The Madness and Genius of Post-Cartesian Philosophy: 
A Distant Mirror

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Over the course of some 35 years, our work has been centrally devoted to liberating psychoanalytic theory and practice from various forms of Cartesian, isolated-mind thinking en route to a post-Cartesian psychoanalytic perspective. We would characterize the essence of a post-Cartesian psychoanalytic framework as its being a phenomenological contextualism (Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 2002). It is phenomenological in that it investigates and illuminates organizations or worlds of emotional experience. It is contextual in that it holds that such organizations of emotional experience take form, both developmentally and in the psychoanalytic situation, in constitutive relational or intersubjective contexts.

If the task of a post-Cartesian psychoanalysis is understood as one of exploring the patterns of emotional experience that organize subjective life, one can recognize that this task is pursued within a framework of delimiting assumptions concerning the ontology of the person. In this paper, we discuss these assumptions as they have emerged in the thinking of four major philosophers on whom we have drawn: Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger. Our purpose in what follows is to describe essential ideas of these various thinkers and to identify the formative personal contexts within which their key insights into human life took form. By psychologically contextualizing philosophical assumptions, we hope to make progress toward discerning the particularization of scope that may be associated with these assumptions, and hence to begin a further opening up of the horizons of understanding that inevitably encircle psychoanalytic inquiry.

A truly post-Cartesian theory is concerned not only with the phenomena of experience and conduct that have always been the province of psychoanalysis, but also with its own philosophical premises and their psychological foundations. The tasks of self-analysis and self-reflection, formative in psychoanalysis since its inception in the life and work of Sigmund Freud, thus acquire a new centrality in our enterprise as we make a lasting commitment to exploring the conscious and unconscious assumptions of our work. This journey of self-reflection is a matter of both the philosophy of psychoanalysis and the psychoanalysis of philosophy. We seek to raise the underlying premises of psychoanalytic inquiry into explicit awareness, and to understand as well how it is that our philosophical and theoretical assumptions embody who we are as individual persons.

In studying the psychological sources of philosophical ideas, we go against a pervasive opinion in contemporary intellectual circles that is rooted in Cartesianism. This opinion, perhaps surprising in its prevalence so long after the life and death of Descartes, arises from a continuing belief – one could almost say a mystical faith – in the autonomy of the life of the mind. The products of the mind are in this view to be treated as independent, self-sufficient creations, verified, falsified, or otherwise evaluated according to criteria that exist apart from the personal contexts out of which they arise. Any attempt to bring considerations of origin to bear on the understanding and development of intellectual works is seen to exemplify the unforgivable fallacy of ad hominem reasoning. It is therefore said that the study of the individual details of a
thinker’s life, although perhaps of some limited interest as simple biography, can in principle have no relevance to the broader enterprise of the development or evaluation of that thinker’s work in its own terms. Intellectual constructions are claimed to have a life of their own, subsisting in the realm of public discourse, above and beyond the historical particularities of specific contributors’ personal life circumstances.

Seemingly well-founded cautions about the fallacy of ad hominem reasoning are sometimes accompanied by a view that reinserting intellectual works into the lives of their creators inevitably diminishes those works, by “reducing” their actual or potential significance to the terms of mere individual biography. Let us regard this separation of creative constructions from their personal contexts of origin as a form of madness – a Cartesian madness – that splits asunder the unbroken, organic unity of life and thought. Let us also imagine that a seeing of a work in its full context, wholly embedded in the life it expresses, would add to our appreciation of that work and assist in its understanding, evaluation, and further development. The madness of isolating thought from life thus itself can be seen to diminish the works that become its victim, draining them of their lifeblood. Whence comes the idea of this separating in the first place? What purpose can be discerned in the insulating of thought from being, of establishing a barrier between the thinker and the products of his or her labor? We believe this purpose is widely one of solidifying the identification of the creator completely with the creation, so that he or she then becomes able to live vicariously, on a kind of ethereal plane beyond the personal limits of his or her situation as an individual (cf., Rank, 1932). Who the creator has been prior to the work - that sad, mortal, perhaps deeply devalued or even despised human being - is overcome, transcended, and jettisoned. The identity of the creator has thus undergone a transformation and reinvention, and he or she may even imagine that the escape has been total as the work completely supplants the life from which it grew. Such an image inevitably turns out to be illusory, however, since traces of the conditions of the creation of any idea inevitably adhere to the idea and are carried forward into each of its applications and extensions. Moreover, to the extent that the rift between work and life becomes profound, the work necessarily must become too abstract, stilted, and bloodlessly intellectual. What finally eventuates is a sense of despair and fragmentation as the pull of all that has been disavowed begins to reassert itself. A circular movement thereby comes into being, in which the exhilarating identification with one’s creations alternates with an intensifying, disturbing feeling of inner disunity.

