

The Use of Kierkegaard as a Stimulus for Autoethnographical Journal Writing

ABSTRACT Kierkegaard wrote extensively, often focusing on his own struggles aligning his Christian faith with the organized structures of the church he was familiar with. His belief was that each individual was responsible for understanding and giving meaning to their own life as opposed to subscribing to a collective position held by the wider society or a faith group. He showed awareness of the impact of more widely held views on those of the individual who found themselves outside of societal norms. Kierkegaard explored his own thoughts and responses to the world around him through the act of journaling. This focus on a unique individual understanding of the world explored through personal writing appears to complement the broader methodological approach of autoethnography. Looking at a brief overview of four fundamental themes of Kierkegaard's personal writing drawn from Kierkegaard's journals, parallels are drawn with autoethnographical written pieces. Suggestions are made for how Kierkegaard's approach to his own personal writing could be of use to autoethnographers, specifically those who use journaling as a process for writing. **KEYWORDS** Kierkegaard, journaling, truth, reflection

INTRODUCTION—KIERKEGAARD AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) was a writer, theologian, and philosophical thinker.

Much of Kierkegaard's writing may seem at odds with autoethnography at a first glance as some of his life experiences are either mentioned briefly or excluded from his writing. For example, his journals make no mention of the death of his mother, and readers are often left to join the dots between the focus of his writing and known events in his life. His desire to remain hidden was a conscious act, and his journals would only contain the narrative that he was prepared to tell of himself. He writes:

After my death, no one will find in my papers (this is my consolation) the least information about what really filled my life, find the inscription in my innermost being which explains everything and what, more often than not, makes what the world would call trifles into, for me, events of immense importance, and which I too consider of no significance once I take away the secret note which explains it all.¹

He is the Schrödinger of philosophical biographical writers, being both present and illusive at the same time.

In spite of this illusiveness, I believe that Kierkegaard would have found autoethnography to be a curious methodology even if he may have viewed some of what he read as "a muddy pond or a mirror,"² expecting something deep and being disappointed with what he found. There is much within the broad field of autoethnography that he would potentially have found aligned to his beliefs. Kierkegaard was in favor of understanding

Journal of Autoethnography, Vol. 3, Issue 4, pp. 459–474, e-ISSN 2637-5192 © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2022.3.4.459>

life backwards,³ and we can apply this principle to the term “autoethnography” itself to understand its overlaps with Kierkegaard as a journal writer.

Dismantling “autoethnography” into its three distinct terms—*auto*, *ethno*, *graphy*—allows us to view the heart of the methodology as one that enables us to use our own stories to make sense of the world around us.⁴ It is common for autoethnographers to place differing weights in terms of their focus on the three terms depending on the nature of their research,⁵ and this is also true of Kierkegaard, whose journals meander and shift their focus on self, culture, and representation, with different terms taking priority at different moments of his life. *Auto* (self) is a dominant theme in Kierkegaard’s journals, where he wrote in the first person just as autoethnographers might.⁶ He was a writer constantly trying to understand his place in the world and how his views aligned (or misaligned) with the wider society. Kierkegaard’s journals are a personal account exploring a developing understanding of self across a period of twenty-one years. Kierkegaard sought to know himself and be true to his own understanding of who he was. He writes: “I am living now just like a distilled copy of an original edition of my authentic I.”⁷

Ethno (culture) is another key concept in Kierkegaard’s journals, as it is for autoethnographers.⁸ Although culture can be hard to define, it is a group-orientated concept stemming from individuals interacting with other individuals.⁹ We see this experience in Kierkegaard’s journals as we witness his interactions with the social scene in Copenhagen as well as with philosophical and theological groups of his day. He was a critic of the culture he saw around him, and this often focused on the Church and its role in society: “As I have often said, the basic confusion in Christianity has been to make it a doctrine. With a doctrine one has to take care first of all to master it all.”¹⁰

