


Kierkegaard's reconceptualisation of divine immutability

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In Søren Kierkegaard's works, the relationship between the immutability of God and the concepts of time and motion emerges as a central theme. This paper examines how Kierkegaard reconciles the idea of an immutable God with the dynamic process of 'coming into existence'. Through an exploration of Kierkegaard's philosophical roots, this study elucidates his understanding of motion and change, delves into his ontological and metaphysical notions of time, and particularly focusses on the 'moment' as a synthesis that bridges the eternal God with the individual's dynamical existence. Kierkegaard's theory of divine immutability represents a genuine departure from traditional metaphysical thought; comparing his ideas with those of other philosophers would highlight the uniqueness of Kierkegaard's approach.

Contribution: This article aims to analyse the philosophical foundation of God's immutability through a detailed interpretation of Kierkegaard's writings, providing a new approach to understanding the movement and immutability of God.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; immutability; eternity; time; moment; metaphysics.

Introduction

The relationship between God's immutability, time and motion represents a central philosophical issue in Søren Kierkegaard's works. According to Carlisle, the concept of motion and the related prospect of 'becoming a Christian' constitutes the central issue and the animating purpose of Kierkegaard's entire authorship. The process of 'becoming' [*Vorden*] or 'coming into existence' [*Tilblivelse*] is not incidental or external to the task of Christianity; rather, it is essential to it (Carlisle 2005:9). Kierkegaard's examination of this issue integrates the notions of time and eternity, change and immutability. In his pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard presents this concept in a highly philosophical manner. Focussing on the dynamic movement of the self, he explores the self's dynamic structure, which, through its inherent dynamism, illuminates the concept of God in relation to transcendent forces. Consequently, discussions about God in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works frequently embrace this dynamic perspective.

Building on this foundation, it is essential to recognise that Kierkegaard does not dispute the eternity of God. The emphasis on the immutability of God began with the edifying discourses in 1843 and continued through Kierkegaard's later works, such as *Moment* and *The Changelessness of God*. Particularly in *The Changelessness of God*, he seems to emphasise the immutability of God unilaterally.

This seemingly contradictory stance may be seen as a product of the philosophical and historical context in which Kierkegaard wrote. Previous research shows that there were at least three main challenges in addressing the incarnation and historical changeability of God:

- Individuals were conceptualised solely within rational, eternal frameworks, without standalone significance.
- Hegelian historicism rendered the incarnation an incomplete event.
- The rise of historical hermeneutics led to scepticism regarding the value of historical evidence as the eternal truth (Perkins 1994:10–11).

Given this philosophical backdrop, the challenges faced during Kierkegaard's time in addressing the incarnation and the historical changeability of God are critical to understanding his nuanced stance. Against this Hegelianism Theology, Kierkegaard naturally pondered the immutable, eternal God in conjunction with movement and change. Yet, it remains for us to elucidate how Kierkegaard articulates a dynamic interplay between eternity and time, God and the individual, while simultaneously underscoring the immutable nature of God. Research into the theme of

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divine immutability within Kierkegaard's oeuvre remains relatively scarce in current academic discourse. In their scholarly article, Martens and Millay (2011) examine the position of 'The Changelessness of God' within the later corpus of Kierkegaard's thought, positing that it serves as a unique theodicy intended to critique the established Danish Church of the 19th century. Hefner (2018a) delves into the philosophical foundations of the 'Doctrine of God's Immutability' with greater profundity in his doctoral dissertation and subsequent scholarly publications (2018b).

To address these theoretical challenges, this paper elucidates the meanings of 'motion' and 'change' within Kierkegaard's philosophy. This inquiry seeks to determine whether these terms are indeed synonymous or if a distinct perspective is necessary to comprehend motion as revealing the nature of a 'changeless' God. Concerned on this issue, Hefner (2018a: 14–35) encapsulates Kierkegaard's position on this issue as a 'non-metaphysical account' of the immutability of God. At its core, this attempt maintains the traditional metaphysical definition of immutability while revising the traditional metaphysical model of thinking about God's perfection in the realm of created things. The immutability of God is presented through the relationship between the individual and God.

Building on Hefner's work, this paper further explores Kierkegaard's treatment of the problem of immutability within the structure of time, aiming to clarify the extent to which God is 'eternally unchanging' in the dynamic process of 'coming into existence'. To illustrate this unique theory, Kierkegaard not only relinquishes traditional metaphysical narratives but establishes a new possibility for broadly defined metaphysical thought centred around the synthetic structure in 'the moment' (Kangas 2007). This structure is not derived solely from biblical doctrinal teachings but also includes philosophical conceptual constructions.