Post-Cartesian psychoanalysis forever reminds us of our own finiteness, challenging us at every stage to understand how the structures of our personal worlds reappear in our theories. The effort to achieve a forgetfulness of individual existence through identification with one’s work is thus undercut, and we are driven instead to remember, to reinvolve ourselves with our histories, to become aware of how our discoveries in the psychoanalytic study of human existence are inevitably also rediscoveries of ourselves. Psychoanalysis is the most personal of the sciences, and it belongs to its nature to include its theorists and all of their ideas within its own empirical domain. In our work as therapists, it has long been recognized that the power of the analytic experience is increased by the analyst’s concurrent reflection on the involvement of his or her own personal reality in every stage of the treatment. We are saying that a parallel reflection is necessary at the level of theory construction and in the laying down of the philosophical foundations of our discipline.

In the history of psychoanalysis, the areas of self-analysis and self-reflection have often been sources of the most fruitful theoretical ideas. This is shown in the early stages of our field in the self-analyses conducted by Freud and Jung, life-long explorations to which their most significant
innovations were intimately tied. One could point as well to Jung’s (1921) theory of psychological types, which developed out of considerations regarding subjective factors coloring the early conceptual frameworks of Freud and Adler. The value of such reflection is also illustrated by the development of the intersubjective viewpoint in psychoanalysis, which emerged from studies of the personal subjectivity of various systems of personality theory (Atwood and Stolorow, 1993). Our thesis here is that the task of self-analysis must be extended to the philosophical premises underlying psychoanalytic inquiry, which like all specific theoretical ideas in the field, also necessarily embody the analyst’s personal forms of being. Our approach to this great task is to study the individual worlds of selected post-Cartesian philosophers, with the aim of comprehending the psychological sources of each thinker’s specific repudiation of Cartesian doctrines. We hope to use the insights gained in this study as a distant mirror to which we may turn for a clarifying glimpse of how our own departures from the Cartesian view also reflect the patterns of our specific personal worlds. It is our additional faith that such an undertaking of self-reflection carries with it the possibility of the creation of new ideas and the opening up of new pathways of inquiry for our discipline.

1. Soren Kierkegaard

In the writings of Kierkegaard, one finds a number of interrelated areas of thought that contribute to the philosophical foundations of a post-Cartesian psychoanalysis. These areas include his ideas about individual existence, his notions of subjectivity and subjective truth, and his studies of self-estrangement in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1848). Let us turn to his life history and bring forth the personal background of his thinking.

Kierkegaard suffered something, as a young man, that in his journals he called the great *earthquake*. His biographers have never understood what he was talking about in this metaphor. It was an earthquake in his soul, opening up a split wider than the Grand Canyon. This division destroyed his inner coherence, and his lifework, taken up as a result, was a sustained effort to heal the breach and recover wholeness.

The earthquake was caused by a succession of losses leading to unbearable grief. Every loss a human being suffers threatens the unity of the soul, because it confronts the person with a break between past and future. Who one has been in a world that included the beloved is not the same individual one becomes in a world from which the beloved has vanished. The agonies of mourning are the effects in our experience of negotiating the journey from the one to the other. Sometimes the transition is too difficult to complete, and a fissure appears between the ‘I’ of the past and the ‘I’ of the present and future. The former remains in a state of mystical union with those who have vanished, while the latter moves on. That is the story of Kierkegaard, who over the course of his childhood years and very young adulthood lost essentially his entire family: mother, father, and five siblings. There was one brother that survived into later years, a theologian, but he was unable to give much to Soren.

Kierkegaard, burdened with a series of unbearable losses of his beloved family members, finally split apart, as an ‘I’ existing separately from his family members and carrying on among the living, while an ‘I’ remaining connected to the dead became dissociated. But he felt the call of the lost ones who retained an everlasting claim on his heart. There is a famous passage in his personal journals that describes this claim most beautifully. It concerns a recurring experience he had while walking alone before an expanse of the ocean.
“[This] has always been one of my favorite spots. And as I stool there one quiet evening as the sea struck up its song with a deep and calm solemnity, whilst my eye met not a single sail on the vast expanse of water and the sea set bounds to the heavens, and the heavens to the sea; whilst n the other side the busy noise of life subsided and the birds sang their evening prayer – the few that are dear to me came forth from their graves, or rather it seemed to me as though they had not died. I felt so content in their midst, I rested in their embrace, and it was as though I were out of the body, wafted with them into the ether above – and the hoarse screech of the gulls reminded me that I stood alone, and everything vanished before my eyes, and I turned back with a heavy heart to mix in the busy world, yet without forgetting such blessed moments” (Kierkegaard, 1834-1842, p. 3).