Graphy (representation) again has parallels with Kierkegaard’s journals, just as it has for autoethnography.¹¹ For autoethnographers, the representation of others might include both description and an element of “showing” to the audience.¹² We can see this mirrored in the journals of Kierkegaard where he wrote extensively about the people around him. At times, this might focus on “showing” the perspectives of a group such as “the rabble”¹³ who stood for those whose opinions were formed through the media, or his observations may focus on describing an event with a single individual: “The only person with whom I have ever had an obscene discussion is the old China sea-captain I talk to in Mini’s Café and who thinks I am forty years old.”¹⁴

Due to these parallels, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard has been widely associated with autoethnography, with many references taken from both his numerous published works and journals. In some instances, Kierkegaard’s writing may be used as a touchstone for the author’s own circumstances explored through their autoethnographical exploration, such as those that discuss issues like death and despair,¹⁵ or those that focus on the anxieties caused by possibility.¹⁶ However, Kierkegaard’s writing is also used to a greater extent within autoethnographic writing. This may be related to a personal connection felt by the author to Kierkegaard,¹⁷ or due to his existentialist philosophical thought,¹⁸ often associated with the autoethnographic due to its focus on human experience and our efforts to understand our place in the world.¹⁹

However, these references to Kierkegaard often focus on the content of his written works (ideas, thoughts, and arguments) or on his use of narrative storytelling. Whilst these are highly relevant connections to make, it is the *process* of writing seen in Kierkegaard's journals and parallels to autoethnographic journaling that have formed the strongest link in my own writing.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOREN AND I

Justinian sits on his bed in the cramped college room. It would be a sizable space if it were not for his array of instruments taking up every inch possible: a violin rests in an open case, an acoustic guitar leans tentatively against a set of drawers, an accordion with a broken key lies prostrate next to a pile of theology books. We are sat in the twilight of an autumn night in the Michaelmas term of our second year at university. I admire Justinian a lot. There is something of the hermit about him, yet he is also wild and untamed like Heathcliff. He has put a CD on and hands me the case, "I think you will like this; Buckley had a knack for getting to the heart of things."

We sit in silence on his cramped single bed as I slip comfortably into the enveloping sound of Jeff Buckley. "Halleluiah" begins to play. Time abruptly stops. Then starts as the song draws to an end. Wracked with emotion, I ask Justinian what made him think I would appreciate listening to the music. He lays back on his pillows and plays with a ringlet of hair which has escaped the bandana wrapped around his head, "It's what you were saying about Kierkegaard. Buckley was influenced by Cohen; Cohen was influenced by Kierkegaard. Plus there is the whole tormented soul, people-watching thing, I guess."

As I walk home through the dark, damp streets I decide to take the riskier path back to my college. It is risky as it is poorly lit and takes a route across the river and through a patch of woodland. Yet the draw of this route is not only the solitude but the view of the lamp-lit cathedral casting a watchful silent eye over all who see her. I cross the bridge and head to my favourite spot. Hunkered down in the wet grass I am out of sight and alone with my thoughts. The conversation with Justinian replays in my mind. Neurons race across synapses linking thoughts, ideas, and emotions together. "Halleluiah" was my halleluiah moment with Buckley, but it was Kierkegaard's journal writing about transformation of will²⁰ which was the halleluiah moment earlier in the day which Justinian had alluded to.

I had sat in my preferred spot in the massive lecture hall. New Testament Studies was not my favourite topic (give me the intertestamental period any day), so I had made my usual bingo card to keep myself occupied during the lecture: ekklesia, agape, Paul, lamb. During the lecture, the Professor put an acetate up with an entry from Kierkegaard's journals on. In one moment, my frustrations with, "Jesus is my best friend" and, "He died to save you" melted away. Kierkegaard had nailed it. We were focusing on the wrong thing. We were called to be Christ-like and to imitate him not to focus on his "sacrifice." Who was this man who wrote so profoundly? How did he do it? Easing myself up from the grass, I said a silent "goodnight" to the cathedral and dragged my tired limbs up the final path towards my college.