To elucidate Kierkegaard's philosophical rationale for upholding the immutability of God, this paper is structured into three distinct parts. Firstly, by examining the theoretical sources of Kierkegaard's philosophical conceptions, I try to explain how Kierkegaard comprehends motion and change. Secondly, based on the above analysis, I will discuss Kierkegaard's use of ontological concepts and the metaphysics of time in greater detail than previous studies, explore how the concept of 'moment' can serve as a 'synthesis' bridging the immutable God and the temporal process of 'coming into existence'. Lastly, I will discuss to what extent Kierkegaard's discussion of divine immutability constitutes a new metaphysics and provide a brief exploration of potential controversies. This paper embarks on an intellectual approach through Kierkegaard's intricate contemplation of divine immutability, nestled within the philosophical crucible of eternity, time and motion. We unpack Kierkegaard's innovative conceptualisation of the 'moment' as an 'atom of eternity', which serves as a pivotal nexus between the divine's unchanging nature and the temporal flux of human existence. By threading together Kierkegaard's rich tapestry

of thought, this paper offers a novel framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between the eternal and the transient. Its argumentative trajectory is designed to contribute to the theological and philosophical discourse by providing a fresh perspective that challenges and extends traditional metaphysical conceptions. It culminates in a conclusion that synthesises the findings and prompts further inquiry into the implications of Kierkegaard's philosophy for contemporary thought.

Change and eternity: Kierkegaard's philosophical exploration of 'Coming into Existence'

Kierkegaard's discussions on change and motion permeate almost all of his significant pseudonymous works, with the most concentrated discussion found in the 'Interlude' section of *Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard 2004:272–285). A detailed examination of this text reveals that although Kierkegaard emphasises the immutability of God, immutability here does not imply that God can only be discussed from the perspective of 'necessity' or 'unchangeable'. This understanding of immutability originates from a reflection on classical metaphysics.

From both theological and philosophical perspectives, the immutability of God is closely linked to necessity. The priority of the unchangeable being over the mutable becoming was already established in Plato's philosophy, philosophically speaking. Theologically, Christianity, be it represented by the Catholic tradition of Thomas Aquinas or the Protestant tradition of Luther, emphasises the immutability of God. However, following Kant's philosophy, the concept of 'necessity' became closely intertwined with human reason. For Kierkegaard, who sought to critique Hegelianism and advocate for the separation of human reason from the Christian faith, 'necessity' was a concept that was undoubtedly to be eschewed (Alfsvag 2018:44–57). Kierkegaard thus understands God's immutability from a new perspective, describing God's constancy in the context of becoming and change. Therefore, immutability in Kierkegaard's understanding cannot be equated directly with the traditional sense of the unchanging necessity of God. Instead, immutability and the concept of 'coming into existence' are paradoxically integrated. To grasp Kierkegaard's notion of immutability, we must first clarify what 'coming into existence' actually means for him.

To construct the conception of 'coming into existence', we must engage with the question Kierkegaard poses in the 'Interlude' (Kierkegaard 2004:273): How is the 'thing which comes to exist' [*det som bliver til*] transformed [*fordandres*], and what constitutes the change [*κίνησις*] associated with coming into existence [*Tilblivelse*]?

Kierkegaard differentiates various types of 'change', drawing upon a creative understanding of Aristotle's theory (Kierkegaard 2004:273). He suggested employing Aristotle's

concept of 'motion' to correct Hegel's ideas about dialectical movement. Aristotle's theories and categories, principally designed to account for 'κίνησις', furnished Kierkegaard with a conceptual framework (Carlisle 2005:9). The 'Interlude' of *Philosophical Fragments* also associates 'coming into existence' or 'becoming' with Aristotle's concept of 'κίνησις'; his construction of the concept of 'coming into existence' does indeed share similarities with the concepts presented in Aristotle's *Physics* (Aristotle 1957:194). However, this superficial conclusion overlooks the potential divergence in thought between Kierkegaard and Aristotle.

According to Håvard Løkke and Arild Waaler's research, Kierkegaard's understanding of 'κίνησις' significantly deviates from the Aristotelian tradition. Kierkegaard himself acknowledged that his acquaintance with Aristotle was derived primarily from secondary sources, and he had not delved deeply into Aristotle's original works (Løkke & Waaler 2010:25–46). Kierkegaard's notes on ancient Greek philosophy suggest that his understanding of Aristotle's philosophy primarily derives from the German philosopher Tennemann's *History of Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Although Tennemann's interpretation of Aristotle is largely consistent with Aristotle's original meanings and aligns with the consensus of modern Aristotelian studies, he interprets the subject of change and motion as an objective physical reality; the transformation from potentiality to actuality is not driven by any external force (Tennemann 1798–1819:17–330). Kierkegaard, however, diverges crucially from Tennemann's understanding in his application of Aristotelian concepts (Løkke & Waaler 2010:28–34). A key point of difference lies in Climacus's approach to the question of 'what exactly moves', which is distinct from both Aristotle's and Tennemann's positions.