Kierkegaard dissociated and broke into pieces, and in the grip of his own fragmentation was then called back to himself, and to all those who had been taken away from him. His subsequent journey involved a to-and-fro movement between death and life, with no possibility of becoming wholly engaged with either.

One of his most famous works, Either/Or (1843), shows by its title the split in the heart of this man. The principal division addressed there is between what he designated the “aesthetic” and the “ethical.” In later works he spoke of the closely related tension between the “religious” and the “aesthetic.” These dichotomies are intellectual parallels to the division within: that between the part that remained bonded to his dear ones, to the eternity into which they had passed, and the part of him that engaged with the temporal world of immediacy and tried to connect with actually living human beings. If one examines how the categories relate to each other, the shadow of the earthquake separating him from his irresolvable mourning and his family members is unmistakably present. Soren Kierkegaard stood between two realms: the present world and the afterworld, and his life and work express a strange balancing act of trying to remain connected to both. Inasmuch as he could not wholly embrace anything or anyone, however, this unfortunate gentleman could really be faithful to neither.

This is seen most clearly in the tragic story of his relationship with a young woman, Regina Olsen, whom he loved dearly but felt compelled to give up. Wholeheartedly choosing a life with his beloved would have required him to cast off the ties to eternity, so he cast off Regina instead. But an inner part of him also turned back to the world and to his fiancee, holding on to a hope that he could somehow be reunited with her. He sacrificed his love for Regina on behalf of his engagement with the infinite; but he looked to Heaven, to God Himself, to make his sacrifice unnecessary and miraculously return his sweetheart to him. This is symbolized in his strange but interesting discussion of the story of Abraham and Isaac in Fear and Trembling (1843), wherein the father commits to sacrifice his son but the son is spared. There was a madness in Kierkegaard’s everlasting duality, and it caused him to hurt himself and his Regina immeasurably. She lost the one she loved, and his heart’s desire was never returned to him.

Kierkegaard’s genius, distributed throughout his writings, lies in a series of things. One could cite first his reconceptualization of the human person as an existing individual. What does the term ‘existence’ mean within the framework of his thinking? A good place to start on this is his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, in which his famous critique of Hegelian philosophy appears. His thesis, simply stated, is:

“A logical system is possible...an existential system is not possible” (1846, p. 196).
What he was saying is that a system of postulates and associated deductions can be constructed that will display an internal consistency and coherence; but an all-embracing system of ideas about human existence cannot be so constructed. The reason is that the latter must necessarily include the thinker, who cannot transcend himself and stand outside the system of his own making. Kierkegaard viewed Hegel as attempting to achieve this impossible goal, and thought it was comical and pathetic. He also pointed out that Hegel’s introduction of movement into logic in his theory of the dialectic mixes the existential with the logical and makes no sense at all.

How does his thinking here relate to the tragedy of his life? An existential “system” would be an inclusive structure, a human creation that bootstraps the thinker into an all-enveloping set of understandings that include even himself. Not possible, said Kierkegaard. He suffered in the presence of two systems: the family system consisting of himself in relation to the dead in eternity, and the system in finite space and time made up of his relations to the living, including Regina. Neither of these included the other, and Kierkegaard unconsciously identified the all-embracing aspirations of Hegelian philosophy with his own personal impossibilities. The ultimate dream of Hegel’s finalizing synthesis of the world was a mirror of the impossible dream of this gentleman becoming a whole person.

A second emphasis in his thought that made a great difference to our world lies in his formulation that “truth is subjectivity” (1846, p. 210). The idea here is that the concept of truth has two sides to it if we think about it sufficiently deeply. One would be empirical, the truth of external facts and situations. A given proposition or belief may be said to possess this truth if it aligns properly with the factual world. But there is a second truth lying in the individual’s own mode of experiencing his or her situation. Here a person may entertain a belief, form an image, or crystallize an attitude that, regarded in external terms, appears false, but it may be held inwardly in a way that is faithful to all that this person is. Such a belief would be subjectively true.

Kierkegaard was trying in these thoughts to find a pathway toward reconciling religion and science, above all toward fighting against the discrediting of faith by ‘scientifically objective’ evaluations. But the significance of his thinking reaches beyond such conflicts and provides a foundation for turning toward subjectivity as a territory having its own primacy and legitimacy. We believe his ideas contributed to the philosophical currents in the 19th Century that led eventually to phenomenology. By elevating the subject in these thoughts, he overthrew the hegemony of the object and established a sort of balance between the two. Here again we see an intellectual expression dramatically paralleling and symbolizing his need to integrate and reconcile his inward attachments to all those dead who remained emotionally real to him and his outward engagement with factually living human beings.