* * *

The journal writings of Soren Kierkegaard have formed a backbone to my own understanding of myself in the world, trying to reimagine faith whilst systematically dismantling the structure of the church upbringing I had experienced. I met in him someone who had walked that path before. Reading his journals felt like a mystery adventure or quest and, whilst I did not ever feel that I had completely understood what I read, I was drawn into his writing because Kierkegaard felt like a real person. Those times when I experienced a breakthrough in understanding seemed revelatory, unique, and very personal. It ultimately felt that here was a writer who was writing just for me, who understood my own experiences of the pull and withdrawal from the church whilst searching for a way through that worked at a personal level. Reading him alongside literary pieces from the same period, Kierkegaard grew into an enigmatic character in my mind much like Alec d'Urberville in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or Mr Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Kierkegaard became an anti-hero for my formative years and helped to form and shape my views on personal faith.

After my degree, Kierkegaard fell into a void as life and work took over. His journals resurfaced in my life over a decade later when I was completing my autoethnographic thesis based on my own story of my professional life as a teacher. When I sat gathering all of the examples of journal writing I owned to try to find some guidance on how to shape and form my work, I came across Kierkegaard again. Having previously only thought of him as a theologian and philosopher, I realized that so much of my own style was influenced by his. Kierkegaard therefore took on a new role for me. Whilst his theological and philosophical influence remained, his practical approach to writing became apparent.

After changing careers and taking on a new role within a university, the need to publish meant that my writing again became a focus. With the move to academia, I returned to writing a journal but was met with the same challenges I had encountered before. This saw me return to Kierkegaard for inspiration and support in my writing process.

COVID AND BREXIT—THE CRISIS POINT IN MY JOURNAL WRITING

“Write about what you know. Clearly know very little.”²¹

* * *

We are in lockdown. A funny word when the world around in nature is continuing along the usual lines it follows through life. The frogspawn has hatched in the pond and the newts have returned just as they did before, just as they will again. Nature is not in lockdown, just one species. I am trying to balance this all and spin the plates of supporting students, teaching, marking; I am also trying to keep my own life and mind spinning.²² I want to write about the chaotic and dystopian world around me. I want to write about my fears for my parents, about the gathering pace of the Emperor's New Clothes policy which Brexit is. But I feel stuck. My writing is in lockdown as my physical being is. I doubt what I write. I see flaws and confusion in the words I lay out on the page.²³ Parcels still get delivered and my credit card has taken a battering as I try new colours of ink in my fountain pen, or brighter-covered notebooks.

I spoke to Liz today. Another online meeting but at least one which felt productive and as close to personal as these things can be when you are staring at pixels on a screen. She has read my thesis to better support a PhD student we share, and the conversation drifted to the flow of my writing at that time in my life. I had to stop her praise and tell her that I was a fraud. I had peaked. I was now descending the mountain. Her advice was salient as ever. Go back. Go back to that time. Go back and understand who you were and what was influencing you. One word came to mind: Kierkegaard.

Why Kierkegaard? Like Kierkegaard, my entries might be short and enigmatic, or longer addressing a particular concern. Like Kierkegaard, I write for myself yet mindful that others might read them if I include the material in publications. Like Kierkegaard I largely omit discussions on my personal life instead only making passing references to events. Like Kierkegaard, my journal entries blend observation, comments on books I have read, and my personal reflections on faith.

* * *

Through my revisiting his unpublished journals, it became noticeable that there were many overlaps with autoethnographical writing. The choice to make a distinction between written autoethnographic work and other forms is due to the fact that written autoethnographic pieces are closer in style to Kierkegaard's journals, and it is therefore more straightforward to draw comparisons. This is not to say that there are not parallels with Kierkegaard's journal writing and other types of autoethnography, and some of the themes outlined below may equally be applicable to other expressions.

THE FOUR THEMES

The four themes chosen are ones that became apparent when I was trying to re-engage with my own autoethnographic writing. What stood out was not necessarily the existential philosophy discussed previously, but his practical approach to journal writing, including what stimulated him to write and the form his writing took. That is not to say that his philosophical and theological ideas play no part in the themes, but rather they are discussed when they relate directly to the craft of autoethnographic writing.

