

A Comprehensive Technical Analysis of Søren Kierkegaard's Philosophical Development: A Guide to the Bretall Anthology

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Søren Kierkegaard, often heralded as the father of existentialism, presents a literary and philosophical corpus that is as labyrinthine as it is profound. For the scholar and the student alike, the challenge has always been how to approach a body of work that utilizes multiple pseudonyms, indirect communication, and a dialectic that shifts between the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The publication of **A Kierkegaard Anthology**, edited by **Robert Bretall** in 1946, marked a watershed moment in the English-speaking world's access to these ideas. Rather than providing mere snippets, Bretall curated a chronological progression that mirrors Kierkegaard's own intellectual and spiritual evolution. This article provides an in-depth technical analysis of the themes found within this anthology, the structural mechanics of Kierkegaard's thought, and a comparative evaluation of his work against contemporary frameworks.

The Structural Framework of the Bretall Anthology

Robert Bretall's editorial approach was rooted in the belief that Kierkegaard's works cannot be understood in isolation. The anthology is structured to showcase the **intellectual and spiritual development** of the author, beginning with early entries from his journals (1834–1842) and culminating in his final, fiery attacks on the established Danish State Church. By arranging the selections chronologically, Bretall allows the reader to witness the transition from a brilliant young ironist to a somber psychological investigator, and finally to a radical Christian thinker.

Technical Breakdown of the Selections

The anthology covers the primary phases of Kierkegaard's career, which are generally categorized into the following technical clusters:

- The Early Aesthetic Writings: Including *Either/Or* and the infamous *Diary of the Seducer*. These works explore the life of immediacy, sensory experience, and the avoidance of boredom.
- The Dialectical-Psychological Works: Such as *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. These texts analyze the internal mechanics of faith, dread, and the human condition.
- The Philosophical-Climacean Works: Specifically *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which tackle the relationship between objective truth and subjective existence.
- The Late Religious Discourses: Including *Works of Love* and *Practice in Christianity*, focusing on the rigorous demands of the New Testament.

Core Concepts: The Three Stages of Existence

At the heart of the Kierkegaardian system—or rather, his anti-system—is the theory of the **Three Stages on Life's Way**. This is not a linear progression for every individual but a description of the existential spheres in which a human being might reside.

1. The Aesthetic Stage

The aesthete lives for the moment. The primary technical driver of the aesthetic life is the **Rotation Method**—the constant seeking of new stimuli to stave off the ultimate existential threat: boredom. In the *Diary of the Seducer*, Kierkegaard illustrates how the aesthetic life is characterized by a lack of commitment and a focus on possibility over reality. However, the aesthetic life eventually collapses into **despair**, as the individual realizes that a life of fleeting moments lacks a cohesive self.

2. The Ethical Stage

The transition to the ethical stage is marked by the act of **choice**. By choosing to choose, the individual accepts responsibility and enters the realm of universal moral laws. Here, marriage and civic duty are the paradigms. The ethical man (exemplified by Judge Wilhelm in *Either/Or*) finds meaning in consistency and the fulfillment of duty. Yet, the ethical stage eventually encounters the limit of **sin**—the realization that the individual cannot perfectly fulfill the moral law, leading to the need for a higher sphere.

3. The Religious Stage

The religious stage is subdivided into **Religiousness A** (the religion of immanence/general spirituality) and **Religiousness B** (Christianity/the religion of transcendence). In Religiousness B, the individual acknowledges the **Absolute Paradox**: that the eternal God entered time as a human being. This requires a **Leap of Faith**, which is not a move toward irrationality but a move beyond the limits of human reason.

Technical Analysis: The Case of Abraham (Kant vs. Kierkegaard)

One of the most rigorous technical debates in modern philosophy involves the interpretation of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. This comparison highlights the divergence between Enlightenment morality and Kierkegaardian faith.

Feature	Immanuel Kant (Ethical Universal)	Søren Kierkegaard (Teleological Suspension)
Classification of the Act	Immortal/Criminal. The moral law is universal and must be obeyed without exception.	The "Teleological Suspension of the Ethical." An act performed for a higher end (telos).
Source of Authority	Practical Reason (The Categorical Imperative).	The Absolute (God) as a personal authority above the universal law.
The Role of the Individual	The individual is subordinate to the universal moral law.	The individual is higher than the universal in a private relationship with God.
Communication	Must be transparent and publicly justifiable.	Abraham cannot speak; his act is a "private trial" that escapes language.
Outcome	Abraham should have recognized the voice as a delusion because it contradicted morality.	Abraham is the "Knight of Faith" because he believed by virtue of the absurd.

The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

In *Fear and Trembling*, writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard introduces the concept of the **Teleological Suspension of the Ethical**. This technical term describes a situation where a higher purpose (Telos) overrides a lower, universal moral duty. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is not seen as a lapse into madness, but as the pinnacle of faith. This analysis is crucial because it differentiates Kierkegaard from standard moral philosophers who view ethics as the highest court of human appeal.