The third point of Kierkegaard’s we would mention is found in his work, *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849). This is a book about human despair, understood as centrally expressed by different forms of self-alienation and self-forgetfulness. He speaks to us with unprecedented eloquence of the ways we have lost touch with ourselves as existing human beings, and of how this forgetfulness has itself become unconscious. The central feature in his analysis is the relationship to God, the Creator, in whose being all individual human beings are foundationally constituted. There is a picture in his rich imagination of the human person as ontologically embedded in the Kingdom of Heaven, and of persons who have lost touch with this truth as victims of the most terrible despair that can occur in a human life. He was, if we are right in our understanding of the great earthquake, the original sufferer from this sickness unto death. Cut away from his attachments to those who had vanished, immersed then in the immediacy of living
human beings, he became separated from his own deep passions and longings for reunion with loved ones stolen away by death. In Kierkegaard’s actual life, the split between Heaven and Earth could not be successfully healed; in his philosophy of despair, in contrast, a vision is developed of acknowledging and relying on one’s foundation in the divine while at the same time flourishing in the world of living humankind.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche was a man who in the last years of his life was declared, officially and medically, insane. The genius of this thinker, however, like that of all 4 of our philosophers, is closely associated with a deeper madness haunting his whole life history, long antedating anyone’s diagnosis of his so-called mental illness. He, like Kierkegaard, was a child of loss. He was also a man divided against himself, with a life-project of seeking – but not finding - a unification of the warring trends in his nature. His biographers, for the most part, give emphasis to the role of the death of his beloved father in his early childhood, rightly pointing to his reactions to the tragedy as an important source of his later philosophical preoccupations. What precisely though was the impact of this early trauma, and how did it relate to his genius and his madness?

Nietzsche suffered a most terrible catastrophe at the age of 4. There is ambiguity in the historical record as to the precise cause of the father’s death, but it is known to have occurred as a result of a cranial illness or injury, and was preceded by a period of agonizing head pain. The future philosopher responded to the tragedy by identifying with his lost father, rebuilding his identity in his father’s image, needing to soothe his devastated mother and family by taking the mantle of the paternal role on to himself (Arnold and Atwood, 2005). In an autobiography penned when he was 13 years old, he tells the story of a dream, dramatically representing how his young life became swept up in the project of reincarnating his dead father. The dream he reports as having occurred soon after his father’s demise.

*I dreamt that I heard the same organ-sound as the one at the burial of my father. While I was looking for the reason for this, suddenly a grave opens and my father, dressed in his shroud, climbs out of it. He rushes into the church and after a short while he returns with a little child in his arms. The grave opens, he enters, and the cover sinks down again on the opening. Immediately the thunderous sound of the organ stops, and I wake up.* (1858, p. 244)

The child taken into the grave was unquestionably the young Nietzsche himself, now held in the deadly embrace of a consuming identification that would compromise his capacity to assert and express himself for the rest of his life. This thinker’s madness is rooted in the split between the incompatible agendas of living for the deceased father and living for himself.

A division had opened up between the young boy and the paternal replacement that he became: his life course accordingly acquired a dialectical pattern, dominated by a need, never lastingly fulfilled, to bring the two parts of himself together. This is mirrored everywhere in the works of Nietzsche’s genius. His works were efforts to fit together two things that ultimately could not be integrated with one another – the incompatible agendas of becoming and replacing his deceased father on the one side, and of being and becoming his own self on the other. One sees an echo of this struggle in the dichotomy between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in the
curious duality of Zarathustra (Nietzsche, 1892) who preaches a doctrine bidding human beings to be themselves but at the same time himself speaks as a paternal, guiding prophet, and in a somewhat more indirect fashion in his view of human knowledge as inherently perspectival.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism inheres in one of his most famous sentences, appearing in the book of aphorisms, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

> "It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir" (p. 37).

The insight crystallized in this statement regarding the embeddedness of philosophy in the life of the philosopher is associated with his understanding that all our thinking is perspectival. No God’s-eye view of human existence is possible for anyone, and the goal of achieving the formulation of truths holding validity transcending individual lives is accordingly rendered meaningless. A specific way Nietzsche found for asserting this idea was his well-known assertion:

*God is dead.* (1882, p. 95)

One looks out upon impressive systems of ideas, cathedrals assembled out of abstractions, and Nietzsche tells us that these magnificent edifices are inextricably linked to the living context of the philosopher’s own personal existence. There are no realities lying above and beyond the immediacy of human existence, and the whole history of proposals about such a transcendent realm turn out to be nothing more than all too human personal perspectives. Soaring, complex thought is integrated with lived experience, and in that unifying act one sees a manifestation of Nietzsche’s lasting search for wholeness. This man’s sensitivity to the perspectival nature of philosophical thought was perhaps magnified in the interplay of the dual, competing perspectives by which his life was inhabited: that of the father whom he sought to replace, and that of the original child whose identity he sought to reclaim.