Theme 1—"Levelling" and "Truth" and our position as a writer

"Man hardly ever makes use of the freedoms he has, such as freedom of thought; in compensation he demands freedom of speech instead."²⁴

When I was struggling with my own writing, I became keenly aware that a lot of my inability to write came from not knowing how to discuss the political issues I found presented in both traditional and social media. The dominant topics when I faced my inability to write in my journals were the UK Government's response to COVID-19 and the final few months of the Brexit agenda.

* * *

I am sat by the pond. It is usually a space where I relax. I look at the newts and I listen to podcasts. Sometimes I just sit and listen to the noise of the birds and the distant pounding of

the wind turbine. Not today. Today I am reading threads on Twitter. I am in the rabbit hole of reading vile xenophobia. "England as it should be: white and Christian." "My village now has an English shop, an English pub, and an English post office. Since we forced the Chinese takeaway to shut down, we now have 95% of the village filled with English people. Brexit is working." I do not recognise myself in these tweets. These are people I sit with on the bus. Who I work with. When did they lose the ability to engage on a deeper level? What about the personal impact on their lives that they haven't thought about?

* * *

Kierkegaard's journals often focus on his personal response to key events of interest to him in wider society. In his journals, he gradually forms an understanding of why people may act in the way that they do and how this impacts on his relationship to them and his own situation. Within my own writing process, I was struggling with locating myself within the world around me and found Kierkegaard's use of his journals to explore levelling and truth as something I could use as a stimulus for my own writing.

For Kierkegaard, the process of levelling was one by which individuals were viewed as part of a public domain. They therefore presented a view of themselves that was culturally acceptable,²⁵ often becoming a mere "type" rather than an individual.²⁶ This can lead individuals to conform to the dominant views and, at the extremity, to give up their personal responsibility and accountability to others. As Kierkegaard explained:

This public becomes more and more numerous; the better people stand without cohesion or choose more modest tasks; those who had at one time some desire and enthusiasm soon find it not worth the trouble to work but much easier to join the big family connection.²⁷

For Kierkegaard, as someone often ridiculed by the press, we can see such a situation in our lives today with faceless media creating public opinion that replaces the need for self-reflection as it gives an individual a ready-made identity to wear.²⁸ Yet, in our current age, this process of levelling has increased with access to methods of communicating ideas, which means they can be quickly spread and are uncontrolled and unregulated.²⁹ Social media has become a means of disseminating information and opinions pre-packaged for readers to subscribe to; they feel part of a collective voice and have given up their own responsibility to critique what they read or evaluate their own deep response to it. The concept of levelling also links with Kierkegaard's views on the nature of truth which, again, has an overlap with autoethnographical research.

For Kierkegaard, truth was not objective and what is known, but subjective and about how a person lives their life. Kierkegaard struggled with the Christian faith throughout his life, gradually forming an anticlerical and anti-ecclesiastical stance against state religion, which he saw as the opposite of a personal faith.³⁰ For Kierkegaard, "truth" was less about believing in the prescribed systems of an organized religious group (potentially levelling yourself to fit in with the crowd) but more about attempting to understand the "truth" of each of our lives:

It is a question of understanding my destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*.³¹

If we turn to thinking about how these ideas of “levelling” and “truth” relate to auto-ethnographic writing, we can see three distinct parallels. First, autoethnographic writing can provide counterviews to mainstream opinions, or allow for individual experiences of widely held beliefs to be heard. Autoethnographic writing refocuses both the reader and the writer from the “we” to the “I.” Even if the views portrayed are in line with the wider group opinion, they have been reflected on and viewed from a singular perspective. Second, autoethnographic writing has a focus on exploring our inner worlds and understanding the life we lead. The importance of self-awareness, and to know yourself before you can really understand anything else, was central to Kierkegaard as without it one could not hope to live a life of meaning.³² Third, to live a life of meaning there was the need to understand the subjective nature of truth and how it manifests for each individual. Autoethnographic writing can be seen as a form of exploring the inner “truth” of our lives and expressing this subjective view as a means to engage with others.