In contrast to Tennemann, Kierkegaard appears to regard 'coming into existence' as motion involving a subjective agent. Aristotle alludes to this point in Book II of *Physics* (Aristotle 1957:103–187), where he states that some instances of becoming are necessary, while others arise from chance [τύχη] or spontaneity [αὐτοματός]. 'Chance' in the context of becoming is linked to the activity of the individual's thinking; if the aim [τέλος] of becoming does not match the motive for thinking, then the cause for becoming is an incidental reason. On the contrary, 'spontaneous' motion is entirely because of 'external causes', where the purpose (external purpose) of the spontaneously generated is not related to the actual outcome. Aristotle suggests that the word 'spontaneous' [αὐτοματός] should be traced back to 'in vain' [μάτος], indicating that 'spontaneous' becoming does not align with the inherent natural nature of a thing (Aristotle 1957:158–160). He also explicitly states that the reasons for becoming on the 'natural' level precede those on the levels of 'chance' and 'spontaneity' (Aristotle 1957:162). Thus, spontaneous becoming is not treated as the central issue of becoming. Correspondingly, in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle differentiates between two types of becoming from potentiality to actuality: the 'incomplete movement' that

eliminates potentiality by being oriented towards an external purpose and the 'complete movement' that retains potentiality in actuality by being oriented towards its existence (Aristotle 1993).

Generally speaking, Kierkegaard's concept of 'coming into existence' largely amalgamates both of the aforementioned modes of becoming. Firstly, the ultimate purpose of becoming is external. For Kierkegaard, 'coming into existence' does not entail a change in the essence of things but rather a change in the state of 'existence' in the essence itself. If the essence remains unchanged in itself, it implies that there must be an external force prompting the essence's change or enabling the essence to enter into and be connected to the changes of actuality (Kierkegaard 2004:275). Although Climacus adopts the principle of the reality of becoming's motion from Aristotle (or Tennemann), Kierkegaard's perspective on the domain in which the motion of becoming unfolds is completely distinct from Tennemann's. Secondly, Kierkegaard elucidates how an actively existing being relates to another active being within the context of becoming and changing. It is precisely the active operation of the transcendent agent (God) that makes becoming and change possible. Thus, becoming is not purely spontaneous. It is solely within the realm of the subject's free operation that the distinction between possibility-actuality and necessity becomes starkly evident.

Specifically, Kierkegaard asserts that the movement of 'coming into existence' must have a subject that remains unchanged. Consequently, Climacus focusses on the movement of 'coming into existence' in this subject's transition from 'not to be' [*ikke at være til*] to what he called 'to be' [*at være til*]. He immediately clarifies that 'Non-existence' [*Ikke-Væren*] and 'existence' [*Væren*] are both forms of existence, with the former as the possibility of existence and the latter as the actuality of existence (Kierkegaard 2004:274). In this process, the essence of existence does not change. The essence that 'exists' never enters the change from possibility to actuality and is defined as necessity.

Here, Kierkegaard categorises the non-existent being as possibility (Muligheden), while the existent being [*en Væren, der er Væren*] is the being of actuality [*Virkeligheden*]. Hence, the act of coming into existence represents a transition from the realm of possibility to that of actuality. Correspondingly, necessity [*Nødvendige*] is considered by Kierkegaard as entirely unrelated to the process of 'coming into existence'. He views necessity as representing no change or impossibility of change:

Necessity does not change at all because it is always related to itself and in an unchanging manner. All coming into existence is suffering, while necessity is not tormented, does not undergo the painful suffering of actuality. (Kierkegaard 2004:276)

'Necessity' always 'is' [*det Nødvendige er*], whereas what comes into existence moves from potentiality to actuality, from 'nothingness' [*Intet*] to 'being'. Thus, necessity is not merely a component of 'coming into existence' but stands

distinct from both actuality and possibility. Ultimately, 'coming into existence' must be traced back to a freely operating cause [Aarsag]. The past and the future both belong to coming into existence and thus to freedom [tilhøre Friheden], belonging to what is generated from it, not to necessity.