Consider in this connection the doctrine of the eternal return of the same. This idea can be viewed as a reification and universalization of Nietzsche’s captivity to the project of making his life repeat and extend that of his father. Every person is destined, according to his thinking, to endlessly repeat lives that have already been lived, returning again and again, without end, to precisely the same situations. Nietzsche’s notion that he was his “father once more” (a statement occurring in his late autobiography *Ecce Homo, 1908. P. 228*)), precisely mirrors the idea we eternally come back to lives that have already occurred.

A madness inheres in this doctrine. Nietzsche’s overall philosophy dispels the sheltering illusions provided to Western civilization by Platonic and Christian metaphysics and their associated ideas – it does this by envisioning the world of human existence as essentially chaotic, without meanings other than those we ourselves impose. He tells us there is nothing permanent we can rely on in the flux of the world’s endless becoming, and such a view can propel the thinker toward a depressing nihilism. There is nothing to rely on, that is, except for one thing: the eternal return of the same. Nietzsche’s doctrine oddly contradicts what his philosophy otherwise is saying – it ascribes a ‘permanent structure’ to the flux of becoming, an essential being defined by the eternal recurrences themselves. This again mirrors how the young Nietzsche contended with the family chaos in the face of his father’s death by transforming himself into a paternal duplicate.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein

As one looks at Ludwig Wittgenstein’s life, one factor cries out for an explanation: his intense desire to be dead. If we want to understand this philosopher, let us also seek to apprehend how his various ideas relate to an everlasting suicidality. Biographical exploration discloses something very interesting relevant to this matter. He had three brothers, and they all killed themselves as young men. It seems very likely that his own wish to die would relate closely to his brothers’ acts of self-destruction, and so one can raise the question: What happened to these people to undermine what ordinarily is the strongest motive a human being feels, the will to live?

The boys grew up in a family ruled over by their father, a wealthy Austrian steel magnate who expected all his sons to follow his own pathway and become engineers (Monk, 1990). This was a situation of overpowering narcissism in which the boys were slated for lives extending and enhancing the personal journey of the father. He was the sun and they were the planets: the significance of their individual efforts to establish themselves lay in how they reflected his radiance. Three of these children finally declined the destinies that had been designed for them, definitively rejecting a life of compliance by rejecting life itself. Ludwig initially conformed to the paternal agenda and became an engineer, and he would almost certainly have ended up the same way as his brothers had he not found philosophy.

Attracted at first to mathematical logic, Wittgenstein sought out the renowned logician, Gottlob Frege, who advised him to go to Cambridge to study with Bertrand Russell. Russell had just published, with Alfred North Whitehead, Principia Mathematica (1927). This new mentor figure operated as a surrogate father almost from the beginning. He was enormously impressed by Wittgenstein’s philosophical depth and passion, and believed the next important steps in Western philosophy might well emerge from his protégé’s work. At the same time Russell saw Wittgenstein’s deep emotional distress and worried that he might well instead end up killing himself.

On a personal level, Wittgenstein’s philosophical efforts reflect a struggle to disentangle his identity from the confusing, mystifying language of his original family. He had been brainwashed, so to speak, under the usurping pressure of his father’s self-centered universe. Hermann Wittgenstein was an epistemological tyrant, defining reality for all those who sought to be connected to him. This philosopher’s thinking, therefore, can be viewed as a self-deprogramming enterprise, ultimately directed toward the possibility of liberating himself from the paternal agenda and claiming his own place in this world.

Wittgenstein’s first book, the only one published during his lifetime, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921/2001), is an effort to clarify the relationship between the words of our language and what he called the “states of affairs” appearing in the world we perceive. Two specific assertion appear in this book, ones we believe are charged with personal significance:

“There is no such thing as the subject...”

“The subject does not belong to the world...” (1922, p. 69)
On a philosophical level, this reminds us that we ought not to objectify the first person singular: the ‘I’ is not an item in the world. We are being told that the experiencing subject we are is not a content of the world we perceive; it is instead what he spoke of as a ‘limit’ of this world, a standpoint from which what we call “world” and all its contents appear.

If we lift the statements out of their ordinary philosophical context, and think about the personal, life-historical meaning they might contain, an epistemological rebellion on Wittgenstein’s part appears, one mounted against the powerful father who tried to be the all-defining director of his son’s existence. The son is saying:

“‘I’ am not a thing belonging to your world, not anything anyone can define or control. My being lies outside the insanity of your self-absorption. Above all, know this: ‘I’ am not an item in the inventory of your possessions, to be made use of as you please!”