Theme 2—Experience as a starting point for writing

“In our time book-scribbling is so wretched and people write about things they have never given thought to, let alone experienced.”³³

When I was re-engaging with writing my journals, I realized that I had been approaching writing as a means to try to explain a situation from the perspective of someone else other than myself. I had tried to write how I felt about Brexit from the perspective of someone who was not British, or a British person who was not from a white heritage.

* * *

I am white. I am British. I am white British. I am the ideal lorded by those who support nationalism and see Brexit as the start of a British revival. I am the daughter of a working-class father. I am the child whose grandparents and parents benefitted from Thatcherism and increased their wealth and social status. I cannot imagine what it is like to be a non-white British person and be asked, “Where are you from? No, where are you really from?” I cannot imagine what it is like to be a non-British national wondering if the home you made here is secure or if it is going to be ripped away. Yet I can write about myself. About the shame I feel being white British. About my fears for what my country is becoming. About the loss I feel for having my rights taken away. I can write about being someone who feels they are European and casts aside the thought of being “British” for that label does not represent who I am.

* * *

Kierkegaard’s journals were the reminder that it is my own experience that needed to be my focus. He wrote from his own perspective as an educated man of some means living within the wider society. He was influenced by the ideas of the day from his extensive reading and personal engagement with the world around him. His journals note his awareness of philosophical classics such as Plato to more current works such as by Hegel.

He was also influenced by books such as *Don Quixote* and the plays of Aristophanes, Shakespeare, and Goethe.³⁴ His writing style exemplifies this breadth of reading with his journals blending narrative, poetry, and a more polemical style. The focus of some of his more polemical writing was aimed at those who were either taking a theoretical stance or attempting to create a conceptual framework to guide others how to live. This included both philosophical writers, such as Hegel, and religious writers of his own time, including Bishop Martensen. Kierkegaard viewed personal experience as different from the interpretations that may be applied to it—the *actuality* of experience versus the *ideality* of it.³⁵

For Kierkegaard, this value of experience linked to his views on a personal “truth,” as discussed before. His vehement rejection of an organized state religion at the end of his life focused on the church’s approbation of the person of Jesus and the attempt to create a collective view of Christianity opposed to a personal experience and faith.³⁶ This personal experience of engaging with the New Testament literature was the lived experience for each individual. However, Kierkegaard’s comments on the value of experience extend beyond his views on church and state. Kierkegaard engaged in a long dispute with the newspaper *The Corsair*, and he was open in his criticism of the media and journalists in particular. He viewed journalists as inferior writers, viewed as speaking from authority, who create issues that did not previously exist. This resulted in a culture that was ready to consume quickly produced thought claiming to be authoritative, rather than to engage with a longer-term relationship enabling people to form their own opinions.³⁷ This led to a person ultimately losing their self to become an anonymous part of the crowd manipulated by the will of the media.³⁸

For Kierkegaard, both of these groups, the church and the media, missed the point of lived experience and the value it holds. What they both held in common was the prepacked presentation of a set of beliefs and values; the churchgoer or newspaper reader did not have to do or experience anything. Excluding this personal experience meant there was no depth of knowledge, personal reflection, or understanding of a personal “truth.” However, Kierkegaard was not implying that everyone had to experience everything in order to have an opinion. For Kierkegaard, engaging with a culture of well-written books enabled readers to access sufficient depth of knowledge that therefore benefitted society as a whole.³⁹

