Climacus begins by identifying two ways in which despair appears from the perspective of consciousness: conscious and unconscious despair. The more conscious a person is of how bad things are, the more intensive their despair.[[402]](#footnote-403) By contrast: “the despairing individual who is ignorant of his despair is simply a negativity further away from the truth and deliverance. Despair itself is a negativity; ignorance of it, a new negativity.”[[403]](#footnote-404) For the person who is unconscious of their despair, there is all the more to do.

As long as a person remains in unconscious despair, they remain *passive* in relation to their despair. That is to say, they are unaware of it and do not in any sense actively contribute to it. Thus, for a person in unconscious despair: “when the illness is most critical, he feels well, considers himself to be in excellent health, and perhaps seems to others to radiate health.”[[404]](#footnote-405) The person in unconscious despair is utterly unaligned with themselves, having no sense of their potential as spirit and having sunk into complete finitude, to the point where they cannot imagine anything else. Their sense of self does not derive from an understanding of themselves as a self before God, but “vaguely rests in and merges in some abstract universality (state, nation, etc.)” or, alternatively regards the self merely as having “powers to produce without becoming deeply aware of their source”.[[405]](#footnote-406) These states of unconscious despair are “the most common in the world”.[[406]](#footnote-407)

After this relatively brief discussion of unconscious despair, Anti-Climacus then turns to describing the forms of conscious despair, where a person develops some conception of themselves as eternal. Initially in this state, a self is aware of their being in despair and yet only feels it fleetingly and occasionally. This fleeting awareness is only capable of being maintained through the self’s identity with finite goods (“work and busyness”) as a means of distracting themselves from the eternal, and the consciousness of their despair. [[407]](#footnote-408) Individuals may undertake this work either without knowing why they do it, or they may actively embrace it as a way of sinking further into darkness.

From fleetingly conscious despair, Anti-Climacus then distinguishes two further, more intensive forms of conscious despair. These are, firstly, despair in or over weakness and, secondly, despair in or over defiance. Climacus writes that both signal “a rise in the consciousness of the nature of despair and in the consciousness that one’s state is despair”.[[408]](#footnote-409) Despair in weakness involves a life of pure immediacy with no infinite consciousness of the self. Consciousness of despair is triggered when a person who lives in this immediacy, “desiring, craving, enjoying…passively”, is suddenly struck by a realisation about their deeper unhappiness with this state of affairs.[[409]](#footnote-410) This unhappiness has more permanence than the fleeting despair described above, and the individual remains unsettled for an extended period of time.

Nonetheless, the individual is still able to supress this despair. Anti-Climacus presents two scenarios for this suppression. The first is that some external intervention arrives, enabling the individual to begin where they left off and revert back to their old life. The second is that, if no external intervention arrives, the individual finds comfort in a new conformity: “he learns to copy others, how they manage their lives”.[[410]](#footnote-411) The conformity described here specifically is that of the institution of Christendom, which reassures the individual of their righteousness and their place in heaven: “the pastor ushers him into eternity for ten rix-dollars—but a self he was not, and a self he did not become.”[[411]](#footnote-412) Despite the external trappings of religiosity, at no point does this individual have an inkling of an eternal conception of the self or of themselves before God. Rather their conscious despair will always hinge on losing something worldly, for example, losing status in the social hierarchy or having a breakdown in a relationship.[[412]](#footnote-413)

Whilst the next form of despair which Anti-Climacus describes remains a form of despair in relation to weakness, it is regarded as “a significant step forward”, because it is despair of the eternal.[[413]](#footnote-414) This form of despair therefore reaches an altogether new level of intensiveness. As Anti-Climacus puts it: “It is difficult to forget such despair – it is too deep; but every minute that despair is kept open, there is the possibility of salvation”.[[414]](#footnote-415) The intensive character of this despair is altogether less common than the previous forms which I have discussed. Specifically, what this more intensive form concerns is despair *over* one’s own weakness. The individual now has a conception of the eternal but they despair over their inability to prioritise the eternal over worldly things. As a result, all worldly things become a sign of (their) despair. Rather than “humbling himself under his weakness”, which might bring the individual closer to faith, instead they undergo a self-destructive repetition of despair over their own weakness.[[415]](#footnote-416)

Finally, Anti-Climacus describes despair as defiance, which is “conscious of itself as an act; it does not come from the outside as a suffering under the pressure of externalities but comes directly from the self.”[[416]](#footnote-417) What this describes is a process of self-creation in which the individual tries to transcend the aforementioned synthesis of the self as finite and infinite. The individual who is in despair of defiance loses all sense of themselves as a definite self. Rather, they endlessly try to remake themselves, flitting from possibility to possibility, harbouring the belief they can become anything they want to be. This too is an attempt to forget despair. But it also fails, since however much the individual attempts to recreate themselves, they will remain with the true image of their self: fragmented and divided, utterly without the coherence that only the eternal can provide. This form of despair represents the final form of despair without consciousness of God.

It is at this point that Anti-Climacus introduces part two ofSUD, which concerns the self who is consciously before God, or has a conception of God. In these circumstances, despair becomes sin. I have already remarked that I will not explore this second part in the same depth as the first part, but it is worth outlining its contents.[[417]](#footnote-418) As in the first part, there is a clear movement from less conscious and more passive to more conscious and more active sin. Anti-Climacus identifies three different types of conscious sin: despairing over one's sin, despairing of the forgiveness of sins, and despairing by dismissing Christianity as untruth. In a mirroring of part one, each of these sins is also conceived in various ways as the result of weakness and defiance respectively – albeit this time before God. The highest, most intensive form of sin is defiant opposition to Christianity, actively attacking Christ and declaring Christianity to be untrue.

## 5.1.3 The Critique of Culture and the Demise of Individuality in Kierkegaard’s Despair

I have now traced the movement of despair inSUD, noting the various ways in which Anti-Climacus sees despair as manifest itself within individuals. In this section I now want to pay attention to the elements of the movement of despair that Adorno might have been particularly drawn to. These are, specifically: the pervasive character of despair, the critique of (capitalist) modernity, and the role that the demise of individuality plays in despair.

The summary I provided above gives an indication of the breadth and extent to which Anti-Climacus conceives of despair as spread out across every single person in existence. Lying behind this in the first instance is the event of the fall, which inaugurates the possibility of sin (and thus also despair) in every human. This makes the demand for not being in despair extremely high: the self must rest *fully* transparently in the power that established it (i.e. God).[[418]](#footnote-419) Anti-Climacus insists that this should not be seen as “depressing” but rather “elevating”, since it “views every human being under the destiny of the highest claim upon him, to be spirit”.[[419]](#footnote-420) Against the standard of this highest claim, all will fail to some extent: “there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little”.[[420]](#footnote-421) Thus everyone is touched by despair. As I have already noted, most people are not even conscious of their despair.

But what brings about the extremity of this latter situation? As Louis Duprè argues, Anti-Climacus’ answer is linked to the wider society and culture that the individual inhabits: “What is sick is not only the individual: he or she participates in the despair of an entire culture.”[[421]](#footnote-422) Whilst Anti-Climacus always keeps the door open to the possibility (however unlikely) that a few individuals might be able to rise above their social milieu, he also views the cultural and social norms and practices of modernity as cultivating an atmosphere in which despair has been able to take root and flourish. The overarching factor which has contributed to this decline is the demise of individuality. This demise, Duprè suggests, is specifically connected to the “decline of individual responsibility”, which in turn has led to the sense of sin disappearing from the cultural horizon.[[422]](#footnote-423) This results in the total distortion of the vision of the modern self.

Within this account of the demise of individuality and individual responsibility, there are a number of aspects to which I want to draw particular attention, with a view to showing later in the chapter how they resonate with Adorno’s own account of despair in late-capitalist modernity. At the heart of Anti-Climacus’ critique is the claim that in modernity people lose the ability to distinguish themselves from others. Instead, they end up conforming to a social prototype and become levelled out as individuals. Kierkegaard makes this point most powerfully in *Two Ages*, published three years before SUD in 1846. There, in Kierkegaard’s most explicitly political work, the neutralisation of individuality is presented as part of a critique of the “present age”, in contrast with the passion and spontaneity of the revolutionary age.[[423]](#footnote-424) Still, the point appears strong enough coming from the pen of Anti-Climacus, when he writes that the despairing person:

 forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.[[424]](#footnote-425)

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that the demise of individuality is linked to the capitalist logic of modernity. Having described the despairing individual as “a mass man”, Anti-Climacus goes on:

 Now this form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. Here there is no delay, no difficulty with his self and its infinitizing; he is as smooth as a rolling stone, as *courant* [passable] as a circulating coin. He is so far from being regarded as a person in despair that he is just what a human being is supposed to be. As is natural, the world generally has no understanding of what is truly appalling.[[425]](#footnote-426)

Albeit somewhat indirectly, Anti-Climacus comments here on how capitalist modernity empties individuals of their intrinsic value, neutralises them and makes them exchangeable, as though they were circulating coins. The self becomes something which stands ready to be imposed upon. Indeed, this logic has become so invasive that it makes the “truly appalling” neutralisation of the individual seem something utterly normal and acceptable, to the extent that to conform to the status quo becomes a mark of success. Elsewhere, he links despair to a prioritisation of capital above all other concerns: “We despair over that which binds us in despair—over a misfortune, over the earthly, over a capital loss”.[[426]](#footnote-427)

Indeed, despair becomes identical with the following description of the archetypal capitalist: “the secular mentality consists simply of such men who, so to speak, mortgage themselves to the world. They use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises, calculate shrewdly”.[[427]](#footnote-428) The loss of self in modernity – its conversion into an exchangeable and identical thing – is only hastened by the consumerist mentality promoted by capitalism: “The man of immediacy does not know himself, he quite literally identifies himself only by the clothes he wears, he identifies having a self by externalities”.[[428]](#footnote-429) Thus Anti-Climacus consistently alights on the bourgeois individual as the historically specific example of despair: “The philistine-bourgeois mentality is spiritlessness”.[[429]](#footnote-430)

There is one other particularly notable aspect of the decline of individuality which Anti-Climacus diagnoses, namely the loss of imagination. This too, he associates with bourgeois individual who: “does not have imagination, does not want to have it, abhors it”.[[430]](#footnote-431) Underpinning this claim is the idea that individuals have been made identical such that they are unable to see or comprehend possibilities beyond their immediate milieu. Every “little bit of passion, feeling, imagination” is slowly sapped out of them and their focus becomes entirely those aforementioned trivialities: capital losses, which clothes to wear, the next enterprise.[[431]](#footnote-432) Eventually, the foreclosing of the imagination and this immersion in immanence becomes such that: “now it could never occur to him to despair— no, he has secured himself.”[[432]](#footnote-433) In such conditions, the individual’s existence becomes static, a foregone conclusion in which nothing new can ever happen; whether that be despair or for the possibility of anything other than the existence they currently inhabit. In short, this fatalistic mindset is precisely despair.

## 5.1.4 Summary: Kierkegaard on Despair

In this section, I have provided an overview of the key elements of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair, drawing attention to particular aspects which I will argue below resonate with associated ideas in Adorno’s thought. I began by demonstrating how Kierkegaard frames despair: as the state of the self not being itself. To be itself, the self must ultimately recognise itself as a self before God. Only in this way can the different realities of selfhood become aligned. I then recounted the movement of (unconscious and conscious) despair as it appears in the SUD, focusing in particular on the first part concerned with the self in despair without a conception of God. Following this, I then emphasised particular aspects of Kierkegaard’s despair, noting that not only are individuals in despair, but these individuals are also in themselves expressions of a wider culture of despair. Whilst there is always the bare possibility of rising out of despair, Anti-Climacus states that there is not one person who has not been touched by despair. The central reason for the commonality of despair is the abrogation of individual responsibility from the self. This abrogation has been exacerbated by the fact that in secular capitalist modernity, individuals have become identical and interchangeable with one another, as well as tending towards conformity. Indeed, the image that Anti-Climacus frequently presents of the despairing self is that of the bourgeois capitalist, utterly lacking in passion, feeling or imagination and utterly embedded in their social milieu.

## 5.2 Adorno on Despair and Unfreedom

Having provided an exposition of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair, I now turn to the equivalent account as it appears in Adorno’s thought. In this section, I will trace the key components of Adorno’s concept of despair and unfreedom, by which all individuals are afflicted, and which derives from their existence in an unfree social whole, rather than from their individual choices. In doing this, I trace the development of late-capitalist modernity out of a wider history of domination and violence which culminates in what Adorno calls the administered world, where subjects are systematically integrated into the processes of the social whole. This administered world or society distorts and suppresses people’s sense of what it is to be free. The result is a situation in which people come to believe that their inhumane existence is representative of freedom. In fact, many people lack any consciousness of their freedom at all. “Freedom” in administered society means efficient functioning and conformity within the economic and cultural apparatus of the social whole. Within this account, Adorno places emphasis on the way in which administered society diminishes certain characteristics of individuality, specifically: critical self-reflection, autonomy, spontaneity, and imagination. Adorno underlines that it is these characteristics which play an important role in enabling individuals to recognise their unfreedom and ultimately keeping open the possibility of being able to resist this unfreedom.

## 5.2.1 What is it to be unfree?

Although I have opened this section overall with reference to Adorno’s idea of “despair”, “despair” [*Verzweiflung*] is only one of a number of interrelated terms (or, a “constellation”, in Adorno’s language) that he uses to describe the profound state of unfreedom which engulfs existence. The context in which Adorno most famously uses the term “despair” is in the concluding aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, where he writes that: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.”[[433]](#footnote-434) What “despair” points to in this context is the wider theme of many of the aphorisms which appear in *Minima Moralia* and indeed is an abiding theme of Adorno’s mature work as a whole. That is to say, it points to Adorno’s extreme and uncompromising judgement that everythingin existence is damaged or distorted. As he goes on to summarise the task of his critical theory in the face of despair: “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as *indigent and distorted* as it will appear one day in the messianic light.”[[434]](#footnote-435) The holistic character of this distortion and the extremity of Adorno’s judgement is perhaps most famously expressed in another aphorism from *Minima Moralia*: “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly”.[[435]](#footnote-436) As for Kierkegaard, despair is not something in short supply for Adorno; every single person’s life is distorted by it, however much they might wish it otherwise. But how does Adorno justify the stringency of his view of an “indigent and distorted” social world, a totality so corrosive that life within it cannot be lived rightly?

The holistic, social character of Adorno’s distorted world and its impact on individuals has its origin in the influence of Hegel. It is Hegel who recognises that individuals cannot be separated or isolated as moments in the social totality. This has important consequences, because it means that if the social totality is unfree, then all individuals within that totality will be too. As Adorno puts it: “Hegel disdains the illusion of freedom, the individual who, in the midst of universal unfreedom, behaves as though he were already free and universal.”[[436]](#footnote-437) How a society is organised will directly influence the freedom or unfreedom of each and every individual within it, since the two are intimately linked. In societies such as the one Adorno thinks we inhabit, where unfreedom – or even, as in this passage, evil is all pervasive, and individuals have little choice but to be implicated within this unfreedom, irrespective of their own actions:

 Whatever an individual or a group may undertake against the totality they are part of is infected by the evil of that totality; and no less infected is he who does nothing at all. This is how original sin has been secularized. The individual who dreams of moral certainty is bound to fail, bound to incur guilt because, being harnessed to the social order, he has virtually no power over the conditions whose cry for change appeals to the moral *ingenium*.[[437]](#footnote-438)

But what is the “evil” that Adorno describes? Gordon Finlayson defines it as: “the widespread and systematic tendency for people to choose their own unfreedom by adjusting to and accepting socially given norms and by pursuing socially given ends”.[[438]](#footnote-439) What follows is an explanation of how Adorno conceives of this situation arising.

The 20th century society which Adorno analyses is organised according to the logic and norms of capitalism and guided by its laws of exchange. Recalling Marx’s account of natural-history, Adorno sees the overarching economic relations of society assuming a compulsion over individuals. Individual behaviour ends up mirroring capitalist norms, even those which ostensibly have nothing to do with capitalism (famously, Adorno finds capitalist norms even infiltrate our practice of cultural and leisure activities).

The principal instance of this absorption of the overarching economic logic within individuals occurs in the idea of the law of exchange. I have already given an indication of an underdeveloped version of this phenomenon appearing inSUD, but what this means for Adorno is the way in which things, labour and time, become translatable into an economic value, or equivalence. All the diversity of objectsthat can be found in the social world, *humans and things*, are translated and distorted into a fungible value. That is, they are treated as commodities, becoming mutually interchangeable and replaceable. In this way, they are abstracted from their qualitative value, and the abstract, imposed economic value becomes primary. Gradually, this logic becomes more and more integrated into the processes that take place within the social whole, permeating the way in which individuals think. Eventually, their very rationality mirrors this law of equivalence and abstraction. The central expression of this process is the condition of reification. When an object or experience is reified, it becomes delimited, thing-like and static: it loses its plenitude and complexity. In other words, again: treated like a commodity. Adorno views reification similarly as one of the symptomatic conditions of late-capitalist modernity.[[439]](#footnote-440) Intimately tied as individuals are to the social whole, if this whole functions in its every aspect through these capitalist logic and norms, then individuals also become enmeshed in this thinking. Thus, Adorno has a sophisticated account of the integration of subjects into the logic and norms of the capitalist social totality. He thinks this process of integration reaches its apex in what he calls the “administered world” of the 20th century, in which every aspect of life systematically reflects an instrumentalising and abstracting logic.

It is worth recalling in this context that for Adorno there is a history that bends back behind the advent of late-capitalist modernity and informs the tendency for the domination of subjects and their integration into the social whole.[[440]](#footnote-441) Furthermore, this history is not contained exclusively within the Marxist story of the compulsion of socio-economic relations over individuals that leads them to dominate one another. Whether in capitalist or non-capitalist economies, domination, integration, and distortion is a constant. As Adorno notes, there is “*no essential distinction between countries on either side of the Iron Curtain: an administered world*.”[[441]](#footnote-442)

Rather, the continuing failure to realise freedom can be traced back to humanity’s first attempt to separate itself from its natural origins. In this endeavour, humanity repeats the natural urge to self-preservation, expressing its difference from nature through the domination, exploitation, and control of that same nature: “everything historical has to be regarded as nature because thanks to its own violent origins it remains under the spell of blind nature, from which it struggles to dissociate itself.”[[442]](#footnote-443) Writing in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with his friend Max Horkheimer, Adorno suggests that “despite all the detours and resistances”, this domination of nature has been “asserted more and more decisively” and has all the more subtly integrated itself into internal human characteristics.[[443]](#footnote-444) Indeed, the wider thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that this integration reaches its apex with the Enlightenment effort to pull humanity out of its natural state through reason, but this effort fails and reverts back into nature. Not only this, but it ends in the integration and neutralisation of the spontaneous subject, the same subject whose autonomy the Enlightenment had aimed to preserve.[[444]](#footnote-445)

Adorno therefore traces a natural-historical dialectic of self-preservation, of human history as the history of the domination of nature. The result of this dialectic is the prevalence of the most corrosive aspects of 20th century societies. The Enlightenment ends in the priority of means understood as ultimate ends and what follows from that, the all-pervasiveness of instrumental reason.[[445]](#footnote-446) In practice, Adorno thinks that the society that prioritises instrumental reason above all else in this way becomes a “total functional context… to be is to be relative to other persons and things, and to be irrelevant in oneself.”[[446]](#footnote-447) In this functional context “individuals are relegated to the role of mere executive organs of the universal.”.[[447]](#footnote-448) These are the fruits of the administered world.

Adorno thus paints a picture of history as the history of unfreedom, a reflection of the latent natural compulsion to domination which humanity has repeatedly failed to overcome. At the same time, Adorno does not insist that this history of unfreedom and domination reflects natural compulsion all the way down.[[448]](#footnote-449) Rather, he evokes the idea of an inexplicable and self-incurred event at the beginning of history, equivalent to the biblical fall:

 If in fact history turns out to be a permanent catastrophe, then we cannot simply reject the conjecture that something terrible must have happened to mankind right at the start, or at the time when mankind was becoming itself, and that this terrible event is like those that have been handed down to us in the myths about original sin and similar stories in which the origins of mankind and the growth of reason are associated with some disaster from the remote past.[[449]](#footnote-450)

In this way, Adorno avoids falling into the pitfall of insisting that human history is merely the fatalisticrepetition of nature through and through, since such an account would risk the denial of the possibility that freedom *could* everhave been realised at an earlier point in history. Despite the picture of an ever-tightening nexus of delusion and unfreedom that he presents, Adorno always remains alive to the importance of avoiding commitment to a closed and final holism which would deny the possibility of escape, however slim.

## 5.2.2 The Demise of Individuality in the Administered World

InSUD, Anti-Climacus articulates a taxonomy of despair, as part of which he explains the different ways in which individuals fail to realise (often even fail to recognise the possibility of) themselves as selves before God and thus find themselves in despair. By contrast, there is no single text where Adorno provides a taxonomy of despair or articulates the explicit movement from delusion to critical self-awareness. Nonetheless, it is clear that for Adorno there are various ways in which individuals fail to recognise their embeddedness in a context of unfreedom. In what follows, I will provide an account of some of the ways in which Adorno thinks individuals become embedded into unfreedom and systematically integrated into the social whole.[[450]](#footnote-451)

As I have already shown, for Adorno, individuals have been increasingly integrated into the social totality and reflect capitalist norms in their rationality and everyday activities, even those ostensibly unrelated to capitalism. Furthermore, Adorno formulates an account of history as the history of violence and domination by humans over nature, including the natural element in themselves. This history culminates in late-capitalist modernity, in a society where the spontaneity and autonomy of the subject has been neutralised and subjects have been systematically integrated into the totality. But what does this loss of spontaneity and autonomy look like? What are the indicative characteristics of unfree individuals? How is the domination of subjects exerted and how does this control over behaviour manifest itself?

Perhaps Adorno’s most well-known answer to these questions can largely be found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In that text, with Max Horkheimer, Adorno identifies one of the most corrosive aspects of the administered society as the way in which subjectivity is moulded to think and behave according to certain patterns. As I have already noted, Adorno thinks that individuals adopt capitalist norms and reproduce the logic of exchange in their rationality. This is in part because the economic system necessitates that to be successful within it, one must live by the profit-motive and the dehumanising logic of exchange by which the system functions:

 The individual is entirely nullified in face of the economic powers. These powers are taking society’s domination over nature to unimagined heights. While individuals as such are vanishing before the apparatus they serve, they are provided for by that apparatus and better than ever before…The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once.[[451]](#footnote-452)

Individuals are “vanishing” because they pursue their own self-preservation and thus conform to the only measure of success presented by the social whole: the pursuit of ever more efficient functionality. In order to survive, each person integrates themselves seamlessly into the system and their function in the economic apparatus. Equally, as the passage suggests, there is a superficial appeal to the system. Individuals’ autonomy and freedom is bought off by the nullifying comfort which is “better than ever before”, supplemented by new knowledge and “amusements”. But this existence remains mere survival rather than real freedom and happiness.

Equally, the integration and the reproduction of a certain type of person is encouraged in all facets of life, including in the new amusements that capitalist modernity provides. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer specifically develop an account of how the media, advertising and the so called “culture industry” tacitly moulds subjects to reproduce certain ways of living and being. As they write:

 The culture industry has sardonically realized man's species being. Everyone amounts only to those qualities by which he or she can replace everyone else: all are fungible, mere specimens. As individuals they are absolutely replaceable, pure nothingness, and are made aware of this as soon as time deprives them of their sameness.[[452]](#footnote-453)

Just as Anti-Climacus had written of individuals as copies, Adorno too thinks subjects in late-capitalist modernity have lost their individuality through conformity to the prevailing norms. People become identical by merely becoming what administered society – at every level – tells them they should be. Accordingly, Adorno and Horkheimer write:

 Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them…The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behavior on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one…Their criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function.[[453]](#footnote-454)

At the same time, why do people simply seem to accept this status quo? On Adorno’s account this is often simply because they are not conscious of the reality that the social whole denies them their freedom. This failure represents another crucial aspect of the demise of individuality in administered society: the loss of critical and reflexive capacities. In order to perpetuate its existence, administered society requires uncritical subjects: “The absurdity of the present system of rule is so transparent to healthy consciousness that it needs sick consciousness to keep itself alive.”[[454]](#footnote-455) Sick consciousness abounds in administered society. This sick consciousness that keeps the system “alive” feels itself to be in perfect health and appears – from the prevailing logic of administered society – to be healthy. To be “human” in administered society is to exist inhumanely as a functionary, an efficient cog in the economic apparatus. Conforming to the prevailing system, and judged against the instrumental logic of administered society, sick consciousness plays its role well and appears healthy. As Adorno puts it in *Minima Moralia*, the reality is quite different: “All the movements of health resemble the reflex-movements of beings whose hearts have stopped beating.”[[455]](#footnote-456)

In the worst cases of this “health” which is in truth sickness, individuals effectively have no critical consciousness, no *self-knowledge* of their unfreedom at all. In other words, their critical capacities have been utterly nullified. Explicitly invoking Kierkegaard, Adorno describes the most extreme form of systematic integration as “objective despair”. This is equivalent to Anti-Climacus’ unconscious despair, in which the self is unaware of its sickness and feels nothing negative about itself. [[456]](#footnote-457) Likewise, in administered society, an individual’s potential negativity about their situation is often nullified by the false happiness afforded in thecomfort and “amusements” which that same society provides. This existence, rather than being real freedom, is a mere, inhumane existence, but this is often unreflectively accepted. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer liken such life to that of the Lotus-eaters depicted in Homer’s Odyssey: “it is only an illusion of bliss, a dull aimless vegetating, as impoverished as the life of animals. At best, it would be an absence of the awareness of unhappiness.”[[457]](#footnote-458) Indeed, the absence of unhappiness and the presence of false happiness are both things which Adorno later associates with Kierkegaard’s idea of objective despair.[[458]](#footnote-459)

The very lack of reflection displayed by those in objective despair is the result of a society which is constantly undermining autonomous reflection through the standardisation of individual’s thoughts and behaviours. Describing the shift that has taken place, Adorno and Horkheimer observe: “Since Hamlet, hesitation was for modern people a sign of reflection and humanity.” In administered society by contrast, this reflection is considered “wasted time”:

 individuals receive their tickets ready-made from the powers that be, as consumers receive their automobiles from the sales outlets of factories. Conformity to reality, adaptation to power, are no longer the result of a dialectical process between subject and reality but are produced directly by the cogs and levers of industry.[[459]](#footnote-460)

Equally, as a result of the way in which instrumental knowledge is prioritised and the individual’s existence has been reduced to functionality within the system, people’s intellectual capacities are increasingly limited to solely fulfilling this purpose:

 Thought, stripped down to knowledge, is neutralized, harnessed merely to qualifying its practitioner for specific labor markets and heightening the commodity value of the personality. In this way the self-reflection of the mind, which counteracts paranoia, is disabled. Finally, under the conditions of late capitalism, the half-educated condition has become the objective spirit.[[460]](#footnote-461)

With its emphasis on instrumental knowledge, this “half-educated” condition entails the increasing tendency for individuals’ inability to reflect critically on their objective conditions, still less to be able to conceive of possibilities for social organisation outside of those which currently exist.

This brings us to the final aspect of Adorno’s account of the demise of individuality to which I want to draw attention: the loss of spontaneity and imagination. For Adorno, this is tied to the sense that individuals in administered society find it increasingly difficult to comprehend the possibility of resisting the status quo, and indeed lack the spontaneity required to resist. The key to this diminishment can be traced back the systematic moulding of subjects in administered society to conform and reproduce certain patterns of thought and behaviour. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the main instrument of conformity in this respect is the culture industry. In capitalist modernity, cultural products are standardised and industrialised. The form and content of these products represents and reinforces specific and limited ways of thinking and being, which the individual repeatedly consumes and then reproduces in their own behaviour:

 Culture has always contributed to the subduing of revolutionary as well as of barbaric instincts. Industrial culture does something more. It inculcates the conditions on which implacable life is allowed to be lived at all.[[461]](#footnote-462)

As individuals repeatedly consume the same standardised representations of life as they appear in the culture industry, this will only lead to the suffocation of these same individual’s imagination and spontaneity:

 The withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today need not be traced back to psychological mechanisms. The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple those faculties through their objective makeup.[[462]](#footnote-463)

Even Adorno himself does not claim immunity to these effects: “Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse”.[[463]](#footnote-464) What Adorno describes here is a world in which the culture industry repeats and reinforces a specific type of “individuality”, such that it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to imagine what true individuality and humanity would be. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer see the culture industry itself as providing the false comfort and false happiness which, as I have already noted above, nullifies the possibility of resistance arising within individuals by minimising people’s expectations about their needs and desires:

 the necessity, inherent in the system, of never releasing its grip on the consumer, of not for a moment allowing him or her to suspect that resistance is possible. This principle requires that while all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfilment by the culture industry, they should be so set up in advance that individuals experience themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers, as the culture industry's object.[[464]](#footnote-465)

In this section, I have provided an overview of various ways in which individuals in administered society fail to recognise that they exist in a situation of unfreedom, and even fall into what Adorno calls “objective despair”. I have focused on the ways in which the economic apparatus and the culture industry systematically integrate individuals into prescribed and identical patterns of thinking and acting that conform with capitalist norms. The result of this systematic integration is that increasingly people have lost their capacity for critical, autonomous thinking; spontaneity, and the capacity to imagine anything beyond the mere existence that they currently inhabit. In short, Adorno fears that systematic integration in administered society is leading to the gradual decay of people’s sensibility to the fact that their existence is one of unfreedom and despair.

## 5.2.3 Summary: Adorno on Despair

Throughout §5.2, I have traced the key components of Adorno’s concept of unfreedom, which all individuals are afflicted by, and which derives from their existing in the unfree social whole, rather than from their individual choices. In the most immediate sense, in late-capitalist modernity unfreedom derives from the suffering which capitalism and the laws of exchange perpetuate. Predating this, however, Adorno traces a wider history of domination and violence which culminates in what he calls the administered world, where subjects are systematically integrated into the processes of the social whole. Specifically, administered society distorts and suppresses people’s sense of what it is to be free. The result is a world in which people come to believe that their inhumane existence is representative of freedom. Indeed, many people lack any consciousness of their freedom at all. “Freedom” in administered society means efficient functioning and conformity within the economic and cultural apparatus of the social whole. Within this account, Adorno places great emphasis on the way in which administered society diminishes certain characteristics of individuality, specifically: critical self-reflection, autonomy, spontaneity, and imagination. Adorno underlines that it is these characteristics which play an important role in enabling individuals to recognise their unfreedom and ultimately in keeping open the possibility of being able to resist unfreedom.

## 5.3 Tracing Kierkegaard’s Influence in Adorno’s Despair

So far, I have given an overview of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair and Adorno’s concept of unfreedom. In doing this, I have aimed to build a wider picture of the evidently distinct philosophical projects which both thinkers pursue. At the same time, points of contact between the two thinkers have been prevalent throughout. In what remains of the chapter, I will now try to make sense of the ways in which these accounts overlap and where elements of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair reappear in Adorno’s thought.

## 5.3.1 Humanity in Despair

In this respect, perhaps the best place to start is the fundamental image of humanity in despair which appears in the thought of both Kierkegaard and Adorno. As Tom Whyman notes, it is perhaps not coincidental that Adorno uses the same word for despair (*Verzweiflung*) in the final pages of *Minima Moralia*, as the word for “despair” that appears in German translations of Kierkegaard’s texts cited in *Construction*.[[465]](#footnote-466) Equally, as I pointed out in Chapter Three, in *Construction* Adorno already acknowledges the moment in Kierkegaard’s philosophy where: “In objective despair, in the ontology of hell, Kierkegaard’s philosophy renders the true image of man: shattered, separated and condemned”.[[466]](#footnote-467) Whilst this insight into existence as hell is an unconscious one for Kierkegaard, because he fails to recognise that his inwardness and the accompanying transcendence of existence are ideological fantasies, it is clear that for Adorno, Kierkegaard unconsciously alights upon something crucial in his account of humanity in despair.[[467]](#footnote-468) At a surface level, this is hardly surprising. After all, in SUD, Anti-Climacus portrays a view of humanity where the most common state is one in which individuals are so far in despair that they are not conscious of their despair. Even in the rarest, anomalous cases of those people who come closest to understanding themselves as selves before God, Anti-Climacus insists there is still not one person who does not despair a little. This status quo can ultimately be derived from Kierkegaard’s theological belief in humanity’s fallen condition as the result of original sin. Notably, as part of this wider account of sin and guilt, individuals do not have to have acted wrongly individually in order to be imputed in sin and guilt.[[468]](#footnote-469) Similarly, for Adorno, on quite different terms, every single person can be said to be in despair insofar as they are touched by the evil of the totality: there is no right life in the wrong. This “guilt” and “evil” can be attributed to individuals irrespective of their actions – or indeed whether they do nothing at all.[[469]](#footnote-470) In this way, Adorno claims that original sin has become secularised.

Finally, in the leading claim of his insightful article, Whyman notes a crucial overlap in Kierkegaard and Adorno’s thought which improves the plausibility of the latter’s idea of the holistic character of the “wrong life”. This idea hinges on the distinction between everything in the social world being literally wrong, and everything being wrong “insofar as it is in despair; that is, because it is distorted, because it fails to be aligned with its concept”.[[470]](#footnote-471) What Kierkegaard’s concept of despair and Adorno’s idea of the wrong life share is the sense that individuals (and also, exclusively for Adorno, things within the social whole more generally) are somehow distorted and fail to align with how they *should be*. For example, both Anti-Climacus and Adorno invoke the idea that what appears as “healthy” in distorted existence is in fact a sign of sickness.[[471]](#footnote-472) As Whyman shows, the notion of distortion displayed here is similar: “the ‘healthy’ today really exhibit sickness, because our present notion of health is distorted; because we just don’t know what health is, we lack a coherent conception of healthiness.”[[472]](#footnote-473) For Anti-Climacus, however, there is at least a coherent conception of true health available to us: understanding oneself as a self before God. But this standard is such that realising it consistently is at best reserved for only a few individuals (and even these have not evaded despair entirely throughout their lives). Meanwhile for Adorno, even the articulation of a coherent concept of health, of what “right life” might look like is extremely difficult if not impossible, before we even start to think about attempting its realisation.[[473]](#footnote-474)

What conjoins Kierkegaard and Adorno’s accounts is the shared view that the majority of people are blind to the possibility of their freedom and do not have any consciousness that their ostensibly “healthy” existence is so distorted. Whilst there is clearly a distinction between Adorno and Kierkegaard in terms of the extent to which unfreedom is linked to the overall form of the social whole, for both thinkers, people are severely hindered from realising their true humanity and freedom because they exist in societies which distort this realisation in all of the ways that I note above.

## 5.3.2 The Demise of Individuality

If in *Construction*, Adorno suggests that Kierkegaard unconsciously depicts the true image of humanity as shattered and despairing, in “On Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of Love”, he becomes willing to give Kierkegaard conscious credit for his exposition of the specific elements of despairing humanity that he depicts. Particularly important in this regard is the way in which Adorno indicates the overlap between his and Kierkegaard’s view of the demise of individuality and the characteristics that individuals lose as part of this demise. Although KDOL is primarily concerned with Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* (WOL)and Adorno exclusively cites this text, he correctly understands WOLto be a development of themes found inSUD, including Kierkegaard’s view of a worldly existence in despair.[[474]](#footnote-475)

As I noted above, for Kierkegaard, despair is not socially derived in the same sense that it is for Adorno. Anti-Climacus always holds open the bare existential possibility of freedom, which exists independently from the wider machinations of society. Irrespective of this thin possibility, in SUD Anti-Climacus still evokes a strong sense of a culture in despair. Indeed, he makes clear that many features of individual despair are inculcated and encouraged by the specifically corrosive culture which arises out of secular, capitalist modernity.[[475]](#footnote-476)

In KDOL, Adorno acknowledges Kierkegaard’s awareness of the dialectical relation between the individual in despair and the wider society they exist in. In fact, he actively acknowledges not only this, but that Kierkegaard sees specifically bourgeois capitalist culture blocking the ability of the self to recognise itself as a self before God. For Adorno, Kierkegaard rejects the “bourgeois seriousness of business and competition” and “protests against a world which is determined by barter and gives nothing without an equivalent”.[[476]](#footnote-477) As I showed above in the section on despair inSUD, this is by no means an example of Adorno projecting his own philosophical concerns onto Kierkegaard’s thought.