The pull of the father’s usurping authority, though, must have continued to be very strong, presenting an ever-present danger of falling back under his control and becoming once again the obedient extension of an irresistible will. This is not just a matter of a child fighting back against a parent who is strict and controlling. Wittgenstein’s separating himself from his father was a matter of rescuing his very being as someone independently real. A crisis occurred in his young life in which he saw that continuing to walk on the road laid out for him by his father would be to become permanently itemized on the list of his father’s many possessions. It would be to embrace annihilation.

A sign of the felt danger of returning to the obliterating conformity of his youth appears in a feature of Wittgenstein’s life that his biographers have noted but not fully understood. It was his incapacity to dissimulate, to lie, to conceal the truth because of the claim of whatever circumstance he was in. If he did move toward some concealment, which happened exceedingly rarely, he was thrown into a crisis of wanting to immediately kill himself. Our understanding of this inability to lie is that presenting anything other than what he felt and knew to be true posed the danger of a re-engulfment by the falseness of an identity based on the need to be accepted rather than on his own spontaneous intentionality and authenticity. If the only possibility was that of a false life, then his only option would have been death.

The philosopher enforced his emancipation from enslavement by cutting off relations with his father, and he refused even to accept his very substantial inheritance after the father finally died. Wittgenstein saw taking the money as sacrificing a very precarious sense of personal existence. The heart and soul of this man’s madness lies in the danger of annihilation that haunted him throughout his life. His philosophy we can thus view as a search for an answer to this ontological vulnerability.

His writings, for the most part, consist in aphoristic meditations focusing on language. He gives us trains of thought that attempt to expose various confusions into which we fall, arguing that many - perhaps all - of the classic problems of philosophy arise as secondary manifestations of these linguistic confusions. Wittgenstein engages himself, and his readers, in dialogues subjecting specific examples of how we speak and think to relentless reflection and analysis. In the process of these conversations, a profound critique of the whole Cartesian tradition emerges, a dismantling of metaphysical
conceptions and distinctions that otherwise enwrap our thinking and imprison us within structures of unconscious confusion. Central in this transforming inquiry are understandings of human existence in terms of ‘mind,’ seen as a ‘thinking thing,’ an actual entity with an inside that looks out on a world from which it is essentially estranged. Such an idea, once posited, leads inexorably to a dualism: one begins to wonder how the entity ‘mind’ strangely, mysteriously connects to another entity, ‘body.’ He makes compelling arguments that specific linguistic confusions based on the human tendency to turn nouns into substantives lie at the root of such otherwise unfounded ideas. In Wittgenstein’s universe, there are no ‘minds’ that have interiors, no intrapsychic spaces in which ideas and feelings float about in some “queer medium,” no mysteries we need to be fascinated by regarding how the mental entity and its supposed contents relate to the physical object we call the body. Longstanding traditions in metaphysics are accordingly undercut and the terrain of philosophy is opened up to new and clarifying ways of exploring our existence. Well-known arguments against the coherence of solipsism as a philosophical position and also against the possibility of an individual ‘private language’ definitively refute the idea that it makes any sense to think of a human life in terms of an isolated ‘I,’ or ego. He was a post-Cartesian philosopher par excellence.

Wittgenstein sometimes viewed his scrutinizing of our linguistic expressions and associated patterns of thought as a form of ‘therapy,’ performed upon philosophy and society. It is our view that this therapy he offered to our civilization mirrored precisely the personal effort described earlier, in which his life goal was to free himself from the entangling confusions, invalidations, and annihilations pervading the family system of his youth. In this respect he succeeded in connecting uniquely personal issues to important currents and needs of the larger culture. His philosophical journey therefore allowed him to find a meaning for his life beyond the narrow orbit of his father’s deadly narcissism and helped him avoid the tragic fate of his brothers.

Let us turn now to one of Wittgenstein’s (1953) most important specific ideas: that of a so-called language game. It is an elusive term that he never formally defined in his various dialogues, so one has to note how he used it in various contexts and extract a meaning. Of course one of his most well-known formulations is that “the meaning is the use,” and exists nowhere else, which is a distinctively post-Cartesian view of semantics. We think of a Wittgensteinian language game as a set of words and phrases, along with their customary usages, that form a quasi-organic system, such that when one uses one or two elements in the system one is catapulted into the whole, subject to its implicit rules, in some respects trapped within its horizons of possible discourse. The German word for this is Sprachspiel, and the word obviously derives from spielen: to play. A language game, in whatever sphere of our lives it becomes manifest, encloses us within a finite system of elements and possibilities, and subjects us to rules we knowingly or unknowingly tend to follow. Such a structure literally “plays” with our minds, shaping and directing our experiences according to preformed pathways and constraining them within pre-established boundaries. Wittgenstein wanted us to become aware of these systems in which we are all embedded, and this would be part of his therapy for our whole culture. The goal is one of ushering in a greater clarity about what we think and who and what we are, illuminating what he spoke of as our “complicated form of life.”
The primal language game of this man’s personal history was the communication system in his early family, which designated his existence – and those of his doomed brothers – as playthings, almost like chess pieces belonging to the father’s controlling agendas and properties. A clear perception of the mystifications and usurping invalidations of his early family world would obviously be of assistance in this man’s attempts to find his own way. He tried mightily in his philosophical reflections to release his discipline and the world at large from its “bewitchment” by language, even as he was able to free himself only very tenuously from the spell cast by his father.

4. Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger was entranced throughout his life with one and only one question: that of the meaning of Being. The great ontological goal of his lifework was to answer this question, or, at least, to prepare the way for that answer to be found. He wanted to know what it means for something – anything – to exist, to have Being. At the beginning of Heidegger’s magnum opus, Being and Time, he defines “Dasein” – his word for the distinctively human form of being – as a being for which Being is an issue. Applying Nietzsche’s remark that every philosophy is a personal confession and an unconscious memoir, the statement is a revelation of the subjective background of Heidegger’s whole thinking. He was a man for whom Being was an issue, a man who was uncertain of his own existence, whose sense of his own reality was tenuous and incomplete.

Being and Time is arguably one of the most important and influential philosophical works of the 20th Century. A central theme of the volume is captured famously in his remarkable claim:

“A bare subject without a world never ‘is’” (p. 152).

The first half of this work is devoted to unveiling the holistic structure of human existence, covered up by traditional metaphysical dualisms, especially Descartes’s (1641), transformed by history into the common sense of our culture. Descartes’s metaphysics divided the finite world into two distinct basic substances – res cogitans and res extensa – thinking substances (minds) with no extension in space and extended substances (bodies and other material things) that do not think. This metaphysical dualism concretized the idea of a complete separation between mind and world, between subject and object – a radical decontextualization of both mind and world with respect to one another as they are beheld in their bare, isolated “thinghood.”

Heidegger (1927), by contrast, sought to illumine the unity of our Being, split asunder in the Cartesian bifurcation. Thus, what he called the “destruction” of traditional metaphysics was a clearing away of its concealments and disguises, in order to unveil the primordial contextual whole that it had been covering up. The unity of our Being (i.e., our intelligibility to ourselves) and its context is indicated early on in Being and Time, in his designation of the human being as Dasein, being-there or being-situated.

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, Heidegger was a deeply divided individual, driven in his thinking to reach for wholeness. His movement toward integration appears in his interpretation of the constitutive structure of our existing as a “Being-in-the-world” (p. 78). With the hyphens unifying the expression Being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-sein), he indicates that in his interpretation of Dasein the traditional ontological gap between our Being and our world is to be definitively closed and that, in their indissoluble unity, our Being and our world always contextualize one another. When we understand ourselves unveiledly, we grasp ourselves as
a rich contextual whole, Being-in-the-world, in which our Being is saturated with the world in which we dwell, and the world we inhabit is drenched in human meanings and significance.

What would lead a thinker to undertake such a quest for the lost unity of our Being? Our answer is that he was searching for reassurance against the constant threat of annihilating isolation, which, for him, was built into the quest for individualized selfhood.

Little has been written about Heidegger’s early childhood and formative developmental experiences. One can infer nevertheless that individualized selfhood was an emotionally powerful and problematic issue for him, as shown with particular clarity in his conflictual struggles to separate himself from, and maintain continuity with, the Catholic Church and his family’s Catholic heritage (Safranski, 1994). Heidegger’s father was a sexton at St. Martin’s Catholic church in the small provincial town of Messkirch, where the family lived under the Church’s care. His boyhood life was pervaded by the customs and practices of the Catholic Church. His lower-middle-class parents did not have the means to support their children’s higher education, and he was able to attend seminary only with the help of financial aid from the Church. His increasingly ambivalent attachment to the Church was thus complicated by his financial dependence on it, which continued over a thirteen-year period. In consequence of his exposure to philosophy, his thinking began to stray from the Catholic world of ideas. This straying, along with the barrier to individualization posed by the required conformity to Catholic doctrine, are vividly highlighted in a passage, drenched in sarcasm, from a letter he wrote to Englebert Krebs in 1914:

"The motu proprio on philosophy [most likely referring to a papal edict requiring Catholic priests and teachers to sign a loyalty oath renouncing Modernist ideas] was all we needed. Perhaps you, as an ‘academic,’ could propose a better procedure, whereby anyone who feels like having an independent thought would have his brain taken out and replaced with an Italian salad." (quoted in Ott, 1993, p. 81)

Heidegger’s growing conflict about his attachment to the Catholic Church was, in the end (but only temporarily), resolved psychosomatically. Only two weeks after entering the Society of Jesus as a novice, he was dismissed for medical reasons because he had complained of “heart trouble.” When these pains recurred two years later, he discontinued his training as a priest. It seems evident that his emotional conflict about differentiating himself from the Church, and thus from his family of origin, was so wrenchingly intense that his growing unhappiness with Catholicism could only be experienced somatically as a physical heartache, and that he could only seize ownership of his spiritual existence by means of a psychosomatic symptom.