There are several clear parallels one can draw with autoethnographic writing. First, the concept of writing about a personal, lived experience is central to autoethnography.⁴⁰ Autoethnography enables individual voices, which may often be marginalized by higher political, religious, or social constructs, to be heard, including those from the LGBTQ community,⁴¹ Black Feminists,⁴² or indigenous populations.⁴³ Second, autoethnographies written from a lived experience of the individuals within those groups give a detailed and rich account. In contrast, a Twitter or Facebook post would not give the same depth. It is this element of social media that Kierkegaard might have aligned with his views on the traditional media he was aware of. For example, the detachment of the individual from the issues around them that one derives from having multiple sources of news and opinion.⁴⁴ Third, I think Kierkegaard would have celebrated a well-written account of someone who had found *their* truth, the truth for which *they* would live and die, especially if this showed

a journey of considering how and why they reached this point. One could imagine him furiously scribbling in his notebooks with frustrated angst, even jealousy, how he had not yet reached that point. One could even argue that autoethnography could have been a methodological tool that he himself may have considered relevant to use, as he said of himself, “I am convinced that not a single person understands me.”⁴⁵

Theme 3—Living life forward but understanding it backwards

“It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends eventually with the thought that temporal life can never be properly understood precisely because I can at no point find complete rest in which to adopt the position: backwards.”⁴⁶

This quote from Kierkegaard is one of the most well-known but only one example of the importance of self-reflection in his journals. Re-engaging with Kierkegaard made me realize that I was finding it hard to write about the events that were causing me concerns as I was too focused on my immediate response to them and had not reflected, and looked backwards, to gain a greater understanding of why they made me feel so disconnected and uncomfortable.

* * *

The route to Brexit did not start in 2016. It did not appear left field unseen and without history. It has roots. Roots that go back longer than I have been alive. From my own memories, I can see the roots I know. I can recall news articles when I was a child about how the EU was wanting us to only sell straight bananas. I can remember the talk about EU members taking holidays to access free National Health Service treatment which British people paid for out of their tax contributions. I can remember the frustration and anger at Spanish fishing trawlers laying nets in Cornish waters. Looking backwards gives context to the present and helps me understand myself.

* * *

For Kierkegaard, self-reflection had a very specific purpose and there were therefore ways of reflecting that were beneficial to an individual and others that were a hinderance. For Kierkegaard, the reason for such reflection was ultimately self-development and self-awareness. Kierkegaard was keen to encourage people to be their authentic selves, to realize who they are and re-center themselves around this awareness; this existential realization was at the heart of Kierkegaard’s understanding of reflection.⁴⁷

Kierkegaard understood self-reflection to be possible in both objective and subjective ways. Objective reflection focuses on an event or concept and tries to understand the meaning of it.⁴⁸ The event or concept is like the person reflecting is holding an artefact that can be turned and manipulated in their hands. Objective reflection does not seek to ask what a person feels or experiences but instead wants to focus on understanding what the artefact held “is.” In comparison, Kierkegaard offers subjective reflection, which is an inward and immersive experience. Whereas objective reflection is looking at the artefact from the outside, subjective reflection seeks to understand the artefact from the internal

subjective experiences of the person holding it. This ties in with Kierkegaard's beliefs about the subjective nature of truth discussed earlier. However, Kierkegaard was also mistrustful of some of the reflection he saw in society around him—reflection that became so inward it led to the path of nihilism or abstraction.⁴⁹ For Kierkegaard, reflection was spiritual, personal, and relational: in understanding our true authentic selves we can better position our being in relationship to others (and to God) rather than becoming lost in reflection on the identity given to us by those in power.⁵⁰

From an autoethnographical perspective, this view of subjective reflection has parallels with the self-reflection often found in such writings. First, while there has been some discussion around the potential for autoethnography to be understood as empirical research,⁵¹ self-reflection in autoethnography is not aimed at claiming an empirical “truth,” or that one person's lived experience is representative for all, but rather seeks to construct a personal reality of a lived experience with which others may find a degree of resonance.⁵² This includes a degree of self-reflection when writing, for this act itself is a method of inquiry to make sense of ourselves and also to make sense of others.⁵³