From the aforementioned discussion on the transition from 'non-existence' to 'existence', we observe that this change does not entail an internal transformation of essence or necessity. Things must always maintain 'what they are', and their essence does not participate in the change; only the state of existence changes. Yet, although the change of 'coming into existence' is directed towards an extrinsic goal, the possibility is preserved in the process of movement. Consequently, the possibility within the motion of becoming realises the 'complete movement' envisioned by Aristotle. Therefore, in the process of becoming, there are two conceptual forms of movement: one that involves the changer and another where the aim of the movement turns inward from an external goal. According to *Philosophical Fragments*, the latter form of movement is when God endows the individual with the conditions for self-knowledge. This movement is distinct from the individual's motion of becoming.

Thus, within the process of 'coming into existence', there exists an agent associated with the becoming individual, and without this agent operating independently of the motion of 'coming into existence', the individual would be unable to actualise the process of becoming. Consequently, eternity itself operates from freedom, and its necessity does not imply motionlessness, but only that its 'being' itself does not change. Eternity, as a free agent, does not operate in one moment and cease the next; its operation is consistent throughout all moments and does not change.

In conclusion, an analysis of the Aristotelian underpinnings of Kierkegaard's thoughts reveals that he distinguishes various types of motion in his discourse on 'coming into existence'. Eternity does not exist at every specific time point but participates in the individual's process of 'coming into existence' at a specific moment. Therefore, the immutability of God needs to be analysed from two aspects: one where God as eternal necessity participates in 'coming into existence' and another where the unchanging God encounters the passing of time in the moment. In this sense, God is obviously 'set in motion', an activity that differs from 'coming into existence', yet serves as the 'telos' of it. The latter seems to present God with the paradox of change and immutability. To explain this paradox, we need to further clarify Kierkegaard's specific ontological foundation for 'coming into existence'.

Moment and immutability: Ontological discussion and the metaphysics of time

Ontological discussion

After clarifying the intellectual origins of Kierkegaard's philosophical theories and distinguishing the different senses

of 'change', we should delve deeper into a discussion on the ontological or metaphysical level of how divine immutability can be reconciled with 'change'.

Explaining Kierkegaard's concept of 'coming into existence' from the standpoint of traditional metaphysics would be quite challenging. From any standpoint, the issues associated with the concept of 'coming into existence' seem to be more numerous and complex than those the concept seeks to resolve. According to Manis (2013), there are two potential ontological approaches to Kierkegaard's concept of 'coming into existence': the possibilism approach and the Platonism approach. Manis believes that both approaches face insurmountable difficulties. Possibilist appears to violate the law of non-contradiction, enabling something to be both existent and non-existent simultaneously. Manis argues:

For the Possibilist reading, it is possible for something to have an essence without existing. When the property of existence (or perhaps being) is added to something of this sort, the result is an actual entity – an actuality – that has the same essence as the merely possible entity. A change of this kind is 'not in essence but in being' because possibility and actuality are not different in essence but in being. (Manis 2013:113–114)

This interpretation is consistent with the text but seems to blur the distinction between 'modality of existence' (possible states of being) and possible beings; on the other hand, the Platonist interpretation distinguishes ideal and actual existence, hence not merely distinguishing between possible and actual existence (as possibilism does). But according to this interpretation, ideal existence becomes a possibility, which does not 'exist', and the possibility of their 'being' is ideal, unchanging, and necessary. Following this reasoning, it becomes impossible to distinguish necessity from possibility, making Kierkegaard's theory appear to conflate many unnecessary, ambiguous concepts and failing to explain in what sense the 'activity' of God is unchanging.

To resolve this issue, we need to analyse how Kierkegaard provides an ontological basis for such a theory, based on the differentiation of two types of movement is provided in the previous section (Change and eternity: Kierkegaard's philosophical exploration of 'Coming into Existence') and to analyse Kierkegaard's unique use of key concepts. We should see that the Platonist interpretation precisely notes Kierkegaard's distinction between ideal and actual existence, but fails to understand the sense in which the existing God is necessary. Conversely, the possibilist approach correctly notes that possibility is excluded through choice in the movement of becoming, but erroneously assumes the possible existence of essence which does not actually exist, failing to distinguish between ideal and actual existence, and hence unable to comprehend how the individual in the movement of becoming 'how' faces the existing God and advances generation through choice.

We must clarify that Kierkegaard perhaps introduces two different senses of necessity and transitions ambiguously between different contexts. In *Philosophical Fragments*,

Kierkegaard mostly discusses logical necessity (Shannon 2012:144). In the parts that Manis sees as problematic, Kierkegaard speaks of the necessity of God's actual existence (*[er til]; is*). Therefore, the key to solving the problem may lie in clarifying that God as the highest necessity is not limited to being a logical, non-temporal necessity. Abstract, non-temporal necessity is only theoretically possible, not yet existing, and so, this abstract necessity is always just a possibility for Kierkegaard. For God, necessity is not a logical necessity. As Kierkegaard says, 'It doesn't come into existence and it doesn't go out of existence; it simply is *[er til]*' (Kierkegaard 2004:274).