There are two pieces of evidence that support the interpretation that, for this philosopher, individualized selfhood was strongly linked to the danger of annihilating aloneness. The first is his (1927) account of authentic (eigentlich) or owned existence in Being and Time. In this account, authentic existing is grounded in nonevasively owned Being-toward-death. Torn from the sheltering illusions of conventional everyday interpretedness (das Man), one who exists authentically apprehends death, not as a distant event that has not yet occurred or that happens to others (as the “idle talk” of das Man would have it), but as a distinctive possibility that is constitutive of his or her very existence, as his or her “ownmost” and “uttermost” possibility, as a possibility that is both certain and indefinite as to its “when” and that therefore always impends as a constant threat. Authentic existing is disclosed in the mood of anxiety, in which one feels “uncanny” — that is, no longer safely at home in an everyday world that now fails to evade Being-toward-death. Heidegger claims that death as one’s ownmost possibility is “nonrelational,” in that death lays claim to one as an
individual, nullifying one’s relations with others. One’s death is unsharable:

“No one can take [another’s] dying away from him… By its very essence, death is in every case mine… Mineness… [is] ontologically constitutive for death.” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 284).

Thus, in Heidegger’s view, it is authentic Being-toward-death as our ownmost, nonrelational possibility that individualizes and singularizes us. In the philosophy of Being and Time, individualized selfhood and annihilating aloneness belong together.

The second sign of this tormenting linkage is biographical—a poignant episode in which Heidegger placed a just-published copy of Being and Time on his mother’s deathbed. Shortly thereafter, she died in a state of deep turmoil and disappointment at her son’s having fallen away from the Catholic Church. The leaving of the book for her was a last, futile effort to find acceptance of the distinctive path to which his life of thinking had led him and to mend the bond with her that had been severed by his self-differentiating process.

During this same period in which Heidegger was bitterly rejected by his dying mother, Hannah Arendt, his lover and sustaining muse during the writing of Being and Time, was also in the process of withdrawing from him and breaking off their relationship. Additionally, his magnum opus was greeted by the academic community with incomprehension. These three isolating traumas, we believe, plunged Heidegger into a crisis of personal annihilation, in which he felt his sense of selfhood slip away and his world collapse around him. It was in the context of these feelings of self-loss and world-loss that he turned toward National Socialism as a way of restoring himself and his world (Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 2010). Heidegger’s personal version of Nazism was actually a form of madness—a resuscitative dream picturing Being itself trying to break upon the world as it had not done since the ancient Greeks. After the war, apparently in reaction to facing the Denazification Committee and being barred from university teaching, he had a mental breakdown and underwent psychiatric hospitalization and treatment, after which he largely withdrew into a life of solitary philosophical reflection, his “cabin existence.” His writings became pervaded by the theme of returning—returning to being-at-home or being homely, to hearth and home, and to the holy and the gods that had disappeared. In his adoption of this imagery, and in the accompanying hypostatizing and theologizing of Being, one sees a vivid expression of his longing to recapture the ties lost in his pursuit of individualized selfhood—such as those with his mother and the Catholic family of his childhood—a restorative returning brilliantly foreshadowed decades earlier in the primordial unity of Being-in-the-world. Both in Heidegger’s philosophy and in his personal experiential world, authenticity and homelessness, ownmost selfhood and radical non-relationality, were inextricably intertwined.

CONCLUSION

We have discovered a striking parallelism in the course of our psychobiographical reflections on the lives and philosophical works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. All four of these great post-Cartesian philosophers sought in their philosophies to reunite fragments hypostatized in the Cartesian bifurcations, just as they sought in their creative work to reunify the disunities in their personal psychological worlds, which had been variously fractured by emotional trauma. Their efforts to reintegrate Cartesian splits mirrored their quests for personal wholeness, and the same can be said for the two of us. We both know from first-hand personal experience the devastation of traumatic loss (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), the profoundly undermining impact of an epistemologically tyrannical parent (Wittgenstein), and the annihilating aloneness that can result from strivings for self-differentiation (Heidegger). Our awareness of
these fracturing experiences and of their impact on our psychoanalytic thinking keeps us ever phenomenological, ever contextual, and ever perspectival, open to new possibilities of understanding yet to be discovered.

REFERENCES