The Mechanics of Pseudonymity and Indirect Communication

Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms is not a mere literary device; it is an essential component of his **pedagogical strategy**. He believed that existential truth cannot be taught directly (like a mathematical formula) but must be **appropriated** by the individual.

- Pseudonyms as Perspectives: Each pseudonym represents a specific life-view (e.g., Victor Eremita for the aesthetic, Johannes de Silentio for the religious-paradoxical).
- The Objective vs. Subjective: In the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard argues that "Subjectivity is Truth." This does not mean truth is a matter of opinion, but that the **way** in which an individual relates to truth is more important than the objective content itself.
- The Double Reflection: Communication must be "doubly reflected." First, the thought is conceived; second, it is expressed in a way that forces the listener to relate to it personally rather than just memorizing it.

Comparative Analysis: Kierkegaard vs. Nietzsche

While both thinkers are considered the progenitors of existentialism, their technical approaches to the individual and morality differ significantly. Both were reacting against the perceived hollowness of 19th-century European culture (the "Present Age").

Metric	Søren Kierkegaard	Friedrich Nietzsche
Primary Critique	The loss of individual passion within the "Christendom" of the State Church.	The "Death of God" and the slave morality of traditional Christianity.
The Heroic Archetype	The Knight of Faith.	The Übermensch (Overman).
Source of Value	A transcendental relationship with a personal God.	The Will to Power and the self-creation of values.
View of Suffering	Suffering is an essential path toward spiritual maturity and imitation of Christ.	Suffering is something to be overcome and harnessed for greatness.
Ultimate Goal	Becoming a Christian (in the radical, primitive sense).	The Eternal Recurrence and the affirmation of life without God.

Practical Implementation: A Field Guide for Reading Kierkegaard

For those utilizing the **Bretall Anthology** or the primary texts, a structured approach is recommended to avoid the confusion inherent in his dialectical style. Following the logic of his development ensures a deeper technical grasp of his arguments.

Phase 1: The Psychological Entry Point

Start with **The Journals**. These entries provide the raw data of Kierkegaard's life, including his broken engagement to Regine Olsen and his relationship with his father. This context is vital for understanding the personal stakes of his philosophy. Then, move to *The Present Age* to see his critique of the "public" and the "crowd," which remains strikingly relevant in the era of social media.

Phase 2: Navigating the Stages

Read *Either/Or* (specifically the contrast between "A" and Judge Wilhelm). This establishes the tension between the aesthetic and the ethical. Follow this with *Fear and Trembling* to understand the move from the ethical to the religious. These texts define the "what" of his stages.

Phase 3: The Philosophical Hard Core

Engage with the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. This is Kierkegaard's most technically demanding work. It provides the epistemological justification for his emphasis on subjectivity and his rejection of the Hegelian "System." Focus on the distinction between **Essential Knowing** (which relates to existence) and **Accidental Knowing** (historical or scientific facts).

Phase 4: The Late Religious Works

Finally, read *Works of Love*. This text provides his most systematic treatment of Christian ethics, defining love not as a feeling (aesthetic) but as a duty (religious/ethical) to the neighbor. It serves as the constructive counterpart to his earlier destructive critiques.

Troubleshooting Common Misinterpretations

Technical students often encounter several pitfalls when analyzing Kierkegaard's work. Addressing these is

essential for a high-level understanding.

1. The Error of Misidentifying the Pseudonym: Do not attribute the views of *Johannes de Silentio* directly to Kierkegaard. The author often wrote pseudonymous "prefaces" to distance himself from the views expressed, allowing the reader to judge the life-view on its own merits.
2. The Irrationalist Fallacy: While Kierkegaard emphasizes the "absurd," he is not an irrationalist. He uses reason to define the exact limits of reason. The "Leap" is taken not because reason is useless, but because reason has reached its boundary and can go no further.
3. The Individualist Extremism: While Kierkegaard emphasizes "The Individual," this is not a call to social isolation. Rather, he argues that one must first become a true individual before one can truly belong to a community or have a meaningful relationship with the neighbor.

Synthesizing the Kierkegaardian Legacy

The technical legacy of Søren Kierkegaard, as preserved in the **Robert Bretall Anthology**, lies in his rigorous mapping of the human interior. By deconstructing the ways in which individuals hide from existence—whether through aesthetic distraction, moralistic legalism, or abstract intellectualism—Kierkegaard forces a confrontation with the self. His work anticipates the major movements of 20th-century thought, from Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* to Sartre's focus on radical freedom and responsibility.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard's project was a corrective. In an age of increasing digitization and mass-media conformity, his insistence on the **infinite qualitative difference** between God and man, and the importance of the single individual, serves as a technical blueprint for maintaining existential integrity. The anthology remains an essential instrument for anyone seeking to navigate the complex topography of the soul, providing a structured path through the thoughts of a man who lived and died for the sake of the truth he called "subjective."

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