Where Adorno reserves particular credit for Kierkegaard, however, is in his critique of the demise of individuality:

 Kierkegaard's misanthropy…enables him, like few other writers, to perceive decisive character features of the typical individual of modern society. He belongs to the very few thinkers of his epoch… who were aware of the truly chthonian changes undergone by men, as it were, anthropologically, at the beginning of the modern industrial age: by human behavior and the total setting of human experience.[[477]](#footnote-478)

Here Adorno alludes to the account which Kierkegaard provides in various places across his pseudonymous and self-authored texts of the modern individual’s descent into becoming nothing but an interchangeable and exchangeable “copy, a number, a mass man”.[[478]](#footnote-479) Not only this, but Adorno also pays homage to the way in which Kierkegaard anticipates the loss of certain individual characteristics in modernity, a loss that reaches unprecedented intensity in the administered society of the 20th century:

 Kierkegaard gives an account of a tendency in today's mass society which, during his time, must have been very latent: the substitution of spontaneous thinking by "reflectory" adaptation taking place in connection with modern forms of mass information… [This account] contains something of an inkling of the mutilation of men by the very mechanisms of domination which actually change men into a mass.[[479]](#footnote-480)

As noted above, despite the distinct philosophical concerns motivating their respective projects, both Kierkegaard and Adorno share a sense of the danger attached to a world in which individuals lose their spontaneity, imagination and even their ability to be self-reflective. Adorno acknowledges these aspects in Kierkegaard’s work also. He notes that Kierkegaard’s thought is directed against “the character which is no longer capable of the experience of possibility.”[[480]](#footnote-481) That is to say, against the individual so immersed in their milieu and triviality that they can no longer conceive of possibilities beyond that, such as the possibility of being a self before God. Similarly, he quotes a passage from WOL: “Alas, the age of thinkers seems to be past!”[[481]](#footnote-482) arguing that this “shows Kierkegaard's realization of the abolition of thinking by information and ‘conditioned reflexes’”.[[482]](#footnote-483)

Thus, Adorno is not only drawn to the power of Kierkegaard’s overarching view of a humanity distorted in despair. He is also drawn to the specificities of Kierkegaard’s account of how modern individuals become immersed in the immanence of despair and are left with few tools to rise out this condition. Of course, Adorno thinks Kierkegaard’s account is understandably underdeveloped: after all, these changes were still “very latent”, especially when compared to the stark analysis that Adorno gives of the total systematic integration of subjects in administered society.[[483]](#footnote-484) But still, that Adorno incorporates specific elements of Kierkegaard’s analysis of the demise of individuality into his own thought should not surprise us. Dupré encapsulates the potency of SUD well, ranking it alongside works by other thinkers altogether more noted for their seminal influence on Adorno’s critique of 20th century administered society:

 Kierkegaard correctly intuited despair as the ultimate consequence of the modern attitude…*The Sickness unto Death* must be read as one of the most incisive contributions to a critique of modernity. In this respect it confirms, completes, and anticipates analyses written by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. [[484]](#footnote-485)

## 5.3.3 Objective Despair and False Happiness

It is this same potency which inspires Adorno at various points to invoke and incorporate what he calls Kierkegaard’s concept of “objective despair” into his mature work. The earliest indication that Adorno gives of his interest in this idea is in *Construction*, where he entitles the penultimate section of Chapter Four “Objective Despair”. Adorno explains here that “objective despair” refers to Kierkegaard’s acceptance as “certain” that there is a form of despair which exists “independent of all self knowledge”.[[485]](#footnote-486) That is, where the person in despair is unconscious of their condition. In this state, Adorno writes that because of their lack of consciousness of their condition, the self is powerless and “surrendered to nature”.[[486]](#footnote-487) In fact, the gravity of this situation causes Adorno to relate this “objective despair” to what Anti-Climacus thematises as the outcome of existing in despair: death and becoming one of the living dead; being unable to die.[[487]](#footnote-488)

Objective despair is thus associated with the extremity of despair as it appears in SUD. As ever in *Construction*, Adorno presents this idea in its dialectical complexity. On the one hand, it exemplifies Kierkegaard’s unconscious insight into the true state of humanity and the complexity of humanity’s despair. On the other hand, it also acts as an expression of the truth of Kierkegaard’s overarching philosophical schema for Adorno. The image of objective despair is: “developed not from Christian dogmatics, but directly from the philosophy of existence and its idealistic core”.[[488]](#footnote-489) Well aware of Kierkegaard’s intention, Adorno claims that the images of objective despair reveal not only the truth of the existence of individuals in modernity, but also the outcome for the Kierkegaardian self.

When the idea reappears in Adorno’s mature work, it is presented as an insight into the condition of objective despair that afflicts individuals in modernity. For example, in an essay from his *Notes to Literature*, Adorno associates the idea of light-hearted art with encouraging “people to submit to what is decreed, to comply. This is the form of objective despair.”[[489]](#footnote-490) Similarly, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Adorno speaks of people shouting down their “objective despair” with “noisy optimism”.[[490]](#footnote-491) Here Adorno takes the concept of unconscious despair which he earlier associates with the analysis of despair presented in SUDand incorporates it seamlessly into his own lexicon.

Invariably in Adorno’s usage, unconscious or objective despair is accompanied by two distinct, but related ideas. The first is the idea of the presence of false happiness, which obscures the individual’s sense of their own despair, leading them to be nullified in feeling anything negative about themselves or their surroundings. As I noted above, this is also a characteristic feature of Anti-Climacus’ unconscious despair. The idea that individuals distract themselves from their despair by immersing themselves in busyness and triviality, in making money, in submitting to the ease of conformity with Christendom, is frequently invoked in SUD. This does not escape Adorno’s notice. He remarks in KDOL that Kierkegaard attacks the “false happiness” of those who, on the one hand revel in their success in an unjust hierarchy and, on the other, those who accept the mere existence they inhabit as the true happiness that they deserve.[[491]](#footnote-492)

As the negativist’s counter to this false happiness, Adorno posits the idea of objective happiness, which he characterises as the inverse of Kierkegaard’s objective despair. Refusing the empty illusory “happiness” that administered society offers, objective happiness gestures towards the existence of real happiness, but one which the individual cannot conceive of under current conditions:

 The position of thought toward happiness would be the negation of all false happiness. It postulates, in stark contrast to the all-governing view, the idea of an objectivity of happiness, as Kierkegaard conceived it negatively in his doctrine of objective despair.[[492]](#footnote-493)

Elsewhere, in a radio debate of 1965 with Arnold Gehlen, Adorno again associates the two ideas:

 I have a conception of objective happiness and objective despair, and I would say that, as long as we unburden people…and do not grant them complete responsibility and self-determination, their entire well-being and happiness in this world is a sham.[[493]](#footnote-494)

These references, even down to this last quote which refers to the importance of individual responsibility, give an indication of the extent to which Adorno absorbed his early engagement with Kierkegaard’s concept of despair into his later thinking. It is clear that in its place as part of the wider framework of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair, the idea of unconscious despair fitted well with Adorno’s own view of a distorted and despairing humanity. The idea perfectly encapsulates the state of despair which most people are afflicted by, despite their own failure to recognise this.

Notably, this influence has not always been acknowledged. Fabian Freyenhagen is one of the few scholars who discusses Adorno’s notion of objective despair, specifically in the context of the debate with Gehlen. Freyenhagen’s reference is not only a passing one and describes the link between objective happiness and despair and humanity and inhumanity as “the backbone” of Adorno’s view.[[494]](#footnote-495) Despite the lineage of the idea of objective despair (and its alignment with a concept of what it is to be human, as well as a rejection of the inhumane) in Kierkegaard, Freyenhagen only refers to Adorno building “on elements from Kant’s philosophy”.[[495]](#footnote-496) Whilst it is clear that Adorno was building on Kant’s philosophy – Freyenhagen provides good evidence that he was – this is an example of overlooking Kierkegaard’s place in the constellation of ideas that encapsulate Adorno’s notion of unfreedom. Despite the myriad of influences on Adorno that came before and after Kierkegaard, it was often to Kierkegaard’s concepts and language that Adorno returned in order to enunciate this reality.

## 5.4 Adapting Kierkegaard’s Concept of Despair

As should be clear by now from my exposition of Adorno’s critique provided above, no concept in Kierkegaard can be appropriated by Adorno without being adapted and made fit for his purposes. As Adorno puts it in a quite different context in *Construction*, concepts in Kierkegaard must be liberated “from the subjective dialectic”.[[496]](#footnote-497) By this, he means the process of extracting concepts from their context in Kierkegaard’s overarching schema in order to redeploy them in his own context. In putting Kierkegaard’s concept of despair to work in his critical theory, Adorno needs to perform two manoeuvres: to socialise and secularise Kierkegaard’s despair.[[497]](#footnote-498) I will address these in turn.

## 5.4.1 Socialising Kierkegaard’s Concept of Despair

To redeploy the concept of despair in the context of the totalising account of unfreedom which Adorno proposes, the notion of distortion will need to be spread out across the entirety of existence. Whilst Kierkegaard articulates the idea of a culture in despair and a clear sense of the way in which culture inculcates and encourages despair, in the final analysis, only humans can be in despair insofar as only humans have a spiritual nature. By contrast, as it appears in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, the entire social world (people and things) is distorted by despair. Insofar as things are grasped by consciousness mediately through the concepts and categories of the social whole, they too are distorted by unfreedom. Nonetheless, as Tom Whyman suggests, this extension of the limits of despair as they appear in Kierkegaard is hardly an inconceivable shift. As he observes, whilst social products are not *Geist* in the sense of “minded” in themselves, they do have a spiritual nature insofar as they are a product of *Geist,* appearing as a result of “the long, ongoing process of the interaction between human thought and action with the nature from which it is emergent”. [[498]](#footnote-499) This is what Adorno identifies as each object’s “sedimented history”.[[499]](#footnote-500) Considered in this light, it is much less of a chasm between Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective ideas than one might first assume. For both thinkers, there is a sense of spiritual nature (of humans *and* things for Adorno) which is distorted and in despair.

## 5.4.2 Secularising Kierkegaard’s Concept of Despair

Nonetheless, this does not resolve the significant distinction between what “spiritual” means exactly for Kierkegaard and Adorno respectively. This relates to the second adaption which Adorno must perform in order to appropriate Kierkegaard’s concept of despair – namely, that he must secularise it. I will spend a little more time on this theme, particularly since Adorno’s secularisation of the idea of divine transcendence is a move which pertains to almost every appropriation of aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought which he undertakes.

As we have seen, Kierkegaard does have a notion of what it would mean to cure despair, which is to exist completely as a self before God, or as Anti-Climacus puts it: for the self to rest “transparently in the power that established it.”[[500]](#footnote-501) For Adorno, however, the individual’s obtaining selfhood before God cannot be sufficient in curing despair; rather, this can only occur through the material transformation of the unfree social whole. Equally, as Whyman points out, whilst Adorno does invoke a sense that despair entails something not being “aligned with itself”, there is an underlying question about how we are able to identify distortion without reference to God.[[501]](#footnote-502) In other words, what standard does critique aim towards, without reference to divine transcendence?[[502]](#footnote-503) Indeed, how can Adorno claim, as he does in *Minima Moralia*, “to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” and to view the world “as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light”, without reference to a transcendent beyond?[[503]](#footnote-504)

Peter Gordon moves towards an answer to these questions as part of his impressive reconstruction of Adorno’s idea of “inverse theology”, which he argues Adorno develops through Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin.[[504]](#footnote-505) At this point, it is important to underline that at no stage does Adorno engage in theology as it is conventionally understood. The central reason for this is that Adorno thinks that making an ideal of transcendence beyond nature, as conventional theology does, deflects from what should be our unrestrained focus on the transformation and alleviation of suffering in this world. As Gordon observes, Adorno remains within “the neighborhood of classical Marxism” in seeing transcendencenot as an ideal, but as a reflection of social conditions, as: “the reflex of an existence that suffers from reification, a longing that emerges from damaged conditions”.[[505]](#footnote-506) Crucially, however: “this seems to imply the counterfactual possibility that an undistorted life would not require any such promise.”[[506]](#footnote-507) This latter point, as we shall see, is an important one.

Despite this rejection of conventional theology, Adorno still employs the idea of “theology” albeit of an inverted kind, which he describes in a 1934 letter to Benjamin as “directed against natural and supernatural interpretation alike”.[[507]](#footnote-508) In this context, Adorno mentions Kafka, whom he says, (in words reminiscent of *Minima Moralia*) represents “a photograph of our earthly life from the perspective of a redeemed life”.[[508]](#footnote-509) He hastens to add, however, that the redeemed perspective’s positive content is not depicted; it appears only indirectly “as an edge of black cloth” (presumably referring to the covering which hides the photographer).[[509]](#footnote-510) Again, however, the question remains: how are we to access this perspective from redemption, which brings into focus our earthly existence as hellish and distorted, without affirming the idea of divine transcendence?

In answer to this question, Gordon suggests that Adorno’s interpretation of Kafka gives rise to the possibility of deploying “the bare idea” of a transcendent vantage point from which to criticise our “fallen” and despairing existence, without at the same time affirming the actual existence of such a transcendent beyond.[[510]](#footnote-511) Considering such a possibility, we are better able to make sense of Adorno’s claim that “inverse theology” is directed against both natural *and* supernatural interpretations. That is to say, on the one hand, Adorno refuses to affirm our existence as it is merely given and thereby foreclose the possibility of overcoming the violent context of natural life.[[511]](#footnote-512) On the other hand, however, he also refuses to affirm any notion of a transcendent escape beyond nature, which he views as ideological fantasy.

The particulars of this idea can be filled out further with reference to Adorno’s specific focus in his 1934 letter on Odradek, who is at the centre of Kafka’s short story “The Cares of a Family Man”. In this story, Odradek features as the “creature” who lurks and scurries around the house of the narrator, looking like “a star-shaped spool” and appearing to be made of “old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together”.[[512]](#footnote-513) Crucially, his entire existence, origin and history is ambiguous; it is unclear whether he arises out of nature or is a product of the world of things. Odradek has no ostensible purpose for his existence, and it seems to the narrator as though he might live on forever. The story closes with the narrator’s observation that while Odradek seems to do no harm to anyone, the idea that he “is likely to survive me I find almost painful.”[[513]](#footnote-514) In response to this tale, which Adorno found highly significant, he wrote the following in his aforementioned correspondence with Benjamin:

 Odradek is a sign of distortion - but precisely as such he is also a motif of transcendence…of the reconciliation of the organic and the inorganic, or of the overcoming of death: Odradek ‘lives on’. Expressed in another way, it is only to a life that is perverted in thingly form that an escape from the overall context of nature is promised.[[514]](#footnote-515)

There is a lot here in a short paragraph, but the key idea to focus on is the link between Odradek’s “thingly” material form, along with the fact that he appears to Adorno both as “perverted” “distortion” and, in the same moment, “a motif of transcendence”. In the first place, Adorno’s fascination with this paradoxical combination arises partly as a rebuttal to the ideal of transcendent divinity, which, as I note above, he cannot affirm. As Gordon writes, Adorno understands Odradek precisely as a sign of the collapse of this same ideal “*into the wounded object itself*…such an incarnation, in its suffering and distortion, belies any trust in a perfection beyond itself”.[[515]](#footnote-516)

This is representative of the fact that, as a materialist, Adorno could not affirm any conception of transcendence which could be conceived as detached, indifferent, or in any sense “beyond” our present worldly, material suffering.[[516]](#footnote-517) Particularly after Auschwitz, there could be no suggestion of a transcendence which was not absolutely implicated and distorted, by the suffering in this world.[[517]](#footnote-518) Hence, as “a motif of transcendence” it is important that Odradek appears both distorted and in “thingly form”.[[518]](#footnote-519) Moreover, and above all, Odradek is significant for Adorno because he points towards the only possible means of transcendent reflection on the possibility of a different world – namely, *through* the resolute, unflinching presentation of our present very real, this-worldly social suffering.

This idea brings us back to the materialist conception of transcendence as the reflex of an existence which suffers from damaged conditions. When we reflect upon and find abhorrent real world suffering, particularly the most extreme forms (for example, in reading accounts of the Nazi deathcamps), in the same moment, we can also be struck by a longing coupled with an awareness, of the bare possibility of a world in which these atrocities did not happen.[[519]](#footnote-520) It is only in this kind of tightly bound tension between an unstinting focus on our this-worldly suffering and the possibility of its abolition that any notion of transcendence is permitted for Adorno. In this light, it is possible to make sense of Adorno’s fascination with the creature Odradek, who, in his material distortedness, as Gordon puts it: “*bears witness* *as a photographic negative to a happiness we have been denied*”.[[520]](#footnote-521) Crucially, Odradek performs this function without the false promise of appealing to an illusory beyond.

In closing, I want to return to the question which I asked at the beginning of this section: how can Adorno claim to attempt to take up the standpoint of redemption, without reference to the idea of divine transcendence? The function of “inverse theology” in Adorno’s critical theory is his attempt to create a space for the bare idea of a transcendent, messianic perspective (which is itself never positively explicated) as a means of gaining critical leverage on our present world. Crucially, this transcendent space becomes available through reflection on our this-worldly predicament, in contemplating and experiencing suffering in our fallen, finite world. It is as part of our response to these negative experiences that we are drawn into a desirous consciousness of the bare possibility that the world could have been different. This brings into relief both how distorted things are, and at the same time provides us with a thin, unreachable strand of hope to use as a leverage against what would otherwise be the total immanence of all-consuming despair.[[521]](#footnote-522)

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced the influence of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair on Adorno’s thought. From the overview of Adorno’s account of unfreedom provided above, it should be clear that, as with almost any concept that appears in Adorno’s work, these ideas have a complex hinterland. For Adorno, history can only be understood as a constellation of ideas. Though Adorno might draw on Hegel or Marx, no one individual concept or pair of concepts holds the key.[[522]](#footnote-523) My central claim in this chapter has been that the same “constellation” approach should be adopted when understanding Adorno’s concept of unfreedom. Kierkegaard’s concept of despair forms an important part of this constellation.

In this respect, I follow Tom Whyman’s argument in suggesting that we miss important and valuable aspects of Adorno’s concept of the wrong life when we overlook the concept’s Kierkegaardian heritage.[[523]](#footnote-524) At the same time, I have tried to deepen this account of Adorno’s Kierkegaardian heritage by showing the existence of new and different elements to those which Whyman has already highlighted. Specifically in this regard, I strengthen the historical account of Kierkegaard’s influence, which is only partly relevant to Whyman’s concerns. I have also further traced new motifs that Adorno takes from SUD and incorporates into his mature work, particularly in relation to the demise of individuality and its role in unfreedom, noting especially affirmative remarks made by Adorno in KDOL. Finally, showing the deep rootedness of Adorno’s early engagement with Kierkegaardian despair, I have tracked his appropriation of “objective despair” from its first appearance in *Construction* to *Negative Dialectics*. The overall account I provide here therefore pushes back at interpretations which suggest that Adorno’s engagement with Kierkegaard’s concept of despair can be adequately characterised as mere critique without appropriation.[[524]](#footnote-525) Whilst it is true that Adorno has no desire to maintain Kierkegaard’s concept of despair in terms of its overemphasis on individual humans in despair and its religious context, in this chapter I have shown that this by no means represents the sum of his assessment. Rather, by socialising and secularising Kierkegaard’s concepts, I argue that Adorno incorporates the truth content in Kierkegaard’s despair into his own work.

He does this in various ways. Firstly, Adorno takes on Kierkegaard’s image of a humanity engulfed in despair: each person is touched by despair. More than this, Adorno adopts a model comparable with Kierkegaard’s in explaining how this despair manifests itself. For both thinkers, unfreedom means to be distorted from how something should be. Distortion means when (for Kierkegaard) an individual, or (for Adorno), anything in the social world, fails to align with its concept. Furthermore, for Kierkegaard and Adorno this distortion is so pervasive that most people do not have a coherent sense of what freedom would look like. Equally, this status quo is not at all surprising for Kierkegaard and Adorno. Both thinkers acknowledge the ways in which society helps to inculcate and hinder the realisation of freedom. Both offer cutting criticism of the prevailing (capitalist, consumerist, and conformist) norms and values of their societies. They emphasise the way in which prevailing social and cultural norms distort and obscure people’s sense of what it means to be free and truly human. Instead, these norms direct people into pursuing false – unfree and inhuman – conceptions of “healthy” life, derailing their better interests and blocking them from seeing the reality of their situation. Within this story of unfreedom, a central theme for both Kierkegaard and Adorno is the demise of individuality and the modern tendency towards conformity. Both thinkers track the way in which the demise of specific characteristics in individuals undermine their capacity to acknowledge and ultimately oppose their own unfreedom. Indeed, Adorno carefully articulates and credits Kierkegaard with recognising these tendencies in KDOL. Finally, recognising the power of the presentation of despair which Anti-Climacus presents in SUD, Adorno appropriates his concept of unconscious or “objective” despair, which he incorporates into his mature work, whilst simultaneously acknowledging Kierkegaard’s sense for the false happiness which accompanies it.

# Chapter 6 Emerging from Interiority: The Difference of the Late Kierkegaard

Thus far in this thesis, I have traced Kierkegaard’s influence upon Adorno in four key areas. The first two of these, in Chapter Four, were in relation to the critique of Hegelian identity theory and the development of the idea of negative dialectic. Following this, in Chapter Five, I explored the partly Kierkegaardian heritage of the idea of despair and its connection to our systematic unfreedom in Adorno’s work. At the same time, as part of this discussion, the fourth key area which I examined is the way in which Kierkegaard and Adorno both trace the demise of the individual in their respective accounts, linking this to the latter’s affirmative comments about Kierkegaard’s critical insight to this effect. I concluded by underlining that, for Adorno, ideas which appear in Kierkegaard’s work cannot be appropriated, without being socialised and secularised (particularly before Kierkegaard’s late writings, in the case of socialisation, as we shall see). Peter Gordon’s recent work on inverse theology is particularly helpful in this regard, showing how Adorno, via Benjamin and Kafka, secularises Kierkegaard’s latent potential, putting it to work in the service of critical resistance, directed against this-worldly material conditions.

Now, in this chapter and the next, I aim to provide a new in-depth account of Adorno’s affinity with the critical resistance that he discerned, specifically, in Kierkegaard’s late writings. As with the approach I have taken already in this thesis, my account will follow parallel tracks, both historical and philosophical. From the historical perspective, drawing on KOM, his final essay on Kierkegaard, I will show that for Adorno it was not just Kierkegaard *in general* who he found most affinity with, but specifically the *late* Kierkegaard, who took on the society of Danish Christendom in a series of direct, polemical attacks. Accordingly, I will show, unlike many aspects of his interpretation of Kierkegaard’s thought, Adorno’s reading of the late Kierkegaard accords much more strongly with the texts, as well as with the view of much of the contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship (even if he is still wont to emphasise certain elements of continuity and difference too strongly). The relevance and importance of the late Kierkegaard for Adorno, I argue, is grounded especially in the manner of Kierkegaard’s protest. Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard occupies a position which those who wish to resist today must also take up. Namely, as an individual who recognises their relative powerlessness to change things, who is unable to involve themselves in affirming collective resistance and prescription for action, but at the same time, refuses to give up and withdraw completely from the world and the accompanying possibility of its transformation.

In proposing the philosophical element of my argument, I draw out the ways in which these similarities lead Kierkegaard and Adorno to a remarkably similar position in their approach to protesting and resisting against the respective societies that they oppose. In particular, I outline the ways in which, so grave was their view of their respective historical situations, Kierkegaard and Adorno both conceive of their principal task: not as one of realising a positive conception of society, but of adopting in practice a defensive approach which aims to reach, through negativity, a certain baseline. Both thinkers, as I show, aim in this endeavour towards the cultivation of certain cognitive and non-cognitive responses in people. Critical in this approach, I suggest, is their shared attention on not merely informing people, but actually cultivating in others the capacity to think and experience for themselves. Whilst not all of the continuities and affinities that I discuss here can be traced back to explicit remarks made by Adorno in relation to the late Kierkegaard, a number of them can be, and all are implicitly consistent with the reading of Kierkegaard that Adorno gives in KOM. Together, what I outline here is the idea of practice as comportment, which I argue is the defining feature both of the late Kierkegaard’s attack upon Christendom and Adorno’s praxis of resistance. It is this shared approach to the problem of protest and resistance which best encapsulates why Adorno took the late Kierkegaard to be a model of resistance, viewing him as one of the few figures who remains relevant to the unique challenge of resistance in our own time.

## 6.1 Two Endings: Kierkegaard and Adorno

## 6.1.1 Kierkegaard: The Attack Upon Christendom

In the final two years of his life, Kierkegaard’s writings took a radical turn. Where before, he had criticised Danish Christendom indirectly, now the tenor and tone of his critique underwent a drastic change. In his own words, he spoke “much more decisively, unreservedly, truly, without, however, thereby implying that what I said earlier was untrue”.[[525]](#footnote-526) Above and beyond the years of rising incredulity and righteous anger, the event that had proved the decisive catalyst for Kierkegaard’s ire was the death of Bishop Mynster. Mynster, who for Kierkegaard represented the physical embodiment of institutional Christianity had posthumously been memorialised as a “truth witness”, one following in the tradition of the Apostles. This association had been so offensive to Kierkegaard, that when combined with the overwhelming hypocrisy and apathy that he perceived in every part of the Danish Church, it motivated him to launch his “Attack Upon Christendom”, a series of polemical articles written between 1854 and September 1855.[[526]](#footnote-527) Amongst these, the most satirical and cutting were a collection of pamphlets written under the title “Øjeblikket” or “The Moment/Instant”. Upon completion of the last of these, Kierkegaard would collapse in the street, dying a few months later after a short period of hospitalisation.

Central to Kierkegaard’s critique was his view that Christianity in Denmark had lost its radical edge, becoming a model of conformity, leniency, and mildness. Far from emphasising the qualitative distinction between the divine and human reality, Kierkegaard’s view, now expressed more strongly than ever before, was that the church actively contributed to the collapse of such difference. That is to say, institutional Christianity had made it altogether easier for individuals to convince themselves of their closeness to God, even if they had themselves not experienced any of the suffering and struggle which Kierkegaard saw as the mark of genuine Christianity. The task of becoming a Christian seemed to him to have diminished to the point that it now meant nothing at all. Kierkegaard’s assessment of the deep-rooted, widespread character of this malaise was so extreme in his late writings that it has been argued that they represent a total departure from his earlier authorship. They seem uniquely abrasive in their criticism of both sociality and finitude, as well as being so ascetic and individualistic that they can appear incompatible with the present possibility of establishing an empirical Christian community.[[527]](#footnote-528) Whether or not the late writings represent a total break with Kierkegaard’s earlier authorship, they do unquestionably constitute a recognition on his part that the subtler, pseudonymous indirect method was no longer sufficient in challenging the gravity of the situation.[[528]](#footnote-529) Kierkegaard’s assessment was of a “Christian” society so mired in despair that, for there to be any hope of undermining it, only a full-frontal, direct and offensive critique could be appropriate. Only this approach would stand a chance, however small, of unsettling individuals from the spiritual slumber that the status quo represented.

## 6.1.2 Adorno: Quietist and Resigned?

Just over a hundred years later, in a very different context, Theodor Adorno was, by contrast, being attacked for his *lack* of radicality and for his failure to intervene in public life. In Adorno’s case, this criticism came from the German left-wing student movement of the 1960s. While Adorno had been a great intellectual inspiration to that movement, as early as 1964, he had already been accused of exhibiting a disparity between his own radical theory and the practical action which he had taken.[[529]](#footnote-530) Whilst Adorno might advocate for the ruthless and all-encompassing critique of the status quo in theory, his failure to act in the political and public sphere had in effect left that same status quo entirely unchanged. From the perspective of the student movement, Adorno had utterly failed in following through on the practical consequences of his theory. As a result, he was a proponent of political quietism and, moreover, one resigned to the powers that be and to the fate of the world.

Unsurprisingly, Adorno did not allow these accusations to go unaddressed. There are three texts which might be described as focal points to his response. The first, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” was unpublished before his death but could well have been prompted by correspondence with Herbert Marcuse on the problem of theory and practice, with the question of student movement protests in the background.[[530]](#footnote-531) The latter two, “Resignation” and “Critique” were among the final pieces he would compose, originally appearing as radio lectures in the first half of 1969. In them, Adorno accuses his opponents of a tendency to cut off critique and reflection at the point at which it is most necessary. Rather than reflecting and critiquing, Adorno suggests that activists fall into impulsive, unreflective “pseudo-action”. This kind of action, he suggests, fails to properly consider the realistic chances of its success nor the implications of these interventions in a systematically unfree society. In truth, Adorno concludes, it is they who are not radical enough, and who in truth are resigned to living within a world within the constraints of the status quo. Exhausted and depressed by the course of these disputes, which famously culminated in the disruption of his lectures by protestors, Adorno died of a heart attack whilst on holiday in August 1969.[[531]](#footnote-532)

## 6.2 Connecting Adorno and The Late Kierkegaard

At first glance, it might appear as though these two accounts have little to do with one another. They may even appear contradictory. After all, the end of Kierkegaard’s life was indisputably marked by an *increase* in the intensity of his protest and a new willingness to intervene directly in the public sphere in his criticism of Danish Christendom. By contrast, at least in the eyes of his critics, the final years of Adorno’s life were defined by his reticence to intervene against the status quo when the historical moment demanded it. Over the next two chapters, however, I will argue that there is in fact much that intertwines these two approaches. Specifically, as I have already suggested, I will argue that the late Kierkegaard’s protest against Christendom and Adorno’s broadly non-prescriptive praxis of resistance (which he most famously defends at the end of his life in opposing the student movement) share profound affinities.

The plan for this chapter will therefore be as follows. I begin by stating the initial case for Adorno’s view that the polemical writings of the late Kierkegaard represent a turning point in which Kierkegaard emerges out of interiority, moving “from the doctrine of existence to intervention”.[[532]](#footnote-533) Specifically, I show how on Adorno’s reading, the late Kierkegaard became increasingly radical in his view of the world’s lovelessness, achieving a new level of intensity in his opposition to the world, such that these late writings represent a break in his previous authorship. Most significantly for Adorno, Kierkegaard develops a newfound awareness of the extent to which the objective organisation of society, what Kierkegaard called “externalities”, systematically inhibit individuals in achieving the inwardness required for the practice of Christian love to be realised. This view is concomitant with much of the contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship, who agree that Kierkegaard’s newfound focus on externals represents a crucial discontinuity in Kierkegaard’s late writings, as distinct from his earlier authorship. Finally, I suggest that when Kierkegaard undertakes this direct critique, any accompanying resistance cannot be pursued via the means of conventional politics or collective action but is restricted principally to individuals. This perspective, which I argue that Adorno shares in his general approach to resistance, gives rise to the discussion with which I conclude the chapter, referring to what I have coined Adorno’s Gordian knot of resistance. This is the idea that individuals must both recognise their objective powerlessness and the limits of their situation, without allowing this awareness to stupefy them into total inaction and/or indifference to the world. Having established the initial case for Adorno’s admiration for the late Kierkegaard, as well as what protest and resistance does *not* entail for both thinkers, in Chapter Seven, I then turn to outlining what the crucial continuities and affinities between their approaches are.

## 6.2.1 Introducing Adorno’s Assessment of the Late Kierkegaard

As I suggest in my introduction to this chapter, the basis for a connection between Adorno and the late Kierkegaard does not arrive from nowhere. In 1963, just a few short years before the height of his clash with the student movement, Adorno wrote the essay “Kierkegaard Once More” (KOM). It would subsequently be published in 1966 as a postscript to the third edition of *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, the book he had written in his youth. In KOM, Adorno makes a number of interesting and underexamined remarks in relation to Kierkegaard. Many of these remarks, as I have argued in earlier chapters, already appear *in nuce* in *Construction* itself. Not only this, but, as I have equally already suggested, in this later work Adorno was altogether clearer, more assured in his own philosophical voice, and also more purposeful in underlining the dialectical truth *and* untruth in Kierkegaard’s thought. One aspect of this newly assured approach which I have only touched on briefly so far is with respect to Kierkegaard’s late writings. Specifically, Adorno’s conclusion to KOM, which reaches hitherto unprecedented enthusiasm in its reflection on the late Kierkegaard’s critical interventions in opposing the status quo of his day.

In *Construction*, the basis of this conclusion is already foreshadowed. There, Adorno clearly tracks what he would later call the “Kierkegaardian curve”, namely, his account of Kierkegaard’s late radicalisation which culminated in his Attack Upon Christendom, the point at which “his dialectic makes its way out of a closed immanence”.[[533]](#footnote-534) In the late writings, Adorno comments, Kierkegaard “absorbs the social condition” and notes that “his attack takes him far enough to allow him to see the socio-economic bases” of Christendom.[[534]](#footnote-535) Consequently:

 [t]here is enough materialist explosive present in the “Instant”, and the either/or of inwardness must, once shaken by the impact of the subsistent, reverse as fundamentally into its antithesis as Kierkegaard asserts the thesis.[[535]](#footnote-536)

Adorno’s point here is that despite inwardness being the dominant theme in Kierkegaard’s thought, and despite this generally leading him to exclude proper consideration of the importance of the external world and the material, socio-economic processes that define it, the late writings of the “Instant” are different. This is because in launching a direct attack on the institutions of Danish Christendom, Kierkegaard cannot but help be confronted by these realities, and is thereby forced to acknowledge their importance. It is as part of this critique, therefore, that Kierkegaard recognises “the distress of incipient high-capitalism.”[[536]](#footnote-537)

While this reveals something of Adorno’s affinity with Kierkegaard’s late writings, this revelation of their affinity reaches an altogether different dimension in KOM. This is above all in the fact that Adorno now seems content to admit that Kierkegaard consciously asserts both the thesis of inwardness alongside the anti-thesis of criticism of “the existing”. Beginning with a familiar nod towards what Adorno considers Kierkegaard’s predominantly conservative intentions (which he associates with his inwardness), Adorno goes on to comment on the force of the late writings with an enthusiasm that strays into admiration:

 His outré conservatism, which in the end did not deter him from speaking dryly of what exists instead of what grows beyond it and from damning the existing, thereby gains an unexpected dimension. Because in a purely, inexorably self-justifying liberalism he caught sight more of the misery that it causes its victims than of the progress it uses to console them about it, he would sooner sympathize with the condemned than with the victors, the more powerful battalions of world history.”[[537]](#footnote-538)

Placing Kierkegaard in the pantheon of great critics, Adorno writes: “[h]e might as well be called Nietzsche, or Karl Kraus, or something similar.”[[538]](#footnote-539) Finally, Adorno concludes KOM by summarising that final period of Kierkegaard’s life in the following striking terms:

 In determinate negation Kierkegaard, according to his own language, emerged from interiority. If as totality and system, the whole was to him the absolute deception, then he took on the whole in which he himself was stuck just like everyone else. That is exemplary of him. Ever since he collapsed in the street, nothing more modestly spiritual would any longer suffice: he has potentiated the Pascalian *On ne doit plus dormir*. The Kierkegaardian curve is the converse of the Brechtian Yea-sayer, whom the collective wants to cheat into believing that assent above all is important to learn. After Kierkegaard there can no longer be friendship with the world, because by affirming the world as it is, it eternalizes the bad in it and precludes it from becoming what would be loved. Someone around to see Karl Kraus expel, through his pure words, Imre Bekessy from Vienna in 1925, still experienced something of the concrete violence of what in Kierkegaard appears so abstractly and in such a monomaniacal form: the power of powerlessness.[[539]](#footnote-540)

Clearly, these passages contain a remarkable amount of insight into Adorno’s assessment of Kierkegaard’s late interventions, including the polemical writings of the final period of his life. Given this, with continued reference to KOM, I will use what remains of the next two chapters to thematically explore the affinities between the two approaches of Adorno and the late Kierkegaard with respect to intervention. In doing this, I aim to show that Adorno came to see the late Kierkegaard’s critical interventions against Christendom as anticipating and incorporating crucial insights which subsequently inform his own approach to the very different task of critical intervention in late-capitalist modernity.

## 6.3 Adorno and the Late Kierkegaard: (The Need for) Resistance and its Limitations

It is only possible to understand why Adorno had a particular affinity with the late Kierkegaard by first articulating the underlying radical changes that the former thought the latter had undergone in his late period. There are a number of layers to this, but I will begin this task by identifying the central ways in which Adorno thought that Kierkegaard had grown ever more extreme in his view about the way in which his own historical situation had got *worse*. This is important, because the radicality of Kierkegaard’s judgement about his historical situation subsequently informs the nature of his response to it. As I shall argue, both the radicality of the late Kierkegaard’s view of his historical situation and his response to it both have a great deal in common with Adorno’s own approach to intervention and resistance.

## 6.3.1 Kierkegaard, Adorno and the Possibility of Love

The central and most important transformation which Adorno thinks the late Kierkegaard undergoes relates to his view about the correlation between how a society is organised and individual’s capacity within that society to act lovingly to others. In short, Adorno’s view is that prior to his late writings, even if he is critical in an abstract, general sense of “worldliness”, Kierkegaard ultimately thinks that the organisation of society poses no substantive obstacle to the individual’s capacity to practice the Christian commandment of love of neighbour. By contrast, in his late writings, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard underwent a radical change. Specifically, Kierkegaard concludes that the organisation of the society (Danish Christendom) in which he lived activelydetracts from and obstructs individuals in their realisation and practice of the ideal of radical, Christian love. The consequence of this conclusion is that Kierkegaard arrives at the view that actively opposing this state of affairs is an integral part of living Christianly.

In order to understand Adorno’s account of Kierkegaard’s development in coming to see the organisation of society as an “obstacle” to the practice of radical Christian love, we must first return to the basis of Adorno’s central critique of Kierkegaard. This is encapsulated in the idea that Kierkegaard excludes the objective, social and material world from his thought. As Adorno puts it: Kierkegaard’s “insistence on inwardness actually leaves the world to the devil.”[[540]](#footnote-541) For Adorno, one of the consequences of Kierkegaard’s inwardness is that it leads him to fail to consider critically the adverse effects of the social whole and the socio-economic processes that define that whole on individuals. More specifically, Adorno’s charge is that Kierkegaard has an unjustified confidence that, through his emphasis on inwardness, individuals can shelter themselves from these effects.