Therefore, the necessity of God's existence is not the same as the logical necessity that 'not yet existing'. As such, the so-called abstract, purely ideal existence must be distinguished from actual 'er til' (which Kierkegaard called 'Faktisk Væren'), and from the standpoint of actuality, it can only be 'not yet exist', unable to enter into actual existence.

Of course, if God's existence as a necessity is also a possibility, it is because it always 'is', always capable of presenting itself as a direction of possibility. That is, the necessity in this sense corresponds to the modal sense of possibility, involving the free action of the existent. In contrast, ideal existence as a necessity is associated with latent potential possibilities.

Therefore, in the context of the former potentiality, the change from possibility to actuality is not the cancellation of potentiality transitioning to actuality. The selection of one possibility does not mean the non-existence of other potentialities, even if they are merely 'ikke at vaere'. In this process, God as an infinitely potential possibility is always 'er til'. Thus, this change from possible series to actual series is the change of the existence of one and the same series in God's mind. That is, by becoming actual, the possible series is not 'intrinsically changed'. The content of the idea in God's mind remains the same through its coming into existence. Otherwise, it would not be the particular idea in God's mind but another idea that comes into existence.

In this manner, we initially clarify Kierkegaard's ontological approach on a metaphysical level. For Kierkegaard, ideal or objective, logically conceived existence must be distinguished from actual existence. The motion of becoming is clearly about the movement of actual existence. Thus, the movement faces not logical necessity, but the immutable existence of God itself. The concepts of possibility, necessity, and actuality no longer overlap or become confused. Now, the core question is: How does eternity enable the individual's motion of becoming to turn toward the individual itself at a specific moment? How does the individual freely choose a possibility at a certain moment to generate a new self?

The metaphysics of time

Addressing this question necessitates a time-tensed analysis, for Kierkegaard does not understand God's 'being' in the sense of 'ideal existence' or 'perfect existence'. God is both

the unchangeable and the existent, which requires us to analyse how the unchangeable exists and how eternity enters time. This means that 'unchangeable' cannot be understood as a perfect, unchangeably static existence without any other possibilities. 'Unchangeable' simply means that God Himself will not become the subject of 'coming into existence'.

Only through the synthesis of two distinct realms can we explain how possibility, by eliminating other possibilities, makes necessity one among many possibles, and through its selection propels 'coming into existence'. 'Coming into existence' is the result of a free individual's choice in time towards the unchanging eternity. Therefore, even as the eternal participates in 'coming into existence', there is no requirement for it to change itself. Without such an immutable entity, change would be nothing more than an alternating, abstract, non-real transformation.

The method to explain the conflict between change and immutability lies in understanding the moment upon which the generative movement relies, or in other words, the relationship between time and eternity within the 'moment'. As eternity intersects with time, Kierkegaard attempts to construct the 'moment' as a 'synthesis' of eternity and time (Blanchet 2010), that is, the point of contact and association between two distinct realms:

If time and 'eternity' are to touch each other, then this 'touching' must occur within time; thus, we arrive at the 'moment'. (Kierkegaard 2004:373)

Here, the 'moment' is the smallest fragment of flowing time and simultaneously the smallest fragment of eternity. Kierkegaard proposes that the qualitatively defined 'present' in Greek philosophy, conceived as a perpetual presence of eternity, is a misconception; what is supposedly eternal is merely the smallest fragment misidentified as eternity itself. Kierkegaard believes that the atoms of time and eternity should be understood in terms of 'synthesis' (Kierkegaard 2004:388). Such a moment cannot be directly understood as a moment of change or passage within time. According to Kierkegaard's conception, if we understand the moment as a segment of the passage of time, we are once again abstractly understanding the moment (Kierkegaard 2004:386). If we accept the conclusion of the first part of this paper, that only the synthesis of necessity and possibility that appears in the 'moment' can explain the generative changes of existing individuals, then we can infer that understanding time solely as a flux from the past to the future will not account for the changes within time. Kierkegaard discusses the correct definition of time as follows:

If time is correctly defined as an infinite succession, it most likely is also defined as the present, the past, and the future. This distinction, however, is incorrect if it is considered to be implicit in time itself, because the distinction appears only through the relation of time to eternity and through the reflection of eternity in time. If in the infinite succession of time a foothold could be found, i.e., a present, which was the dividing point, the division would be quite correct. However, precisely because every moment, as well as the sum of the moments, is a process (a passing by), no moment is a present, and accordingly there is

in time neither present, nor past, nor future. If it is claimed that this division can be maintained, it is because the moment is spatialised. (Kierkegaard 2004:376)

