

## Sex, Secularity and Belief in This World

### 2.1 SEX AND SECULARITY

But what precisely *counts* as foreplay?

This question, posed by our grade nine gym teacher who was doubling that day as sex educator, was a pivotal moment in sexual education at our Christian high school. It arose at the end of a lesson that laid out what our teacher assured us were the essential details of sexual activity. Above all, she explained, we were each going to have to be able to draw a line between what counts as sexual (initiated by “foreplay”) and what doesn’t. On one side of this line, we would enjoy a capacity for autonomy and choice, especially relevant in the context of exercising the choice to refrain from foreplay. On the other side, we would surely be drawn into an escalating intensity of sexed and gendered behavior, culminating in sex itself.

In response to our teacher’s question, we decided as a class that kissing with the tongue was likely the best designate for “foreplay.” The best way to evade the slippery slope of sexual desire, then, would be to refuse the joys of French kissing. While I didn’t know the joke at the time, the now-familiar Mennonite quip seems consonant with this formative moment of Calvinist sex education (“Why do Mennonites refrain from sex? Because sex leads to dancing”). While the joke hinges on a misplaced anxiety by religious believers, so worried about dancing that they refrain from sex, it attests to another kind of anxiety: anxiety over teleology, especially the teleological force of nature itself.

Our teacher's request that we establish a precise definition of "foreplay" appealed to a determinant trajectory of sexual activity (this leads to this leads to this) through an account that reifies the sex and gender relation (boys and girls, distinguishable by sex, manifest gendered behavior that we can anticipate and predict) and naturalizes gendered norms. As burgeoning Christian adults, we needed to be able to recognize "foreplay" so that we would be forewarned about the aggressive dynamics that would surely result when boys became intimate partners with assuredly more passive girls. While such tendencies were cast as natural and therefore universal, as 13-year-olds, the lesson's normative import was salient to us as specific to a particular socio-ethical community: what the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel would demarcate as an "ethical" community. Virtue, on these terms, was synonymous with faith; its particular norms, if followed, would mark us as members and, indeed, secure our membership in the community (theological protestations about faith being solely an individual matter aside).

In other words, we were learning scripts about how to participate as individuals within a broader whole—a whole that, in the case of our high school, was made up almost entirely of Calvinist Dutch immigrants and their families. By grade nine, we had of course, like most children our age, experienced ourselves or lived vicariously through close friends the confusing and uncertain relations between sex, gender and sexuality. We would have been able, had the teacher inquired, to point to kinds of sexual encounters that did not fit the prescribed sequence that her lesson sought to underscore: namely that sex adheres to specific intimization tracks and, as such, secures reproductive bonds between cisgender and straight married folks (see Bettcher 2012). ("Cisgender" refers to gender identities that are associated with sex designations that are assigned at birth. I am cisgender, for example, as I identify as a woman who was sexed "girl" at birth). Our sex education lesson, then, bore the burden of squaring our dissident experiences with the normative expectations of the community.

As members of a *religious* ethical community, we could not ignore the fact that the normative cast of our sex education lesson was out of step with the times—that we were learning how to be otherwise than mainstream secular folks. As an active participant in the church, for example, I never described myself as "religious" because this would have affirmed a judgment of me and my tradition that I implicitly understood to be secularizing (see Jaarsma 2010a). Instead, I identified as "Christian" or, more true to the church's own affiliations, "Christian Reformed." After all, our Christian high school existed *because* of our immigrant community's

refusal of secularizing approaches to education. Our Christian high school had been established by Dutch Calvinists who brought sectarian commitments with them to the so-called New World, determined to create communities that resembled those left behind in the Netherlands. These communities, demarcated along precise if at times almost imperceptibly nuanced lines (Christian Reformed, Canadian Reformed, Free Reformed, Reformed, Independent Reformed; the list goes on) secured recognizability as distinct “ethical” communities through mechanisms like schools. (It was a well-known fact that Dutch *Catholics* who immigrated to North America assimilated fairly quickly, largely because they lacked the separate schools that the Dutch Calvinists maintained.)

There are fault lines here that religious and secular liberals both tend to uphold vigilantly. Consider contemporary sexpert Dan Savage, who extends his own sexual instruction to religious people by entreating them to leave their ethical communities behind and assimilate into modern, secular society. His advice to leave religion behind echoes one of the two insults that, according to theologian Mark D. Jordan, will likely disparage queers in the church. “To be a gay Christian,” Jordan explains, “is to double occasions for insult” (2011, 128). Dan Savage’s sex-positive lessons presuppose an incommensurability of queer identities with Christian membership. On Savage’s terms, queerness elicits insult when it occurs within the pejorative contexts of religion. By leaving their churches, queers lay claim to the emancipatory promise of secularity. While there *are* people who are able to undermine this occasion for insult, combining religiosity with tolerance, Savage calls them NALTs (“not all like that”), a moniker that underlines their rarity.<sup>1</sup>

My own journey away from the church in some ways bolsters Savage’s argument. While I attempted for several years to combine participating in church community with partaking of the joys of queer life, I was eventually told (by a church chaplain with a philosophy Ph.D., incidentally) that the church did not and never would want me. I accepted the truth of the statement (and still do) and gave up any affiliation with the community I’d grown up in.