It is this conclusion that forms the basis of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s notion of Christian love of neighbour:

 the concept of the ‘neighbor,’ the foundation of Kierkegaard’s ethics, is a fiction. The concept is valid only in a society of direct human relations, from which Kierkegaard well knows that he is separated.[[541]](#footnote-542)

Adorno’s point here is that Kierkegaard can only continue with the idea of an ethics of love of neighbour by naively overlooking all of those objective phenomena which systematically obstruct the viability of such relations. In short, for Adorno it is not just Kierkegaard who is separated from a “society of direct human relations”, but each and every person who finds themselves systematically alienated from the other. Adorno explains this as follows: “what can loving one's neighbor mean, if one can neither help him nor interfere with a setting of the world which makes such help impossible?”[[542]](#footnote-543) On Adorno’s analysis, relations between people have become abstract and instrumental as a result of their deformation and definition by the capitalist logic of exchange. In these conditions, loving one’s neighbour for anything more than an anomalous spontaneous moment becomes impossible. Not only this, but Kierkegaard’s ethics of neighbour-love fails to provide the tools to challenge this structural arrangement, nor sees the need to. The reason for this, in Adorno’s view, is that because of his emphasis on inwardness, Kierkegaard ultimately does not see the objective organisation of society as an obstacle to the practice of Christian love. On Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard’s conception of neighbour love, like his thought more generally, is abstract and “objectless”, insofar as its success is not ultimately measured by its realisation in the objective, external world.[[543]](#footnote-544)

Whilst Adorno insists that, in the majority of his authorship, Kierkegaard does not view the objective world and its organisation as an obstacle to Christian love, he doesacknowledge that Kierkegaard “is insatiable in condemning the world, worldliness, and its limited worldly aims.”[[544]](#footnote-545) Similarly, as I have acknowledged at various points throughout this thesis, Adorno credits Kierkegaard for his incisive eye as a critic, discerning various negative developments in individuals as the result of changes in socio-economic currents. Adorno’s criticism, however, is that vis à vis the practice of radical Christian love and indeed more generally, Kierkegaard never demands that these external conditions be changed. Again, in Adorno’s view, the reason for this is that for Kierkegaard the world and its various ailments do not feature as substantive obstacles in disabling the individuals’ ability to practice what is an inward Christian love.[[545]](#footnote-546) As a result, Adorno writes, Kierkegaard’s “ascetic rigorousness is carried through only abstractly” and is “soft-pedaled as soon as it could lead to serious conflicts with the ‘existing’ condemned by Kierkegaard *in abstracto*.”[[546]](#footnote-547)

How then does Kierkegaard’s view change, according to Adorno, in his late writings? The contrast could not be more pronounced. In KOM, Adorno writes: “No one says that Kierkegaard’s hatred of what exists is too abstract. One only need properly imagine Martensen in order to know whom and what it goes against.”[[547]](#footnote-548) The Kierkegaard of the late writings “is disgusted by the prevailing awful state of things”; this disgust leads him to speak “dryly of what exists” and he thereby condemns “the existing”.[[548]](#footnote-549) On Adorno’s reading, it is only the late Kierkegaard who comes to realise the power of objective social functions in diminishing and subverting the individual’s capacity for radical Christian love. Before this, Adorno claims that Kierkegaard fails to come to terms with the way in which the structures and institutions of the objective world, as well as those who uphold them, really obstructed such love.[[549]](#footnote-550) The result of Kierkegaard’s late recognition of this fact was that the active identification of and opposition to these external obstacles became an integral part of his vision of what it meant to live Christianly.

Whilst the Kierkegaard scholarship is generally extremely sceptical of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s inwardness (and often justifiably so), Adorno’s account of Kierkegaard’s late development is seemingly far more consistent with contemporary reconstructions. Specifically, a number of scholars affirm the idea that Kierkegaard intensifies his view that the world poses a significant obstacle to the practice of Christian love *and* that the intensification of this view leads him to a more direct critique of that world. In his summary of the scholarly assessment of Kierkegaard’s shift in the late writings, Lee C. Barrett writes that Kierkegaard’s “sensitivity to the antithesis of Christianity’s love and the world’s lovelessness increased over the years”, concluding with the view that there was a “fundamental valuational dichotomy” between the world and Christianity which rendered them incompatible with one another.[[550]](#footnote-551) In short, the reality for the late Kierkegaard was that the world was “implacably hostile to Christian love”.[[551]](#footnote-552)

Again, however, it could be argued that all this ultimately amounts to is the same opposition to an abstract notion of worldliness that Adorno condemns in Kierkegaard’s earlier work. Can this really denote a shift in Kierkegaard’s view about the way in which the objective organisation of the world actively obstructs the realisation and practice of radical Christian love? David R. Law suggests as much in arguing that as late as 1851 (three years prior to his late polemics), Kierkegaard resists any attempts to reform the established Church. The reason for this, Law suggests, is that such change would “address only unessential externalities and distract from the real issue, namely the individual's inward appropriation of Christianity.”[[552]](#footnote-553) By contrast, in the late writings, Kierkegaard’s assessment of the effect of such “externalities” on the individual’s inward appropriation of Christianity (and thus ultimately of their ability to practise radical Christian love) markedly changes. Specifically, in the late writings he comments that as result of the “illusion that Christianity and the state have been fused together, that the state installs 1000 officeholders…people do not find out what Christianity is and that they are not Christians”.[[553]](#footnote-554) Before going on to note that “this illusion is different from…[one] related to people's conceptions, individuals' entrapment in the delusion that they are Christians.”[[554]](#footnote-555) On the contrary, this illusion must be dealt with in a different way, because it concerns an objective, *structural* impediment to the realisation of genuine Christian love. As such, “the state, after all, has the power to remove it. Thus…the task is to work along the lines of getting the state to remove this illusion.”[[555]](#footnote-556)

Clearly, when Kierkgaard writes about the state’s impediment to the realisation and practice of radical Christian love, he is not principally thinking along the lines of materialist analysis of the capitalist logic of exchange and the reification of human relations which Adorno posits as the reason for the impossibility of love in late-capitalist modernity.[[556]](#footnote-557) Rather, Kierkegaard identifies a number of “externalities” which he views as culpable for obstructing the radical practice of Christian love, all of them related in some way to the life of the established church in its alliance with the state.[[557]](#footnote-558) Amongst them, the idea of a Christian “career” as a clergyman, the bestowal of worldly honours, a “family”, “respectable wages” and the institutions of baptism, confirmation and marriage.[[558]](#footnote-559) What all of these aspects of the organisation of a nominally “Christian” society share is the way in which they institutionalise and normalise a mode of living which blinds people to – indeed, directly contradicts – the radical, suffering love which the imitation of Christ demands. The more entrenched this worldview becomes, the more individuals become incapable of love, captive and entrapped within its loveless, self-interested logic.[[559]](#footnote-560)

Whilst Kierkegaard’s late writings and his critique of these culpable “externalities” do not arise from a materialist analysis, at the same time, they are not developed in isolation from the socio-economic context of the time. As Law suggests, Kierkegaard’s late polemic was motivated in part by his view that the Church had uncritically absorbed an account of selfhood which derived not from the New Testament, but from the prevailing secular ideologies, specifically bourgeois liberalism and early capitalism.[[560]](#footnote-561) The liberal, capitalist notion of the self was not rooted in the ideal of suffering, self-giving love of God and neighbour, but in serving its own self-interest, as in competition with others. As Law points out, for Kierkegaard, the increasing prevalence of this individualist conception “increasingly pushes God out of the public domain” in favour of other priorities.[[561]](#footnote-562) Indeed, the “externalities” which Kierkegaard condemns reflect his opposition to the self-interested, bourgeois priorities which the Church had centred its practice around. In this respect, Adorno is not wrong in noting approvingly that Kierkegaard’s late polemics are motivated by a “disdain for stable, middle-class life”.[[562]](#footnote-563)

In this section I have traced what I take to be the key turning point in Kierkegaard’s writings for Adorno. I began by noting that, on Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard relies on an excessively inward conception of love. As such, he overlooks the way in which capitalist modernity systematically and structurally restricts the possibility of truly, direct “loving” human relations. Adorno’s complaint, in short, is that even if Kierkegaard perceives negative socio-economic developments, he does not view them as a substantive obstacle to the practice of Christian love. Crucially, in Kierkegaard’s late writings, this changes. Whilst Kierkegaard does not undertake the same level of socio-economic analysis as Adorno, he does undertake a shift in his late writings in his view that the organisation of society does not pose a substantive threat to the realisation of loving relations.[[563]](#footnote-564) in this way, as Adorno puts it, Kierkegaard “emerged from interiority”.[[564]](#footnote-565) This shift informs Kierkegaard’s subsequent opposition to the established Church and specifically the “externalites”, which, as Timothy Dalrymple puts it, constitute an active working “against the means of divine love in the world.”[[565]](#footnote-566) As I noted at the end, Kierkegaard’s opposition to the predominance of a logic of self-interest within the state church was not conducted in isolation from the socio-economic context of the time. Rather, Kierkegaard had a keen awareness of the bourgeois liberal and capitalist currents which had infiltrated the Church and led it to systematically undermine its true mission of leading individuals to self-giving, sacrificial love of God and neighbour.

## 6.3.2 Kierkegaard, Adorno and the Collective

So far in this chapter, I have explained how the late Kierkegaard came to a radicalised position in opposing to the status quo of his day. Specifically, I have argued that he arrived at a previously unprecedented position about the organisation of the (nominally Christian) state and the extent to which it structurally obstructs individuals from inwardly appropriating Christianity, and thus being able to realise the ideal of Christian love in the world. More generally, I have suggested that the late Kierkegaard intensified in his view not just about the world’s lovelessness, but its active hostility to radical, self-giving Christian love.

Consistent with this new emphasis on the world’s hostility to Christianity, Kierkegaard becomes ever more reluctant to affirm the (at the very least *present*) possibility of Christian community in the world.[[566]](#footnote-567) Bruce Kirmmse has argued, for example, that the late Kierkegaard’s final view was that “true Christianity is too unsocial for the concept of congregation”.[[567]](#footnote-568) While this may go too far in seemingly definitively dismissing the possibility of Christian community for Kierkegaard, it does give an indication of the extent to which, at this late stage, Kierkegaard perceived the limitations of collective endeavours.[[568]](#footnote-569) The strength of this view was of course greatly informed by Kierkegaard’s historical experience of the present “Christian” community, not only in its failure to realise genuine Christianity, but its active obstruction of this realisation.

Indeed, for Kierkegaard, Danish Christendom’s collective ethos had not just been an incidental factor in the erosion of Christianity, but instrumental in helping to bring it about. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is that the particularly procedural, institutional character of Christendom encouraged individuals to associate being Christian with the simple matter of “identification” with the official Christian community. For example, one of the roots of Kierkegaard’s criticism of the “external” sacraments of baptism and confirmation above was that they entail an empty, formalised recognition of participation within the life of the Church community. To this end, Kierkegaard writes that the history of Christendom can be characterised as being one in which “everything is stamped ‘community, society - I am a true Christian’”.[[569]](#footnote-570)

The conception of Christianity as the mere act of formal identification with the community is the most visible manifestation of the deeper, underlying problem for Kierkegaard. This is namely the idea that the overemphasis on collective identity will tend to encourage conformity amongst those within that collective. Thus, Kierkegaard writes of the “thoughtless crowd of people” and the tendency in Christendom for people to run “with the herd” and to be “like the others”.[[570]](#footnote-571) To become a Christian on the basis of becoming like the others directly contradicts what Kierkegaard deemed imperative to Christianity: its passionate, inward subjective appropriation. Thinking of Christianity in this collective sense reduces it to a safe, certain, and steady enterprise, one which precludes the individual’s passionate relationship with God.[[571]](#footnote-572) In short, the fear and trembling, the uncertainty and risk that true Christianity should entail. The steady life of Christianity in the crowd precludes not only the individual’s passionate relationship with God, but also negates the individual’s passion which is required in order to practice radical, counter-cultural self-giving Christian love. As Barrett puts it, for Kierkegaard, “any immersion of the individual in a corporate entity would make authentic love impossible… love involves self-giving, and self-giving requires that there is a self in place to give”.[[572]](#footnote-573)All of these points inform Kierkegaard’s (at times hyperbolic) opposition to the idea of empirical Christian community.[[573]](#footnote-574) Certainly, these insights into Kierkegaard’s scepticism towards the “crowd” and its deleterious effects on the individual’s ability to inwardly appropriate Christianity confirm that there is little sense in which Kierkegaard would have seen collective opposition to Christendom as the way out of the impasse.

Without by any means subscribing uncritically to the inward and at times asocial rhetoric which Kierkegaard propounds in his late writings, Kierkegaard’s attitude towards “the crowd” and his scepticism towards the possibility of rehabilitation through the collective certainly has a relevance and appeal to the challenges which Adorno faced. Indeed, Adorno says as much in KOM when he writes that the basis for Kierkegaard’s power “in his afterlife” and the truth of his “resistance” is that:

 a different position than that of the particular, which he occupied, does not primarily present itself to those who protest today; and every immediate identification with the collective is instantly the untruth to which the position of the particular unfailingly and primally becomes.[[574]](#footnote-575)

The crucial idea that Adorno appeals to here is that Kierkegaard’s thought is relevant contemporaneously because it anticipates (what Adorno takes to be) one of the central impediments facing those who wish to resist and protest against the status quo today. Namely, that in terms of the effort to undermine the unfree social whole, there are fundamental limitations to collective endeavours. As the passage above suggests, Adorno, like Kierkegaard, has an instinctive suspicion of the way in which an overidentification with collectives inhibits our subjectivity and leads us to uncritical conformity.

Much in the same spirit as Adorno perceives the limits of an ethics of love in a society defined by reification, Adorno thinks that the same relations foreclose the healthy social bonds that are constitutive of successful collective action between groups. In order to illustrate some of Adorno’s worries in this direction, I will consider a few examples. In the first place, Adorno indicates that organisations will always tend towards expanding and outgrowing the original purpose of their existence, often in unhealthy ways.[[575]](#footnote-576) The reason for this is that Adorno thinks in an unfree society, the function and purpose of collectives (for example, in aiming for the emancipation of society) will be manipulated to reflect the distorted norms of that society.

For example, as a result of the pervasive grip of the logic of exchange on social relations, group membership and the symbols that groups display have become signals for the socio-economic status of their members, rather than anything else. As Deborah Cook observes, for Adorno, “class struggle” becomes “the struggle for social prestige which is tied directly to exchange”.[[576]](#footnote-577) In the same vein of misdirection, even when done with the best of intentions, Adorno links the individual desire to identify with the collective as an appeasement of their own narcissism.[[577]](#footnote-578) In short, individuals recognise their own “real powerlessness” to change things, and in the face of this “narcissistic injury” seek “a compensatory identification with the power and the glory of the collective”.[[578]](#footnote-579) On this reading, when individuals identify with collectives in order to compensate for their narcissistic deficit, they consequently develop an “aversion to [critical] introspection” about the aforementioned collective.[[579]](#footnote-580) In different ways, Adorno thereby suggests that individuals end up having a vested interest in conformity with the collective, even against what would be their better judgement. Under current conditions, therefore, Adorno is deeply critical of collectives as a vehicle for social change. Above all, this is because the “consolation that thinking improves in the context of collective action”, is “deceptive”.[[580]](#footnote-581) In fact, Adorno thinks that the degradation of individuality, spontaneity, autonomy, and critical thought, all in themselves imperative to keeping alive the prospect of resistance, is only furthered by a dependency on collective action.

This being so, Adorno thinks it therefore works in the interests of administered society to “channel” individuals who might otherwise be inclined to other forms of non-conformity and resistance into what he calls collective “pseudo-activities”.[[581]](#footnote-582) In fact, this is the central criticism which he levels at the student movement, in response to their claim that he is quietist and resigned. Specifically, Adorno suggests in riposte that the collective action which they demand he support and participate in, which is outwardly radical, spontaneous and non-conformist, in reality amounts to a form displacement activity. For Adorno, this principally practically oriented protest is effectively a collective exercise in avoiding confronting the reality of our systematic unfreedom, that revolutionary action is blocked and that we are presently powerlessness to change this situation. In this context, Adorno thinks that such protest becomes action for the sake of action, for the sake of keeping busy and feeling as though one is being active, rather than action which has any hope of achieving concrete change.[[582]](#footnote-583) Given that such activity poses no real threat to the status quo, Adorno for this reason suggests that the agents of the administered world can direct people into this form of “resistance”. All this considered, Adorno concludes, in a sentence directed originally in opposition to Bertolt Brecht: “the sentence that a thousand eyes see more than two is a lie and the exact expression of the fetishism of collectivity and organisation, which to pierce is the highest obligation of social insight today”.[[583]](#footnote-584) The consequence of this conclusion is that there are currently no forms of non-repressive collective agency available to the individual who wishes to resist the status quo.

Whilst this is the case insofar as Adorno viewed the situation in his own historical moment, care should be taken in emphasising that Kierkegaard and Adorno’s ultimate position on the role of collectives is not an identical one. Where the late Kierkegaard can at times be seen to suggest that genuine Christianity would not require empirical form of community or collective, this is clearly not the case for Adorno and his conception (so far as he has one) about how freedom will be realised. Adorno’s critical theory ultimately aims at the radical and wholesale transformation of humanity as a whole. This transformation would entail a material and social realisation of freedom, something which he thinks can only occur through a collective endeavour of some description.[[584]](#footnote-585)

In this section, I have explored the shared scepticism with which the late Kierkegaard and Adorno regarded the present possibility of collectives (of various different stripes). I began by noting that, in his late writings, Kierkegaard became more radicalised in his view of the present barriers to the possibility of Christian community, a radicalisation which he arrives at alongside his wider, general sense of the world’s increasing hostility to Christian love. Whilst there is evidence that he did not rule out the future possibility of Christian community, it seems clear that, at least in his view about how Christendom should be resisted, any such resistance should arise through individuals, rather than through anything which could be described as collective or communal action. Following this, I then turned to Adorno’s correspondingly critical view about the prospects of collective resistance in a systematically unfree society. Viewing collective action principally as a coping mechanism for our alienated condition and individual powerlessness, Adorno thinks that such action will invariably ultimately lead to conformist tendencies and the stultification of critical thought. Placed together, I suggested that, for Adorno, what was crucially significant about the late Kierkegaard’s view of the unavailability of collective action was its anticipation of the central problem facing those wishing to resist late-capitalist modernity today.

## 6.3.3 Kierkegaard and Adorno: Confronting Powerlessness

What I have argued in this chapter, then, is that for Adorno, there were initially two key ideas which informed the relevance of the late Kierkegaard’s work in the context of resistance. The first is that resistance is necessary. On Adorno’s reading, unlike his earlier work, it is only in his late writings that Kierkegaard moved “from the doctrine of existence to intervention”.[[585]](#footnote-586) That is to say, that he saw the need for a critique of “externals” as true obstacles to inwardness and, consequently, to the practice of Christian self-sacrificial love. The second is that Kierkegaard shared a sense (often for very different reasons) with Adorno of the inherent limitations in this resistance which would have to be approached. Namely, without being able to appeal to the idea of the “crowd” or the possibility of collective action.

Hence Kierkegaard and Adorno agree both in terms of their shared sense that the social whole needed to be overturned, that the world was inhospitably loveless, and above all, that the individual who finds themselves critical of this arrangement experiences severe limitations in terms of their ability to change this situation. This shared predicament, and the late Kierkegaard’s response to it, is ultimately what makes the latter’s writing most relevant to the individual who wishes to resist late-capitalist modernity. Before moving on in the next chapter to examine how exactly both thinkers proceed in their resistance, it is worth briefly examining a little further exactly how Kierkegaard’s late writings fit into Adorno’s account of what he sees as the Gordian knot of resistance in a systematically unfree world.

Fabian Freyenhagen introduces this dilemma by writing that for Adorno, in the political sphere, “the various options open to us individually and collectively are...problematic.”[[586]](#footnote-587) We have already seen how this is true in the case of collective action. Indirectly, we have also already considered many of Adorno’s reasons for seeing individual resistance as problematic. For example, in discussing the problem with collective action, we saw that Adorno thinks that such action is unavailable to us, because it requires free and autonomous individuals. But this obviously also has an impact on individual resistance. In short, because of the systematic context of unfreedom, for Adorno, there is no individual who can be considered free and autonomous. Moreover, even if there *were* a few limited free and autonomous individuals, their right conduct in the private sphere could not be considered an appropriate response to the scale of the *political* crisis: “the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics”.[[587]](#footnote-588) As we saw in his criticism of Kierkegaard’s ethics of love of neighbour, for Adorno, individual conduct will not be enough to bring about the transformation of the social world.

But what about the interventions of individuals in the public sphere? After all, whilst there are no individuals who are free and autonomous, Adorno does hold out for the possibility that “a stroke of undeserved luck has kept the mental composition of some individuals not quite adjusted to the prevailing norms”.[[588]](#footnote-589) He also insists that in this situation “it is up to these individuals to make the moral and…representative effort to say what most of those for whom they say it cannot see”.[[589]](#footnote-590) Whilst this approach, as we shall see, forms a significant part of Adorno’s conception of resistance, even here, Adorno is crucially conscious of its limitations. Simply put, for an individual to avoid adjustment to prevailing norms in this way, they would have to live a marginalised life, being in some way exempt or excluded from the practices that integrate most people into the social world.[[590]](#footnote-591) In one sense, this marginalised life is extremely important, since Adorno thinks it may preserve elements of autonomy and critical thought necessary for resistance. Nonetheless, such marginalisation also entails that such individuals find themselves (as would any individual wanting to push back against the status quo) *lacking* in the power to change things. Developing a version of this criticism in KOM, Adorno writes that “[a]gainst the absolute being-for-another of the commodity world, the absolute being-for itself of the Kierkegaardian individual is conceived.”[[591]](#footnote-592) The point that Adorno makes here is that whilst the late Kierkegaard as a “being-for itself” stands in an insightful, critical opposition to “the commodity world”, Kierkegaard still remains a product of it, insofar as he is isolated, powerless and for himself; absolutely unreconciled with others in the social world. In living out this opposition marginalised and alienated from society, Kierkegaard still reflects, ironically and unavoidably, the alienated world which he opposes. As Adorno goes on to write of the “Kierkegaardian individual”: “In its perverted form, this is the imprint of the perverted form of the whole”.[[592]](#footnote-593)

In summary, therefore, individual as well as collective resistance can be seen to be problematic. These are the fundaments of the double-bind which Adorno thinks that those who wish to resist the social whole face today: “The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us.”[[593]](#footnote-594) So how does Adorno come to see the late Kierkegaard’s relevance and appeal in attempting to untie this Gordian knot? How does he help in confronting the tensions between individual and collective, powerlessness and power; the choice between living an “aesthetic life due to weakness” or “the bestiality of the involved”?[[594]](#footnote-595)

In what remains of this thesis, I will attempt to answer this question. Suffice it to say, however, that what I have shown so far in this chapter is that, for Adorno, the first moment of truth in the late Kierkegaard is his rare, valuable awareness of the obstacles which the critical individual faces today. Specifically in this regard, Adorno is of course thinking of Kierkegaard’s refusal to invoke the idea of the collective in his clarion call for change. Despite the limitations of the individual, however, Adorno ultimately concludes that this must be the starting point for resistance. As Freyenhagen puts it, for Adorno: “the hope for a better social world finds its current refuge not so much in politics and collective action, but in the…existence of the individual”.[[595]](#footnote-596) In ploughing a lonely furrow in his resistance to the status quo, Adorno thinks that the late Kierkegaard prefigures and anticipates the central available path for resistance in late capitalist modernity. As we shall see, any of the subsequent relevance of the late Kierkegaard for Adorno can be traced back to the former’s anticipation, in this powerless situation, of the need for a “the turn to the subject” as the context of resistance in an unfree world.[[596]](#footnote-597)

## 6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter overall, I introduced and established the basis for the connection between the late Kierkegaard and Adorno in relation to intervention. I began by noting that the end of the lives of both thinkers was marked by questions relating to practical intervention and resistance. Whilst this was ultimately the result of historical circumstance, I argued that a closer connection between the two endings can be found. The basis for making this connection came in the form of an extensive passage from KOM, where Adorno expresses his admiration for the Kierkegaard, who, in his late writings moved “from the doctrine of existence to intervention”.[[597]](#footnote-598) The rest of the chapter was then dedicated to showing the crucial transformation that Adorno thinks Kierkegaard undergoes in this late movement. Above all in this respect, I first argued that it is only the late Kierkegaard, for Adorno, who emerges from interiority. The reason for this emergence, on Adorno’s reading, is that it is only in the late writings that Kierkegaard takes seriously the “external” obstacles of the organisation of the state in the threat that this poses to the individual’s ability to inwardly appropriate Christianity and thus also practice self-sacrificial Christian love. It is only this realisation which leads Kierkegaard to take seriously the need for external intervention and resistance to Christendom. Following this, I then explored the late Kierkegaard’s radicalisation in his view with respect to the present possibility of Christian community, as a result of his view of the hostility of the world to Christian love. Arising out of this reading, I concluded that whilst Kierkegaard did not rule out the possibility of Christian community, he judged that resistance to the Christian state would only come about through individuals, rather than through some form or collective action or alternative empirical community. The significance of this for Adorno is not so much that he thought this was a new, anti-collective turn in the late writings. As we have seen, Adorno already thought Kierkegaard was fundamentally opposed to any notion of communal or collective forms of life. However, what Adorno *did* find newly significant and relevant to his own concerns was Kierkegaard’s attempt to apply this insight to the context of intervention and resistance. In attempting to resist the status quo of his day, but at the same time recognising that collective or communal forms of resistance were not available to him, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard anticipates the central problem facing those who wish to resist in late-capitalist modernity. It is this above all which makes Kierkegaard’s late writings relevant to Adorno’s own concerns about intervention. Having established this initial case for Adorno’s admiration for the late Kierkegaard, as well as what protest and resistance does *not* entail for both thinkers, in the next chapter, I will now turn to outlining in detail what the continuities and affinities between their approaches are.

# Chapter 7 Breaking Out of Immanence: Resistance and Intervention in Kierkegaard and Adorno

In the previous chapter, I made the initial case for establishing a connection between the late Kierkegaard and Adorno in relation to intervention. The central evidence for this came in the form of the extensive concluding passage from KOM in which Adorno outlines his admiration for the late Kierkegaard. In this passage, Adorno indicates the manner in which the late Kierkegaard “emerged from interiority”, undertaking a campaign of critique and intervention, opposing the organisation of Danish Christendom, the society in which he lived. Having established this initial connection, I then moved on to show the various ways in which the late Kierkegaard and Adorno arrive at the problem of intervention from surprisingly similar perspectives. Continuing this line of enquiry in this chapter, I will now simultaneously develop the historical and philosophical case for continuities between Kierkegaard and Adorno in relation to the specifics of their respective approaches to critical interventions as a form of resistance.

In doing so, I begin this chapter by demonstrating that in the respective historical situations that Kierkegaard and Adorno found themselves, the task of resistance was not, in the first place, one of positively building towards freedom (however construed). Rather, I will argue that for both, the first task was one of taking a step back. For Kierkegaard, it was about negatively creating the conditions which would even allow for the possible introduction of Christianity. For Adorno, resistance was primarily directed towards negatively creating the conditions for a society which would resist the worst evil, as represented by Auschwitz. Having established the basis for this fundamental continuity, in the main body of the chapter, I then explore the key components and continuities between Kierkegaard’s late protest against Christendom and Adorno’s praxis of resistance. Specifically, focusing on the *modus operandi* which drew Adorno to Kierkegaard’s late writings, I show how both writers try to cultivate similar cognitive and non-cognitive responses in those who engage with their writings and activities. Crucially, this entails bringing about resistant responses not merely by informing others about the intolerable character of their society but also inculcating in them the ability to think and experience for themselves. Drawing these two approaches together, I show how the late Kierkegaard retains a persuasive truth, power and attraction for Adorno because he anticipates and performs the task of resistance as an individual, even despite his limitations. This remains relevant because it is this same position of the individual that those who wish to resist in late-capitalist modernity inhabit, as a result of the societal context of systematic unfreedom. In concluding, I propose that this shared approach can be described as practical resistance through comportment, which in turn, I argue, represents Adorno’s attempt to untie the Gordian knot of resistance that I introduced at the end of Chapter Six.

## 7.1 The Basis of Resistance: The Refusal to Affirm

In attempting to build a detailed picture of Adorno’s affinity with the late Kierkegaard on the question of resistance and intervention, perhaps the most obvious place to start is with Adorno’s explicit admiration for what he saw as Kierkegaard’s resolute negativity. Specifically in this respect, I refer to the idea that whilst the late Kierkegaard was resolutely critical of the whole edifice which the society of his day comprised, at the same time, he refused to offer any alternative positive programme for reform. As I shall show, this is a stance which Adorno praises in Kierkegaard’s late writings, and which is reflected in his own approach to resistance and intervention.

Just as I argued in the previous chapter, while Adorno clearly thought that there was a demonstrable requirement for change and for resistance to the status quo, he was far from happy to assent to simply *any* form of resistance. His scepticism about the possibilities for collective action, linked to his view about our systematic unfreedom, lead him to conclude that there are only certain modes of resistance presently available to us. Accordingly, Adorno thinks that the critical individual who conducts a critique of the status quo should not feel compelled to be constructive, nor feel it necessary to propose an alternative to what is being criticised. For Adorno, as I shall argue, it is important to preserve the space for a form of resistance in which the individual is able to live in tension: persisting in a negative, critical stance towards the social whole, without necessarily producing a concrete programme of action. This resolutely critical stance forms the cornerstone of his conception of resistance and intervention in an unfree world. Crucially for our purposes, on Adorno’s reading, it is this stance which also underpins Kierkegaard’s resistance in his late writings.

Adorno’s view of an affinity between his own unrelenting negative stance in relation to resistance and the late Kierkegaard’s protest against Christendom can be shown by comparing two key passages from his writing. The first passage, which forms part of the conclusion to KOM, concerns the late Kierkegaard’s “curve” towards unrelenting criticism of the social whole:

 The Kierkegaardian curve is the converse of the Brechtian Yea-sayer, whom the collective wants to cheat into believing that assent above all is important to learn. After Kierkegaard there can no longer be friendship with the world, because by affirming the world as it is, it eternalizes the bad in it and precludes it from becoming what would be loved.[[598]](#footnote-599)

Three years later, in Negative Dialectics, Adorno would publish the following, unusually candid remark about what having (a touch of) freedom might look like in a systematically unfree society:

 A free man would only be one who need not bow to any alternatives, and under existing circumstances there is a touch of freedom in refusing to accept the alternatives. Freedom means to criticize and change situations, not to confirm them by deciding within their coercive structure. Brecht, in defiance of his official creed, helped this insight along after a talk with students, when he followed up his doctrinal collectivistic piece on ‘Yes-sayer’ with the deviating ‘Naysayer.’[[599]](#footnote-600)

As Adorno suggests in the second passage, one of the foremost challenges for the critical individual today is to avoid the ever-present danger of attempting to anticipate a practical way forward, as an alternative to the way in which things are presently organised. The reason for this relates again to Adorno’s view about systematic unfreedom. In a systematically unfree context, any such anticipation will always be tinged by the prevailing norms and the “coercive structure” in which they are presented. Instead, the only thing that remains available for the critical individual is the attempt to “criticise and change situations” *without* also giving assent to any particular course of action.[[600]](#footnote-601)

In relating these two passages above we can see that, on Adorno’s reading, the late Kierkegaard proves to be an instructive model for those who resist today. Like the “Naysayer” who appears in Bertolt Brecht’s writing as the converse of his earlier character the “Yea-sayer”, Kierkegaard refuses to affirm the customary (and false) alternatives presented to him.[[601]](#footnote-602) Instead, in his late writings, Kierkegaard maintains a posture of absolute negativity towards the status quo. He remains relentlessly critical (refusing to “affirm” the world), demanding change and yet at the same time not also becoming lured into proposing his own programme for action.

## 7.1.1 The Late Kierkegaard: Clearing the Ground and Cleansing of the Temple

Importantly, this is not just an instance of Adorno’s projecting his philosophical interests on Kierkegaard’s work. On the contrary, there is evidence for Adorno’s reading of the late Kierkegaard in the texts and in the interpretation of more contemporary scholarship. Throughout the late writings, whilst Kierkegaard is vehemently critical of the established order, going to great lengths to expound the various ways that it falls short of the Christian ideal, he never offers any positive programme for how Danish society might be re-organised in order to realise this ideal. As already implied in his opposition to collectives, Kierkegaard also never proposes establishing a group or party that would replace the present order that he opposes.

The central reason for this is as part of Kierkegaard’s effort to aid the emphasis in showing how far Christendom is from realising the ideal of New Testament Christianity. In refusing to depict in any detail how this ideal would be realised, Kierkegaard endeavours to express the complete otherness of genuine Christianity in comparison with society’s present understanding of “Christianity”. For the late Kierkegaard, there should be no sense that we are able to use the resources and norms of Christendom as a guide or jumping off point for a transition to genuine Christianity. Rather, any such transition would be entirely discontinuous with what is currently understood as “Christianity”. As Kierkegaard writes: “The Christianity of the New Testament does not exist at all. Here there is nothing to reform”.[[602]](#footnote-603)

Accordingly, Kierkegaard thinks that one of the many adverse tendencies in Christendom is the popular pre-occupation with the idea of re-structuring and reforming the state. Such tinkering fails to get to the heart of the problem, as Kierkegaard indicates in *Judge for Yourself!*: “the evil in our time is… [the] penchant for reforming, this flirting with wanting to reform… instead of fear and trembling and much spiritual trial”.[[603]](#footnote-604) His point is that “reforming” and proposing an alternative course of action using the resources that the status quo provides us with is a distraction from the scale of the task at hand. Above all, it acts as a diversion in bringing people to consciousness of the radicality of their own need to change.[[604]](#footnote-605) In short, what is needed is not the reform of the state, but a questioning of everything which the state represents, including its very existence.[[605]](#footnote-606) Only by questioning the entire edifice, rather than gesturing towards reform, Kierkegaard thinks, will people be led to turn in on themselves and truly reflect on the shaky ground which their putative faith stands.

As David R. Law argues, this marks a clear disparity with Kierkegaard’s earlier authorship, which strived in encouraging the individual to aim “to accommodate one’s actuality ever more closely to ideality”.[[606]](#footnote-607) For the late Kierkegaard, such an endeavour is all too timid, remaining tied to the unloving, unchristian way of living which constitutes “normality” in Christendom. Rather, what is required (Law again) is the radical “act of clearing the ground or cleansing the temple”, a process which Kierkegaard ultimately hopes will lead so-called Christians to “confess how distant their actuality is from the Christian ideality”.[[607]](#footnote-608) In this insistence on the primacy of the negative act of cleansing, uncompromising criticism, of a total re-orientation of perspective in our relation and distance from the status quo, we can understand how Adorno comes to view Kierkegaard as someone who refuses to “accept alternatives” within what he perceives to be a “coercive structure”.[[608]](#footnote-609)

Rather, as Kierkegaard himself writes, he is “kept pure in the separateness of singleness.”[[609]](#footnote-610) This “purity” is not maintained out of some misguided self-satisfaction, but with an awareness that were he not to insist first on the primacy of the negative, and instead propose or align himself with a positive programme, this programme would be quickly neutralised and absorbed into the status quo.[[610]](#footnote-611) By instead, as Adorno puts it, expressing “the distance” from the given status quo, the potency of Kierkegaard’s attack and the otherness of the ideal of Christianity are preserved.[[611]](#footnote-612) This latter point is especially important, since above all what Kierkegaard aims to do in the late writings is to “crank ideality up to the highest possible level” and therefore avoid “weakening the presentation of the ideal” in its full force.[[612]](#footnote-613) This analysis of the aim of the late writings by David R. Law correlates with Adorno’s own assessment that the late Kierkegaard realised that “by affirming the world as it is, it eternalizes the bad in it and precludes it from becoming what would be loved”.[[613]](#footnote-614)

## 7.1.2 Adorno: Negation and Non-Conformity

As is probably already evident from Adorno’s affirmative comments in relation to the late Kierkegaard’s approach, like Kierkegaard, Adorno also largely refrains from recommending any particular course of action, let alone proposing a comprehensive programme. Like Kierkegaard, this is because he recognises that the scale of the task demands not prescription, but a similarly negative and defensive approach to resistance.

Within the specificities of their respective philosophies and contexts, there are of course not insignificant differences between Kierkegaard and Adorno. For example, Adorno’s refusal to prescribe a course of action, derives from his view of the modern context of systematic unfreedom as an all-pervasive one. In this total context, Adorno thinks that individuals are systematically integrated into ways of thinking and being which reinforce their unfreedom. As we have already seen at some length, Adorno thinks that all individuals are unfree, and insufficiently autonomous or self-reflective. Equally, people are conditioned and constrained into making choices which are contrary to their (individual and collective) better interests. Adorno points, for example, to instances where we might act in ways which we perceive to be resisting or protesting against our own freedom, but where in fact we are inadvertently reproducing this unfreedom in our actions, or, at the very least, worthlessly expending energy on ‘paths’ to freedom that are blocked.[[614]](#footnote-615) In short, in view of Adorno’s understanding of the scale of the task and particularly of the systematic character of our unfreedom: “no shortcut helps, and what does help is deeply obscured.”[[615]](#footnote-616)

Along these lines, Adorno is therefore deeply suspicious of what he perceives to be the widespread tendency towards finding positive, practical “shortcuts”. On a general social level, Adorno writes: “The word positive… [has] been made into a magic charm”.[[616]](#footnote-617) In this vein, there is a predilection towards a practical “*do-it-yourself*” attitude, reinforcing the idea in individuals that “everything depends on them”.[[617]](#footnote-618) Whilst these attitudes are regrettable in and of themselves, Adorno thinks they become outright dangerous when applied in the explicitly political sphere in the present situation. Hence, Adorno was deeply critical of what he saw as a universal and impulsive demand for positive, practical recommendations in charting a way forward. Referring to criticisms of his own writings for their failure to recommend what should be done instead, Adorno writes that:

  One continually finds the word critique, if it is tolerated at all, accompanied by the word constructive. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is being criticized. [[618]](#footnote-619)

As Adorno sees it, this demand for positive proposals for action comes from both sides: the revolutionaries of the student movement who criticise him for political quietism and the reformists.[[619]](#footnote-620) He rejects both approaches for their shared and misguided focus “pragmatically on the next step”, which he views as a manifestation of the general tendency towards a primacy for action rather than reflection.[[620]](#footnote-621) Whether in the form of violent direct action or in advocating for gradual reform through traditional means, both approaches, Adorno claims, ultimately mirror each other in their failure to contend with the systematic context of unfreedom. They both fail to recognise, in other words, that “what does help is deeply obscured”.[[621]](#footnote-622) Rather, both instead impulsively persist (albeit in wildly different ways) in pursuing the alternative courses of action immediately presented to them. Adorno’s point is that both of these ways forward are immediately present within the context of a coercive system which has complicated and obscured the real path to resistance and, ultimately, to freedom.

By contrast, as I have already underlined in Adorno’s remark from *Negative Dialectics* above: “there is a touch of freedom in refusing to accept the alternatives” rather than in choosing “within their coercive structure”.[[622]](#footnote-623) In other words, what Adorno aims to preserve here is the individual’s right to criticise, to remain critical, and – conscious of the systematically unfree state in which we live – to refuse to affirm any particular course of action.