As Kierkegaard elaborates, understanding time as a series of 'present segments' extending and passing from past to future prevents us from truly explaining the nature of time or the movement of becoming within it. Hence, Kierkegaard's philosophy draws us toward a seemingly paradoxical conclusion: to understand the movement of becoming within time, we must ascribe to the pivotal moment of movement or change a meaning that transcends the flow of transformation. Accordingly, the movement of becoming must also be understood as the meeting and synthesis of eternity and time:

The present, however, is not a concept of time, except precisely as something infinitely contentless, which again is the infinite vanishing. If this is not kept in mind, no matter how quickly it may disappear, the present is posited, and being posited it again appears in the categories: the past and the future. (Kierkegaard 2004:377)

From the preceding text, the 'moment' as the atom of eternity cannot unimpededly transition to the next moment. Hence, the present is not a passage of time; there exists an unsurpassable referent that is qualitatively different from the actors within the vicissitudes of time, establishing the description of the flux of time through the determination of a singular, unchanging 'contemporaneity'. As Kierkegaard himself puts it, 'God is not the one who changes (God could neither become gentle nor angry), but that man changes his position in relationship to God' (Kierkegaard et al. 1970:86).

It thus follows, within the relation between eternity and time, that the unchangeability of eternity allows it to relate to time and serve as its reference point. There is no transition from past to future among the moments as atomic units of eternity, but they delineate time's passage. This is the significance of the moment as 'synthesis', where eternity and time, as realms with qualitative differences in existence, can correlate. The unchangeable can thus relate to the domain of the moving existent. This correlation enables the eternal, as an unchanging reference point, to continually coincide with every moment within events.

In summary, 'coming into existence' as a kind of 'synthesis' brings eternity and time into connection. The eternal, unchanging God thereby participates in 'coming into existence' as one pole of the 'synthesis'. The moment, as a relation and 'synthesis', correlates time and eternity, which possess 'qualitative differences', without erasing their distinctions within the intermediate term (Ward 2016). The intermediary eliminates the internal differences of time, orienting it towards eternity within the moment. On this basis, we can discuss the paradox of God remaining unchangeable within the 'coming into existence'. The moment provides us with an explanatory conceptual method from the standpoint of the philosophy of time to address this paradox.

Beyond traditional metaphysics?

After analysing Kierkegaard's understanding of motion and change, and his explanation of the relationship between eternity and time in change, the next question we need to address is whether Kierkegaard's philosophical construction truly proposes a philosophical foundation for God's immutability that is different from traditional metaphysics. To clarify this point, it is necessary to explore the uniqueness of his thoughts by comparing Kierkegaard's views with those of other thinkers.

On this issue, Hefner argues that Kierkegaard offers a non-metaphysical explanation of God's immutability grounded in biblical theology (Hefner 2018a). Hefner understands metaphysics in a particular light; he uses 'metaphysical' here to refer narrowly to a way of gaining knowledge of God, where one begins with the nature and properties of the created being and then reasons by abstraction to the attributes of God (Hefner 2018:4). However, according to the foregoing discussion, Kierkegaard's transformation of traditional metaphysics is not merely on the epistemological level. Nor can we deny that Kierkegaard provides a broad metaphysical foundation for such a proposal. Yet, this metaphysical foundation might lead us to question whether Kierkegaard breaks through traditional metaphysical thought at the philosophical level, because similar theories had already emerged earlier. For instance, Thomas Aquinas articulated the special relationship between beings and the Absolute whose essence is identical to existence, proposing that God's existence implies His pure actuality (Thomas von Aquin 2001:96). Therefore, understanding God from the standpoint of actuality is certainly not an innovation of Kierkegaard's (Wyschogrod 1954:21). Likewise, the distinction between existence and essence is not unique to Kierkegaard's divergence from traditional metaphysics. The distinction between existence [*esse*] and essence [*essential*] is fundamental in Aquinas' ontology, marking the essential difference between the *prima causa* and all other existing entities [*seiende*]. As Aquinas asserts, 'Apart from this one thing, in every other there must be something which is existence and something else which is essence or nature, or even form' (Thomas von Aquin 1988:42).

Therefore, if one does not take into account the relationship between the eternal God and the active individual, Kierkegaard has indeed not developed a distinct concept from traditional metaphysics regarding the everlasting God Himself. Even the distinction between existence and essence, as previously mentioned, is already present in Aquinas' thought. This distinction informs us that while the perfect being does not change its existence in essence, existence itself is first and foremost 'pure actuality'. Thus, the distinction between 'coming into existence' and activity has already been hinted at.