Second, self-reflection within autoethnographical writing also has a parallel with Kierkegaard's quest for understanding our authentic selves as opposed to wearing the identity expected of us from the society we live within. For example, those who write from the perspective of being indigenous/native, from being in a specific community, or from evocative personal narratives could be said to be engaged in intersectional cultural research offering experiences that disrupt power or counter the beliefs of the wider society.⁵⁴ Kierkegaard's understanding of the authentic self that we find through self-reflection could be a useful starting point to discuss how possible it is to achieve this level of self-awareness when living within a society that systematically prevents this from happening.⁵⁵ We could view Kierkegaard's own life as an intersectional one where he lived with the multiple identities of being a Christian, poet, theologian, philosopher, a sufferer of physical and mental illness, all within the broader context of existing in these identities outside or in opposition to the established societal norms. Kierkegaard's journal writing could therefore be viewed as an exploration into the self to make sense of the interplay between these different identities.

Theme 4—Writing can be chaotic and unstructured

“One thought succeeds another; no sooner have I thought it and am about to write it down than there's a new one—hold it, grasp it—madness—insanity!”⁵⁶

When I was trying to find a renewed rhythm for my journal writing, I often felt hindered by the feeling that I should have had a fully formed idea before I started to write. As I often did not, my writing felt disjointed and I wanted to rework and edit whole sections to give them a more coherent feel. I disliked looking at a journal page where the writing was not “perfect,” where I had crossed out a word and replaced it with one that was more meaningful. Yet Kierkegaard's journal writing style is not about perfection but about writing, editing, and constantly building upon ideas.

* * *

My thoughts are not coherent. They do not follow each other with the well-trained manner of ducklings, but canter and turn like new foals. Like the new foal, they also drop to the ground mid flow to stop and sleep. Why this quest for perfection? Partly those lasting hang-ups of my handwriting being criticised for being ‘messy’ by teachers, partly that drive to want to always ‘do my best’, partly that sense that everyone else in academia is more eloquent than I am so would not struggle with writing in the way that I do. Yet here is the realisation: when do we ever see someone’s writing process? When do we ever read how ideas have grown and been shaped? We don’t. We see the finished and polished output and not the journey.

* * *

While, in print, we lose the immediateness of seeing Kierkegaard’s handwritten journals, there is still a sense of the formation of ideas and the process of writing within them. There are occasions when Kierkegaard explicitly states he has reread some of his own work,⁵⁷ often writing additional comments in the margins. There are times when he will write at length on a topic, such as the multiple entries on his publication *Either/Or*,⁵⁸ or have no overall coherence between his entries moving from love for Regina to grief in a few pen strokes.⁵⁹ It is also apparent that he edited whole sections of his work by removing pages,⁶⁰ or wrote so illegibly that transcribers were unable to decipher the meaning of words.⁶¹

As mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard was keen to ensure a degree of self-editing in his journals so that what was eventually known about him was what he was content with others knowing. This “secret note” was an event or experience that was clearly not for public knowledge, yet, while this remained hidden, his writing and thought processes are laid bare. His journals contain edits as discussed above as well as short observations, comments on a text he has read, references to events of the day, and longer pieces of theological or philosophical thought. What he writes, and the times he feels motivated to write, vary considerably. Sometimes multiple entries occur on the same day; other times large gaps occur between entries. What is apparent is that Kierkegaard wrote when and how he wanted to. However, he also struggled with crafting his work that had a view to it potentially being in the public eye:

No doubt in what I wrote about myself in the journals from ’48 and ’49, some creativity still slipped in. It isn’t so easy to keep such things out when one is as poetically productive as I am. It comes as soon as I have pen in hand. Curiously enough, privately I am much more concise and clear about myself. But as soon as I note it down it becomes a production.⁶²