This approach, framed in Adorno’s own context and language, has evident similarities with the late Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the principal task (and until further notice, sole task) of clearing the ground. There is at least one important difference, which is that the late Kierkegaard is willing to utter that his own aim to bring about a clearing of the ground in Christendom might ultimately be the precursor to the introduction of Christianity. Adorno’s resistance, meanwhile, is directed much more modestly towards the cultivation of a society in which the repetition of Auschwitz would not occur. Nonetheless (as I argue in further detail in §7.6.1), we should not underestimate just how distant the realisation of the introduction of Christianity was for the late Kierkegaard.[[623]](#footnote-624) Overall, both thinkers still ultimately adopt an overwhelmingly defensive approach, grounded in their shared view of societies which have lost their way and individuals who have utterly failed to come to terms with scale of the task ahead of them. Both Kierkegaard and Adorno think, as a bare minimum, that without a total reorientation of perspective, achieved through the work of the negative, people simply will not be capable of the overhaul that would be required for substantive change.

Given this defensive approach, Adorno warns against any overzealousness in prescribing certain forms of action; he considers both prescription and conventional political action, in the main, an exercise in futility. Instead, he insists on the importance of exercising our reflective, negating critical capacities, without at the same time necessarily affirming a course or a programme for action. That is to say, we should “focus upon the power of resistance to all things imposed on us”.[[624]](#footnote-625) Ultimately, this is because: “Little else remains to us, other than the power to reflect on these matters and to oppose them from the outset, notwithstanding our consciousness of our impotence.”[[625]](#footnote-626)

## 7.2 Resistance in Kierkegaard and Adorno: Criticism, Intervention and Cultivation

Given this situation, what resources are left for us, then? On the analysis that I have traced thus far, we are unable to invoke the idea of collective action or affirm the kind of popular movements that have been conventionally associated with advancing the vanguard of resistance. As individuals, both the late Kierkegaard and Adorno are unwilling to recommend any substantial, positive programme for action. Equally, as we have just seen, Adorno insists on keeping a constant vigilance in relation to our own “impotence” and powerlessness. In such circumstances, one must ask: what is to be done?

In what remains of this chapter, I will attempt to answer this question, exploring the key components and continuities between Kierkegaard’s late protest against Christendom and Adorno’s praxis of resistance in turn. Specifically, I will focus on the *modus operandi* which drew Adorno to the late Kierkegaard, showing how both writers try to cultivate similar cognitive and non-cognitive responses in those who engage with their writings and activities. Crucially, this entails bringing about these resistant responses not merely by informing others about the intolerable character of a society, but by actually inculcating the ability to think and experience this for themselves. By drawing both approaches together, I show how the late Kierkegaard retains a persuasive truth, power and attraction for Adorno because he anticipates and performs the task of resisting as an individual. This remains relevant for Adorno because it is this same position of the individual that those who wish to resist today are forced into, because of the context of systematic unfreedom. Adorno thinks that this context places profound limitations on the possibilities for resistance.

## 7.3 Kierkegaard’s Protest Against Christendom

So far, I have established that Kierkegaard’s resistance to the status quo was, in the first place, a *negative* act. That is to say, in his late writings Kierkegaard refuses to offer any substantial positive programme for a reconceptualised Christian society, insisting that what is needed instead in this historical moment is an act of cleansing and clearing the ground. In this section, I will now establish what exactly this effort to work against Christendom actually entails. Specifically, I will show the ways in which Kierkegaard attempts to cultivate certain cognitive and non-cognitive responses within his readers. In this way, he hopes to be able to prepare the conditions – the ground – such that it might be possible to work towards the introduction of Christianity.

Kierkegaard provides the most concise description of what the task of clearing the ground entails when he writes that: “If Christianity is to be introduced here, then *first and foremost* the illusion [that all are Christians] must be removed…this is the first thing that must be done; the illusion must go. This is the task”. [[626]](#footnote-627) This passage effectively summarises the late Kierkegaard’s sense that we cannot even consider the introduction of “positive” Christianity without first undertaking and fulfilling the negative work of removing certain obstacles and illusions that presently prevent individuals from arriving at it. Kierkegaard comes to regard this as a “double task”, the two parts of which cannot be isolated from one another. Firstly, and above all, it is necessaryto change “people's conceptions, individuals' entrapment in the delusion that they are Christians”.[[627]](#footnote-628) But secondly, as we have seen already, this attempt at changing people’s conceptions will ultimately prove a limited exercise if there is not also a push for a change in the “purely external” organisation of the state.[[628]](#footnote-629) This is because these delusive individual conceptions “hang together with an enormously huge…[external] illusion that Christianity and the state have been fused together”.[[629]](#footnote-630) The second element of the task, therefore, “is to work along the lines of getting the state to remove this illusion”.[[630]](#footnote-631) Writing in a journal entry of 1854, Kierkegaard suggests that whilst both parts of the task will ultimately be necessary if genuine Christianity is to be achieved, his principal focus is on the first part, on changing individuals’ conceptions: “I understand it as my task…to extricate the Christian concepts from the illusions in which we have entangled them, and in so doing work toward an awakening…that is urgently needed in Denmark”.[[631]](#footnote-632) So, how does Kierkegaard hope to contribute to achieving this in his late writings?

## 7.3.1 Cognitive Cultivation in the Late Kierkegaard

In the first place, his writings are aimed at cognitive, conceptual clarification.[[632]](#footnote-633) In his own words, he produces writings which aim “to clear up people’s concepts, to instruct them”.[[633]](#footnote-634) When Kierkegaard talks about clearing up concepts in this way, he specifically means people’s conception of Christianity, which in Christendom has become utterly unmoored from the New Testament ideal of Christianity. Indeed, as we have seen repeatedly, Kierkegaard’s view is that in Christendom the ideal in general has been greatly obscured. Taking inspiration from Socrates and from the notion of the Socratic gadfly, Kierkegaard relentlessly endeavours to expose the common understanding of “Christianity” in Christendom and the cavernous distance it has from New Testament Christianity.[[634]](#footnote-635)

In this endeavour, Kierkegaard uses a range of tools. Some aspects of his late writings are more indirect than others, attempting to engage his readers in lines of questioning that he hopes will lead them independently to the conclusion that Christendom fails in every way to realise the ideal that supposedly underpins it. In this respect, Kierkegaard follows Socrates most closely, using “the gadfly sting of irony”.[[635]](#footnote-636) By questioning the conventional understanding of Christianity in Christendom in this interrogative mode, Kierkegaard aims to disrupt what it is taken to be accepted knowledge by his readers. Indeed, the very act of questioning this conventional understanding, of not immediately affirming it, is *already* an act of resistance.[[636]](#footnote-637) This is because such questioning is already unconventional enough that it disrupts the familiarity and immediacy of commonly accepted ideas and opinions in Christendom. To this end, anticipating his late writings, Kierkegaard writes in a letter of 1848: “Oh, that there might be such a gadfly in the confused struggle of our times who with Socratic *ataraxie* would directly oppose the ‘whither’ of modern haste”.[[637]](#footnote-638) In and of itself, the presence of questioning and introspection that Kierkegaard confronts his readers with in the late writings already opposes the overwhelming “haste” to affirm the ideas and activities which underpin the status quo.

Of course, Kierkegaard’s work in attempting to lead people to cognitive, conceptual clarification in the late writings does not operate merely in the ironic, interrogative, and introspective mode of questioning. As Hong and Hong note in their introduction to the texts, the late writings are marked by a “steadily intensified bluntness of critique that many readers found repulsive”.[[638]](#footnote-639) That is to say, with previously unprecedented directness, Kierkegaard engages not just in the questioning of conventional views in Christendom but also launches an active opposition to their proliferation and to the negative effects which they have on individuals’ ability to become genuinely Christian. As David Law puts it, the late Kierkegaard sharpens “Socratic irony into polemics.”[[639]](#footnote-640) In this way, Kierkegaard also seeks more directly to draw attention and polemically condemn with “scorn” and “sarcasm”, the contradiction between what is purported to be Christianity in Christendom and ideal Christianity.[[640]](#footnote-641) Even this more direct approach, Hong and Hong note, “is an adaptation of the method of the thinker he admired most, Socrates, who thrust away, repelled, in order that the learner might be independent of him in confronting the issue”.[[641]](#footnote-642) The point here is that the force, offensiveness and negativity of Kierkegaard’s polemics, like the more neutral mode of Socratic questioning, is intended to disrupt the conventional, familiar patterns of thinking of his reader. Kierkegaard hopes that this in turn will lead them to their own introspection about the state of the “Christian” society and, crucially, their individual role in conforming to it. Even if the reader does not find themselves agreeing with each and every one of Kierkegaard’s claims in their uncompromising, (even at times hyperbolic) radicality they may well still fall short and end up in a position which finds the continuation of Christendom in its current form intolerable. Using a range of tools, therefore, Kierkegaard tries to help to unveil to his readers the systematic illusion posited by Christendom, that the ideal of Christianity is identical with the actuality of the “Christian” state.

Whilst Kierkegaard’s late writings overwhelmingly avoid offering any concrete recommendations, there is one area in which he deviates from his refusal to prescribe specific action. That is, in his recommendation that “the state…make all the proclamation of Christianity a private practice”.[[642]](#footnote-643) Were this to be implemented, Kierkegaard hope is that it would act as a crucial catalyst in disrupting the “love of comfort that prefers to remain in the old routine” and help bring about an “intensification” in the earnestness of the clergy (earnestness entails reflection on the demand of the ideal of Christianity and, as I shall show, a newly passionate relation to it).[[643]](#footnote-644) The obvious problem that follows from this is how, without a collective identity, people would communicate the need for spiritual awareness to others. Indeed, Kierkegaard brings attention to the potential for this problem, since he is aware that this intensification will not work for everyone: “when people are made free religiously, one can have plenty of trouble in making their spiritual need clear to them”.[[644]](#footnote-645) Whilst Kierkegaard does not offer an explicit answer to this, David Law convincingly makes the case that this implies the need “for individuals whose task it is to prompt such awareness in their fellow human beings”.[[645]](#footnote-646) That is to say, the imperative for those who are conscious of the radicality of the Christian ideal would be to act as gadflies, confronting other individuals with this ideal in their thoughts and action.

## 7.3.2 Non-Cognitive Cultivation in the Late Kierkegaard

As I have just noted, Kierkegaard’s resistance is not limited only to eliciting a cognitive, conceptual response in his readers. Rather, in the late writings he alsoaims to provoke a variety of non-cognitive responses in his readers, often in combination with the aforementioned cognitive ones. The principal evidence for this is in Kierkegaard’s stated aim “to stir” his readers up “by means of the ideals, through pathos to bring them into an impassioned state, to rouse them up”.[[646]](#footnote-647) In the first place, this “impassioned state” might not necessarily imply an affinity with Kierkegaard’s polemic. It might instead initially entail offence on the part of the reader and perhaps even disgust at Kierkegaard for the blunt, extreme nature of his attack. Nonetheless, such an impassioned reaction would already be indicative of the effectiveness of Kierkegaard’s polemic, since the strength of this repulsion would already represent a departure from the kind of familiar patterns of thinking which otherwise prevail in the public sphere. Moreover, as Hong and Hong note above, part of Kierkegaard’s aim is to repel his readers in order that they might be led to engage more passionately with, as well as reflect on, the questions and critical claims that he poses. Kierkegaard hopes that a passionate, albeit perhaps initially adverse reaction to the extremity of his polemics might lead ultimately to engagement with the possibility of their truth (and thus the possibility that Christianity entails something altogether more radical than Christendom provides).[[647]](#footnote-648)

Above all of course, in his principal aim of clearing the ground in Christendom, (by inculcating critical responses in relation to its failure to realise the ideals of New Testament Christianity), Kierkegaard ultimately hopes to cultivate feelings of passionate repulsion towards the hypocrisy of the Christian state. When he writes that he wishes to “stir” “by means of ideals”, he means for example showing beyond refutation the way in which the clergy act in self-serving ways utterly contrary to the New Testament ideal, despite themselves claiming to be heirs to the Apostles. His representation of the unvarnished truth of the situation and indeed his wider criticisms of the self-indulgent, self-interested motivations of individuals and institutions within Christendom he hopes will evoke the full range of negative emotions that will “impassion” and “rouse” individuals to oppose Christendom as no longer tolerable. Whilst Kierkegaard ultimately hopes that it will be these latter kinds of passionate responses, his late writings evoking *any* passionate response is in and of itself an aim of Kierkegaard’s resistance to the status quo. Developing this thought, however, evoking passionate responses in general is also an important aim of Kierkegaard’s late writings because he thinks that Christendom cannot not ultimately be deposed, and Christianity introduced, without passionate individuals. As Lee C. Barrett writes: “The culture and the church have developed a spiritual anesthesia that tranquilizes the restless heart. For Kierkegaard…[passionlessness] is the root problem generated by Christendom.”[[648]](#footnote-649)

Thus, a crucial aspect of the late Kierkegaard’s negative work in trying to cleanse the ground of Christendom is his trying to cultivate feelings of passion in his readers. As I showed from Chapter Four onwards, one of his overwhelming concerns about the way in which individuals detach themselves from any subjective relation with questions of faith, treating it as a matter of cold intellect, as something which one can transition into through propositional knowledge alone. Christendom embodies this dispassionate, stultifying relation, turning Christianity into an “official”, institutional affair. By contrast, genuine Christianity should be one of passionate, subjective relation; questions of faith should be related deeply to one’s own existence and orient everything about one’s self. For Kierkegaard, to live in any way less passionately than this, is not to live Christianly. Thus, by cultivating passionate responses and reactions (whether positive or negative) in response to questions relating to Christianity, Kierkegaard already works against the predominant, stultifying, dispassionate logic which predominates in Christendom. This is the same neutralising, dispassionate logic that precludes the possibility of the introduction of genuine Christianity.

There is one other non-cognitive response which Kierkegaard aims to communicate to his readers and one which is an overarching theme of the late writings: suffering. As I showed in the previous chapter, an important aspect of Kierkegaard’s critique of Christendom is his sense that it is perpetuated in part by individuals’ self-interest, financial and otherwise. Accordingly, the late writings underline that this self-interest is fundamentally at odds with Christianity. In contrast with the self-interested, comfortable lives of the clergy who obscure the irreducible importance of self-giving love and suffering, Kierkegaard endeavours to *give expression* to this suffering as the mark of genuine Christianity. In this sense, in his late writings, Kierkegaard attempts to communicate this suffering to those who engage with him.

He puts this contrast bluntly in one of the earliest of his articles. On the one hand, there is Bishop Mynster, who is treated as a “truth-witness” by Christendom. He has “enjoyed on the greatest scale every possible benefit and advantage”.[[649]](#footnote-650) On the other, Kierkegaard presents the genuine truth-witness as expressing: “Christianity's heterogeneity with this world, from which it follows that *the witness* must always be distinguishable by heterogeneity with this world, by renunciation, by suffering.”[[650]](#footnote-651) In one of the passages that Adorno quotes at the beginning of KOM, Kierkegaard comments that Christians, “ready for any suffering, are to go out into a world that with all its might and main expresses the contrast to what it is to be a Christian. This is what Christ calls witnessing, being a witness”.[[651]](#footnote-652) Kierkegaard aims in his late writings, therefore, to express more strongly than ever before this contrast with the world. To do this, as I showed above, is to present and express radical suffering and self-giving love. The mere presentation of this suffering is intended to break up the predominant, conventional narrative and patterns of thinking that Christianity entails a life of ease and self-interest. Moreover, what Kierkegaard hopes to cultivate in his readers is a receptiveness to this self-giving suffering, as a sign of truth and a mark of genuine Christianity.

## 7.3.3 Summary: Kierkegaard’s Protest Against Christendom

In the past three-subsections, I have explored the substance of the late Kierkegaard’s resistance against Christendom. At the beginning, I underlined Kierkegaard’s view that before there can be any prospect of introducing Christianity, there is a preliminary need, at the very least, for a negative clearing of the ground. This task requires that two distinct (cognitive and non-cognitive) transformations take place in people, often in combination. The first is to bring about cognitive, conceptual clarification. To this end, Kierkegaard aims to unpick the immediate and systematic falsehood in Christendom that all are Christians and that the state is representative of Christianity. His tools in this endeavour are irony and direct, sharp polemic, aiming to disrupt and undermine the familiarity and immediacy of the claim that Christianity has been realised in Christendom. Secondly, principally by means of the radical offence of his writings in their presentation of the demand of the New Testament, Kierkegaard hopes to cultivate a passionate engagement with questions of faith which is currently missing. This passionate engagement is itself a pre-requisite for overcoming the passionless stultification of Christianity in Christendom and must be present for any subsequent introduction of Christianity. Finally, Kierkegaard endeavours throughout his writings to express what it means to be a contrast to Christendom, and this contrast is suffering. In this vein, he encourages his readers to cultivate receptiveness to suffering as the mark of the truth-witness.

Importantly, the thread which runs throughout the work of “clearing the ground” in Kierkegaard’s late writings is the overwhelming refusal to prescribe any particular course of action. Instead, through a range of approaches in his writings, Kierkegaard attempts to cultivate certain cognitive and non-cognitive postures towards Christianity and Christendom in his readers. In doing so, he hopes to contribute to the “awakening” which he deems necessary before Christianity can be introduced. This same impulse is exemplified by his sole recommendation for action: the private practice of Christianity as a move to disrupt the prevailing mindset, forcing individuals to reflect on their relation to the ideal with the aid of Christian gadflies.

## 7.4 Adorno’s Praxis of Resistance

Just as Kierkegaard thought it first necessary to engage in the negative work of clearing the ground before Christianity could be introduced, Adorno also thinks that, as things stands, individuals are extremely limited in their capacity to resist, still less bring about truly free society, be that through collective revolutionary action or any other means. As Henry Pickford puts it, “[f]or Adorno, people not only cannot envisage a different society, but they also do not even wish for one”.[[652]](#footnote-653) In light of this bleak state of affairs, Adorno writes that “[w]hat is necessary is…the turn to the subject”.[[653]](#footnote-654) Expanding on what this “turn to the subject” entails, Adorno invokes the imperative to avoid the repetition of Auschwitz (which is symbolic as the endpoint of the systematic unfreedom he describes), and argues that:

 One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds [like Auschwitz], must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again.[[654]](#footnote-655)

In other words, in light of the effectiveness of the systematic distortions of late capitalism, the foremost task of resistance for Adorno becomes “necessarily restricted” to bringing about a change in people’s consciousness and psychology.[[655]](#footnote-656) Whilst both Kierkegaard and Adorno refer to their respective initial negative tasks as bringing about “awakening”, Adorno is altogether more austere about where any such awakening might lead. Whereas the late Kierkegaard at least allows himself to utter that a successful awakening might ultimately be a precursor to the introduction of Christianity, Adorno conceives of it overwhelmingly as a matter of damage limitation.[[656]](#footnote-657) That is to say, where Adorno’s writings try to cultivate certain forms of cognitive and non-cognitive responses as part of a resistance to the prevailing patterns of thinking and ways of being, this is conceived above all as part of an effort to avoid the repetition of Auschwitz. As Pickford argues, Adorno’s writings and activities are the theory and practice “of cultivating and deepening one’s susceptibility to and experience of *intolerables*”, which constitutes for Adorno an “essential precondition for the capacity to resist”.[[657]](#footnote-658) Adorno summarises this sentiment in his own words in his lectures *Problems of Moral Philosophy*:

 I believe that only by making this situation [the distorted, deformed, intolerable world] a matter of consciousness – rather than covering it up with sticking plaster – will it be possible to create the conditions in which we can properly formulate questions about how we should lead our lives today.[[658]](#footnote-659)

This constitutes the Adornian equivalent of the late Kierkegaard’s task to change “people’s conceptions” before the introduction of Christianity can even be considered. For Adorno, until there has been a significant shift in people’s consciousness’, unveiling the delusions and the true conditions that they live under, there will similarly be no capacity for coherent and consistent resistance to the present world, let alone the envisaging of a different one. I will now explore in more detail the responses, cognitive and non-cognitive, that Adorno aims to cultivate in his readers through his writings (essays, university lectures) and activities (radio broadcasts, public talks). These constitute his fundamental praxis of resistance.

## 7.4.1 Cognitive Cultivation in Adorno

In line with the view of systematic unfreedom that I have provided in this thesis already, Adorno aims in his work to bring this situation, and how each and every one of us has been deformed by it, to critical consciousness in individuals. In general, this critical consciousness is achieved by the production of analyses which, in Pickford’s words, “reveal and accentuate conceptual and social antagonisms”.[[659]](#footnote-660) Bringing these antagonisms and contradictions to light in his work, Adorno facilitates the experience of negativity in his readers, and this negativity in turn bears witness to the failed promise to achieve a rational, humanely organised society.

This work is necessary, because, as I have suggested throughout this thesis, Adorno is of the view that this negativity and these antagonisms are deeply obscured from people. In a myriad of ways, administered society systematically manipulates and distorts individuals in the belief that the world is not riven with contradictions. That is to say, it systematically reinforces the lie that the unfree society which we inhabit is in fact humane, free and rationally organised.[[660]](#footnote-661) By revealing conceptual and social antagonisms, Adorno attempts to separate this ideological assertion of identity from the reality.[[661]](#footnote-662) This is achieved in Adorno’s critique, firstly, by undermining the illusory familiarity and self-evident “second nature” of the social untruth. Adorno shows, in other words, that claims about society which are taken by people to be universally, self-evidently true, are in fact socially and historically mediated and constructed.[[662]](#footnote-663) Secondly, Adorno shows how the concept that he is analysing, for example, “freedom” or “progress”, has not yet been realised. In this way, “critique can proceed by way of confronting realities with the norms to which those realities appeal”.[[663]](#footnote-664) Proceeding immanently, Adorno shows how, in administered society, the norms and concepts (for example, “freedom” or “progress”), to which that society appeals are not yet true. That is to say, under current conditions they fail to fulfil the requirements of their own realisation.[[664]](#footnote-665)

What Adorno’s critical analyses aim at, then, is bringing readers to experience the cognitive awareness of this failure and of the contradictions and antagonisms between, as Pickford puts it “a concept fundamental to society’s self-understanding…and its present unfulfillment.”[[665]](#footnote-666) This experience of negativity, Adorno hopes, will initially disrupt the conventional, predominant and familiar patterns of thinking and subsequently lead people to recognise aspects of their false consciousness, which is itself a precondition for its change. As he comments in a published conversation with Max Horkheimer of 1956: “What we want is for people who read what we write to feel the scales falling from their eyes”.[[666]](#footnote-667) Crucially, Adorno aims to do this through his theoretical writings without expressing particular practical actions. His sole aim instead is to create the conditions for individuals to experience this cognitive negativity and thereby come to an awareness of the illusory and false consciousness that administered society imposes on them.

Whilst I have suggested that Adorno’s resistance is overwhelmingly and almost entirely non-prescriptive, there is at least one important exception to this. Specifically, I refer here to Adorno’s practical recommendations in relation to education. Again, thinking about cultivating resistance in the cognitive mode, in a number of places Adorno proposes the introduction of educative practice which cultivates in people, especially children, “critical self-reflection”, “autonomy” and “political maturity”.[[667]](#footnote-668) This inculcation, he hopes, will ultimately lead to “general enlightenment that provides an intellectual, cultural, and social climate in which a recurrence [of Auschwitz] would no longer be possible”.[[668]](#footnote-669)

Such a climate, he argues, would only be achieved once “the motives that led to the horror [of Auschwitz] would become relatively conscious”.[[669]](#footnote-670) Accordingly, this will require that people, through educative practices and their own reflection on this education, cultivate the learned ability to apply the kind of ideology critique that, as we have just seen, Adorno practises in his own writings. That is to say, they would become aware of the dangers of the familiar immediacy of the “second nature” which administered society imposes upon us. To this end, Adorno gives some examples:

 senior classes of secondary schools could be taken as a group to commercially produced films, and that the students could quite simply be shown what a con is being presented, how hypocritical it all is…[Similarly] they could be immunized against certain morning broadcasts, such as still exist on the radio, where on Sunday mornings cheerful music is played to them, as though we live in a so-called ‘ideal world’...Or a magazine could be read with them, and they could be shown how, by having their own inner needs and desires exploited, they are being taken for a ride.[[670]](#footnote-671)

As a result of this educative process, Adorno hopes that people will come to consciousness both of their own false consciousness and to an at least partial understanding of the all-pervasiveness of the ideological norms that are asserted in a systematically unfree world.[[671]](#footnote-672) Adorno couples the facilitation of this consciousness raising education with encouraging what he considers to be one of the few remaining acts of resistance available to us, that of not joining in: “The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating”.[[672]](#footnote-673) To this end, Adorno speaks about working against the “passion with which especially young and progressively minded people desire to integrate themselves into something or other”.[[673]](#footnote-674) This appears in his lectures on *Problems of Moral Philosophy* to be one of the few acts he is willing to prescribe: “we ought also to mobilize our own powers of resistance in order to resist those parts of us that are tempted to join in.”[[674]](#footnote-675) By this, he means not joining in not only effectively impotent forms of collective activism like those which he criticises above, but also more ostensibly innocuous aspects of life in administered society. For example, he comments that an “apparently harmless visit to the cinema…[is] a betrayal of the insights that we have acquired”.[[675]](#footnote-676) These and similarly “innocuous” activities, he argues:

 entangle us…to an infinitesimal degree, but assuredly with a cumulative effect – in the processes that will transform us into what we are supposed to become and what we are making of ourselves in order to enable us to survive, and to ensure that we conform.[[676]](#footnote-677)

Accordingly, Adorno advocates for an education which not only helps to make us aware of the consequences of uncritical participation in administered society at all levels, but also one which encourages us to enact individual acts of resistance by refusing to participate as a result of this knowledge. In this latter respect, Adorno thinks we therefore make maximal use of the limited self-determination and autonomy granted to us, as well as actively disrupting (in however small a way) the habits, practices and patterns that administered society asserts upon us. The significance of Adorno’s advocacy for these society-wide educative practices is his recognition that substantive and sustained resistance to the prevailing world can only arrive through a comprehensive overhaul of people’s consciousness and conceptions. This cannot be achieved individually, as Iain Macdonald puts it: “substantial autonomy cannot just be ‘my’ autonomy; it has to be autonomy integrated into the very fabric of society”.[[677]](#footnote-678) These widespread educative efforts therefore become *imperative* as a task in the present situation for those who can think critically already:

 the only real concrete form of maturity would consist of those few people who are of a mind to do so working with all their energies towards making education an education for protest and for resistance.[[678]](#footnote-679)

Both what Adorno demonstrates in his writings and in his prescription for new, society-wide educative processes is his principal awareness of the need for a “turn to the subject”. This must at all costs be “rational”, by which he means not that “people who believe untrue things for irrational reasons are then confronted with the truth”, but rather when people are “*brought to the point in themselves*, through self-reflection, of gaining insight into what they can do”.[[679]](#footnote-680) As we have seen, all of Adorno’s energies and activities are directed toward prompting people in cultivating this self-reflection and awareness. This in turn, he hopes, will act as a crucial safeguard to the same people having the kind of immediate, uncritical, and instinctual relationship to their society (and particularly to authority) that the perpetrators of Auschwitz had.

## 7.4.2 Non-Cognitive Cultivation in Adorno

We should not overlook, however, that the work of cultivating a certain critical way of thinking and being is not limited merely to the cultivation of cognitive responses. Rather, Adorno’s writings and activities are also directed towards the cultivation of non-cognitive emotions, feelings and affects which are systematically suppressed in administered society. These non-rational characteristics act as important barriers in impeding the ease of our adaptation to administered society, since they disrupt the process of the neutralisation of subjectivity which I described in Chapter Five. As Adorno observes, in administered society, people “lose their impulses, they lose their passion. The idea of a passionate person seems almost anachronistic today”.[[680]](#footnote-681) By trying to cultivate more impulsivity and passion in others, Adorno endeavours to counteract the atomised, reified and ultimately inhumane consciousness which he thinks is imposed upon us. This effort, he thinks, goes hand in hand with the possibility of a less irrational society:

 irrationality is the instinctual impulses and the affects that are repressed...and emerge again in distorted, twisted altered form as aggression, as projection, as displacement…I therefore do not mean that people should become merely cold rationalists and shouldn’t have affects and passions any more. On the contrary, if they have more affects and more passions, they will have less prejudices.[[681]](#footnote-682)

The most important of these “instinctual impulses” which are repressed by the forces of administered society pertain to the suppression of our impulsive abhorrence towards suffering and our “distorted” and “twisted” justifications for this suffering (based on the aforementioned prejudices). Accordingly, for Adorno, “the most important psychological condition” which enabled Auschwitz to happen, was the “inability to identify with others”.[[682]](#footnote-683) He connects this disfigurement primarily to an atomised and indifferent bourgeois society and the reifying, exchange logic which underpins it: “[t]he coldness of the societal monad, the isolated competitor, was the precondition [to Auschwitz], as indifference to the fate of others”.[[683]](#footnote-684) This indifference is only possible through a suppression of our impulsive abhorrence to suffering. One of Adorno’s central tasks therefore becomes bringing this “coldness to the consciousness of itself, of the reasons why it arose”; individuals should endeavour to work against this learned indifference, cultivating a new responsiveness, sympathy, and solidarity with those who suffer.[[684]](#footnote-685)

Crucially, this is not simply an optional element in cultivating a capacity for resistance, but essential to it, as Pickford points out: “the somatic affective impulse animates cognitive moral judgment, thereby motivating action.”[[685]](#footnote-686) Adorno expresses this thought in his description of the addendum [*das Hinzutretende*] which is irreducible to purely rational processes:

 The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different “Woe speaks: ‘Go.’” Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice.[[686]](#footnote-687)

In describing the addendum here, Adorno refers to our responsiveness to our own material, bodily abhorrence in the face of the experience of suffering. It is precisely the systematic repression of this same responsivity which Adorno thinks led to a situation in which Auschwitz could occur. By contrast, then, the capacity to resist requires this non-cognitive (material, affective, embodied) responsivity. Specifically, it requires *both* that we reflect critically for ourselves on the conditions of our unfreedom and the motivations of those who defend it *and* experience a non-cognitive abhorrence at the suffering which these conditions both obscure and perpetuate. Indeed, as the passage above suggests, both cognitive (criticism) and non-cognitive (material, affective, embodied) responses are necessary for actualising out capacity to resist. Adorno sees the latter as the “jolt”, which, working in combination with theoretical consciousness, taking us beyond interminable reflection, towards action and the demand for “social change in practice”.[[687]](#footnote-688)

Finally, as Pickford points out and the passage above points towards in referring to the need for more “affects” and “passions”, Adorno thinks more generally that administered society suppresses “imagination, anticipation, desire and enthusiasm”.[[688]](#footnote-689) In order to break through this pacification and neutralisation of spontaneity and affectivity, Adorno comments that in trying to get the “scales” to fall from people’s eyes, he attempts to produce “a particular way of writing that offends against specific taboos. You have to find the point that wounds”.[[689]](#footnote-690) The reason for this is that such affectivity is crucial in revivifying our capacity to transcend prevailing modes of thought and patterns of thinking. Adorno makes clear, for example, that this is the case for desire: “the castration of perception by a court of control that denies it any anticipatory desire, forces it thereby into a pattern of helplessly reiterating what is already known”.[[690]](#footnote-691) Whilst Adorno dedicates less time to discussing these latter affects and passions and their role in resistance, there can be little doubt that they do have a role to play.

## 7.4.3 Summary: Adorno’s Praxis of Resistance

In this section, I have suggested that Adorno’s praxis of resistance is principally formed around what can be referred to as a ‘defensive’ position. Consistent with his reading of the blockage in possibilities for change in the conventionally conceived political sphere and in forms of collective action, Adorno deems resistance necessarily restricted to what he calls the “turn to the subject”. What this entails is a renewed concern with cultivating particular cognitive and non-cognitive awareness within individuals, which is a precondition for fostering the capacity to resist. Specifically, Adorno thinks that the cultivation of this capacity to resist provides the basis for preventing the repetition of Auschwitz.

In cultivating cognitive awareness, in his writings and activities, Adorno aims above all to facilitate negative experiences in people by unveiling the conceptual and social antagonisms which administered society obscures to us. In short, this concerns the attempt firstly to undermine the familiar “second nature” of social truth and secondly to show how concepts to which society appeals are not yet true. This is the task of attempting to bring to light the gap between ideology and reality. Also in the cognitive mode, whilst Adorno is overwhelmingly non-prescriptive in his approach, he does trace the basis for a recommended course of action in education. Aimed principally at young children, Adorno suggests that they should be inculcated in the kind of critical responses and ideology critique which he exemplifies in his writings. In a similar way, he also suggests that they could be shown small, seemingly insignificant acts of non-compliance and of not joining in. Again, the emphasis in all of these endeavours is not so much to prescriptively inform, but rather to provide a general education which individuals subsequently understand for themselves and apply to their own lives. As important and indeed necessary for the capacity to resist are certain non-cognitive responses, above all responsivity to suffering, the lack of which Adorno suggests was instrumental in enabling Auschwitz to occur. Thus, in his writings and activities, Adorno tries to cultivate this responsivity, as well as the more general affects, passions, and imaginative, anticipatory desire which he thinks is suppressed in administered society. This he thinks will help us not only in being more rational (in the sense of less repressive and prejudiced) but will also help us in moving beyond the prevailing patterns of thought which society tries to lock us into.

Overall, what arises from the account I have given here is the view that Adorno thinks that in creating the conditions for resistance it is imperative that individuals are not only informed of the wrongs of the unfree society or follow the demands of a collective group, but actually come to think through the systematic unfreedom present in society for themselves. Not only this, at the same time, he also thinks that individuals must become responsive to and experience for themselves the suffering that this society systematically produces in others. In Adorno’s view, without bringing about this subjective engagement with objective conditions, there can be little hope of a substantial, sustained resistance.

## 7.5 Interlude: Kierkegaard and Adorno’s Religious Partition

Before concluding and bringing together the insights of the past two chapters, I first want to underline the key and unavoidable partitions that separate both thinkers, at least as Adorno sees it. It is important to emphasise, as I have tried to make clear throughout the thesis, that whilst Adorno is greatly influenced by Kierkegaard’s writings, he is no Kierkegaardian. This is not least because, as I argued already in Chapter Three, Adorno maintains the basis of his early overall critique of Kierkegaard’s thought throughout his life. That is to say, for Adorno, Kierkegaard’s philosophy as a whole is ultimately all too inward, abstract, and irrational, ending as he claims it does in the disavowal of conceptual dialectic and the embrace of absurd faith.

Despite the many affirmative remarks which Adorno makes in relation to Kierkegaard’s late writings and however strongly he thinks Kierkegaard criticises Christendom as upheld by the “ideology of the system of profit”, Adorno always maintains that the force of his critique will in some ways be foreshortened, restrained, or displaced “into the interior”.[[691]](#footnote-692) The root of this criticism is what he sees as Kierkegaard’s failure to focus squarely and solely on the transformation of material conditions in *this* world. As Peter Gordon rightly emphasises, Adorno fundamentally still holds to “the materialist’s view of religion as an index of social suffering”. [[692]](#footnote-693) That is, he understands the desire for religious transcendence as an instinctive reflex to escape material conditions. Whilst the endeavour to go beyond the frame of what merely exists is not without its moment of truth, Adorno cannot abide, as Gordon puts it, “the direct affirmation of a transcendent other beyond nature”, since this would “contravene the imperative of this‐worldly redemption.”[[693]](#footnote-694) Hence, despite the late Kierkegaard’s direct criticism “of what exists”, this criticism for Adorno will always be restrained by Kierkegaard’s conventional theological motivation for it: namely, his appeal to divine transcendence.[[694]](#footnote-695) Adorno clearly thinks that Kierkegaard’s theological motivation impedes what might otherwise be an unstinting focus on the alleviation of suffering and the demand for change in *this* world. As he succinctly puts it, Kierkegaard’s “uncompromising conception of transcendence would have precluded the victory of truth “within-the-world”.[[695]](#footnote-696) Kierkegaard’s ultimate concern is *not* with socio-historical emancipation.

A helpful way of illustrating this distinction between Adorno’s materialist stance and the late Kierkegaard’s theological position, is by examining the former’s interpretation of the latter on suffering. As we have seen, for both thinkers in a general sense, suffering plays a vital role. For Kierkegaard, being able to recognise suffering in others is important because it is the mark of the truth-witness in a damaged, fallen and finite world. The place of the Christian in such a world (*contra* the self-interest which predominates in Christendom) is one of self-sacrificial suffering, in imitation of Christ. Following this logic, suffering for Kierkegaard becomes a mark of the imperfection of this world and, indirectly, the ultimate possibility of its overcoming in divine transcendence. Adorno already acknowledges this in *Construction* in the following terms: “[t]he doctrine of the late writings”, he writes, is that “the ‘meaning’ of existence is suffering and that only in the negativity of suffering can positive [theological] meaning be represented”.[[696]](#footnote-697) As a materialist, Adorno views this ascription of suffering with a transcendent ‘meaning’, as an outstanding example of the ideological limitations of conventional theology. That is, Kierkegaard’s understanding of suffering as having an other-worldly meaning distracts from what should be our undivided attention on the alleviation of this suffering and the transformation of *this* world.[[697]](#footnote-698) By contrast, for Adorno, suffering has no transcendent meaning, and it points to no otherworldly beyond; his emphasis on our responsiveness to it is aimed solely and squarely at its removal in this world.

Having said that, we should not neglect to recall that – as I note above – Adorno does think there is a moment of truth in the appeal to transcendence as a reflex in the face of suffering. This moment of truth is Kierkegaard’s unconscious anticipation of the idea of inverse theology, the idea that, as Gordon puts it: “the consummate negativity of social suffering serves as an index to utopia”.[[698]](#footnote-699) In short, as I discussed in detail at the end of Chapter Five, Adorno thinks that there is a place for employing the *bare idea* of transcendence, a vantage point which only becomes available to us as the photographic negative of the distortion of suffering. What Adorno tries to achieve through this is a critical vantage point from which to view our existence – which for him is living hell – from the perspective of salvation. Whilst Kierkegaard anticipates this viewpoint unconsciously in his conception of absolute opposition to the world in the name of an other-worldly transcendence, as we have seen, Adorno refuses to endorse such a transcendence. Accordingly, inverse theology represents Adorno’s secular and materialist alternative.