Further, thinkers after Kierkegaard may critique his theory for not completely breaking from traditional ontological theology. Heidegger, for example, believes that although

Kierkegaard posits the critical concept of the moment, interpreting the moment as the immutable 'present' is a failed attempt. In contradistinction to Kierkegaard, Heidegger undermines pure Being as an ontological structure. According to Heidegger's analysis, 'Being-in-the-world' [*In-der-Welt-sein*] now reveals itself as rooted in its essence not because 'Dasein' happens to know of a world but because 'Dasein', since it is essentially ahead of itself, must have a field in which to be ahead of itself. Hence, we cannot speak of any unchangeable, eternal pure existence (Wyschogrod 1954:59–60).

In *Fundamental Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger evaluates Kierkegaard's concept of the 'moment' as follows:

Thus, one cannot, as Kierkegaard attempted, comprehend the phenomenon of the 'moment' from the 'present'. Although he grasped the actual content of the 'moment' well, he failed to successfully elaborate on the special practicality of the 'moment', and instead equated the 'moment' with the commonly understood present of time. From this, he fabricated a paradoxical relationship between the 'present' and 'eternity'. (Heidegger 1975:408)

Here Heidegger argues that Kierkegaard still explains eternity, time and the moment from an 'ontic' [*ontisch*] rather than an 'ontological' [*ontologisch*] level, which means Kierkegaard has not yet broken away from the Western metaphysical tradition since Socrates. For Heidegger, the 'moment' is the temporal node of 'authentic existence' [*Dasein*]. If the appearance of the 'moment' in Kierkegaard primarily signifies the atomic moment of eternity, the eternal present, then in Heidegger, the 'moment' directly manifests as the opportunity of individual existence. Thus, we cannot construct a single point in time.

Unlike Kierkegaard, Heidegger contends that if we are to understand the problem of 'being' at an ontological level, we must not equate temporality with the series or totality of the passage of time; otherwise, we risk falling into the now as commonly understood in time. If the moment is merely comprehended from the 'present', its underlying eternal present remains an abstraction; hence, Heidegger has a compelling reason to claim such a 'moment' and the eternal 'present' it presupposes are contrived. Similarly, his analysis of death also reflects this point. 'The ending which is meant by death does not signify a cessation [*Zu-Ende-sein*] of *Dasein* but a Being-to-the-End of this being' (Heidegger 1927:245).

However, from our previous analysis, it is clear that Kierkegaard's 'moment' also inherently contains a structure of 'synthesis'. In contrast to Heidegger's 'authentic existence', Kierkegaard faces the significant theoretical problem of how to handle the 'qualitative difference' between God and humans, eternity and time. This is because Kierkegaard starts from different theoretical premises than Heidegger. Kierkegaard faces the 'qualitative difference' between eternity and time in Hegelian philosophy, where Hegel

integrates eternity with time and the infinite with the finite into the concept of the 'true infinite', conceptually incorporating the finite or change as an element of the dialectical movement of the infinite.

Kierkegaard's theoretical aim is to explain how, while rejecting this reconciliation, one can still demonstrate the immutability and eternity of God and the relationship between God and the existing individual. For this relationship, the unchanging eternity seems necessary, and the 'moment' must express this state of the condensed eternal present. For the generative movement of the individual, eternity as a dimension related to the individual is most importantly characterised by its 'unchanged' essence. To some extent, the unchanging eternity or immutability sets a 'reference' for the process of change of the individual. Hence, from an existential perspective, this immutability gives purpose to existence itself. If there were no 'qualitative difference' between the flow of time and the purpose of existence, existence would have to source its purpose or meaning. Instead of allowing this insight to prompt an attempt at the temporalisation of being, he argues that only in relation to eternity can being be re-established within its meaningful context. In Kierkegaard's 'moment', the individual within the movement of becoming intersects at the plane of eternity through establishing a relationship with the other, thereby forging a connection with the immutable aspect of God and conferring meaning upon the individual's becoming movement. This meaning is precisely manifested in the irreconcilability of time and eternity, as time gains significance through its orientation towards eternity, and eternity does not change within time, nor does it then subsume the very significance of temporality itself.