From an autoethnographical viewpoint, to hear Kierkegaard discussing his own struggles crafting and shaping his writing makes him someone we can directly relate to. We also see him reflecting on his own writing and making judgments about the balance of personal and creative elements in his style. The process of autoethnographic journaling, and the concept of using this writing as a “paper mirror,”⁶³ cements the relationship between our personal writing and our own development. Within the broad field of autoethnography, the use of our personal narrative varies. For some, the personal narrative is the

autoethnography we write,⁶⁴ and they can enable personal experiences to be shared in an evocative way.⁶⁵ For others, personal journals are part of the writing process rather than the finished autoethnographic piece and there is a degree of self-editing about how much of the “I” is actually made public.⁶⁶ This can be due to ethical dilemmas of writing about people who can be identified rather than concerns over the personal nature of the writing for the author alone.⁶⁷ As an autoethnographer trying to force myself to write a neat and precise page a day, the reminder from Kierkegaard was that this did not have to be the approach to journaling I took. We can therefore use Kierkegaard as a template for accepting, and encouraging, an unstructured and chaotic approach to journaling. This sense of freedom—of allowing ourselves to write, revisit, and build on our ideas—could enable us to write in a more honest and reflexive way.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The sheer quantity of writing that forms Kierkegaard’s journals hinders our engagement with it, as access to his writing is often mediated through the selected readings available in the languages we speak. It means that the scope of this paper could only touch the surface of Kierkegaard’s journal writing from a selected set of journal entries easily available in English. However, though I acknowledge this limitation, the outlined four broad principles found in Kierkegaard’s journal writing identifies three potential areas for autoethnographers to investigate across the whole range of his personal writing.

First, the model of Kierkegaard as a journal writer. The breadth of Kierkegaard’s writing, the sometimes unclear lines of thoughts, and his often hidden life, make unpicking his personal views challenging. There is a large focus on his published works and his relationship to both theological and philosophical discourses.⁶⁸ Therefore, his journal writing is often discussed in relation to how this aligns to his published works.⁶⁹ While it is useful to try to understand the person behind the literature, this focus fails to appreciate Kierkegaard as a journal writer in his own right. His extensive journals offer autoethnographers engaged in their own journal writing the chance to view a variety of writing styles and approaches to narrating our own lives. To view an example of someone able to approach journaling through a mixture of descriptive, poetical, philosophical, and humorous ways highlights how broad journal writing can look in practice.

Second, the role of Kierkegaard as narrator of the “self” in relation to a wide range of topics. Kierkegaard may often be overlooked due to his focus on his own struggle with the Christian faith or due to his links with existentialism. If those topics are not of interest to the reader, it might be assumed Kierkegaard has nothing to offer. While it is important to remember his place within the disciplines of theology and philosophy, the broader ideas in his journals above are relevant to wider areas of study, including anthropology,⁷⁰ politics,⁷¹ and therapeutic approaches.⁷² However, we can also view him as being particularly relevant when viewed through an autoethnographic lens as a journal writer, which in turn can add a different dimension to all of the disciplines he is associated with. To limit Kierkegaardian thought solely to the realm of Christianity or existential philosophy is to see him through a narrow lens, not as the prolific writer he was across a range of

subjects linked to his personal experiences. While we cannot ignore his influence in these spheres, we can also view him as a writer and narrator of the “self” across multiple identities and spaces. In particular, the ability to be able to self-edit our lives, which may be applicable to autoethnographers who are unable, or unwilling, to share the full story of their lives from all of the identities and spaces they inhabit.

Finally, Kierkegaard’s ability to self-edit, to return to his thoughts and revise or add to them at a later point in time, is an approach worthy of consideration for autoethnographic writers. The act of self-editing for Kierkegaard was an act of self-reflection aimed at identifying the process of self-consciousness; for Kierkegaard, it was not enough to be self-conscious but also necessary to understand the driving force behind this self-awareness that this was only possible through reflection.⁷³ This deeper understanding of ourselves, and the questioning of why we have understood or positioned our identity in such a way at moments in our lives, enables the individual to understand who they really are.⁷⁴ Yet, for Kierkegaard, the process of writing alone was not enough to achieve this level of reflection, as we needed to reflect retrospectively on our lives.⁷⁵ For autoethnographers, this is a potential point of development in our use of journaling and reflective writing. Rather than viewing our journals as completed reflection in and of themselves, there is potential to revisit our thoughts and engage with a continued dialogic process. This continued conversation would aid us in understanding the development of our identity over time and perhaps give us a greater understanding of our own “truth.” ■

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NOTES

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