The final key partition which needs to be underlined relates again to Kierkegaard’s theological hinterland. Even though Adorno admires Kierkegaard’s for his opposition to “positive theology” and for his refusal to “publish his own dogma” in the late writings, he still remains suspicious of his appeal to tradition in his invocation of the ideal of genuine Christianity.[[699]](#footnote-700) In KOM, Adorno formulates this criticism by arguing that Kierkegaard: “inquired neither after the source of law nor after tradition…Christian dogma remains the blind spot of Kierkegaardian reflection”.[[700]](#footnote-701) In short, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard cannot rationally justify his appeal to the authority of the Apostolic tradition of the New Testament which he frequently invokes. To the contrary, Adorno suggests that this represents the mere affirmation of “that which was instilled in him”, something which is otherwise utterly incompatible with his critical, philosophical instincts.[[701]](#footnote-702)

Accordingly, any account of the continuities between Kierkegaard and Adorno, and of the latter’s historical affinities with the former must proceed in the knowledge that whilst the late Kierkegaard’s texts contain much insight for Adorno, this insight could not be and was not appropriated without criticism and adaptation. This is most obviously the case in Adorno’s opposition to Kierkegaard’s theological appeal to the ideal of divine transcendence, New Testament Christianity, and the Apostolic tradition.

## 7.6 “Truth Content” in the Late Kierkegaard’s Resistance

In §7.5, I have emphasised what Adorno still sees in KOM as the crucial limitations of Kierkegaard’s thought, even the late Kierkegaard’s approach. Principally, this concerns the extent to which Adorno finds Kierkegaard’s late resistance to be guided by an affirmation of transcendence and the Apostolic tradition of the New Testament. Despite Adorno’s predominant analysis that in his late polemical writings Kierkegaard emerges from interiority, underlying this, he remains concerned that Kierkegaard’s aforementioned religious impulses will always blunt his capacity to bring about the necessary socio-historical emancipation. This worry appears in Adorno’s commentary that Kierkegaard’s critical insights are displaced “into the interior”, which stifles “the possible”.[[702]](#footnote-703) This stifling of the possibility of socio-historical emancipation is intimately linked with Kierkegaard’s world-denying Christianity, which Adorno conceives in the final analysis as *ultimately* concerned with spiritual, rather than material transformation in this world: “[h]is uncompromising conception of transcendence would have precluded the victory of truth within-the-world”.[[703]](#footnote-704) Setting these (not inconsiderable) limitations aside however, Adorno still begins the final section of KOM by insisting that Kierkegaard’s voice – here we might add, the late Kierkegaard’s voice – is “irresistible…by virtue of its truth content”.[[704]](#footnote-705) Following the comparison of Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective approaches that I have undertaken in this chapter, in this section, consistent with Adorno’s interpretation in KOM, I will now bring together exactly what this truth content entails.

## 7.6.1 Negativity in the Late Kierkegaard and Adorno

The first key moment of truth that I draw attention to in this regard is Adorno’s view of the late Kierkegaard’s emphasis on negativity. Both the late Kierkegaard and Adorno agree that the present organisation of their respective societies is an intolerable one. However, their principal response to this assessment is not to outline an alternative blueprint for the realising the path to freedom. Still less do they attempt to propose and implement a programme for action. Rather, what Adorno admires above all in the late Kierkegaard is his resolute and absolutely oppositional stance towards the world. Such was the late Kierkegaard’s view of the profound and embedded depravity of the present (and foreseeable) historical situation, that his protest was not one of building, but of clearing the ground and cleansing the temple of the society of Danish Christendom. Accordingly, there could be no sense of reform within the status quo or of formulating an alternative out of its distorted logic; only an absolute exodus from the present state would suffice. It was this uncompromising stance, leading Kierkegaard to demand the removal of everything which Christendom represents, including its present institutional forms, which Adorno finds most affinity with. Indeed, it is this uncompromising criticism which led him to conclude KOM by remarking that Kierkegaard refuses to affirm “the world as it is” and comparing him to the Brechtian Naysayer, who refuses false alternatives and instead thinks afresh in each new situation.[[705]](#footnote-706) As I suggest above, this fundamentally negative stance which refuses the unfree and false alternatives which society presents is shared by Adorno. Adorno finds affinity with Kierkegaard precisely because he also thinks, albeit in many ways for very different reasons, that the historical situation of his own time required above all a resolutely negative clearing of the ground.

This is not to deny that there are potential limitations within this affinity. After all, as I noted above, the late Kierkegaard connects the negative work of clearing of the ground in Danish Christendom with the ultimate aim that Christianity (his idea of freedom) be “introduced here”.[[706]](#footnote-707) This seems to be at odds with Adorno’s altogether more defensive approach, insofar as his own negative work (which, as we have seen, entails the cultivation of certain critical attitudes and responses) is directed towards working “against the repetition of Auschwitz”.[[707]](#footnote-708) There are a number of points which can supplied in response to this. The first is that Adorno himself does not seem overly concerned with this distinction. Beyond his criticism that Kierkegaard is still too dogmatically committed to pursuing the outlines of an Apostolic ur-Christianity, he gives no other indication of divergence with the late Kierkegaard in relation to negativity.[[708]](#footnote-709) Moreover, as I have tried to show in the previous two chapters, there is good reason for Adorno’s lack of divergence. His interpretation of the late Kierkegaard is broadly concomitant with the texts and with much of the contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship. The late Kierkegaard really was overwhelmingly negative and really did come to think of the depravity of his historical situation as requiring an overwhelmingly negative posture. Even if the late Kierkegaard speaks of the introduction of Christianity as an aspiration which might follow the negative work of clearing the ground, in his late writings, there is little indication that this is anything more than the most faint and distant outline on the horizon. Genuine Christianity is far from within our grasp and until further notice, our energies must be directed towards bringing about the collapse of the present world.

At the same time, of course, we should not assume that this view of the late Kierkegaard is a universal one, as Sylvia Walsh makes clear:

 Numerous interpreters have found Kierkegaard’s attitude in his last writings to be radically negative and world denying…however, such a culmination would represent not the logical conclusion of his central vision but rather an abrogation of it...[h]is foremost intent was to assert the positive in and through the negative, not to advance a purely negative characterization of Christian existence.[[709]](#footnote-710)

Here Walsh argues that, when read in isolation, the late writings appear to be radically negative and world denying. She suggests however that they should not be read like this and instead should be read in communication with his earlier authorship, particularly his signed religious writings. When read in this way, the late writings can be seen precisely as a negative clearing of the ground for the sake of the positive existence.

In attempting to preserve the absolute continuity of Kierkegaard’s authorship in this way, however, Walsh underplays the difference which Adorno rightly emphasises between Kierkegaard’s last writings and his earlier authorship – namely, Kierkegaard’s increasing sense of the depravity of his own historical situation. Consistent with what I argue above, Kierkegaard’s view became ever more radically negative. This resulted in the conclusion that the entire edifice of Christendom was so debased that it was no longer responsible to entertain any suggestion of its reform or of the progressive adjustment of actuality to Christian ideality. Whilst there is therefore a case for arguing that the late Kierkegaard was still ultimately hoping to advance the positive (that Christianity could be “introduced here”) in the aftermath of the negative, his sense of the historical situation in the here and now was that it demanded a total, negative rupture.[[710]](#footnote-711) Finally, even in Walsh’s suggestion that the late Kierkegaard might ultimately hope to advance a version of the positive Christian existence present in his religious writings, we should take care to consider how this positivity should be construed. As Marcia Morgan emphasises, even in the context of Kierkegaard’s “positive” theology, he never permits “any resolution, delimiting itself by an unbridgeable gap between the human and the Other of divinity, sustained in an infinitely negative manner *in this world*”.[[711]](#footnote-712) This is the case before we consider that the late writings, as a result of Kierkegaard’s changing view of the historical situation, took an altogether more radically negative approach. Taking all of this together, we can get a sense of how far the late Kierkegaard found himself, and more importantly, Christendom generally, from positivity. This remains true even he allows himself, *contra* Adorno, to gesture towards the idea that the task of his protest against Christendom is in some sense ultimately directed towards the possible realisation of freedom.

Having considered the fundamental affinity between the late Kierkegaard and Adorno in relation to negativity, as well as Adorno’s acknowledgement of this affinity, I will now move on from this and consider how far both thinkers’ approaches overlap in terms of their practice of this negative, critical stance. In other words, having recognised the task as one of negative, critical opposition to an intolerable society, how do Kierkegaard and Adorno actually endeavour to undertake this opposition? The first and perhaps key affinity in this regard relates to the surprising fact that both thinkers end up alighting on the view that it is primarily the task of the individual, not the collective, to oppose the status quo. Whilst Kierkegaard comes to this conclusion for largely different reasons from Adorno, the latter still ends up crediting the former with anticipating what he thought those who wish to protest faced in late-capitalist modernity. I will return to the significance of this point in §7.7, but for now it is important to underline this here, because it helps to foreground the affinities that I will now explore.

## 7.6.2 Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Cultivation in the Late Kierkegaard and Adorno

These affinities relate primarily to Kierkegaard and Adorno’s shared perspective that it was their task as critical individuals to awaken others to the reality of their intolerable situation and society. As I argued above, they aim to do this through their writings and activities, cultivating certain cognitive and non-cognitive responses, often in combination. Although not all of these affinities feature explicitly in KOM, Adorno undoubtedly does affirm the late Kierkegaard’s general individual, critical and non-conformist approach to resistance. This approach is inextricably linked with the late Kierkegaard’s conclusion that his task was one of cultivating the aforementioned responses within others, an approach which Adorno shares.

Addressing cognitive responses first, both thinkers try in different ways to elicit negative conceptual experiences in their readers. By this, I mean that through the use of irony, polemic, and immanent critique, they both try to cultivate an awareness of the ways in which their respective societies have *failed* to realise concepts which are fundamental to them.[[712]](#footnote-713) As Adorno writes, in “determinate negation, according to his own language” the late Kierkegaard “took on the whole in which he himself was stuck just like everyone”.[[713]](#footnote-714) In their writings and activities, both thinkers try to strip back and disrupt the familiarity and immediacy of illusions which the prevailing status quo systematically reinforces and as part of this process, awaken individuals’ consciousnesses to this reality. This aim is reflected in the only substantive practical recommendation that Kierkegaard and Adorno offer. In Adorno’s case, he proposes the introduction of a programme for critical education. In Kierkegaard’s case, he proposes that Christianity be detached from the state and become a private practice. Whilst there are clear distinctions between these two recommendations, the explicit and (in Kierkegaard’s case) implicit consequence of both is that it becomes incumbent on those individuals who are aware of the scale of the task to educate and prompt others in cultivating this awareness. Crucially, both Kierkegaard and Adorno aim to prompt individuals in a such a way that they develop the capacity to sustain this awareness *for themselves*, rather than merely being informed of it.

As well as emphasising the cultivation of certain cognitive, conceptual responses, Kierkegaard and Adorno also stress that the cultivation of non-cognitive affects and emotions is just as important. The reason for this, they both suggest, is that these affects are systematically suppressed in different ways by the societies that they oppose; both identify, for example, the stultification of passion in individuals. Accordingly, they both deem affectivity to have an important role in breaking out of the prevailing norms and (passionless) patterns of thinking that dominate their respective societies. Indeed, at different points both explicitly acknowledge that their aim is to “stir up” and “offend” their readers to this effect.[[714]](#footnote-715)

Whilst there are differences in the context and content of their respective understandings of passion, these differences do not ultimately inhibit Adorno’s fundamental view that Kierkegaard was “arguably the first to discover the phenomenon of neutralization”: the integration of individual with “culture as commodity, and finally reduced to a commodity itself, to something absolutely detached”.[[715]](#footnote-716) This view of Kierkegaard’s “discovery” of “neutralisation” cannot be separated from his discerning awareness of a culture which was fundamentally suppressing passion within individuals.

## 7.6.3 Suffering, Transcendence and Resistance in the Late Kierkegaard and Adorno

Perhaps the most significant claim that Adorno makes in relation to Kierkegaard and non-cognitive responsivity appears in his (brief) allusion to the late Kierkegaard’s own response to suffering. As I have argued in the sections above, the relationship between Adorno’s interpretation of the late Kierkegaard on suffering is a complex one. In very different ways, both thinkers articulate the importance of suffering. Articulating their concerns with distinct religious and materialist aims, they both see suffering as obscured and suppressed by the intolerable societies which they oppose. Accordingly, both try to give expression to suffering as in some sense revelatory of the falsity of these societies. For Kierkegaard, suffering is suppressed in Christendom because it is a mark of genuine Christianity and of the truth witness.[[716]](#footnote-717) For Adorno, suffering is suppressed in administered society because it gives expression to the lie that the social whole is truly free and harmonious. The attempt to give expression to one’s own suffering and the suffering of others therefore becomes for Adorno the endeavour to effort to give expression to this (negative) truth. Clearly, as I noted in §7.3, there are limits to how far one can take these connections and the extent to which Adorno really sees this is as “truth content” in Kierkegaard. For one, Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard’s theological understanding is problematic, insofar as it can lead him to draw an other-worldly transcendent “meaning” from suffering where this none. At the same time, however, Kierkegaard’s understanding of the connection between suffering and transcendence (as exemplified in the suffering truth-witness) is an unconscious anticipation of the idea of inverse theology. Crucially, the difference in the latter idea is that whilst there is a connection between suffering and “transcendence”, this remains only the bare idea of transcendence, used as a leverage to draw attention to the material suffering present in *this* *world*. To this extent, then, Adorno does find (ultimately largely unconscious) “truth content” in the late Kierkegaard in his emphasis on the importance of suffering in its relation to transcendence.

But it is not only unconscious truth content in relation to suffering which Adorno finds in the late Kierkegaard. To be clear, there is no point in KOM where Adorno claims that Kierkegaard encourages us to cultivate a responsivity to suffering in others, in a manner analogous to Adorno himself. Nonetheless, Adorno does close KOM by concluding the following about the late Kierkegaard: “Ever since he collapsed in the street, nothing more modestly spiritual would any longer suffice: he has potentiated the Pascalian *On ne doit plus dormir* [One must no longer sleep]”.[[717]](#footnote-718) In this comment, which is rich with allusion, Adorno suggests that in the last part of Kierkegaard’s life, he underwent an experience in response to suffering (which sounds very similar to Adorno’s addendum that I describe above) that leads him to the active radical, external criticism of his late writings.

Now, as a piece of historical biography, this is erroneous. The collapse in the street to which Adorno refers occurred just over a month before Kierkegaard’s death and had no bearing on the content of his late writings.[[718]](#footnote-719) In a sense, however, this fact is irrelevant. What matters more is the way in which the passage conveys what Adorno thought that the significant *difference* of Kierkegaard’s late writings was. The passage which Adorno alludes to, claiming that Kierkegaard “potentiated” its meaning, is an adaptation of Blaise Pascal, who wrote the following about Christ’s suffering as a result of his taking on of humanity’s continued sin and suffering: “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world. There must be no sleeping during that time.”[[719]](#footnote-720) This passage appeals to Adorno because it ties other-worldly transcendence to suffering in this world and urges us to alleviate the latter for the sake of the former.[[720]](#footnote-721) In other words, it represents the moment at which conventional theology comes closest to his own inverse theology. Along these lines, in the 1962 essay “Commitment”, Adorno refers to Pascal again: “The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting; Pascal's theological saying, *On ne doit plus dormir*, must be secularized”.[[721]](#footnote-722)

Returning to the conclusion of KOM, published a year later, the implication of Adorno’s conclusion is that the late Kierkegaard does everything *but* secularise this insight. Adorno sees the late Kierkegaard as a figure in whom, to paraphrase *Negative Dialectics*, “criticism”, and “social change in practice” converge.[[722]](#footnote-723) That is to say, for Adorno, the late Kierkegaard is not only deeply critical of the external world (a critical potential which Adorno always saw present within him). Moreover, and crucially, the late Kierkegaard no longer persists with “modest” spirituality but instead turns his criticism outwards. That is to say, in his late polemical writings, Kierkegaard practically intervenes and demands the change of the external social world, a demand which Adorno thought he had previously evaded. Hence, with a critical eye, now placed in combination with an accompanying demand for social change in practice, Adorno thinks the late Kierkegaard potentiates what was previously impotent critical insight. What the late Kierkegaard offers through this change is an uncompromising model of resistance against self-preserving, self-interested individuals and the self-perpetuating institutions which they reinforce as part of a loveless, dehumanising world. In his late critique of the church and Christendom, Kierkegaard protests in practice against the suffering that the capitalist logic of exchange and self-interest systematically perpetuates, even if he does so in the name of the divine.[[723]](#footnote-724)

## 7.7 Conclusion: Praxis as Comportment and the Gordian Knot of Resistance

Having explored key aspects of the “truth content” which Adorno finds in the late Kierkegaard’s resistance in the preceding sub-sections, I will now conclude by considering the idea of praxis as comportment, which I take to be the “glue” connecting the approach that I have explored in the preceding two chapters. Specifically, I identify this approach as Adorno’s attempt in trying to untie the Gordian knot of resistance which I introduced at the end of Chapter Six.

As I suggested above, perhaps the most significant “truth content” that Adorno found in Kierkegaard’s late protest was their shared position, arrived at for different reasons, that the task of resistance was one which should be undertaken by the individual. As Adorno puts it, the “dismaying power of Kierkegaard in his afterlife has as its foundation” the truth that:

 a different position than that of the particular, which he occupied, does not primarily present itself to those who protest today; and every immediate identification with the collective is instantly the untruth to which the position of the particular unfailingly and primally becomes.[[724]](#footnote-725)

This passage effectively encapsulates the Gordian knot of resistance which I describe at the end of Chapter Six. In Adorno’s view, those who resist today face a fundamental problematic. On the one hand, because of the systematic unfreedom of administered society, resulting in a blockage in political possibilities, “identification with the collective” is closed off. Consequently, the only position available for resistance is as an individual. But this position is also “unfailingly” untrue. Whilst such individuals might rightly stand in absolute opposition to the social whole, refusing conformity and integration with it, this opposition will always also be in some sense problematic. As alienation from the rest of society, the position of the particular is, ironically, a reflection of an administered society which has reduced individuals to “powerless atoms”.[[725]](#footnote-726) The marginalised, non-conformist life of the critical individual, detached from the prevailing norms, inevitably risks leaving the status quo as it is, by virtue of the very same detachment that enables them to resist integration with those norms. The alternative is the illusion of “power”, but “power” which Adorno thinks will be contained to actions tacitly sanctioned or channelled by the forces of the unfree social whole.

Reflecting upon this problem, Adorno describes the challenge for those who resist in late-capitalist modernity as follows. In *Minima Moralia,* he writes: “The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us.”[[726]](#footnote-727) Secondly, in a connected passage from *Negative Dialectics*:

 Spellbound, the living have a choice between involuntary ataraxy—an aesthetic life due to weakness—and the bestiality of the involved. Both are wrong ways of living. But some of both would be required for the right *désinvolture* and sympathy.[[727]](#footnote-728)

Whilst Adorno is clear that there is no adequate resolution to this double bind in a systematically unfree society, he does provide an uncharacteristically candid remark here about what would be required to begin to unpick the contradictions of resistance today. Namely, of avoiding both the *Scylla* of power and involvedness in a systematically unfree world andthe *Charybdis* of totally withdrawn, powerless, aesthetic life, condemned to the fate of the same world. He quickly follows this up by noting that both moments of truth in these respectively “wrong ways of living” [*falsches Leben*] would be required for the “right” [*richtigen*] posture.

My claim in this concluding section is that Adorno’s answer to navigating this challenge, insofar as there is an answer, is represented by his approach to praxis as comportment. Specifically, this entails the effort to maintain a negative, critical stance, whilst also cultivating certain (cognitive and non-cognitive) responses in others through one’s writing and activities, through one’s “general way of being”, as Pickford describes it.[[728]](#footnote-729) Broadly conceived, in other words, Adorno’s praxis of resistance as I have articulated in this chapter. Crucially, I will conclude by proposing that in the late Kierkegaard, Adorno found an early proponent of this idea of resistance as comportment. Like Adorno, the late Kierkegaard navigates the tension between negative, critical detachment from the social whole, without, at the same time, removing himself entirely from it and thereby leaving the status quo undisturbed. Indeed, his opposition to society appears precisely through his way of being, as presented in his critical, polemic writings, which aim to cultivate certain responses within those who read them. It this shared approach which leads Adorno to conclude that the late Kierkegaard’s protest has a profound “power” and relevance for individuals resisting in late-capitalist modernity.

Adorno makes the most prominent invocation of the idea of comportment as a mode of practice in his 1969 piece “Resignation”. There, he writes that: “Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part a comportment, a form of praxis, it is more akin to transformative praxis than a comportment that is compliant for the sake of praxis.”[[729]](#footnote-730) This insightful remark which, we should not forget, was originally directed against the activists of the German student movement in the same period, reiterates Adorno’s concern with becoming implicated in the “bestiality of the involved”. Specifically, in this case, being involved in what he calls a “compliant” praxis, which, elsewhere, he associates with pseudo-activity. That is, the kind of primarily practically motivated protest, which, whilst (delusively) diminishing people’s sense of powerlessness, Adorno thinks ultimately constitutes wasted energy and compliance.

Instead, (consistent with the analysis of the previous two chapters) that rather than primarily engaging in “conventional” political action, or indeed prescribing specific action, Adorno attempts to forge a different approach. That is, through the cultivation of a kind of “thinking” (and, we could add, a type of feeling) in his writings and activities. This approach informs his comment in “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis”, which refers to the success of the interventions which he has made:

 In recent decades the *Studies on Authority and Family*, the *Authoritarian Personality*, even the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*…were written without practical intentions and nonetheless exercised some practical influence. That influence came from the fact that in a world where even thoughts have become commodities…no one could suppose when reading these volumes that he was being sold or talked into something. Wherever I have directly intervened in a narrow sense and with a visible practical influence, it happened only through theory.[[730]](#footnote-731)

Through this idea of practice as comportment, Adorno hopes to maintain a certain distance from society, refusing to participate in its coercive structure, whilst avoiding the kind of complete detachment which for all intents and purposes entails sanctioning the unfree state of affairs. Rather, acknowledging his genuine powerlessness, Adorno attempts to intervene through the presentation of his critical way of being, as expressed in his writings and activities. This way of being communicates Adorno’s uncompromising refusal to play along and accept the world’s false alternatives, whilst simultaneously, through his critical interventions, indicates his clear demand for the utter transformation of this world.[[731]](#footnote-732)

So, where does Kierkegaard fit in here? As I have argued, there are several areas in which the late Kierkegaard and Adorno’s approaches to protest and resistance overlap. Particularly, of course, in relation to their shared endeavours to cultivate certain cognitive and non-cognitive responses in others through their writings. This is entirely consistent with – in fact, it constitutes the main work of – the idea of practice as comportment that I have described in this section. Specifically, I want to conclude by suggesting that the late Kierkegaard was not simply relevant “in his afterlife” because he resisted as an individual, a position to which we are all reduced in late capitalism.

Rather, I think Kierkegaard’s late resistance was most powerful for Adorno because he conducted it through an individual comportment which brings him close to achieving the right “*désinvolture* and sympathy” in relation to the society which he opposed. That is to say, in his late writings, Kierkegaard displays a potent mix of necessary critical detachment (which had been latently present, even in his inwardness) whilst, *at the same time*, avoiding becoming stupefied into an inactive disengagement with the external world. Consequently, in his late writings, Kierkegaard is no longer, at least in this sense, the absolute particular who refuses any contact with objectivity and opposes “every intervention into external reality as a waste of purely interior being”, thereby sanctioning “given relations as they are.”[[732]](#footnote-733) Rather, he directly takes “on the whole in which he himself was stuck just like everyone else”, critically engaging with an objective world with which up to that point he had shunned conflict.[[733]](#footnote-734) This informs Adorno’s conclusion that “no one says that Kierkegaard’s hatred of what exists is too abstract”.[[734]](#footnote-735)

Consistent with what I have already suggested, it is how Kierkegaard takes on the whole that is particularly striking for Adorno. Again, he does not do so by calling for collective action or by proposing a programme for action. This would be to affirm false alternatives in an unfree and coercive context. Instead, in introducing the late Kierkegaard’s “truth content”, Adorno underlines that the real “power” of his protest is its catching “fire in the dry air of Kierkegaardian interiority”.[[735]](#footnote-736) This has the resulting effect that the protest “nowhere expresses itself”, but “rather expresses unwaveringly” its “distance” from what exists.[[736]](#footnote-737) It is only by virtue of his detachment from the social whole that Kierkegaard stands any chance of being able to express any real contrast with the prevailing norms. He is only able to disrupt the familiarity of the social whole in the manner he does through his “distance”; his refusal to entertain conformity and bend the ideal of genuine Christianity to the practical constraints of a depraved actuality. Even considering Kierkegaard’s distance vis à vis society, his ability to “sympathize with the condemned [of history]” and express solidarity with the suffering of others does not seem lacking.[[737]](#footnote-738) On the contrary, in Adorno’s view, Kierkegaard expresses this precisely as a part of his protest and his opposition to the society of his day. This position of critical tension was achieved in Adorno’s view through the approach to praxis as comportment that I have elaborated across the previous two chapters.[[738]](#footnote-739)

In the final sentence of KOM, Adorno compares Kierkegaard with the great 20th century Austrian critic Karl Kraus, whom Adorno profoundly admired. Specifically, he suggests that the approach of the late Kierkegaard is reminiscent of the way in which, through a series of polemical attacks, Kraus turned public opinion against the corrupt press tycoon Imre Bekessy and subsequently forced him to leave the country.[[739]](#footnote-740) Adorno writes:

 Someone around to see Karl Kraus expel, through his pure words, Imre Bekessy from Vienna in 1925, still experienced something of the concrete violence of what in Kierkegaard appears so abstractly and in such a monomaniacal form: the power of powerlessness.[[740]](#footnote-741)

This final passage encapsulates why Adorno thinks that the late Kierkegaard must be carried forward, because he remains relevant to the challenges which late-capitalist modernity poses for resistance. In the same moment, the passage also underlines why any unreflective repetition of Kierkegaard’s resistance would be a mistake for Adorno. In closing, I will address these two moments in turn, beginning with Kierkegaard’s limitations. Noting the “monomaniacal” form of Kierkegaard’s protest, Adorno returns again to what he deems to be Kierkegaard’s unhealthy refraction of all criticism through the prism of criticism of the Danish Church. This approach, and the religious impulse underpinning it, cannot be continued today, for all the reasons I discuss in §7.3. Similarly, and I suggest relatedly, the “power of powerlessness” in the late Kierkegaard, appears only “abstractly”. Again, the reason for this pertains to Adorno’s view of Kierkegaard’s still ultimately too inwardly orientated Christianity. This belief meant that Kierkegaard’s principal aim was not ultimately emancipation or the achievement of reconciliation within the socio-historical domain.[[741]](#footnote-742) This belief, as Adorno puts it, “precluded the victory of truth “within-the-world”.[[742]](#footnote-743) Finally, Kierkegaard’s critique cannot simply be taken forward because the powers of subjectivity have diminished still further since the time of Kierkegaard and Kraus. Certainly, there is a sense in Adorno’s writing that the kind of polemical attack which Kierkegaard and Kraus attempted would be inhibited in administered society today.[[743]](#footnote-744) There is no longer the ability to effect events as a critical individual in the way that Kierkegaard and Kraus endeavoured to do. Accordingly, a mere repetition of Kierkegaard’s protest would be mere wishful thinking.

Nonetheless, Adorno still holds out the hope that the “power of powerlessness” has not been completely absorbed into the social whole. It is this hope which sustains his view that Kierkegaard’s late resistance still proves relevant in his afterlife, in the context of late capitalism. Whilst subjectivity is increasingly integrated within administered society, Adorno thinks that we must resist this compulsory process of integration. Inevitably, he thinks this will entail a degree of detachment and withdrawal from society, insofar as refusing to join in is possible at all. In his refusal to conform and in his uncompromising opposition to what presently exists, Kierkegaard anticipates this stance which Adorno thinks is required today: “Whoever puts forward proposals easily makes himself into an accomplice. Talk of a “we” one identifies with already implies complicity with what is wrong”.[[744]](#footnote-745) Accordingly, for Adorno, our objective political situation as one of powerlessness. Repeatedly, he emphasises the importance of retaining consciousness of this reality, of resisting the temptation to delusively alleviate our sense of powerlessness by channelling our energies into grand but ultimately impotent pseudo-activities. Conscious of the poverty of possibilities in the conventional political sphere, resistance is restricted primarily to the individual domain.

All the same, Adorno is insistent that we must engage in *resistance*, not allowing the reality of our powerlessness to stupefy us: “[a] purist attitude…that refrains from intervening likewise reinforces that from which it timorously recoils.”[[745]](#footnote-746) In this belief, and in his own critical interventions against administered society, Adorno follows none other than the late Kierkegaard, whose own “intervention”, he affirmed as “a cutting attack on the ideology of the system of profit”.[[746]](#footnote-747) Crucially, this affirmation cannot be detached from the manner in which Kierkegaard conducts his attack. That is to say, he intervenes not by bending to the broken logic of a deformed system, which would in any case have led to his defeat by other means. Rather, the *power* of Kierkegaard’s intervention was precisely in its uncompromising heterogeneity to everything within the social whole, a heterogeneity which at the same time points negatively to possibilities beyond that whole. In the same way that over a hundred years later, Adorno thought his influence resided in the fact that no one could suppose they were “being sold or talked into something”, Kierkegaard’s ability to disrupt the familiarity of Christendom lay in his negative expression, which contrasted with the self-interested positivity that predominated.[[747]](#footnote-748)

Through this negative comportment, his writings and activities, “his pure words” and his “intellectual body”, Kierkegaard directed every aspect of his being into effecting and cultivating a cognitive and non-cognitive awakening in others.[[748]](#footnote-749) This is the lesson that Adorno thinks those who resist today must learn from Kierkegaard: by refusing to join in; by bringing others to consciousness; by responding to suffering; by gesturing, negatively, to the possibility of another way. However bleak his general diagnosis, Adorno still hopes in this way that individuals will bring about social change in practice: by harnessing the power of powerlessness.

# 8 Conclusion

Having now reached the end of my exploration of the Kierkegaard-Adorno relationship, in concluding this thesis, I will begin by providing a chapter-by-chapter overview of the ground which I have covered in the preceding pages, before drawing some more general conclusions about the significance and contribution of the thesis as a whole.

## 8.1 Chapter-by-Chapter Overview

In Chapters One to Three, I began by providing an interpretation of Adorno’s intellectual development and engagement with Kierkegaard. In Chapter One, I recounted the historical context of Adorno’s earliest engagements with Kierkegaard, prior to the writing of *Construction*. In so doing, I re-emphasised what has sometimes been overlooked, namely that when Adorno came to write his *Habilitationschrift*, Kierkegaard was already a distinctive intellectual figure in his consciousness and one with whom he had grappled extensively in dialogue with Siegfried Kracauer. The significance of this is that it lends credence to the idea that when he came to write (what would become) *Construction*, Adorno was not coming to Kierkegaard entirely anew and *only* with a view to him as a prop for his own philosophical concerns, or *only* as a cipher for Walter Benjamin.

In Chapters Two and Three, I then proceeded to provide a summary and interpretation of the key themes and arguments in *Construction*. I did so with two aims in mind. Firstly, to ground the thesis in an understanding that, on Adorno’s reading, Kierkegaard’s thought is in a number of important ways irreconcilable with his own. Adorno’s principal objection in this regard is that Kierkegaard’s dialectic is subject centred, inward and “objectless”. Accordingly, Kierkegaard’s self is founded on its disassociation from social, historical, and material reality, which Adorno considers a metaphysical impossibility. The consequence of this lack of mediation between subject and object is that Kierkegaard’s dialectic, and as a result, his concept of the self, ends up abstract and indeterminate, as well as foreclosing any possibility of achieving reconciliation with the material world. Finally, Adorno claims that the last move in Kierkegaard’s irreconcilable dialectic is to dispense with concepts altogether, and with them any semblance of a relation to the objective world. This occurs in what Adorno calls Kierkegaard’s sacrifice of the self and of reason and his embrace of the absurd, the absolute paradox of faith. For Adorno, these amount to attempts to totally sunder the absolutely “spiritual” self from its finite, material and historical context. Crucially, my claim is that the fundamentals of Adorno’s judgement on Kierkegaard’s overall authorship do not change in this regard. Indeed, the basis for each of these critical claims on Adorno’s part can be found in KOM. The first aim of Chapters Two and Three was therefore to assert that any study of Adorno’s intellectual relationship with Kierkegaard must proceed by recognising that he was not Kierkegaardian any straightforward sense. The second aim, however, which I emphasise in the latter half of Chapter Three, is to show that Adorno’s negative, critical reading of Kierkegaard does not tell the whole story. This argument both continues and disputes Peter Gordon’s recent narrative for understanding Adorno’s intellectual relationship with Kierkegaard. It continues it, insofar as I agree with Gordon that there is evidence throughout Adorno’s work that the latter saw profound critical potential in Kierkegaard’s thought. I go further than Gordon, however, in suggesting that there is already more substantial evidence of the strength of Adorno’s affinity with Kierkegaard in *Construction* and in Adorno’s early correspondence than his narrative suggests, with its emphasis on the late transformation of Adorno’s view.

In Chapter Four, I give an example of this argument in detail, showing how in *Construction* there is already good evidence of Adorno’s view that Kierkegaard contributes to the critique of Hegelian identity theory and anticipates the possibility of a new, negative form of dialectic, a view which Gordon only attributes to the ‘mature’ Adorno. Specifically, I make this claim by showing how Adorno considers Kierkegaard’s alternative dialectical model, qualitative dialectic, to be an “expressly formulated”, and effective critique of Hegelian idealism.[[749]](#footnote-750) In this dialectic, according to Adorno, Kierkegaard emphasises the ineluctable role of the finite, existing individual in thinking; the rejection of the necessarily progressive, systematic character of dialectic and the preservation of the particular. Crucially, this has great significance in showing the dialectical irony that Adorno perceives in Kierkegaard’s thought. On the one hand, as I show in Chapters Two and Three, Kierkegaard tries to completely deny the importance of the subject’s mediated relationship with the material, objective world. On the other hand, however, in underlining the way in which our thought is conditioned by our status as finite, embodied, contingent individuals, he emphasises the mediation of material objectivity on the subject in this respect “more strongly than Hegel”.[[750]](#footnote-751) I closed Chapter Four by noting that this discussion is far from an abstract debate about dialectic for Adorno, but imperative in informing his approach in keeping alive the possibility of resistance in a systematically unfree social whole.

Having outlined Kierkegaard’s contribution to the development of Adorno’s negative dialectic, in Chapter Five, I turn to the more concrete, critical analysis of society that motivates Adorno in deeming such a dialectic necessary. I achieve this principally through an examination of Adorno’s idea of the wrong life and his associated concept of unfreedom, exploring Kierkegaard’s influence on these ideas via his concept of despair. Crucially, this analysis brought into relief Adorno’s view of a distorted and systematically unfree “administered” world. Within this analysis, I focused particularly on the aspects of the development of our systematic unfreedom as a piece with a view of history as “the rise and fall of the individual.”[[751]](#footnote-752) That is to say, I focused on Adorno’s view that (late-capitalist) modernity and administered society ushers in the demise of the individual subject in its self-reflective capacities, spontaneity and imagination; each individual is reduced to a thoughtless, fungible, copy of the other. In pursuing this interpretation, I referred both to Kierkegaard’s analysis and anticipation of this trend in *The Sickness Unto Death*, comparing this with Adorno’s own affirmative remarks about Kierkegaard in relation to the diminishment of the individual. Finally, I concluded by underlining the point that Adorno cannot put Kierkegaard’s concepts (like despair) to work without socialising and secularising his thought. This is ably demonstrated by Peter Gordon, who shows how Adorno recognises the critical purchase of Kierkegaard’s theological concept of transcendence and the manner in which it leads Kierkegaard (unconsciously) to view the world as a despairing, living hell to be negated. As a materialist, Adorno cannot affirm such transcendence, but instead, with reference to ideas found in Benjamin and Kafka, crafts the idea of an “inverse theology”, a materialist way of viewing the world, through our this-worldly suffering, from the “standpoint of redemption”.[[752]](#footnote-753)

In Chapters Six and Seven, I explored what Adorno considers the point at which Kierkegaard comes closest to enacting consciously this absolute negativity and criticism towards the world, in his late polemical writings against Christendom. In these two chapters, I break new ground, arguing in detail that it was not just Kierkegaard *in general* who became of principal significance to Adorno, but specifically the *late* Kierkegaard who actualises his latent critical potential and emerges from interiority. I go on to suggest that the late Kierkegaard engages in an individual mode of resistance which shares considerable affinities with Adorno’s own praxis of resistance.

In Chapter Six, I state the initial case for Adorno’s view that the polemical writings of the late Kierkegaard represent a turning point in which Kierkegaard emerges out of interiority, moving “from the doctrine of existence to intervention”.[[753]](#footnote-754) Specifically, I show how, on Adorno’s reading, the late Kierkegaard became increasingly radical in his view of the world’s lovelessness, achieving a new level of intensity in his opposition to the world, such that these late writings represent a break in his previous authorship. Most significantly for Adorno, Kierkegaard develops a newfound awareness of the extent to which the objective organisation of society, what Kierkegaard called “externalities”, systematically inhibits individuals in achieving the inwardness required for the practice of Christian love to be realised. This view is concomitant with much of the contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship, who agree that Kierkegaard’s newfound focus on externals represents a crucial discontinuity in the Kierkegaard’s late writings, as distinct from his earlier authorship. Finally, in this chapter I also established that when Kierkegaard undertakes this direct critique, any accompanying resistance cannot be pursued via the means of conventional politics or collective action but is restricted principally to individuals. This perspective, which I argue Adorno shares in his general approach to resistance, gives rise to the discussion with which I conclude Chapter Six, relating to what I coin Adorno’s Gordian knot of resistance. That is, the idea that individuals must both recognise their objective powerlessness and the limits of their situation, without allowing this to stupefy them into total inaction and/or indifference to the world.