Thus, although Kierkegaard does not adopt the Heideggerian existential ontology, but rather offers a more traditional understanding of time and eternity, he nevertheless expounds the importance of the freedom of individual activity in his own method. With his emphasis on the freedom of individual activity, Kierkegaard does not view the unchanging eternity as the perfect, superior existence, but rather an existence that engages with human action. This allows Kierkegaard to reconceptualise our understanding of time, moving beyond its metaphysical – and even Aristotelian physical – foundations, ensuring that time is not a phenomenon originating solely from an existential-phenomenological perspective. Yet, it simultaneously breaks from the time theories closely associated with theological ontology, which extend from ancient Greece to modern philosophy, integrating the immutability of God with the flux of time into a domain of 'contemporaneity'. Comparing Kierkegaard's stance on metaphysics to that of Heidegger undeniably reveals more profound insights into the uniqueness of the concept of the unchanging eternal God in Kierkegaard's thought.

In this sense, the actuality constructed by Kierkegaard is clearly distinguished from the pure actuality of traditional metaphysics. Kierkegaard sees actuality achieved through the elimination of many possibilities, directing towards the

possibility of eternity that becomes real. The immutable 'pure actuality' of God participates in the movement of existence by being 'chosen'. At this level, Kierkegaard's ontology refashions traditional metaphysics, and this transformation extends beyond mere epistemology. Only by clarifying this point can we understand why, for Kierkegaard, the question of how the eternal God relates to humans precedes what the eternal God is. Thus, while Kierkegaard still regards God as a being and discusses the relationships between God's existence and that of other beings, without venturing into a discussion of 'being' itself like Heidegger, Kierkegaard has profoundly altered the traditional metaphysical approach to considering God as the highest being. This approach has enabled Kierkegaard to escape both the concept of God as absolutely immutable and perfect within traditional ontological metaphysics and the speculative concept of God in Hegelianism. In this respect, although Kierkegaard retains the concepts of 'pure being' and unchanging God, he does not posit the immutable God as the basis of the highest existence, but rather as the guarantee for human freedom of action.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper presents innovative perspectives that significantly contribute to the existing scholarship on Kierkegaard's philosophy. It offers a fresh reinterpretation of the 'moment' as an 'atom of eternity', providing a new lens through which to view the interplay between divine immutability and human temporality. By delving deeper into the ontological and metaphysical underpinnings of Kierkegaard's thought, the paper distinguishes his understanding of 'coming into existence' with God's unchanging essence. The dialogue established with traditional metaphysics, particularly through a critical comparison with the ideas of philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and Martin Heidegger, showcases Kierkegaard's transcendence of conventional metaphysical frameworks. Furthermore, the paper emphasises the connection between God's immutability and individual freedom, positioning the divine's constant nature as an enabler of human action rather than a static ideal. Finally, by engaging with contemporary academic discourse, this paper underscores the ongoing relevance and impact of Kierkegaard's philosophy, asserting its contribution to modern theological and philosophical conversations.

From the preceding analysis, it is not difficult to see that Kierkegaard's construction of the relationship between eternity and time, possibility and necessity, forms the philosophical foundation for our understanding of God's immutability. Kierkegaard distinguishes 'coming into existence' from God's activity, thereby building a theory centred around the God who is 'unchanging yet ever operative'. This theory posits that the unchanging God serves as the fixed reference point for the individual's movement of becoming, wherein the immutability of God signifies that the eternally existent remains unaffected by 'coming into existence'. However, this does not preclude the activity of the eternal itself. This theory necessitates a 'qualitative difference'

between immutable eternity and the passage of time, allowing for the eternal's pure act to participate within the 'moment' in the becoming movement, redirecting the goal of this movement from the external to the internal for the individual, even though such a 'moment' appears as a paradox to human reason (Snow 2016).

Considering the historical context in which Kierkegaard worked, we can better understand why he might make such seemingly extreme claims, such as 'God will silently witness the disappearance of Christianity in Denmark' (Kierkegaard 2009:337). The disappearance of Christianity in Denmark can be attributed to the fact that Danish Christians abandoned the mission of faith to be simultaneously present with God; God operates merely to transform the necessity that associates time with eternity into a possibility with which individuals can engage and make choices. The unchanging God does not overshadow possibility or eliminate the scope for Christian choice and action; on the contrary, by presenting eternity as a possibility, God opens up space for activity. Hence, any expectation for God to intervene and bring salvation within time is destined to be in vain. Salvation has already been eternally given, which serves as a resonant warning issued by Kierkegaard to Christians in Denmark (Kulak 2013).

Kierkegaard's synthesis of philosophy with theology, and that of faith with reason, allows us to comprehend more clearly the immutability of God. Kierkegaard demonstrates that the immutability of God, in its most fundamental sense, transcends a classical metaphysical construct. Although he retains the seemingly metaphysical concept of the unchanging God, the core of his theory lies not so much in the existence of God as an entity, but rather in the interrelationships between eternity and time, and between God and individuals. This enables us to perceive God's immutability from a perspective centred on existence.

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