In Chapter Seven, I then provided an exposition of what this individual resistance and intervention looks like for the late Kierkegaard and Adorno. I begin by noting that for both thinkers, such is the extremity of their respective views about the malaise that they oppose, that in the present moment there can be no sense of affirmation or a positive proposal for a programme for action. Rather, what both thinkers turn their efforts towards is the cultivation of certain cognitive and non-cognitive responses in individuals, in the hope that this will bring about a baseline level of ‘awakening’ within them. The main body of the chapter explores the late Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective endeavours to cultivate these cognitive and non-cognitive responses in people. Following this, after underlining the crucial partition between them – Kierkegaard’s theological content and appeal to divine transcendence – I demonstrated the key areas of overlap between the two thinkers in their respective attempts to cultivate resistance towards the status quo. I concluded by arguing that the late Kierkegaard becomes a model for Adorno’s own critical praxis of resistance because, through his writings and activities, he anticipates and articulates a version of praxis as comportment, through one’s general way of being. Resisting as an individual, the late Kierkegaard encapsulates both the need for a certain kind of (powerless) detachment and distance from the world, whilst at the same time, avoiding allowing this detachment to morph into indifference or inactivity by not sympathising with others and/or not working, insofar as one can, through interventions to try and change the situation. This model of individual praxis, I conclude, is representative of Adorno’s attempt to navigate the aforementioned Gordian knot with which he thinks those who want to resist are faced today.

Before concluding, it is worth underlining that I do not claim that the connections which I have traced here are exhaustive. I have not considered, for example, the aspects of Kierkegaard’s role in shaping Adorno’s aesthetic theory, which has its own important role to play in the latter’s idea of resistance.[[754]](#footnote-755) Moreover, and related more directly to the thinking behind Adorno’s praxis of resistance, a possible future study could also include exploration of the link between Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness (of which Adorno was undoubtedly aware) and his critique of the displacement “pseudo-activity” of the student movement which accused Adorno of inaction.[[755]](#footnote-756) Similarly, at different points in his assessment of Kierkegaard, Adorno emphasises the presence of both hope and hopelessness in Kierkegaard’s work.[[756]](#footnote-757) Both themes have appeared at different moments in this thesis. As I noted in relation to the idea of inverse theology (which is one facet of Adornian hope), hope is important in providing a leverage against our despair. It can play an important role in enabling us to summon the strength to resist in otherwise bleak circumstances, appearing in the midst of despair without our willing it, and against our probabilistic judgements about the (lack of) reasons for hope.[[757]](#footnote-758) Again, a future study could explore these questions and their relation to Kierkegaard’s influence more directly and in further detail. Nonetheless, even in spite of these lacunae, the study that I have provided in the preceding pages has addressed all of what I deem to be the most integral aspects of the Kierkegaard-Adorno relation.

## 8.2 The Resisting Subject and Objective Society: Historical and Philosophical Significance

As the chapter-by-chapter overview I outlined above demonstrates, my aims in this thesis have been both historical and philosophical. That is to say, I have been concerned both with tracing connections rooted in Kierkegaard’s historical influence on Adorno as well asthe more broad, thematic connections which draw their respective philosophical projects together, read through Adorno’s critique and appropriation of Kierkegaard’s thought. By way of conclusion, I will now seek to highlight the significance of the historical and philosophical findings that I have made.

## 8.2.1 Historical Significance

Perhaps the central thread connecting this thesis has been a detailed textual examination of Kierkegaard’s historical influence upon Adorno’s thought. Whilst I have concerned myself primarily in this respect with Adorno’s explicit comments in finding connections with Kierkegaard, I have also, albeit to a lesser extent, considered connections with Adorno’s thought which are implicitly present in his work.

As I noted at the beginning of the thesis, there has been a recently renewed interest in Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno, in large part because of Peter Gordon’s 2016 monograph *Adorno and Existence*. In this thesis, I have therefore endeavoured to maintain the fundamental spirit of Gordon’s argument, strengthening the case for Kierkegaard’s profound influence on Adorno’s philosophical development. At the same time, however, I have also brought to light points of contention within this narrative where they appear, developing and extending the understanding of Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno as it has been presented in the scholarship thus far.

The first of the key arguments I made in this regard concern the development of Adorno’s affinity with Kierkegaard. Whilst I agree with Gordon that Adorno undoubtedly underwent a significant change over the years in relation to the strength of his affinity with Kierkegaard, I think the extent of this change has been overemphasised. As I argue in Chapters Two to Four, the young Adorno had already arrived at several of the key affinities (even if he expresses them more obliquely) that Gordon attributes only to the mature Adorno. The central reason that these affinities appear more obliquely, I suggested, was primarily because of Adorno’s need to maintain an internal consistency with the predominant against the grain approach of *Construction*. But it was also because of the need for *Construction* to be particularly thoroughgoing, functioning as it did as a critique of Kierkegaard’s perceived successors, the German “existentialists” (specifically Heidegger) and dialectical theology.

The second key argument which I made, going beyond the present historical narrative, was my claim that it was not so much Kierkegaard’s thought in general that Adorno came to have a particularly close affinity with, but specifically the *late* Kierkegaard in his polemical attack upon Christendom.[[758]](#footnote-759) Through this attention to the late Kierkegaard’s writings and entirely in keeping with the spirit of KOM, I put forward the case for Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno’s approach to intervention and resistance, an approach which the latter contrasted with what he saw as the ultimately conformist, praxis-first approach of the student movement. This work is important because it better enables us to understand why Kierkegaard was significant for Adorno in his challenge to resistance in late-capitalist modernity. Not only this, but it helps to brings into relief the specifics of Kierkegaard’s individual, passive and active mode of protest and the relevance that this has for those forced into a position of individual resistance today. Whilst Gordon convincingly makes the case via inverse theology that Adorno’s “task” was one of inheriting Kierkegaard’s “critical resistance” and transforming his “theological disdain for the unredeemed world into a practice of this-worldly criticism that…refuses all worldly consolation”, Gordon does not expand further in terms of what this might mean in practice.[[759]](#footnote-760) With reference to KOM, I have tried to develop an account in this direction, outlining what more active – or at least not merely passive – social and political resistance arising out of Adorno’s engagement with Kierkegaard would involve.

It has only been possible to pursue these links in the depth that I have done so by virtue of the attention I have given both to Adorno’s interpretation of Kierkegaard and to the primary Kierkegaard texts with which he was engaging.[[760]](#footnote-761) This approach helps to explain the reasons for the choice of the Kierkegaard texts that I have focused on: all are amongst those which Adorno was most familiar and cited most readily. Taking this approach brings to light not only further potential points of insight for Adorno in his engagement with Kierkegaard, but also further clarity in understanding where Adorno’s reading is erroneous, or in some instances, intentionally against the grain. The fruits of this approach are most evident in the final two chapters, where I provide an account of Adorno’s reading of the late Kierkegaard in its proximity to the primary texts and contemporary scholarship.

In taking this approach, it becomes clear why Adorno was drawn most towards the late Kierkegaard’s polemic against Christendom. Above all, this is because the late writings represent the point at which Kierkegaard’s non-pseudonymous religious writings and the “real” Kierkegaard’s position comes genuinely closest to Adorno’s thought. There are two key elements to this. Firstly, in the late writings, Kierkegaard makes most explicit his awareness of the dialectical relation between inwardness and externalities.[[761]](#footnote-762) Moreover, it is only in the late writings that Kierkegaard directly, actively, opposes the existence of these externalities and demands their radical overhaul. Thus Adorno, Kierkegaard and much of the contemporary scholarship are unified in the view that the late writings represent the point at which, construed in one sense at least, Kierkegaard emerges from immanence.

The second reason that Adorno found it easier to find affinity with the late Kierkegaard relates to the genuine attitude of ascetic negativity which the latter adopts in his protest against Christendom. For the late Kierkegaard, what the historical moment required was a stance of absolute, negative opposition to the world. Such was the extremity of the situation, the reformist stance of attempting to arrive at ideality in actuality through gradual adjustments, could no longer be justified. Only radical opposition, a clearing of the ground and a cleansing of the temple, would suffice. It is from this initial judgement that all subsequent negative, critical attitudes which distinguish the late writings and make them most compelling to Adorno, follow. Thus, it is only in the late Kierkegaard that Adorno sees the actualisation of a non-conformist resistance which was previously only present in latent critical insights.

## 8.2.2 Philosophical Significance

Intimately connected to the historical work of tracing Kierkegaard’s (explicit and implicit) influence on Adorno, throughout this thesis, I have also developed a philosophical account of Adorno’s understanding of the subject. Specifically, the subject’s relationship to the external, objective world and ultimately, the subject’s role in the task of resistance to this world. For obvious reasons, the frame through which I have developed this account has been Adorno’s continuing dialogue with Kierkegaard’s philosophy both in its critique and appropriation.

To this end, in the first three chapters, I began by analysing the theme which appears most predominantly in Adorno’s earliest analysis of Kierkegaard, *Construction*. This entailed an extended discussion of the various ways in which Adorno thinks that the inward Kierkegaardian subject avoids entering into a substantive, mediated dialectic with the objective, external world. Adorno concludes that Kierkegaard fails in this endeavour, viewing his asocial, inward refuge from the world as a metaphysical impossibility. Kierkegaard ends up falling prey precisely to the same world from which he wanted to disassociate himself, unintentionally reproducing its reified, alienated condition in his concept of the subject.

In Chapter Four, I then tempered this account of Adorno’s overwhelmingly critical analysis, by showing how Adorno sees Kierkegaard as possessing an unusual critical insight into the way in which our thinking as subjects is conditioned. Firstly, by our ineluctably finite, embodied existence and secondly by the temporal and contingent horizon which this entails. At least at this moment in his thought, Adorno takes the view that Kierkegaard treats the impingement of objective conditions on our thought more seriously than Hegel. Moreover, he thinks this signals insight into a crucial second moment of truth in Kierkegaard’s thought, namely his insistence on the preservation of the particular against the universal. I concluded this chapter by suggesting that this is far from an abstract debate about dialectic, but ties into both Adorno’s worries about systematic unfreedom of society and, in this context, the importance of the particular individual as a source of resistance.

In Chapter Five, I then moved from this, via an exploration of Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective accounts of despair and unfreedom, to a more concrete discussion about the reasons why such resistance is necessary. Specifically, I traced Adorno’s account of history as the rise and fall of subjectivity. This decline culminates in a systematically unfree, administered society in which individuals’ entire being becomes conformed and homogenised with the objective reality of the social whole. Importantly, whilst Kierkegaard in many ways fails to think through the effects of the objective, social whole on subjectivity, on Adorno’s account he does anticipate the decline, integration, and neutralisation of subjectivity long before it had truly taken hold.

Finally, in Chapters Six and Seven, I consider Adorno’s approach to resistance to this process, which constitutes his attempt to confront the entanglement between subject and objective society. As I show in these chapters, there are a number of continuities between the late Kierkegaard’s protest against Christendom and Adorno’s praxis of resistance, including some which go beyond explicit acknowledgement by the latter (whilst remaining within the spirit of his interpretation). This is not coincidental. Adorno found in the late Kierkegaard a figure whose response to the challenge of his own time was profoundly relevant to the challenge of resistance in late capitalist modernity. Specifically, it was relevant to the challenge of resistance as a subject in a world where the same subject had been largely rendered powerless in the face of a systematically unfree objective social whole. As I show in Chapter Seven, whilst separated significantly in their language and context, both the late Kierkegaard and Adorno seek to rehabilitate a subjectivity which had been suppressed and diminished, an approach which the latter calls the “turn to the subject”.[[762]](#footnote-763)

As Lydia Goehr observes, crucial to Adorno’s emphasis on the turn to the subject “was to recognize its objective mediation, the [subject’s] shaping of and by objective conditions, the inextricably private-public character of thought”.[[763]](#footnote-764) This quote succinctly describes both sides of Adorno’s entire praxis of resistance. On the one hand, it points to the reasons for Adorno’s defensive approach: subjects are systematically adversely shaped by objective conditions. Accordingly, the principal aim of resistance cannot currently be an effort towards collective revolutionary action or the creation of a truly free society. On the other hand, however, Adorno’s interventions are evidence of his hope that the critical subject could shape objective conditions, in however seemingly insignificant a way, through “transformative” comportment.[[764]](#footnote-765) For Adorno, this meant through his general way of being and his public writings and activities. Indeed, Goehr’s reference to the “private-public character of thought” is a nod to Adorno’s insight in this regard. Thinking, the presentation of thought and the task of bringing others to reflection, is never restricted only to the private sphere for Adorno, but is something which stretches beyond itself, into the public sphere and the practical domain. As he put it in “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis”: “If thinking bears on anything of importance, then it initiates a practical impulse, no matter how hidden that impulse may remain to thinking”.[[765]](#footnote-766)

In Kierkegaard, Adorno returned to a figure who all those years ago in *Construction* he had recognised as acknowledging the conditioned character of the subject’s thought by the objective conditions of existence. Now, finally, in his late writings, Kierkegaard put that insight to work in demanding social change, acknowledging *both* the subject’s shaping by objective conditions whilst, at the same time, harnessing its ever-diminishing capacity to shape them in return. Whatever remains of that capacity and its limits, Adorno believed it was imperative for us to capture and communicate.

## 8.3 The Power of Powerlessness Today

Since his death in 1969, the web of “disaster” and “delusion” which Adorno thought constituted administered society has grown ever tighter.[[766]](#footnote-767) Technology advances at unprecedented speed, but the universal alleviation of basic material needs, a goal which is realisable, remains a utopian dream. Instead, we find ourselves helpless spectators as the same technologies progress towards our ever-increasing integration with, and dependency upon them in the name of efficiency, with no more than a passing thought for the dangers that this might entail. Power, which was once at least ostensibly ascribed to democratically elected governments, is held all the more explicitly and unashamedly in the hands of a few grotesquely wealthy individuals and unaccountable conglomerates. The radical evil of unmitigated violence which Adorno describes continues; far from diminishing, its escalation seems more inevitable every day. Above all, in the rich Western world, we stand on the precipice of ecological catastrophe, a catastrophe which is already manifest in the poorest corners of the earth, and which will transform the organisation of human societies in ways that we cannot yet begin to imagine.

Even without completely affirming Adorno’s austere judgement about the lack of political possibilities, the prospects for a radical transformation of the situation I describe appears minimal at best. Almost all attempts at transformation in this direction are absorbed as soon as they appear. As subjects in administered society, our condition is apiece with the citizens of Danish Christendom, at least insofar we are left “severed from the potential” of our own “actualization”.[[767]](#footnote-768) In these circumstances, Adorno’s reflections, via Kierkegaard, on our powerless place as subjects in an overwhelming society retain an abiding relevance.

Where political transformation is blocked, it becomes incumbent upon us to reflect on the reasons for this. In short, we have little choice *other* than to use our “power to reflect on these matters”.[[768]](#footnote-769) In the first instance, what this means is undertaking the unending task, imperative for both Kierkegaard and Adorno, of ensuring that we *in ourselves* maintain “the utter absence, the ultimate impossibility, of anything like self-deception”.[[769]](#footnote-770) Only by refusing the temptation to endorse comforting, but ultimately disempowering deceptions about the obstacles that stand in our way, do we keep alive the possibility of overcoming them. At the same time, as Adorno repeatedly emphasises, we must not allow this consciousness of our impotence to lapse into stupefaction and interminable reflection on the pointlessness of trying to change things. Instead, our energies must remain steadfastly focused “upon the power of resistance to all things imposed on us”.[[770]](#footnote-771)

In a situation where the roads that would lead us out of unfreedom appear to be blocked, precisely the kind of resistance that the late Kierkegaard and Adorno practised becomes relevant. Now, it becomes all the more important to work towards bringing ourselves and others to the kind of consciousness which perceives and experiences the world beyond its immediate appearance.[[771]](#footnote-772) This is because, in the final analysis, it is *only* this kind of collective consciousness that would be able to lead us out of the impasse in which we find ourselves today.

All that said, ultimately, these questions concerning our own withdrawal or involvedness as a part of this resistance will never be resolved through the power of thought alone; nor can they be. As Adorno himself observes, the Gordian knot of resistance “cannot be settled by reflection; it is the constitution of reality that dictates the contradiction”.[[772]](#footnote-773) Confronting this reality remains the task which faces us today.

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1. On a more biographical note relating to the intensity of my own interest in this relationship, although I did not know it at the time, the first inklings of this thesis appeared in 2016, as a paper written during the final year of my undergraduate degree. The subject of that paper was Søren Kierkegaard’s influence on Theodor W. Adorno. From then on, a fascination with Adorno’s intellectual relationship with Kierkegaard had been initiated in me. As I increasingly came to see, and have continued to learn ever since, the subject I was embarking on was far more complex, disputed, and multi-layered than I could have supposed. The fruits of that learning are contained in the pages that follow. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1996), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Max Pensky, *Melancholy* Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning, (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 140. I will expand on Walter Benjamin’s role in the creation of *Construction* below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Hermann Deuser, *Dialektische Theologie: Studien zu Adornos Metaphysik und zum Spätwerk Kierkegaards*, (Mainz: Kaiser und Grünewald, 1980). Deuser’s book is an example of an early study in comparing the respective categories which Kierkegaard and Adorno use. This is undertaken with the more general aim of rehabilitating the notions of "paradox" and “dialectic” for their use in theology. Deuser ultimately argues that negative dialectics is a form of Christology. This work subsequently sparked a noted debate with Klaus Michael Kodalle, which is attested to in the latter’s essay “Adornos Kierkegaard – Ein kritischer Kommentar,” In *Die Rezeption S. Kierkegaards in der deutschen und dänischen Philosophie and Theologie: Vorträge des Kolloquiums am 22. und 23. März 1982,* ed. Heinrich Anz, Paul Lübke and Friedrich Schmöe (Copenhagen: Wilhelm Fink, 1983), pp. 70-100, as well as Kodalle’s later monograph: Klaus-Michael Kodalle, *Die Eroberung des Nutzlosen: Kritik des Wunschdenkens und der Zweckrationalität im Anschluss an Kierkegaard*, (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schönigh, 1988), pp. 195-214, 223-33. Whilst Deuser and Kodalle agree that Adorno was profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard, their debate orients itself around the legitimacy of Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard in *Construction*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Marcia Morgan, *Kierkegaard and Critical* Theory, (Idaho: Lexington Books, 2013); Angermann, Asaf. *Beschädigte Ironie: Kierkegaard, Adorno und die negative Dialektik kritischer Subjektivität*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Peter Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016). Beyond monograph length studies, a number of articles have been published since the millennium using historical and philosophical and approaches to find connections between Kierkegaard and Adorno: Lore Hühn and Philipp Schwab. “Intermittenz und ästhetische Konstruktion: Kierkegaard” In *Adorno-Handbuch*. eds. Klein, Richard, Kreuzer, Johann and Müller-Doohm, Stefan. (J.B. Metzler: Stuttgart, 2019), pp. 392-401; Mattias Martinson, “Ontology of Hell: Reflections on Theodor W. Adorno’s Reception of Søren Kierkegaard”, Literature and Theology, 28:1 (2012), pp. 45-62; Marcia Morgan, “Reading Kierkegaard”, In *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Max Pensky. (NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 35-50; David Sherman, “Adorno’s Kierkegaardian debt”. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 27:1 (2001), pp. 77–106; Matt Waggoner, “Giving Up the Good: Adorno, Kierkegaard, and the Critique of Political Culture”. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 6:2 (2005), pp. 63-83; Tom Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim and the Concept of Despair”, *Hegel Bulletin*, 40:2 (2019), pp. 237–256. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Morgan, *Kierkegaard and Critical Theory,* p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Morgan, *Kierkegaard and Critical Theory*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Morgan, *Kierkegaard and Critical Theory*, p. 20. As Morgan concludes, *Construction* “is an outlier beyond any possible congruence with Kierkegaard’s oeuvre” (p. viii) and Adorno’s claims “have less to do with Kierkegaard and more with the desire to read something else into and against Kierkegaard” (p. 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Angermann concludes however that for Adorno the impossibility of irony is “not to be regarded as total, much less as fatal”. Rather, irony operates as “an endless figure…a trope that constantly unfolds”. Recognising the impossibility of irony thus “precisely opens up the possibility of risking a glimpse from this precarious situation at the incommensurability that is becoming more and more covert, more subtle, but yet is still present. It is precisely damaged irony that keeps the wound of negativity open – and with it the inner impulse of criticism.” Angermann, *Beschädigte Ironie*, p. 286. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Gordon, AE, p. xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Gordon, AE, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Gordon, AE, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Gordon, AE, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Gordon, AE, pp. 188-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. KCOA, pp. 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. KOM, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. HF, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. MM, p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. KOM, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. The *Habilitationsschrift* is the second doctorate, a qualification required in Germany to achieve the status of full professor. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Kracauer to Löwenthal, 8th December 1923, (Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main: Löwenthal’s Literary Estate), quoted in Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. NTL II, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 17th June 1925, pp. 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. TAAB, Adorno to Alban Berg, 28th June 1926, p. 59. In this case, he refers to the role of “personality and inwardness” in music. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Harry Craver notes that “The period of Kracauer’s most intensive interest in Kierkegaard coincides with when he began work on *The Detective Novel*. Near the end of 1923, he mentioned the beginning phases of his ‘metaphysical’ study in a letter to Löwenthal. At the same time, Kracauer was very close to Adorno, whom he described as obsessed with the work of the Danish writer.” Harry T. Craver*, Reluctant Skeptic: Siegfried Kracauer and the Crises of Weimar Culture*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), pp. 118-119. Indeed, *The Detective Novel*, which was Kracauer’s most Kierkegaardian work, is dedicated to Adorno. For a full assessment of the extent of Kierkegaard’s influence on Kracauer’s thought during the 1920s, see especially Chapter Three, pp. 106-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. NTL II, p. 65. Although not relevant to Kracauer’s influence on Adorno in the early period that concerns us here, it is worth noting that Adorno did not retain an uncritical attitude towards his early tutor’s thought, later writing that Kracauer’s work was tinged with an “amateurish thinking on his feet” and a “dampened self-criticism in favor of a playful pleasure in felicitous insights”. (NTL II, p. 60). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. As Craver puts it in *Reluctant Skeptic* (p. 119): “During parts of 1923–1924, he [Kracauer] and Adorno travelled together, and Kierkegaard appears to have occupied much of their discussions and collective reading.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 25th July 1930, pp. 159-161. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. That Adorno had a sustained interested in Kierkegaard in the decade prior to writing his *Habiliation* does not of course rule out the very real possibility that Adorno used Kierkegaard predominantly as a cipher for other philosophical themes and concerns in *Construction*. Nonetheless, I think it does provide us with an important context which should lead us to consider more seriously the possibility that whilst *Construction* is in many ways not “about Kierkegaard” (for reasons I will discuss below), this should not be our assessment of the book without any qualification. Kierkegaard was an important philosophical figure for Adorno in his own right and, as I hope to show, his distinct philosophical influence can be recognised in *Construction*, even in the face of Adorno’s obscure “against the grain” method and alongside the multitude of influences that inform that early text. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. A helpful summary of Adorno’s doctoral dissertation and Hans Cornelius’s influence upon it is given in Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, pp. 77-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Rolf Wiggershaus. *The Frankfurt School: Its History Theories and Political Significance.* trans. Michael Robertson. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 81. These strategic concerns were well grounded, since in 1925, just a few years earlier, Walter Benjamin had presented a genuine piece of work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as his *Habilitation* under Cornelius, and it was rejected for its incomprehensibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Adorno had published over a hundred articles on music criticism and aesthetics between 1921 and 1932, but the 1933 publication of *Construction* was his first published work of philosophy. See Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. In May 1930, Adorno wrote to Kracauer saying that: “I am really enjoying my work and have never been so intensely preoccupied with a literary project as I am this time”. (TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 12th May 1930, p. 140). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. TAAB, Adorno to Berg, 16th January 1931, p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Walter Benjamin wrote the following about Adorno’s revisions: “I presume that your book owes an enormous amount to the total re-working to which you subjected it even when you originally felt it was complete.” (TAWB, Benjamin to Adorno, 1st December 1932, p. 32) [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Morgan*, Kierkegaard and Critical Theory*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. A good example of this tendency to overlook Kierkegaard as a distinctive philosophical influence amongst other influences on Adorno in *Construction* is the “*Intermittenz*” section (pp. 100-102), which I will discuss in further detail below and which receives no treatment in either Angermann, Gordon or Morgan. Traditionally, it seems to have been straightforwardly interpreted as an appropriation of Walter Benjamin, probably because of Adorno’s reference to the Benjaminian idea of “intermittent dialectic”. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 25th July 1930, pp. 159-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Paul Tillich, ‘Gutachten über die Arbeit von Dr. Wiesengrund: Die Konstruktion des Ästhetischen bei Kierkegaard’, File on Theodor W. Adorno, Archive of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main (Section 134, Number 4, Sheets 17–24) quoted in Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. In the English translation of the text, this continuous style is not reflected in the text. The translator, Robert Hullot-Kentor, has instead chosen to divide up the text by placing paragraph breaks where new section headings appear and indeed places these headings into the main body of the text. When I refer to specific sections of *Construction*, it is to these divisions which I refer for the sake of ease, although the idea of *Construction* having “sections” is slightly misleading. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. In a letter to Kracauer, Adorno writes that the book’s method is one of “fitting ideas into one another into an uninterrupted sequence – a ‘train of thought’ understood as a form of presentation”. (TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 14th March 1933, p. 207). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Kracauer’s influence on the method of *Construction* has gone largely unacknowledged in the scholarship, but it is clear from Adorno’s later comments in his tribute to Kracauer that his influence should be noted, if not equal to, then alongside Benjamin. For example, Adorno writes that Kracauer taught him to read philosophical works as “coded text…from which the historical situation of spirit could be read” (NTL II, p. 58). This applies particularly strongly to the *intérieur* section of *Construction*, which I refer to below. Not only this, but Adorno goes onto note that: “If in my later reading of traditional philosophical texts I was not so much impressed by their unity and systematic consistency as I was concerned with the play of forces at work under the surface of every closed doctrine and viewed the codified philosophies as force fields in each case, it was certainly Kracauer who impelled me to do so.” (NTL II, p. 59). The idea of reading texts as “a play of forces at under the surface” is evidently prevalent in Adorno’s deconstructive approach in *Construction*. Kierkegaard’s theory of the stages is read as unified and systematic, and yet ultimately undermined by the aesthetic and natural themes which reappear as “truth” against Kierkegaard’s purportedly spiritualist and anti-natural intention. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Again, this approach is often accurately described as an appropriation of Walter Benjamin’s cognitive method in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* references to which (explicit and implicit) are replete throughout *Construction*. What is less often mentioned is Kracauer’s contribution to the critical method of *Construction* and its emphasis on going beyond the appearance of continuity expressed in Kierkegaard’s direct statements. Accordingly, Adorno wrote of Kracauer that “he showed me how…[f]rom a certain point of view, the fissures and flaws in a philosophy are more essential to it than the continuity of its meaning, which most philosophies emphasize of their own accord.” (NTL II, p. 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Marcia Morgan goes as far as to suggest that Adorno’s presentation of Kierkegaard is so distant from Kierkegaard’s actual writings that it tells us nothing directly about Kierkegaard’s influence on Adorno, but merely offers us an early insight into Adorno’s own philosophical concerns, which, she notes, have much in common with Kierkegaard’s own. See Morgan, *Kierkegaard and Critical Theory*, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 12th May 1930, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. AE, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Scholem to Benjamin, October 24th 1933, *in The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*: *1932–1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. TAWB, Benjamin to Adorno, 1st December 1932, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. TAWB, Benjamin to Adorno, 1st December 1932, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. As Benjamin wrote in his review of *Construction*: “Nowhere does Wiesengrund's [Adorno’s] insight go deeper than where he ignores the stereotypes of Kierkegaardian philosophy and where he looks Instead for the key to Kierkegaard's thought in its apparently insignificant relics, in its images, similes, and allegories.” Walter Benjamin, “Kierkegaard: The End of Philosophical Idealism” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*. trans. Rodney Livingstone and others. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005) pp. 703-705. The most famous example of Adorno’s Benjamin-inspired allegorical reading of images in Kierkegaard’s work is the section on the *intérieur*, which I outline below. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. By no means am I suggesting that what I list here is exhaustive, but that it merely serves to indicate the breadth of Benjamin’s influence on the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. The section on the Baroque appears in KCOA, pp. 62-64. This section does nonetheless contain one of the few explicit citations of Benjamin in the book. Perhaps the most egregious examples of plagiarism appear in the concluding chapter of the book. For example, without any reference to Benjamin, Adorno almost entirely (and somewhat unconvincingly, given the differences between the passages from Goethe and Kierkegaard) co-opts a theme from the former’s 1924-1925 essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, applying it to a passage from *Fear and Trembling* (KCOA, p. 121): “Sacrifice disappears and in its place dialectic holds its breath for an instant; a caesura appears in its progress…Certainly, to the eyes of Kierkegaard the existentialist, reconciliation passes by overhead like a radiant meteor that never reaches earth.” The origin of this metaphor and in fact the entire discussion of the caesura of illusive reconciliation can be found in Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926.* ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), pp. 354-355. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. KCOA, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. A full exposition of this concept is beyond the scope of this thesis, but good expositions of Adorno’s concept of natural-history and its intellectual genesis can be found in Gordon, AE, pp. 55-57 and Tom Whyman, “Understanding Adorno on ‘Natural-History’”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 24:4, (2016), pp. 452-472. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Adorno undertakes the same correction much more explicitly in an essay he published in 1932, the year before the publication of *Construction*. For a particularly clear exposition of this correction, see Whyman, “Natural-History”, pp. 461-469. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press, 1977, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. For example, as Susan Buck-Morss notes (*Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 44) Adorno’s concept of natural-history which appears as an important theme in *Construction* owed much to Lukács’s pre Marxist, aesthetic writings, such as his 1916 work *Theory of the Novel*, written at a time when his thought was greatly influenced by Kierkegaard (as we have seen from his scathing critique, that would not remain the case). Similarly, whilst Benjamin’s influence on *Construction* is often noted, Kierkegaard’s own influence on Benjamin and the overlap between their thinking (of which Adorno himself was aware) is ignored almost completely when considering the development of Adorno’s thought in this early period. But this overlap was undoubtedly present, as Rainer Nägele, notes: Kierkegaard plays a “discreet but decisive role in Benjamin’s thought in general”. “Body Politics: Benjamin’s Dialectical Materialism between Brecht and the Frankfurt School,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 174. For a full assessment of Kierkegaard’s explicit influence, see Joseph Westfall, “Walter Benjamin: Appropriating the Kierkegaardian Aesthetic”, In *Kierkegaard’s Influence on Philosophy, Tome I: German and Scandinavian Philosophy,* ed. Jon Stewart, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 49-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. A good example of the kind of influence I have in mind here is Adorno’s incorporation of the idea of caesura and dialectics at a standstill in *Construction*, often attributed straightforwardly to Benjamin’s influence. But as Rainer Nägele notes, these ideas, particularly the latter are not straightforwardly Benjaminian, but are themselves influenced by Kierkegaard and his critique of mediation in Hegel. See Nägele, “Body Politics”, p. 156 and p.174. Adorno himself notes this influence (albeit denying that Benjamin was aware of the Kierkegaardian connection): “‘dialectics at a standstill’- a name, incidentally, he [Benjamin] found without knowing that Kierkegaard's melancholy had long since conjured it up”. NTL II, p. 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. A number of summaries of *Construction* have helped to clarify and inform my interpretation and approach in this chapter:Roland Boer, “A Totality of Ruins: Adorno on Kierkegaard”, Cultural Critique, 83 (2013), pp. 1-30; Mattias Martinson, “Ontology of Hell: Reflections on Theodor W. Adorno’s Reception of Søren Kierkegaard”, Literature and Theology, 28:1 (2014), pp. 45-62;Peter Šajda, “Tracing the Trajectory of Kierkegaard’s Unintended Triumphs and Defeats”, In *Kierkegaard’s Influence on Philosophy, Tome I: German and Scandinavian Philosophy*, ed. Jon Stewart, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 3-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. There is only one major exception to this rule: I introduce Adorno’s sociology of inwardness and analysis of the significance of Kierkegaard’s historical status as *rentier* before discussing Adorno’s more intricate critique of Kierkegaard as a philosopher of interiority. In my view, the former serves as a better entry point to the latter than the other way around. Notably, Adorno also introduces the themes in that order in his own summary, which I quote below. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. *Theodor W. Adorno Archiv*, quoted In TASK, p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. KCOA, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. KCOA, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. KCOA, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. KCOA, p. 11. Adorno emphasises that this approach should not mean that one can simply disregard the function of the pseudonyms and “take their opinion as Kierkegaard’s own”. Whether he is entirely consistent in this approach is questionable to say the least. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. KCOA, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. KCOA, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. KCOA, p. 9 and p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. KCOA, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. KCOA, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. KCOA, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. KCOA, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. As Peter Gordon puts it: “the governing claim of Adorno’s book” is that Kierkegaard’s philosophy can only be understood “if one resists both its theistic appeals to a transcendent God and its protoexistentialist meditations on the anxiety of finite life.” (Gordon, AE, p. 21). As I argue in §3.3-§3.4 and Chapter Four below, however, I do not think this tells the whole story in relation to Kierkegaard’s apparent early non-engagement with religious and proto-existentialist themes. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Accordingly, Adorno writes of Kierkegaard’s “lack of any evident experience of the social landscape…which results in the creation of “a parody”. (KCOA, p. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. KCOA, p. 13. The brief nod to common cause with Kierkegaard in the midst of critique should be noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. KCOA, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. KCOA, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. KCOA, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. KCOA, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. KCOA, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. KCOA, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. KCOA, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. Particularly relevant in this regard is Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, one of the few pieces of secondary literature which Adorno cites more than once in *Construction*. For the central definition of the phenomenon of reification in that book, see György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (London: Merlin Press, 1990), pp. 83-109. As I suggest above, reification occupies a particularly central place in Adorno’s early thought. Whilst it retains importance in Adorno’s mature work, in the final analysis he regards it as an “epiphenomenon” and warns against those who view “the dissolution of reification” as “the philosophers’ stone”. (ND, p. 190). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. KCOA, p. 48. The quoted passages can be found In Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family*, in Collected Works, vol. 4 (New York: International Publishers), p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. KCOA, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. Adorno’s historical account is rather selective. Amidst the many claims about Kierkegaard’s “fleeing” from the external world, Adorno fails to mention the former’s frequent interaction with people on the streets of Copenhagen and his wider presence in public life. For a detailed account of this, see Bruce Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. Bruce Kirmmse & Virginia Laursen, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. The history of Adorno’s concept of mediation is a complex one, because although the term derives from Hegel, he does not use to denote subject-object interaction, but applies it in the context of his logic. Equally, it should be distinguished from the idea of social mediation (also relevant to Adorno’s criticism of Kierkegaard), which is the related idea that our thought is inevitably influenced and impinged upon by the prevailing norms of the social whole, such that we are unable to take up a transcendent position in relation to that whole. For a clear and thorough exposition of Adorno’s idea of mediation and its Hegelian roots, see Brian O’Connor, *Adorno*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 66-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
93. O’Connor, *Adorno*, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
94. KCOA, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
95. KCOA, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
96. KCOA, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
97. KCOA, p. 32. As Adorno writes: “Kierkegaard’s dialectic exempts itself from material definition. It is immanent and in its immanence infinite”. (KCOA, p. 31). Translation emended. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
98. KCOA, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
99. KCOA, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
100. KCOA, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
101. KCOA, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
102. KCOA, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
103. KCOA, p. 38. The very idea of attempting to reduce specific historical content to a containable existential “Situation” gives an indication of Kierkegaard’s intention here (at least on Adorno’s reading). [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
104. KCOA, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
105. The external world still confronts Kierkegaard, at least in the aesthetic and ethical spheres. “Only when its immanent dialectic is repelled by external reality – where it is still tolerated as aesthetic immediacy and as the ‘middle reality’ of the ethical – does reality enter into the dialectic and the dialectic plastically reproduce the contours of the external world.” (KCOA, p. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
106. KCOA, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
107. KCOA, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
108. KCOA, pp. 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
109. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
110. KCOA, pp. 38-39. Øieblikket appears in the original translation that Adorno uses as “*Augenblick*”. Hullot-Kentor translates in this as “The Instant” in his English translation of *Construction*, although Øieblikket is principally translated from the Danish by Kierkegaard scholars as “The Moment”. To avoid confusion, I will maintain the former translation, in order to maintain continuity with Adorno’s texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
111. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
112. KCOA, p. 39. In so doing, Adorno echoes the conclusion of “Kierkegaard Once More” thirty years later, though the latter passage is interpreted far more positively than the “Situation” section of *Construction*, which has been overlooked: “In determinate negation Kierkegaard, according to his own language, emerged from interiority” (KOM, p. 73). [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
113. KCOA, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
114. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
115. Adorno later gives the clearest philosophical exposition of this idea in KOM: “If Hegel reproaches the Unhappy Consciousness – as a blind actor opposed to its context – with abstractness, then the Kierkegaardian particular becomes even more literally abstract. What its possible content could be arises from the world, to which the absolute particular is said to be in absolute opposition. If it refrains completely from it, then its apparent concretion, that of the pure this-there [*Diesda*], becomes something wholly indeterminate…this manifests itself in the absorption of all contentual determinations into the ‘situation’...Its content serves contingency.” (KOM, p. 66). In an attempt to radically distinguish itself from the external world, Kierkegaard’s subject instead ends up blindly and arbitrarily absorbing all of its content from that world, without reflection or distinction. Thus, the subject’s relation to this world becomes one of differentiation and identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
116. KCOA, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
117. KCOA, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
118. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
119. Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
120. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
121. KCOA, p. 37. Adorno’s use here of *Indifferenz* rather than *Gleichgültigkeit* is significant, particularly as the translations of Kierkegaard which Adorno cites in order to justify this claim use *Gleichgültigkeit*. As Paul Redding notes, *Gleichgültigkeit* usually corresponds to the English sense of indifference: unconcernedness and apathy on the part of subject towards the object. *Indifferenz*, by contrast, is a neologism which has its origin in Schelling: see Paul Redding, *Hegel’s Hermeneutics*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 58, n. 18. In Schelling’s identity philosophy, *Indifferenz* is contrasted with *Differenz*; the beginning and end of philosophical knowledge is characterised as *Indifferenz*. In *Indifferenz*, there is no possibility of thinkable distinction, only the non-difference (coincidence) of opposites. Kirill Chepurin suggests that the pursual of the logic of indifferentiation is not for Schelling: “a logic of emergence or dialectical interweaving, but as a repetition and intensification of the very principle of indifference, to the point of its becoming obliterative. It is a potentiation of matter towards ‘the effacement of all potency or difference’”.(Kirill Chepurin, “Indifference and the World: Schelling’s Pantheism of Bliss”, *Sophia*, 58 (2019), p. 621). This same idea tracks well when applied to Adorno’s treatment of Kierkegaard’s “Situation”. Specifically, the use of “*Indifferenz*” suggests that Kierkegaard ends up not merely in an alienated, apathetic “indifference” towards the objective world as conventionally understood (as for example, Buck-Morss describes it in *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 115 and p. 118). Rather, this alienation ends up dissolving into an indeterminate identity with the social world: a non-difference which is a coincidence of opposites. This also fits with the wider argument in *Construction*, in which Adorno thinks that Kierkegaard pursues precisely the same repetitive logic of indifference instead of dialectical interweaving. Indeed, this logic leads all the way to the point of an oblivion between self and world in which, contrary to Kierkgaard’s intention, the subject becomes indeterminately immediate with the social world. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
122. KCOA, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
123. KCOA, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
124. KCOA, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
125. KCOA, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
126. KCOA, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
127. Gordon, AE, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
128. KCOA, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
129. KCOA, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
130. KCOA, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
131. KCOA, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
132. KCOA, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
133. KCOA, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
134. KCOA, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
135. As Adorno puts it “in the apartment eternity and history merge”, (KCOA, p. 44). Thus, in Kierkegaard’s philosophy there is not only the indifferentiation of subject and object, but also of nature and history. In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, the historical ends up being naturalised. See fn**.** 58for an exposition of *Indifferenz* as the principle of indifferentiation which ends up effacing all difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
136. Throughout the text, Adorno places scare quotes around “meaning” in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
137. NTL II, p. 251. Translation amended. For a fuller discussion of Adorno’s interpretation of Beckett’s critique of existentialism and the difference between the desolate scene in *Endgame* and Kierkegaard’s orderly *intérieur*, see Gordon, AE, pp. 107-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
138. KCOA, p. 46. The quote in full reads that the origin of inwardness is “in the historical, as in the prehistorical”. This theme is found throughout *Construction* and anticipates a thesis developed later in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that history as the story of progress is an illusion. Rather, history has not yet really begun. What constitutes “history” has only been a repetition of the same violent logic of natural life over and over again. It is this sense, that “history” remains mythical-natural pre-history. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
139. KCOA, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
140. KCOA, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
141. KCOA, p. 69: “Kierkegaard’s concept of existence does not coincide with mere existence, but with an existence that, dynamic in itself, obtains a transcendent meaning that is supposedly qualitatively different from existence”. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
142. Adorno writes that Kierkegaard’s critique is “not only of the scientific comprehension of the objective world, but equally of the ‘objectifying’ interpretation of subjectivity and therefore, *a priori*, of the possibility of an ‘existential analytic of existence”. (KCOA, p. 70). This is a good example of Adorno acknowledging and defending a truly “existential” aspect of Kierkegaard’s thinking in *Construction*. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
143. KCOA, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
144. KCOA, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
145. KCOA, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
146. KCOA, p. 72. In embracing the paradox, the person negates their immanent subjectivity and forfeits their powers of reason. Thus, Adorno describes the paradox as “the highest power of conjuration…a power…without images”. This is a crucial theme, which I will return to below. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
147. KCOA, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
148. KCOA, p. 74. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
149. My definitions here are indebted to Brian O’Connor’s lucid exposition of these ideas in *Adorno*, pp. 55-56 and pp. 76-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
150. As I will show in Chapter Four and then more indirectly in Chapter Five, for Adorno, part of what constitutes unfree society in late-capitalist modernity is the systematic assertion of “identity” as a way of obscuring the real antagonisms which exist in that same society. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
151. ND, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
152. ND, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
153. I have taken this distinction between coercive and non-coercive identity from O’Connor, *Adorno*, p. 78. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
154. LND, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
155. HTS, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
156. Hegel describes this task of systematicity in his *Phenomenology* as follows: “The necessary progression and interconnection of the forms of the unreal consciousness will by itself bring to pass the *completion* of the series”. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 50. O’Connor explains Adorno’s problem with this approach as follows: “Hegel’s actual deployment of

his conception of experience is constrained by a deeper commitment to developing these categories in a systematic order…By constraining dialectical experience within systematicity, however, the dynamic elements are distorted and forced to a conclusion. Indeed, they cease to be elements of experience, precisely in that they are geared towards a predetermined outcome.” (*Adorno*, p. 64). [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
157. KCOA, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
158. KCOA, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
159. KCOA, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
160. KOM, p. 70. This use of the idea of “coercive” identity [*Identitätszwang*] in the context of Adorno’s interpretation of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelian identity, shows that my own use of this contrast between coercive and non-coercive identity is wholly appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
161. KCOA, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
162. KCOA, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
163. SUD, p. 13 and KCOA, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
164. KOM, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
165. KCOA, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
166. KCOA, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
167. KCOA, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
168. KCOA, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
169. KCOA, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
170. KCOA, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
171. KCOA, p. 79: “Material statements about existence that contain more than the proclamation of the factual thereness-of the self or the attempt at its localization through the combination of universal concepts, occur in Kierkegaard only rarely and with the greatest abridgement.” [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
172. KCOA, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
173. KCOA, pp. 88-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
174. On Adorno’s reading, ethical life confronts aesthetic immediacy “as a new level of spirit” (KCOA, p. 89). [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
175. KCOA, p. 89. For example, Adorno argues here that whilst Kierkegaard claims to be explicitly anti systematic, the arrangement of the ideas that have been pulled free of “process” is still one which corresponds to the Hegelian “form of contradiction that…brings particular elements into relation with one another.” [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
176. KCOA, p. 89. I explore Hegel’s dialectic and Adorno’s relation to it in further detail in Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
177. KCOA, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
178. KCOA, p. 88**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
179. Adorno’s reference (KCOA, p. 89) to Hegel’s invocation of the idea of a “qualitative leap” can be found in Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
180. KCOA, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
181. KCOA, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
182. KCOA, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
183. KCOA, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
184. KCOA, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
185. KCOA, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
186. KCOA, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
187. KCOA, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
188. KCOA, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
189. KCOA, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
190. KCOA, p. 92. Accordingly, Adorno writes (also on p. 92): “the continuity of uninterrupted deductions from the ‘idea’ becomes a fiction”. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
191. KCOA, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
192. KCOA, pp. 92-93. To demonstrate this, Adorno quotes a long passage from Kierkegaard’s *Stages on Life’s Way* which critiques both the idea that the subject could take up the consciousness of the totality which infinite knowledge implies and the notion that positive infinity would entail a “finished” system. This is good evidence of an instance in the chapter on the spheres where Adorno moves seamlessly from a critique of what he sees as Kierkegaard’s idealism to a critique, using Kierkegaard’s thought, of Hegel’s idealism. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno later recapitulates a critique of Hegel’s positive infinity which is notably similar to the Kierkegaardian one which he cites, claiming that Hegel’s positive infinity becomes “closed” and therefore static: “No matter how dynamically a system may be conceived, if it is in fact to be a closed system, to tolerate nothing outside its domain, it will become a positive infinity—in other words, finite and static. The fact that it sustains itself in this manner, for which Hegel praised his own system, brings it to a standstill.” (ND, p. 27). This is a theme to which I return in Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
193. KCOA, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
194. KCOA, p. 93. On the same page, Adorno makes explicit the simultaneous critique of Hegel and Kierkegaard that he conducts: “The claim of ‘absolute’ spirit presides both over the surrender of the world as perfectly meaningless and over its glorification by the system of reason”. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
195. KCOA, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
196. KCOA, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
197. KCOA, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
198. This is clearly an intentional inversion on Adorno’s part of the very same accusation of conflating concepts and existence which Kierkegaard criticises Hegelian philosophy for, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
199. KCOA, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
200. KCOA, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
201. KCOA, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
202. KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
203. KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
204. KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
205. KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
206. KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
207. KCOA, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
208. KCOA, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
209. KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
210. KCOA, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
211. KCOA, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
212. KCOA, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
213. KCOA, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
214. KCOA, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
215. KCOA, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
216. KCOA, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
217. KCOA, pp. 106-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
218. KCOA, pp. 106-107: “Although all these categories originate in the self-enclosing infinity of the system, they draw the systematic structures into themselves like whirlpools in which they disappear”. In Hegel’s case this category is absolute spirit, whilst in Marx, it is the category of exchange-value. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
219. KCOA, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
220. KCOA, p. 107. Specifically, Adorno here refers to the position which appears in Kierkegaard’s authorship as Religiousness B, which is the highest form of religiousness and requires the individual’s embrace of the transcendent absurd. This is in contrast with Religiousness A, which is the immanent form of religion in Kierkegaard’s work. In *Construction*, Religiousness A represents the final point of Kierkegaard’s dialectic of despair before his sundering of reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
221. KCOA, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
222. KCOA, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
223. Mattias Martinson provides a helpful explanation of this theme in “Ontology of Hell”, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
224. KCOA, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
225. KCOA, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
226. KCOA, p. 110. The contrast between the idea of achieving reconciliation against that of sacrifice is developed throughout the chapter on “Reason and Sacrifice” in *Construction*. Although Adorno makes a variety of arguments in relation to this theme, one recurrent claim is that through his emphasis on “reconciliation” achieved through sacrifice, rather than reconciliation achieved without sacrifice, Kierkegaard merely ends up repeating the violent natural logic of destruction and domination which he had precisely sought to overcome. This is a claim which Adorno later develops with Max Horkheimer in a different context in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
227. Šajda, “Kierkegaard’s Triumphs and Defeats”, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
228. KCOA, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
229. KCOA, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
230. KCOA, pp. 114-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
231. KCOA, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
232. KCOA, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
233. Martinson, “Ontology of Hell”, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
234. KCOA, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
235. KCOA, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
236. KCOA, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
237. KCOA, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
238. The most prominent example of this kind (KCOA, pp. 124-126) is Adorno’s extended analysis of the ‘Diapsalmata’ which appears in *Either/Or Part One*. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
239. KCOA, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
240. KCOA, p. 140. The extended quotation with its context in Kierkegaard’s texts reads as follows: “But Abraham's faith was not of this sort, if there is such a faith at all, for actually it is not faith but the most remote possibility of faith that faintly sees its object on the most distant horizon but is separated from it by a chasmal abyss in which doubt plays its tricks.” (FT, p. 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
241. The only other book length Anglophone study on the Kierkegaard-Adorno relationship is Marcia Morgan’s *Kierkegaard and Critical Theory*. Although Morgan does conclude that Kierkegaard had a profound influence on Adorno’s mature thought, she does not explore the changing face of Adorno’s interpretation of Kierkegaard from *Construction* to the two later texts I have mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
242. Gordon,AE, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
243. Gordon, AE, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
244. Gordon, AE, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
245. Gordon, AE, p. 31. The problem with this view is that it seems to assume a completely ascetic approach on Adorno’s part in relation to Kierkegaard’s theological texts and the qualities therein. As I show below, however, in *Construction* Adornomakes repeated reference to Kierkegaard’s late religious writings (particularly *Practice in Christianity* and *The Moment and Late Writings*), both on their own terms and in reading “aesthetic” truth into them against their intention. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
246. Gordon, AE*,* pp. 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
247. KCOA, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
248. KCOA, p. 36. The passage Adorno quotes is from *Practice in Christianity* and reads as follows: “If only, as that pagan who burned the libraries, one could push aside those eighteen hundred years —if one cannot do that, then Christianity is indeed abolished. If only it could be made evident to all those orators who demonstrate the truth of Christianity by the eighteen hundred years and win people, if only it could be made evident to them, frightful as it is, that they are betraying, denying, abolishing Christianity—if that cannot be done, then Christianity is abolished.” (PC, p. 144). Equally, earlier in the same chapter of *Construction* (p. 25), Adorno notes how for the late Kierkegaard “the image of scripture is finally torn away from the subject” as a result, *crucially*, of the scripture’s “historical deterioration”. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
249. Gordon, AE, p. 32. The quotes from KDOL appear on p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
250. TAAB, Adorno to Berg,17th October, 1929, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
251. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
252. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
253. Even in this instance, however, there is an ambiguity in KDOL which supports the conclusion that is still not all that far from Adorno’s conclusion in *Construction*. Whilst Adorno sees Kierkegaard’s criticism of progress and civilisation as simultaneously criticism of the reification of humanity, Adorno still qualifies this earlier in the piece by noting that, in other aspects of his thought Kierkegaard “denies reification” (KDOL, p. 420). [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
254. KDOL, p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
255. Gordon, AE, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
256. KDOL, p. 426. For Gordon’s argument see AE, pp. 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
257. KDOL, p. 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
258. KCOA, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
259. KCOA, p. 130. In *Construction*, this recognition of the limitations of existential and religious seriousness, as in KDOL, leads to a potential consonance between Kierkegaard’s writing and “the cell of a materialism whose vision is focused on ‘a better world’”. (KCOA, pp. 130-131). [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
260. KCOA, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
261. SL, p. 466: “in practice there is nothing more ridiculous than to see religious categories used in deep and dumb seriousness where one should use esthetic categories with humor and jest.” [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
262. Adorno makes this point in the final chapter of *Construction*, where he argues that aesthetic and religious spheres “go over into each other”, insofar as in both spheres, “the depersonalization of the living” occurs and “life, while passing away yet breathes and rests free of sacrifice”. Here, in *Construction*, he insists that these appear as “enciphered images” within Kierkegaard’s religious writings, but against their dominant intentions. (KCOA, p. 133). [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
263. In KDOL, Adorno indicates that Kierkegaard’s wider philosophical commitments prevent his critical insights from obtaining their full force, writing that he “denies reification” and ends up leaving “everything in its status quo”. (KDOL, p. 420 and p. 424). [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
264. KDOL, p. 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
265. KDOL, p. 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
266. SUD, p. 40 and KCOA*,* p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
267. The context of this passage (the “Intermittence” section of *Construction*) is a complex and significant one which I discuss in detail in Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
268. KOM, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
269. KOM, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
270. KOM, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
271. Gordon, AE, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
272. Gordon, AE, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
273. KCOA, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
274. KCOA, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
275. KOM, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
276. KOM, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
277. KCOA, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
278. KCOA, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
279. KCOA, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
280. KCOA, pp. 104-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
281. Gordon, AE, pp. 183-184. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
282. Gordon, p. AE, p. 186 and 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
283. KOM, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
284. Gordon, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
285. Gordon, AE, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
286. KCOA, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
287. KOM, p. 73 and KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
288. KCOA, p. 38 and KOM, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
289. KOM, pp. 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
290. Morgan, “Reading Kierkegaard”, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
291. Morgan, “Reading Kierkegaard”, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
292. Morgan, *Kierkegaard and Critical Theory*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
293. TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 25th July 1930, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
294. Gordon, AE, p. 189, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
295. Gordon, AE, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
296. This section, and relevant material preceding it appears in KCOA, pp. 99-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
297. KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
298. Whilst the qualitative dialectic is principally developed and named in CUP, the ideas which underpin the qualitative dialectic and the accompanying critique of Hegel appear in a number of works throughout Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous and signed authorship. Indeed, Adorno quotes some of these works (for example, SUD) in *Construction*. For an overview of their intersection, see Sylvia Walsh, “Kierkegaard’s Inverse Dialectic”, *Kierkegaardiana* (1980), XI, pp. 34-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
299. CUP, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
300. “Qualitative Dialectic” is the most frequent name for this new form of dialectic, but it is also called “the Greek or existence-dialectic” and “concrete thinking”. CUP, p. 309, p. 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
301. CUP, p. 490. That is to say, qualitative dialectic takes a person to faith without taking them all the way, something which can only be achieved through the leap that the individual must take themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
302. I have taken this formulation from David R. Law, “Making Christianity difficult: the ‘existential theology’ of Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*” In Rick Anthony Furtak (ed.) *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
303. CUP, (abstract) p. 448, p. 552 and (world-historical), p. 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
304. There is an extensive debate in the scholarship over whether Hegel is the target of Kierkegaard’s criticism, or instead whether his ire is more accurately described as being aimed at those who appropriated (and misunderstood) Hegelian philosophy in 19th century Danish Christendom. For a comprehensive account of this debate, arguing that Kierkegaard main criticism was in fact directed towards the Danish Hegelians rather than Hegel himself, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel Reconsidered*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
305. CUP, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
306. CUP, p. 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
307. CUP, p. 114. Hence Climacus writes: “Hegelian philosophy has cancelled the principle of contradiction”. (CUP, p. 304). [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
308. CUP, p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
309. Along these lines, Climacus criticises the idea of the presuppositionless beginning posited in Hegel’s *Logic*. To begin with the “most abstract”, as Hegel suggests, requires a “resolution” on the part of the existing individual to abstract from everything (and therefore the beginning is not presuppositionless). Thus, Hegelian philosophy “forgets” the existing individual. See CUP, pp. 111-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
310. Climacus writes of the “necessity of transition” in the Hegelian method and that it “advances – by *necessity*”. CUP, p. 343, p. 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
311. CUP, p. 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
312. As he puts it: “far less does something become necessary by having come into existence, since only the necessary cannot become, because it is always presupposed to be”. (CUP, p. 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
313. CUP, p. 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
314. CUP, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
315. CUP, p. 381. For continual references to Christianity’s “mediation” with speculative thought, see pp. 371-381. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
316. CUP, p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
317. CUP, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
318. CUP, p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
319. CUP, p. 301. In the footnote to this passage, Climacus references Hegel by name. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
320. CUP, p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
321. CUP, p. 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
322. Law, “Making Christianity difficult”, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
323. Law, “Making Christianity difficult”, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
324. CUP, p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
325. CUP, p. 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
326. CUP, p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
327. I have not explored these aspects in further detail as they relate only tangentially to Adorno’s interest in Kierkegaard’s qualitative dialectic. For a fuller exposition, one which I am indebted to in writing this section, see Law, “Making Christianity difficult”, pp. 228-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
328. In *Postscript*, Climacus contrasts the crucial distinction between Christianity with non-Christian religion through the idea of Religiousness A and B, with the latter being representative of Christianity. Whilst Religiousness A involves the expression of the eternal in an individual’s subjective, finite existence (as described in the idea of pathos above), existence is ultimately still viewed as an obstacle to be overcome in sustaining a relationship with the eternal. By contrast, in Religiousness B, finite existence is embraced as the individual’s gateway to a relationship with the eternal. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
329. CUP, p. 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
330. Throughout *Construction*, Adorno expresses his explicit opposition to a number of ideas from *Postscript***.** For example, he opposes what he takes to be Kierkegaard’s negative “central definition” of the self as existing to be abstract and “indeterminate”. (KCOA, p. 78). Nonetheless, even in spite of this, Kierkegaard’s not at all unrelated insight into the unavoidably negative and non-conceptual moment in thinking as a finite, existing individual remains of considerable value to Adorno, as I show below. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
331. KCOA, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
332. KCOA, pp. 99-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
333. ND, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
334. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
335. Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality.* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), p. 78 and p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
336. LND, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
337. CUP, p. 239 and KCOA*,* p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
338. CUP, p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
339. CUP, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
340. LND, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
341. SO, p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
342. SO, p. 249. This may originate as a reformulation of the following passage from *Postscript*:“*Objectively the emphasis is on* ***what*** *is said; subjectively the emphasis is on* ***how*** *it is said*”. CUP, p. 202. Adorno also mentions this objection with a nod to Kierkegaard in *Negative Dialectics*, writing that the “opposite poles of cognition” are equated by Hegel “at the expense of their qualitative difference, the difference on which simply everything depends”. (ND, p. 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
343. Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001),p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
344. Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
345. Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
346. SUD, p. 97 and KCOA, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
347. ND, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
348. It should be noted that in extracting what he takes to be the truth content of Hegel’s thought, Adorno principally draws from the introduction to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. This introduction provides Adorno, as Brian O’Connor (p. 29) puts it “with a model of how consciousness is determined through the experience of objects”. In extracting this model, Adorno explicitly takes Hegel’s insights out of their own context, which is the systematic reconstruction of reality. By contrast, Adorno is concerned with the examination of particular experience. For a full account of this dynamic, see O’Connor, *Negative Dialectic*, pp. 29-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
349. O’Connor, *Negative Dialectic*, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
350. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
351. ND, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
352. Gordon Finlayson, “Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Criticism”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22:6 (2014), p. 1150. Finlayson emphasises that this should not be confused with an ascent to a Platonic heaven of higher ideas. To the contrary, Hegel’s ascent is driven from below, initially by contradictions in the most abstract, finite, and partial knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
353. Finlayson, “Origins of Immanent Criticism”, p. 1152. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
354. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
355. O’Connor, *Adorno*, p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
356. ND, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
357. In other words, the view that the dialectic is working towards the absolute identity of subject and object. Hence Adorno calls the double negation the “quintessence of identification”. (ND, p. 158). [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
358. HTS, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
359. ND, p. 160, KCOA, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
360. HTS, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
361. Brian O’Connor, “Adorno’s Reconception of the Dialectic” In *A Companion to Hegel*. ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur. (NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), p. 544. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
362. HTS, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
363. O’Connor, “Adorno’s Reconception”, p. 544. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
364. Peter Gordon, paraphrasing Adorno, suggests that Hegel “metastasized subjectivity into *Geist*”. Gordon, AE, p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
365. David Sherman, *Sartre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity*. (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
366. ND, p. 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
367. This is ultimately a dividing line between Adorno’s materialism and Hegel’s idealism. As Brian O’Connor notes, the former “is attentive to individual moments of suffering and to the tangible effects of social arrangements on individuals”, whereas the latter “involves the construction of narratives whose dialectical development transcends in significance the material beings whose lives are determined by that development” (O’Connor, “Reconception of the Dialectic”, p. 544). [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
368. KCOA, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
369. KCOA, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
370. ND, p. 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
371. SUD, p. 40 and KCOA*,* p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
372. CUP, p. 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
373. KCOA, pp. 99-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
374. TASK, Adorno to Kracauer, 26th May 1930, pp. 147-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
375. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
376. NTL II, p. 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
377. Gordon, AE, pp. 186-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
378. Gordon’s central evidence for Adorno’s “late rapprochement” with Kierkegaard vis-à-vis his critique of identity theory is the first of the cited passages. (Gordon, AE, pp. 185-186). [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
379. KOM, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
380. KCOA, pp. 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
381. KOM, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
382. KCOA, p. 101. The key point here is that, in doing this, Kierkegaard has, as Adorno puts it: “has shattered the staple of the philosophy of identity”. (KOM, p. 67). [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
383. KOM, p. 67. It should be noted that Adorno remarks here that Kierkegaard secures the non-identical “in its concept but not its unfolding”. In other words, his affirmation of Kierkegaard is still a qualified one. The reason for this is that Kierkegaard’s dialectic still had its basis, in Adorno’s view, in objectless inwardness. As a result, Kierkegaard’s subject was unable to move beyond itself into the objective, social world of which it was critical. As Gordon puts it: “The Kierkegaardian individual gained its reality only by means of a metaphysically impossible dissociation from all social being” (Gordon, AE, p. 184). Again, even Adorno’s affirmation of Kierkegaard’s concept of the non-identical subject is qualified in exactly the same way in *Construction*: “Yet its empty figure, the rhythm of mere time, without any expression than that of itself, is the voiceless intervention of reconciliation” (KCOA, p. 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
384. KOM, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
385. KOM, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
386. KCOA, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
387. KCOA, pp. 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
388. Gordon, AE, p. 189, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
389. Gordon, AE, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
390. As Espen Hammer puts it, Adorno’s “long detour through philosophy is meant to serve a practical and political purpose…negative dialectics is Adorno’s political philosophy, though in a coded and highly mediated form — the only form which he sees as possible in a world that prohibits rational practice”. Hammer, *Adorno* *and the Political*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
391. ND, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
392. See for example the interpretation offered by Robyn Marasco in *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 87-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
393. Tom Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim and the Concept of Despair”, *Hegel Bulletin*, 40:2 (2019), pp. 237-256. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
394. SUD, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
395. SUD, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
396. SUD, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
397. SUD, pp. 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
398. SUD, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
399. SUD, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
400. SUD, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
401. As I shall show, the concept of unconscious despair is particularly relevant in this regard. Equally, this is not to say that the rest of Kierkegaard’s concept of despair, despair as sin, is irrelevant. Adorno appropriates the entirety of the Kierkegaardian concept of despair insofar as it describes the world’s distorted character. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
402. SUD, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
403. SUD, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
404. SUD, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
405. SUD, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
406. SUD, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
407. SUD, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
408. SUD, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
409. SUD, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
410. SUD, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
411. SUD, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
412. Anti-Climacus notes that this form of despair is not really despair in the proper sense, since to be truly in despair is to despair over losing the eternal. (SUD, pp. 51-52). [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
413. SUD, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
414. SUD, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
415. SUD, p. 61. Anti-Climacus describes various pathways for an individual in this state, noting that if the person in despair “does not experience an upheaval that puts him on the right road to faith, despair of this kind will either become intensified in a higher form of despair…or it will break through and destroy the outward trappings in which such a despairing person has been living out his life as if in an incognito.” (SUD, pp. 55-56). [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
416. SUD, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
417. For an in-depth summary, see James L. Marsh. “Kierkegaard’s Double Dialectic of Despair and Sin” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 67-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
418. The “definition of faith” is: “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it”. (SUD, p. 131). [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
419. SUD, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
420. SUD, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
421. Louis Duprè, “The Sickness Unto Death: Critique of the Modern Age” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death.* (Macon, Georgia:Mercer University Press, 1987), p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
422. Duprè, “The Sickness Unto Death”, p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
423. Given the obvious appeal that this text should have for Adorno, to my knowledge he surprisingly only makes one reference to it, contrasting the text’s critical focus on material conditions with Heidegger who “ennobles” the latter from the outset. ND, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
424. SUD, pp. 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
425. SUD, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
426. SUD, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
427. SUD, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
428. SUD, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
429. SUD, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
430. SUD, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
431. SUD, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
432. SUD, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
433. MM, p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
434. MM, p. 247. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
435. MM, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
436. HTS, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
437. ND, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
438. Gordon James Finlayson, “Adorno: Modern Art, Metaphysics and Radical Evil”, *Modernism*, 10:1 (2003), p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
439. The reified consciousness reflects the world in which everything has become thingified: “The reified consciousness is a moment in the totality of the reified world” (ND, p. 95) and reification “is all the more damaging as its universal prevalence prevents people from becoming properly aware of it”. (LND, p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
440. For a fuller account of this history and one which I have drawn on in this summary, see Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 192-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
441. LND, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
442. HF, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
443. DE, p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
444. Adorno and Horkheimer note that the mastery of external nature also requires the mastery of nature within humanity itself: “The human being’s mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained”. (DE, p. 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
445. “the enthronement of the means as the end, which in late capitalism is taking on the character of overt madness, is already detectable in the earliest history of subjectivity” (DE, p. 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
446. ND, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
447. ND, p. 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
448. Peter Dews notes this important distinction in *The Idea of Evil*, p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
449. HF, pp. 54-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
450. My choice in focusing particularly on the demise of individuality in Adorno’s thought is ultimately related to the overall aim of the thesis, which is to show continuities between Kierkegaard and Adorno’s thought. I am not suggesting that the concept of the individual is sole basis for understanding the history of unfreedom in Adorno. As implied by the complex and multi-layered account of the wrong life outlined in §5.2.1, Adorno believes that: “history is a constellation that can really be grasped only with the help of an elaborate philosophical theory, and not by reducing it to individual concepts or pairs of concepts”. Nonetheless, the individual still plays a pivotal role in this constellation, as Adorno remarks: “the individual is a crucial phenomenon of history…we might just as well assert that history is the history of the rise and fall of the individual as make a similar claim under some other heading.” (HF, p. 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
451. DE, p. xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
452. DE, pp. 116-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
453. DE, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
454. DE, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
455. MM, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
456. “For despair is objective for Kierkegaard and independent of all self-knowledge.” (KCOA, pp. 82-83). For references to objective despair as they appear in Adorno’s mature work, see HF, pp. 72-73; ND, p. 353; NTL II, p. 250; WAIT, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
457. DE, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
458. See §5.3.3 on “Objective Despair” below for details of Kierkegaard’s influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
459. DE, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
460. DE, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
461. DE, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
462. DE, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
463. MM, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
464. DE, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
465. Tom Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim”, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
466. KCOA, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
467. Indeed, as Adorno argues in *Construction*, Kierkegaard is himself implicated in this “hell” and is in “objective despair” insofar as he does not realise that the exit offered by inwardness is an illusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
468. These distinctions appear in *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* rather than in *The Sickness Unto Death*. This imputation of sin and guilt without the necessity of wrongful acts is an important distinction between Kierkegaard and Kant, whose respective accounts otherwise share a great many features. For further discussion of this, see Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good: Virtue, Happiness, and the Kingdom of God*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), especially p. 35 for distinctions between Kant and Kierkegaard’s account of sin and guilt. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
469. ND, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
470. Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim”, p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
471. SUD, p. 45 and MM, pp. 58-60. In Adorno’s case, he evidently has Kierkegaard in mind when invoking this notion of distortion, since the title of the aphorism is an inversion of the title of *The* *Sickness Unto Death*: “The Health Unto Death”. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
472. Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim”, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
473. In noting that this is “difficult” but not necessarily entirely off limits, I agree with Deborah Cook’s interpretation of Adorno’s negativism when she argues that Adorno allows us to conceive of limited, fallible, and always criticisable possibilities for what right life might look like. In this respect, I agree with Cook when she suggests that Adorno is *largely* but not *exclusively* negativist. See Cook, “Open thinking: Adorno’s exact imagination”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 44:8 (2018), pp. 816-818. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
474. Adorno notes at the beginning of KDOL that whilst WOL is written under Kierkegaard’s own name and SUD is not, the latter is still to be associated with the “the open theological tendencies of his later period”. (KDOL, p. 413). In his essay on Kierkegaard’s notion of social despair, at a number of points John Elrod shows how SUD anticipates insights into despair which are later developed more fully in WOL. These include the criticism of “egoistic self-seeking, characterizing private, personal relations” and small-minded exclusivity which Kierkegaard links to class-relations, something which Adorno credits Kierkegaard for in KDOL (p. 425). See John Elrod, “The Social Dimension of Despair” *in International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), especially pp. 107-112. A crucial distinction between SUD and WOL is the development in the latter text of the positive idea that worldly differences are not ultimately decisive, insofar as all humans are united through their shared createdness by God.SUD, by contrast, presents a view of individuals created as distinct particulars. For a developed account of this distinction, see Sharon Krishek, *Lovers in Essence:* *A Kierkegaardian Defense of Romantic Love*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 87. Krishek’s overall argument defends the plausibility of a continuity reading between the two texts, particularly in Chapters Six and Seven. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
475. Robyn Marasco therefore overstates the case when she claims that: “Kierkegaard does not advance an account of…despair embedded in social forms, political institutions, cultural practices, and economic life.” See Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, p.77. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
476. KDOL, pp. 426-427. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
477. KDOL, pp. 423-424. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
478. SUD, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
479. KDOL, p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
480. KDOL. p. 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
481. WL, p. 368 and KDOL, p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
482. KDOL, p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
483. In his Journals, Kierkegaard comes close to similarly hyperbolic pronouncements about the total demise of self-reflexive thought as those which Adorno would later make: “In *Works of Love* I said: The age of thinkers is past. Soon one will have to say: The age of thought is past”. (JP III, 3313). [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
484. Louis Dupré, “The Sickness unto Death”, pp. 105-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
485. KCOA, pp. 82-83. Robyn Marasco thus misses the specific truth content that Adorno finds in Kierkegaard’s concept of objective despair when she simply summarises Adorno’s position as follows: “Though he calls despair an “objective” concept and says it is the sickness of his age, Kierkegaard can only place despair within the bowels of inwardness”. (Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, p. 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
486. KCOA, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
487. In a passage that I have already partly quoted from *Minima Moralia*, Adorno takes on the Kierkegaardian motif of despair as living death: “Underlying the prevalent health is death. All the movements of health resemble the reflex-movements of beings whose hearts have stopped beating.” (MM, p. 59) [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
488. KCOA, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
489. NTL II, p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
490. WAIT, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
491. KDOL, p. 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
492. ND, p. 353. Translation amended. The difficulty in coming to know this happiness is what makes the idea an inversion of Kierkegaard’s unconscious (objective) despair. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
493. TAAG, p. 250. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
494. Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
495. Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, p. 11. This is not a link I have been able to fully develop here, but only considering references in SUD, Anti-Climacus explicitly relates despair to inhumanity in two places. See SUD, p. 16 and p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
496. KCOA, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
497. In “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim”, Whyman articulates the point I make in this section, that Adorno has to socialise and secularise Kierkegaard’s concept of despair to make it work, see pp. 252-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
498. Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim”, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
499. ND, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
500. SUD, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
501. Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim”, p. 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
502. Or, as we will later see in relation to Kierkegaard’s late writings, without reference to the ideal of the New Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
503. MM, p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
504. Whilst I have tried to do justice in this section to the fundamental ideas which underpin Adorno’s “inverse theology”, the concept is multi-layered and the account of its development unusually complex, even by Adorno’s already complex standards. For the most comprehensive account available, see Gordon, AE, pp. 173-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
505. Gordon, AE, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
506. Gordon, AE, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
507. TAWB, Adorno to Benjamin, 17th December 1934, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
508. TAWB, Adorno to Benjamin, 17th December 1934, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
509. TAWB, Adorno to Benjamin, 17th December 1934, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
510. Gordon, AE, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
511. As Gordon notes, Adorno sees this partially as a response to Heidegger and the German existentialists who precisely affirm existence in this way; Heidegger, for example, through his idea of the *constitutive* “guilt of Dasein’s being-in-the-world”. (Gordon, AE, p. 179). At the end of Chapter Three, I quoted a variation of Adorno’s criticisms of the existentialist affirmation of existence (in contrast with Kierkegaard) in DOL. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
512. Franz Kafka, “The Cares of a Family Man” In *The Complete Stories*. ed. Nahum Glatzer. (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 427-428. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
513. Kafka, “The Cares of a Family Man”, p. 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
514. TAWB, Adorno to Benjamin, 17th December 1934, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
515. Gordon, AE, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
516. This is part of Adorno’s rebuttal to the positive transcendence of dialectical theology, as Gordon notes (AE, p. 181): “to present our happiness directly would only reify perfection, as if it were truly a “beyond” that is indifferent to our current suffering.”. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
517. Obviously, the Holocaust came a number of years after the correspondence with Benjamin, although Adorno also references Odradek in the wake of that atrocity also (for example in MM, p. 240). [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
518. Gordon draws analogies in this respect between Odradek and the logic of Christology, albeit with the important addendum that there can be no sense of an “ideal of a higher subjectivity that remains free from the pain of incarnation.” (Gordon, AE, pp. 179-180). [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
519. The idea of contemplating the most extreme forms of evil is something which Adorno provides as an example in a related context. Speaking of his experience reading Eugen Kogon’s book on the SS State, he remarks that: “If there is any way out of this hellish circle – and I would not wish to exaggerate that possibility, being well aware of the weakness and susceptibility of such consciousness – it is probably the ability of mind to assimilate, to think the last extreme of horror and, in face of this spiritual experience, to gain mastery over it…[this is] the possibility of the mind, despite everything, to raise itself however slightly above that which is.” (MCP, pp. 196-197). [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
520. Gordon, AE, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
521. Indeed, Adorno describes Odradek as the “indubitable promise of hope”. (TAWB, Adorno to Benjamin, 17th December 1934, p. 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
522. HF, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
523. Whyman, “Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim”, p. 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
524. For an example of this kind of interpretation, see Robyn Marasco, *Highway of Despair*. Although Marasco acknowledges Kierkegaard’s employment of a notion of objective despair, her takeaway of Adorno’s interpretation is solely that of critique. For Marasco’s Adorno, Kierkegaard calls despair “objective, but then treats [it] in narrowly subjectivist terms” (p. 90). This misses the significance that Adorno goes on to appropriate the fundamental core of the concept outside of Kierkegaard’s subjectivist framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
525. JFY, p. 215. This quote does not appear in the articles entitled “The Moment”, the most well-known of his late attack upon Christendom, but as an appended statement accompanying *Judge for Yourself!*, the former written in March 1855, a few months before his death. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
526. For a full account of the historical context, see Howard. V. & Edna H Hong, “Historical Introduction” In *The Moment and Late Writings*, (Kierkegaard’s Writings XXIII), trans. Howard. V. Hong & Edna. H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. ix-xxxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
527. There is an expansive scholarly debate regarding the question of whether Kierkegaard’s late writings are in continuity or a break with his earlier writings. For a summary of this debate, see Lee C. Barrett, *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard*, (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 315-316. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
528. To some extent Kierkegaard had already moved in this direction in publishing *Works of Love* under his own namein 1847. Still, the late writings (as the quote from JFY suggests), were unique in the directness of their attack on the “externalities”, specific individuals, and aspects of the institutional life of Danish Christendom. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
529. Fabian Freyenhagen provides a clear and insightful summary of the development of opposition to Adorno’s praxis in “Adorno’s politics: Theory and praxis in Germany’s 1960s”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, (2014), 40:9, pp. 867–893. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
530. Müller-Doohm makes this connection in *Adorno: A Biography*, p. 463. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
531. For an account of Adorno’s death and the events leading up to it, see Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, pp. 475-479. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
532. KOM, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
533. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
534. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
535. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
536. KCOA, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
537. KOM, p. 72. Beyond the obvious nod to Hegel’s idea of world history, Adorno refers here to Kierkegaard’s repeatedly scathing comments in the late writings to the “battalions” of “victorious” Christianity. For example: “If everything is all right with these enormous battalions of Christians, nations, kingdoms, countries, a whole world, then the prospect of the second coming is bound to be far off. Conversely viewed, one would certainly have to say: Everything is ready for the second coming”. (TMLW, p. 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
538. KOM, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
539. KOM, pp. 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
540. KDOL, p. 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
541. KCOA, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
542. KDOL, p. 420. A very similar remark can be found in KCOA, p. 51. M. Jamie Ferreira criticises this passage and others from Adorno’s work with the aim of defending Kierkegaard (p. 80). Interestingly, she suggests that Kierkegaard *is* in some ways indifferent to material, socioeconomic conditions, albeit only in two specific senses. See *Love’s Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Works of Love*. (Oxford: Oxford, University Press, 2001), p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
543. Adorno attacks Kierkegaard from a number of angles along the lines that his notion of love over-emphasises the importance of inwardness and as a result diminishes (or is even indifferent to) the importance of material, objective circumstances. Perhaps the most compelling evidence that Adorno provides for this argument is in KDOL (p. 420), where he suggests that, as Ferreira puts it, Kierkegaard is indifferent “about the condition actually effected by our attempts to fulfil our duty.” That is to say, what ultimately matters to Kierkegaard is that one acts in fulfilling one’s duty to love one’s neighbour, *irrespective* of whether this act is actually successful in bringing about a change in physical circumstances (Ferreira, *Grateful Striving*, p. 192). Although there remain unanswered questions over the effectiveness of Kierkegaard’s account of neighbour-love in sufficiently challenging the social structures which might inhibit it, Ferreira otherwise convincingly shows that as a *general* characterisation of Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, the charge of indifference to objective, material suffering which Adorno lays down is unjustified: see, pp. 61-63, pp. 94-98, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
544. KDOL, p. 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
545. As well as this, there is the additional reason that, consistent with Adorno view of Kierkegaard’s conception of love as principally “inward” and hidden, he is unable to condemn other individuals for their “external” actions. Notably, there are some figures within the contemporary scholarship that seem to concur with this view. They suggest that Kierkegaard is only able to actively oppose individuals within Christendom in his late writings because he changes his view on the absoluteness of “hidden inwardness”, instead placing renewed emphasis on the idea that love must be active (thus visible in the public sphere), even if its roots are hidden. See Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, pp. 315-316. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
546. KDOL, p. 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
547. KOM, p. 73. Bishop Hans Lassen Martensen was a noted Danish Hegelian and defender of Christendom, one of the figures about whom Kierkegaard was particularly scathing in his late writings. For a detailed account of Martensen’s view and Kierkegaard’s opposition to it, see Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Christian Nationalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), especially pp. 34-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
548. KOM, pp. 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
549. As Adorno puts it in KDOL, p. 422: “Kierkegaard's doctrine of love keeps itself within the existent.” [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
550. Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard,* p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
551. Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
552. David R. Law, “Irony in the Moment and the Moment in Irony: the Coherence and Unity of Kierkegaard’s Authorship with Reference to The Concept of Irony and the Attack Literature of 1854-1855“, In *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Moment and Late Writings*,ed. Robert Perkins, (Macon, Georgia:Mercer University Press, 2009), p. 82. The crucial passage which Law cites in support of this view is from *The Corsair Affair*: “I have overscrupulously seen to it that not a passage, not a sentence, not a line, not a word, not a letter has slipped [into my authorship]…suggesting a proposal for external change or suggesting a belief that the problem is lodged in externalities, that external change is what is needed, that external change is what will help us.”. (COR, p. 53). [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
553. TMLW, p. 107. In the same passage, he writes that the illusion that Christianity (and thus Christian love) is practiced “hang[s] together with an enormously huge illusion that has a purely external aspect”. Namely, the organisation of the state in upholding this illusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
554. TMLW, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
555. TMLW, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
556. In the same way, when Kierkegaard and Adorno talk about “love” they mean quite different things; the former’s conception is clearly wrapped up in theological baggage which Adorno has no desire to take on. The role of love more generally occupies a curious position in Adorno’s philosophy, but he is clear in a number of places that an unfree society is one which lacks love. Bourgeois “coldness” precludes the possibility of love: “People, of course, are spellbound without exception, and none of them are capable of love, which is why everyone feels loved too little.” ND, p. 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
557. Lee Barrett writes: “Kierkegaard…condemns the close alliance of church and state as…contributing to the erosion of the ideal of the Christlike life of suffering, persecuted love.” Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, p. 316. Barrett provides a more general overview of what Kierkegaard saw as the erosion of love by “externalities” in pp. 316-320. [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
558. Any number of passages could be provided as evidence for Kierkegaard’s criticism of these externalities. The quoted remarks are from TMLW, p. 47. For careers and worldly honours, see p. 95, p. 107. For family life, see p. 237. For a criticism of all of baptism, confirmation and marriage see, pp. 243-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
559. At different points in his late writings, Kierkegaard speaks of egotistical (self) interest, financial self-interest and the instinct of “self-preservation” as being the underpinnings of the preservation of Christendom. TMLW, pp. 95-96, p. 107, p. 149, p. 186, p. 248, p. 251. These comments inform Adorno’s remark that Kierkegaard “condemned the accommodation to mediocre institutions of self-perpetuating life.” (KOM, p. 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
560. David R. Law, “*The Contested Notion of ‘Christianity’ in Mid-Nineteenth Century Denmark: Mynster, Martensen, and Kierkegaard’s Antiecclesiastical, ‘Christian’ Invective in* the Moment and Late Writings”, In *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Moment and Late Writings*,ed. Robert Perkins, (Macon, Georgia:Mercer University Press, 2009), pp. 66-68. As I argued in Chapter Five, Kierkegaard already analyses these developments in selfhood under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Equally, Ferreira suggests that even in his earlier *Works of Love*, “Everything he says against 'the world'—the search for worldly equality and the selfishness and irresponsibility of a community of self-lovers—needs to be seen in the light of his fears about the dangers of the particular social and political currents of his age.” (Ferreira, *Grateful Striving*, p. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
561. Law, “*Kierkegaard’s Invective*”, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
562. KCOA, p. 104. In a similar vein, Adorno is not merely applying his own categories to Kierkegaard’s work when he writes that “in a purely, inexorably self-justifying liberalism he [Kierkegaard] caught sight more of the misery that it causes its victims than of the progress it uses to console them about it”. (KOM, p. 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
563. By suggesting that Kierkegaard does not undertake quite the same level of socio-economic analysis as Adorno, I am perhaps being more cautious than Adorno himself, who writes that when Kierkegaard “moves from the doctrine of existence to intervention, in the polemic of *The Moment*, he becomes aware of the entanglement of the ruling Christian spirit with the crude interests of those who promulgate and administer it” and undertakes “a cutting attack on the ideology of the system of profit”. (KOM, p. 68). [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
564. KOM, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
565. Timothy Dalrymple, “On the Bronze Bull of Phalaris and the Art and Imitation of Christ”, In *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Moment and Late Writings*,ed. Robert Perkins, (Macon, Georgia:Mercer University Press, 2009), p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
566. For a summary of various arguments from a range of scholars who suggest that the late Kierkegaard ultimately “had no room for an empirical Christian community”, see Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
567. Bruce Kirmmse, “‘But I am almost never understood . . .’ Or, Who Killed Søren Kierkegaard?” in George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare, eds., *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
568. It is important to distinguish Kierkegaard’s reluctance to affirm the possibility of establishing an empirical Christian community at the time of writing with the outright view that Christianity was incompatible with community. As Joel Rasmussen points out, Kierkegaard does keep open the possibility of a “community of love” not just in a higher, religious sphere, but in the “concrete particularity of suffering solidarity”. Joel D.S Rasmussen. “Poetry, Piety, and Paideia in Kierkegaard’s *Practice in Christianity*” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2010: Kierkegaard’s Late Writings*, ed. Niels Cappelørn et al., (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), p. 172. At the same time, it is quite clear that any such community would be quite radically different form of social life from the Church “congregation” as it has thus far been realised in history. [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
569. TMLW, p. 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
570. TMLW, p. 45 and 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
571. Kierkegaard complains that in contrast to spiritual people, “we human beings continually need ‘the others,’ the crowd; we die, despair, if we are not safeguarded by being in the crowd, are not of the same opinion as the crowd, etc.” TMLW, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
572. Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, p. 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
573. Whilst Kierkegaard’s late writings have been taken to imply the outright rejection of the possibility of Christian community, Rasmussen’s conclusion suggests (see fn. 44), that this does not tell the whole story. Rather, the extremity of Kierkegaard’s judgement in his final writings may originate in the hyperbolic rhetoric which he deployed, shocking his readers into awareness of the utter falsehood which the nominal community of love in Christendom represented. [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
574. KOM, p. 63. Translation amended. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
575. SOC, p. 273.This complaint echoes Kierkegaard’s central criticism of Christendom. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
576. Cook, “Prospects for Change”, p. 51. Again, this has obvious resonance with Kierkegaard’s criticism of Christendom as existing as a self-perpetuating vehicle for self-interest, whether financial or otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
577. As I have noted in various places throughout this thesis, Adorno (and for that matter Kierkegaard) thinks that mass society systematically hastens the decline of the individual and its weakness. One particularly prevalent manifestation of weakness is the proliferation of narcissistic individuals. For more on Adorno’s analysis of narcissism, see Cook, “Prospects for Change”, pp. 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
578. ODS, p. 111.In different places, Adorno links this narcissistic impulse both to explicitly fascist collectives and to those activists who identify with collective organisations in order to overcome fascism. For an example of this shared impulse, see MTTP, p. 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
579. MTTP, p. 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
580. R, p. 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
581. R, p. 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
582. Whilst Adorno’s development of the idea of pseudo-activity probably derives from a number of sources, there is a strong case for the influence of Kierkegaard and his concept of busyness. Amongst other things, Kierkegaard uses this to denote the kind of noisy, outward activity which individuals engage in to distract themselves from engaging in the kind of internal self-reflection which would lead them to a realisation of their real despair. For a comprehensive assessment of the function of busyness in Kierkegaard’s thought, see Barney Riggs, *Between Movement and Rest: Kierkegaard’s Critique of Busyness*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, (2022). Adorno was clearly aware of Kierkegaard’s concept of busyness and connected this idea of “busyness” with an empty, practice which has been sundered from theory and reflection. In MTTP (p. 260), Adorno likens the modern prioritisation of practice and its detachment from theory with an attitude of “industriousness” or “bustle” [*Betriebsamkeit*] and “busyness” [*Geschäftigkeit*]. In an earlier work, *The Faithful Répétiteur* (GS 15: 186-187), Adorno contrasts an aspect of Kierkegaard’s thought (admittedly from his aesthetic writings) with the idea of *Betriebsamkeit* and “busy participation” [*emsigen Mitmachen*], the latter word which has conformist connotations of “joining in” and “playing along”. Furthermore, in a 1940 review of Jean Wahl’s *Études kierkegaardiennes*, he criticises the “busy bustle” [*emsigen Betrieb*] of those German existentialists who water down Kierkegaard’s radical, critical edge. (GS 20.1: 230). These are the same group of thinkers who, in the same year, Adorno contrasts with Kierkegaard for their preoccupation with “practical aims…not suspended by the thought of what is possible”. (KDOL, p. 426). [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
583. GS 8: 455, quoted and translated In Freyenhagen, “Adorno’s Politics”, p. 885. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
584. See for example, ND, p. 203: “[i]t is not up to the individual sufferer to abolish suffering or mitigate…[t]his job is up solely to the species, to which the individual belongs even where he subjectively renounces it and is objectively thrust into the absolute loneliness of a helpless object.” Any collective endeavour on the part of “the species” however should be strongly distinguished a monolith or mass movement, as Deborah Cook writes: “Adorno not only champions pluralism but considers it a precondition for radical change. His global subject is an internally differentiated one, rather than a monolithic party. What is needed, then, is a more robust form of solidarity that not only extends universally to all living beings but respects their particularity, or their difference from the universal”. (Cook “Prospects for Change”, p. 66). Despite the undeniable differences between the two thinkers, it is interesting that Cook’s description of Adorno’s “global subject” has a number of affinities with Kierkegaard’s “community of love” in “suffering solidarity” as described by Rasmussen in fn. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
585. KOM, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
586. Freyenhagen, “Adorno’s Politics”, p. 871. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
587. PMP, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
588. ND, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
589. ND, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
590. Freyenhagen gives as examples “the disciplinary effects of the workplace or other integrative social pressures inherent in many practices”, “Adorno’s Politics”, p. 875. [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
591. KOM, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
592. KOM, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
593. MM, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
594. ND, p. 364. Translation amended. The last part in quotation marks, which I return to below, is another variation of what Adorno sees as the fundamental Gordian knot of resistance in a systematically unfree society. On the one hand, there is the “aesthetic life” due to weakness. In other words, a life of powerless withdrawal into the private sphere, motivated by weakness and the knowledge that there is no right life in the wrong (systematically unfree) world. On the other, there is the “bestiality of the involved”, in which one throws oneself into (usually, but not exclusively collective) action within the public sphere, but thereby exposes oneself to the risk of contributing to and maintaining the wrong life. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
595. Freyenhagen, “Adorno’s Politics”, pp. 889-890. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
596. EAA, p. 193 [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
597. KOM, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
598. KOM, p. 74. Peter Gordon (AE, p. 188) translates “*Kierkegaardische Kurve*” as “Kierkegaardian tendency”. However, this translation runs the risk of obscuring the significance that Adorno is referring not so much to Kierkegaard’s general inclination, but specifically to the developmental “curve” of his life, which ended in his eventual emergence out of interiority in his late writings. Indeed, the sentences directly preceding it refer precisely to this. Consequently, I concur with Jensen Suther’s subsequent rendering of the passage as “Kierkegaardian curve”. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
599. ND, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
600. As I discuss below, there are some exceptions to this within Adorno’s own practice. As a general rule, however, Adorno remains committed to avoiding prescribing certain courses of action. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
601. As the quotes above suggest, Brecht produced two works, one paired with the other. The first, *Der Jasager*, appeared as an opera in 1930. This follows the story of a boy who repeatedly makes a number of affirmative decisions based on established customs, subordinating himself to the collective good, which ultimately leads to his gruesome death. As a consequence of the repulsion by a school class to this ending, Brecht subsequently produced a follow up piece, *Der Neinsager*, in which the boy rejects the customary and established thinking, instead insisting on thinking afresh in each situation. For a full synopsis of the development of both works, see Roswitha Mueller, “Learning a new society: the Lehrstück”, In *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. ed. Peter Thompson and Glendyr Sacks. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 101-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
602. TMLW, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
603. JFY, pp. 212-213. It should be noted that whilst *Judge* *for Yourself!* was written between 1851-1852, it was not published at the time on the grounds that Kierkegaard deemed it too direct an attack on the established order and Bishop Mynster in particular. It was subsequently published posthumously. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
604. As Kierkegaard goes on to say, there is “hypocrisy” in “avoiding the consciousness of one’s own incompetence by being busy with the diversion of wanting to reform the Church, which our age is least of all competent to do”. (JFY, pp. 212-213). [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
605. David R. Law makes this point in connecting Kierkegaard’s late attack with his view of Socrates, as outlined in his first work, *The Concept of Irony*. Both place “in question the state as such”. (Law, “Irony in the Moment”, p. 92). [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
606. Law, “Irony in the Moment”, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
607. Law, “Irony in the Moment”, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
608. ND, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
609. TMLW, p. 76. This passage comes in the context of Kierkegaard’s opposition to joining popular movements of opposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
610. Law makes this point, as well as noting that Kierkegaard’s contemporaries expressed their frustration at his refusal to provide alternatives in “Irony in the Moment”, p. 94. Adorno makes a related comment to this effect in noting that when Kierkegaard: “sunk his teeth into what is not Christendom” this was “not merely” because “he knew himself to be beneath his idea of the Christian; his reason was rather an intellectual one. Through the transition to dogmatic positivity, its own content would already be denied”. (KOM, p. 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
611. KOM, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
612. Law, “Irony in the Moment”, p. 100, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
613. KOM, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
614. In this respect, Adorno has particularly in mind those “actionists” and “activists” of the student movement who opposed his supposed inaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
615. MTTP, p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
616. C, p. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
617. R, p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
618. C, p. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
619. Adorno writes: “Whoever does not make the transition to irrational and brutal violence sees himself forced into the vicinity of the reformism that for its part shares the guilt for perpetuating the deplorable totality.” (C, p. 268). [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
620. C, p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
621. MTTP, p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
622. ND, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
623. To underline this point, we only need to think of the scholars who have argued that for the late Kierkegaard the realisation of empirical Christianity was an impossibility. For evidence of this, see Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
624. PMP. p. 168. Included in this notion is the importance of reflecting on the reasons why action is presently blocked (i.e. – why the courses of action imposed on us would fail) as well as why previous revolutionary action has failed. [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
625. PMP, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
626. TMLW, p. 107. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
627. TMLW, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
628. TMLW, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
629. TMLW, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
630. TMLW, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
631. TMLW, p. 474/JP VI 6943. Whilst Kierkegaard thinks that the overall task of clearing the ground cannot be achieved without the removal of external aspects (the “system” that upholds the illusions within individuals’ conceptions), Kierkegaard seems implicitly to hope that his writings will unsettle enough individuals, including those in power, that this will work towards enough awareness and uproar that the external links between Christianity and the state will be removed. Without this removal, individuals’ illusory conceptions about what Christianity is will not ultimately be removed on the widespread scale that Kierkegaard seems to deem necessary. Evidently, part of this work in clearing up individuals’ conceptions of Christianity will involve demonstrating the various ways in which the “externalities” are incompatible with genuine Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
632. I have borrowed this distinction between resistance to intolerable situations in both “cognitive” and “non-cognitive” modes from Henry Pickford’s immensely insightful article, “Adorno and the Categories of Resistance”, *Constellations* (2023), p. 3: “Cognitively, an intolerable is a perceived conflict or contradiction between espoused values, laws, policies, and so on, on the one hand, and actuality, application, enforcement, and so on…Non-cognitively, however, an intolerable situation might be registered as feelings of suffering, disgust, anger, or disrespect. These modes can occur and recur individually or in combination”. Reading some passages from the late writings in isolation, it can appear as though the illusion which Kierkegaard is trying to unravel is principally conceptual and cognitive. As I shall show, however, his writings also aim, alongside cognitive transitions, to cultivate impassioned non-cognitive responses which are essential to Christianity, and which Christendom has otherwise supressed. [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
633. TMLW, p. 107. The full quote reads that he also aims “to stir them up by means of the ideals”. I will return shortly to the significance of this remark, which already indicates that his resistance goes beyond the mere clarification of concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
634. For an extensive comparison of the late Kierkegaard as a Socratic gadfly and his use of` Socratic methods, see Law, “Irony in the Moment”. [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
635. TMLW, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
636. As Pickford notes (in the context of a comparison between Socrates and Adorno), such acts of resistance are both active and passive, constituting a logical space for a “middle voice” in resistance. They are active in the sense that the writer or speaker disrupts and confronts the “daily activities” of the interlocuter in their questions, but passive insofar as they ultimately only constitute “a cogent and consequential series of questions”, the effectiveness of which depends on the responsiveness of the reader. See Pickford, “Resistance”, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
637. LD, p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
638. Howard and Edna Hong, ‘Historical Introduction’ In *The Moment and Late Writings*, (Kierkegaard’s Writings XXIII), ed. trans. Howard. V. Hong & Edna. H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. xxix. [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
639. Law, “Irony in the Moment”, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
640. TMLW, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
641. Hong and Hong, “Historical Introduction” In *The Moment*, p. xxix. [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
642. TMLW, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
643. TMLW, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
644. TMLW, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
645. Law, “Irony in the Moment”, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
646. TMLW, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
647. Again, in this context the extremity and hyperbolic character of the claims is important. Even if the reader ends up falling short of Kierkegaard’s claims, they will still end up with a significantly more critical view of Christendom than before. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
648. Barrett, *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
649. TMLW, p. 10. For an account of the role of Bishop Mynster in Kierkegaard’s critique, see Backhouse, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Christian Nationalism*, pp. 36-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
650. TMLW, pp. 10-11. As Law notes (“Irony in the Moment”, p. 89), the necessary expression of heterogenous suffering is a key distinguishing characteristic between the ironist and the truth-witness. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
651. TMLW, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
652. Pickford “Resistance”, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
653. EAA, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-654)
654. EAA, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-655)
655. EAA, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-656)
656. I emphasise “overwhelmingly”, because there is an argument that Adorno’s resistance cannot entirely be captured by this extremely austere position. In “Resignation”, for example, Adorno can be read to be suggest that his writings try to cultivate a different kind of “open thinking”, which would encourage consciousness of other possibilities in his readers. (R, p. 292). As Deborah Cook writes: “even as Adorno questions the likelihood of change today, he nonetheless insists that change remains possible. He ties prospects for change to resistance and specifically, in the first instance, to critique as a form of resistance.” (“Open Thinking”, p. 812). The possibilities contained in “open thinking”, she suggests, do seem to “indicate something more positive: a more sensibly, rationally, and humanely organized society”. (p. 815). Following this line of thinking, the critical consciousness and the affects which Adorno tries to cultivate in his writings can arguably be seen as part of a fallible effort on Adorno’s part to “prepare the ground” negatively for this more rational and humane society, as well as enabling individuals to be able to resist the present irrational and inhumane one. [↑](#footnote-ref-657)
657. Pickford, “Resistance”, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-658)
658. PMP, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-659)
659. Pickford, “Resistance”, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-660)
660. As I showed in Chapter Five, this includes the systematic subversion of spaces which stand well outside the conventionally understood political sphere. As a result, Adorno’s critique, and his work in revealing contradictions and antagonisms is not limited to this explicitly political sphere, but extends far beyond it. [↑](#footnote-ref-661)
661. Adorno, as it were, aims to demonstrate the non-identical relation between ideology and reality, in contrast to the identity which administered society asserts. For example, administered society asserts upon individuals that society as currently organised is an instantiation of the idea of freedom. Adorno aims to undermine that assertion by showing its untruth. [↑](#footnote-ref-662)
662. To give one side of a conventional view that Adorno analyses, many people immediately and uncritically accept, as though it were a fact of nature, the broadly Enlightenment view that modern societies are the result of historical progress. In various places, Adorno both disavows this conventional notion and makes pains to trace its socio-historical appearance. He writes: “We must therefore put the concept of progress under the microscope, as it were, so as to strip it of its semblance of naturalness, its semblance of being a second-nature.” (HF, p. 139). [↑](#footnote-ref-663)
663. C, p. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-664)
664. As Pickford explains, for Adorno, the idea of a concept being true in its emphatic or utopian sense: “functions analogously to the Kantian regulative use of rational ideas: although never fulfilled by empirical experience, the emphatic meaning nonetheless offers a standard against which candidates for the concept’s instantiation can be evaluated, and hence providing a measure of society’s ‘untruth,’” (“Resistance”, p. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-665)
665. Pickford, “Resistance”, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-666)
666. TNM, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-667)
667. “The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection… education seeking to prevent the repetition [of Auschwitz] must concentrate upon early childhood”. (EAA, p. 192). For “autonomy”, see EAA, p. 195 and for an extended discussion of the idea of “political maturity”, see TAHB, pp. 21-32. It should be emphasised that when Adorno invokes the idea of autonomy, this is not an endorsement of the Kantian conception. For Adorno, autonomy is restricted to a limited conception of “self-determination” insofar as this is possible in an unfree world. This self-determination is principally expressed through the refusal to join in, to not accept the false alternatives laid before us, as Pickford points out in “Resistance”, (p. 10). For a developed exposition of Adorno’s conception of “autonomy” and “political maturity” in the respects that it departs from and remains similar to Kant, see Iain Macdonald, “Cold, cold, warm: autonomy, intimacy and maturity in Adorno”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*,37: 6, (2011), pp. 669-689. [↑](#footnote-ref-668)
668. EAA, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-669)
669. EAA, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-670)
670. TAHB, p. 31. Further examples of Adorno’s ideas to teach ideology critique in this way can be found on the same page reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-671)
671. As Adorno puts it in more oblique terms in that discussion: “all we try to do is simply to open people’s minds to the fact that they are constantly being deceived, because the mechanism of tutelage has been raised to the status of a universal *mundus vult decipi*.” (TAHB, p. 31). [↑](#footnote-ref-672)
672. EAA, p. 195. As I note above, in conjunction with the idea of the “Brechtian Nay-sayer”, the late Kierkegaard’s exemplification of this refusal to join in is one of the main reasons that he remains relevant for Adorno. [↑](#footnote-ref-673)
673. EAA, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-674)
674. PMP, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-675)
675. PMP, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-676)
676. PMP, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-677)
677. Macdonald, “Autonomy”, p. 684. [↑](#footnote-ref-678)
678. TAHB, pp. 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-679)
679. DMWTP, p. 299. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-680)
680. Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, “Die verwaltete Welt oder: Die Krisis des Individuums”, In Max

Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 13 (Frankfurt: 1989), p. 129, quoted In Oshrat Silberbusch, *Adorno’s Philosophy of the Non-Identical*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 20. Appropriately, Silberbusch draws attention to the Kierkegaard connection after citing this passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-681)
681. DMWTP, p. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-682)
682. EAA, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-683)
683. EAA, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-684)
684. EAA, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-685)
685. Pickford, “Resistance”, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-686)
686. ND, p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-687)
687. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a complete account of the workings of Adorno’s addendum here. For three readings which emphasise different aspects of one of Adorno’s more complex and baffling ideas, see Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, pp. 253-256; Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, pp. 255-270; Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, pp. 117-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-688)
688. Pickford, “Resistance”, p. 12. This suppression, particularly of the imagination, is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five above. [↑](#footnote-ref-689)
689. TNM, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-690)
690. MM, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-691)
691. KOM, p. 68, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-692)
692. Gordon, AE, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-693)
693. Gordon, AE, p. 195. How far Kierkegaard can really be said to directly affirm transcendence is by no means straightforward. As Marcia Morgan suggests, “there is no affirmation of religion for Kierkegaard in the sense of any coherent doctrine” and moreover Kierkegaard’s positive theology “does not permit any resolution, delimiting itself by an unbridgeable gap between the human and the Other of divinity, sustained in an infinitely negative manner in this world.” (“Reading Kierkegaard”, p. 46). As I note below, this assessment seems to accord with Adorno’s view as expressed in KOM (p. 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-694)
694. KOM, p. 72. As Adorno puts it in KOM, this is Kierkegaard’s concern with what “grows beyond” material existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-695)
695. KOM, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-696)
696. KCOA, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-697)
697. As Morgan rightly points out, this view somewhat overlooks that the challenge for Kierkegaard: “is not to permanently leave the world behind in favor of some otherworldly transcendence; the challenge is to return to it, so that we might learn to reconcile our transcendent love with the fact that we are also limited, and embodied creatures”. (“Reading Kierkegaard”, p. 46). This is a theme which appears, albeit indirectly, and of course in Kierkegaard’s philosophical rather than theological mode, in my discussion of the idea of qualitative dialectic in Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-698)
698. Gordon, AE, pp. 179-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-699)
699. KOM, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-700)
700. KOM, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-701)
701. KOM, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-702)
702. KOM, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-703)
703. KOM, p. 58. As I will suggest in what follows, however, this does not negate the fact that Adorno still thought that the late Kierkegaard demanded material transformation within the world. As he wrote, the late Kierkegaard learnt that subjective spirit is not “pure-in itself but rather as secondary and dependent, not merely of divinity but also of the conditions of empiricism.” (KOM, p. 68). Accordingly, the late Kierkegaard does demand that those empirical conditions change. Nonetheless, my suggestion is that Adorno thought this demand would always be limited and foreshortened by the fact that ultimately for Kierkegaard “redemption” does not hinge on the realisation of socio-historical emancipation in this world. [↑](#footnote-ref-704)
704. KOM, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-705)
705. KOM, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-706)
706. TMLW, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-707)
707. EAA, p. 192. I do not want to deny that there isundoubtedlya stronger, negative sense of damage limitation in Adorno’s work. Indeed, this is represented in the fact that we cannot even call Adorno’s negative resistance a “clearing of the ground”. [↑](#footnote-ref-708)
708. KOM, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-709)
709. Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence*, (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2005), p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-710)
710. TMLW, p. 107. It is worth underlining that I am being somewhat conservative in granting this case for Kierkegaard’s ultimate positivity. As Walsh notes, there are numerous commentators who would side more strongly with the case for total discontinuity between Kierkegaard’s late polemical writings and his earlier authorship. This view would obviously be even more consistent with Adorno’s reading of the late Kierkegaard than my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-711)
711. Morgan, “Reading Kierkegaard”, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-712)
712. I have not addressed the continuities and distinctions between Kierkegaard and Adorno’s respective approaches to criticism as irony and immanent critique in any great detail, beyond noting that there are clear overlaps in their approaches. This question, however, is explored extensively through a primarily philosophical rather than historical perspective in Asaf Angermann’s *Beschädigte Ironie*. [↑](#footnote-ref-713)
713. KOM, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-714)
714. TMLW, p. 107 and TNM, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-715)
715. KOM, p. 71. The key difference being that Kierkegaard’s emphasises pathos directed inwardly, whilst Adorno emphasises passion outwards, in relation to others. Nonetheless, there is ultimately a dialectic between inner and outer at work for both, even if Adorno only really comes close to acknowledging the presence of this in the late Kierkegaard. [↑](#footnote-ref-716)
716. As Adorno describes it: “If Kierkegaard claims that the sign of the truth-witness is suffering, then
Martensen chimes in that “it must be pointed out...,” a tried and tested linguistic gesture.” (KOM, p. 73). [↑](#footnote-ref-717)
717. KOM, pp. 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-718)
718. For an account of Kierkegaard’s last days, see Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 782-793. [↑](#footnote-ref-719)
719. Blaise Pascal, Pensées, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-720)
720. As I showed at the end of Chapter Five, this is why Kafka’s Odradek is significant for Adorno. As a motif of transcendence, Odradek is precisely distorted and warped, symbolic of the detritus of this world and drawing us towards suffering here and now, without what Adorno sees as the baggage of the ideological fantasy of other-worldly escape. [↑](#footnote-ref-721)
721. NTL II, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-722)
722. ND, 203. The passage quoted relates to the addendum where Adorno describes how, through the experience of suffering, we are led to demand social change in practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-723)
723. Hence Adorno is able to write that “Kierkegaard’s critique is not obsolete, not even that of his church, with whose dogmatism he was morbidly fascinated.” (KOM, p. 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-724)
724. KOM, p. 63. Translation amended. [↑](#footnote-ref-725)
725. KOM, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-726)
726. MM, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-727)
727. ND, p. 364. Translation amended. [↑](#footnote-ref-728)
728. Pickford, “Resistance”, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-729)
729. R, p. 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-730)
730. MTTP, pp. 277-278. Adorno goes on to list the following examples: “in the polemic against the musical Youth Movement and its followers, in the critique of the newfangled German jargon of authenticity, a critique that spoiled the pleasure of a very virulent ideology by charting its derivation and restoring it to its proper concept.” [↑](#footnote-ref-731)
731. To avoid any potential confusion, I am not suggesting that Adorno’s refusal to affirm false alternatives in a coercive society should be seen as a commitment to avoid act of resistance in discrete and specific practical situations where the conditions are appropriate. For example, as Pickford notes (“Resistance”, p. 13), in a “rare case”, Adorno identifies participation in the 1944 conspiracy to assassinate Hitler as a “concrete example of political resistance”. This situation conforms to both the cognitive and non-cognitive components required for resistance. For Adorno’s reference to this discussion, see PMP, pp. 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-732)
732. KOM, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-733)
733. KOM, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-734)
734. KOM, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-735)
735. KOM, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-736)
736. KOM, p. 71. The full quote reads as follows: “The regressive, unconscious rise of the natural religion as the repressed inner and outer human nature of its deputy wins for him all the more power when the protest, catching fire in the dry air of the Kierkegaardian interiority, nowhere expresses itself—as if it were nature—but rather expresses unwaveringly the distance from it.” There may be an important connection, which I am not able to fully elaborate here, between Adorno’s assessment of the late Kierkegaard and his discussion of Hamlet in his *History and Freedom* lectures (HF, pp. 231-237). For Adorno, both figures find themselves unable to act – there is a separation between their inner and outer nature – and assert themselves in the external world. That is, until they each undergo somatic interventions (Hamlet’s wounding, Kierkegaard’s collapsing) which shock them from interiority into action. Hence, Adorno writes that for Hamlet: “to put into practice the moral and political ideas he has formed, he must perforce regress; he must return to an earlier, archaic stage [i.e., impulsive nature]”. (HF, p. 234). I suggest that Adorno describes a similar process occurring in the late Kierkegaard. For a relevant discussion of the role of Hamlet in Adorno’s thought, one which suggests that the former’s case may be representative of the beginnings of “autonomous political action”, see Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, pp. 118-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-737)
737. KOM, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-738)
738. Notably, in *Hegel: Three Studies*, Adorno effectively associates Kierkegaard with the idea of conveying one’s (in this case, critical) philosophical position through one’s comportment: “Hegel's withdrawal from life should not be confused with the ideology of scholarly renunciation. As sublimated spirit, Hegel the person resounds with the outward and the physical the way great music does: Hegel's philosophy murmurs and rustles. As with his devoted critic, Kierkegaard, one could speak of an ‘intellectual body’ in him”. (HTS, p. 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-739)
739. For a full account of what is described as one of “the most extraordinary episodes in Austrian cultural history” (p. 184), see Edward Timms, “The Kraus-Bekessy Controversy in Interwar Vienna”, In *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century From Franz Joseph to Waldheim*, ed. Robert S. Wistrich (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 184-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-740)
740. KOM, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-741)
741. Despite the truth, represented in Kierkegaard’s opposition, that the subject and objective society could not presently be reconciled with one another, the Kierkegaardian individual’s “being-for-itself” (KOM, p. 71) is not ultimately a tenable position. As Adorno writes in LND (p. 16): “Human beings are in fact...‘political animals’ in the sense that they can only survive by virtue of society and social institutions to which, as autonomous and critical subjectivity, they stand opposed.” [↑](#footnote-ref-742)
742. KOM, p. 58. Notably, Adorno would also have been aware that Kierkegaard’s critique and demand for the general overhaul of Christendom did not succeed, unlike Kraus’ campaign against Bekessy. [↑](#footnote-ref-743)
743. The evidence for this ever-diminishing capacity can be found in Chapter Five. As Adorno puts it in *Minima Moralia* in relation to the irony which Kierkegaard and Kraus both deploy: “There is not a crevice in the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail…total society…has absorbed the opposing voice”. (MM, p. 211). [↑](#footnote-ref-744)
744. INTCM, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-745)
745. INTCM, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-746)
746. KOM, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-747)
747. MTTP, p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-748)
748. KOM, p. 74 and HTS, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-749)
749. KCOA, pp. 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-750)
750. KOM, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-751)
751. HF, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-752)
752. MM, p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-753)
753. KOM, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-754)
754. The only exception to this is in my noting Adorno’s dismissal of Kierkegaard’s diminishment of the aesthetic sphere in Chapter Three. The central reason for this omission is that aesthetics only appears tangentially, if at all, in KDOL and KOM, the two pieces which I have focused my attention on in relation to Kierkegaard and resistance. Both Peter Gordon (AE, pp. 188-193) and Marcia Morgan, (“Reading Kierkegaard”, pp. 43-47) discuss Kierkegaard’s influence in this respect. [↑](#footnote-ref-755)
755. I provide a brief discussion of this connection in Chapter Seven, fn. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-756)
756. Amongst other references to hope in Kierkegaard’s work, Adorno makes a comment in KDOL (p. 426) which pertains to Adorno’s critique of the primacy of praxis in Chapters Six and Seven: “In the name of hope, he becomes the foe of…the absorption by practical aims which is not suspended by the thought of what is possible”. [↑](#footnote-ref-757)
757. For a discussion of this kind which traces the development of Adorno’s concept of hope in dialogue with Kant, see Timo Jutten, “Adorno on hope”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45:3, pp. 1-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-758)
758. The only explicit reference Gordon makes to Kierkegaard’s late attack (p. 86) is in noting the partition between Kierkegaard and Adorno that I discuss in §7.3 – namely, that Kierkegaard attacked Christendom for the sake of the ideal of authentic Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-759)
759. Gordon, AE, pp. 182-183. As Espen Hammer notes in his review of *Adorno and Existence*: “Responding to the shortcomings of existentialist despair might require attentiveness to more publicly available forms of resistance”. (Hammer, “On Peter Gordon’s Adorno and Existence”, *Adorno Studies*, 2:1 (2018), pp. 54-55). In Chapter Seven, I outlined more of what these public interventions might involve, anticipated in part by the approach of the late Kierkegaard. [↑](#footnote-ref-760)
760. There are inevitably limitations in how far one can take this approach from a historical perspective, insofar as the German translations which Adorno cites were amongst the earliest of their kind and contain what are now considered egregious errors. [↑](#footnote-ref-761)
761. This was the aspect of Kierkegaard’s thought which was present in his earlier authorship (contrary to Adorno’s claim) and which Adorno had most consistently overlooked in *Construction* and, to a lesser extent, KDOL. [↑](#footnote-ref-762)
762. EAA, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-763)
763. Lydia Goehr, “Reviewing Adorno: Public Opinion and Critique”, In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. xlvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-764)
764. R, p. 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-765)
765. MTTP, p. 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-766)
766. HF, p. 96 and p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-767)
767. KOM, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-768)
768. PMP, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-769)
769. Edward Mooney, *Excursions with Kierkegaard*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-770)
770. PMP, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-771)
771. One of the many challenges arising from this approach to resistance is the question of how best to communicate this in our own time, as well as which mediums are most appropriate for this task. Notably, despite his opposition to the general effects of radio and television in the context of administered society, Adorno uses both to communicate his critical comportment to others. [↑](#footnote-ref-772)
772. INTCM, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-773)