If the first occasion for insult is one that reflects the church’s rejection of queer sex, what is the second occasion that Jordan is identifying? Savage’s message and my own narrative about leaving the church reflect

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<sup>1</sup>This moniker has given rise to a “project” synced with the It Gets Better Campaign. See: <http://notalllikethat.org> (accessed February 11, 2016).

this second insult: namely, that unless they forge ways to be “not all like that,” religious believers face admonishments by secular liberals. On these terms, religious participation deserves insult because it is “entirely of the past,” a phrase that Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn used to describe the Dutch neo-Calvinists (cited in Nichols 2012).

Fortuyn made this claim in the context of a long-standing campaign against Muslim immigration to Holland. By linking the Reformers of the past to the contemporary Islamic community, Fortuyn sought to substantiate his own credentials as a modern and tolerant citizen: a cosmopolitan citizen, and also a gay one. (Fortuyn was murdered, as was director Theo van Gogh whose last film depicted Fortuyn’s assassination; their positions about Islam and modernity continue to play key roles in European debates about Islam, Islamophobia and the imperatives of secularization.) As many scholars have noted, the figure of the “queer” often embodies the modern, tolerant and necessarily secular individual in liberal discourses about progress (Puar 2007; Wekker 2016). To be liberal, on this score, is to be white, included in progress narratives of modernity and therefore “excluded from a critique of one’s own power manipulations” (Puar 2007, 31). As the examples of Fortuyn and Savage demonstrate, the liberated queer *reinstates* the privileges that were lost by being outside the heterosexual norm. The exclusions wrought by liberal norms are overcome through successful assimilation into white neo-liberal society. (We could turn here to incisive critiques of same-sex marriage campaigns that foreground the ways in which assimilation presupposes and even legitimates exclusions, prejudice and violence.)<sup>2</sup>

To be gay *and* Christian, then, is to occasion double insults. These insults instantiate a sharp distinction between the “secular” and the “religious” that, according to Talal Asad, is better understood as a mistaken claim of “secularism” (2011, 672). Whether one pathologizes the *queer* on religious grounds or the *Christian* on liberal grounds, one participates in a broader set of secularizing discourses about progress and development. Despite these insults and their assumptions, however, the line between the religious and the secular does not stand up to scrutiny. Jordan explains, for example, that Christian sex education partakes of the same developmental science as non-religious instruction: “Christian

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<sup>2</sup>See Somerville (2005) and Brandzel (2005); for an overview of this critique in relation to the religious/secular divide, see Jaarsma (2010b).

discourses at every level appropriate scientific theories that circulate in the culture. They typically offset the risk of appropriation by subordinating them to perennial religious truths” (2011, 208).

I was advised by an evangelical Christian to check out Exodus International, during those awkward years before I left the church; and while this suggestion to explore an “ex-gay” identity is an example of the first kind of insult, it is also an example of how Christians navigate modern scripts about sexuality. There is no “ex-gay” without “gay” after all, and, updating the rhetoric slightly, there is no “not-gay” without the gay liberation movement.<sup>3</sup> Just like the ex-gay figure, the homosexual individual, who emerged in the nineteenth century as a personage, with a case history and sexual identity, is legible as an object of management because of an entire modern machinery for “speechifying, analyzing, and investigating” (Foucault 1990, 32).<sup>4</sup> If something becomes a “species” it can be diagnosed as such by experts. It can also start to self-identify and lay claim to emancipation. Exactly in this way, Foucault explains, “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf” (1990, 101), often using the very same vocabulary by which it was rendered deviant by medical experts. In terms of more recent proliferations, Dan Savage’s listeners adopt his terms in order to lay claim to the explanatory powers of sex: “I’m a GGG straight woman,” someone declares in one of his podcasts, for example: good, giving and game. If sex-talk produces new forms of regulation or subjugation, it also produces new schemas of knowledge—like being “GGG” or “NALT.” Religious followers of Savage, renouncing repression, employ his vernacular for sex-positivity and identify proudly as “Not All Like That.”

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<sup>3</sup>Jordan makes this point: “There is no ex-gay without gay” (2011, 151). As of 2013, Exodus International no longer exists as an organization. And the somewhat defunct ex-gay movement seems to have shifted towards the language of “not gay,” as seen in the TLC reality show “My Husband’s Not Gay.” In this show, Mormon husbands acknowledge same-sex attractions while rejecting the identity of “gay.” Dan Savage, in addition to organizations like GLAAD, calls the show dangerous and irresponsible (see episode 430 of *The Savage Lovecast*).

<sup>4</sup>Religion does not contest or alter the basic categories of the scientific account, in other words. And, according to Michel Foucault’s history of sexuality, science does not alter the basic form of religious accounts: “The statement of oppression [we used to be repressed!] and the form of the sermon refer back to one another; they are mutually reinforcing” (1990, 8). As Dan Savage puts it, “I like to think of my column as a long, extended Sermon on the Mount” (*Savage Lovecast* episode 10).

After leaving the church, I faced an open question: was there a way to relate to religious affiliation (that of my own, in the past, and that of my family and close friends in the present) that did *not* align with the secularizing logics of Dan Savage and other liberals? At this time, I seized upon the nineteenth-century writings of Søren Kierkegaard as a resource for resolving this question. Kierkegaard shows us how the markers of religion are often merely *simulations* of spiritual life: expressions of despair that often resist recognition as such. He also affirms the possibility of “belief” and other forms of religious life that undercut, rather than subtend, the progress narratives that saturate modern sociality. A critic of Christendom as caustic as Nietzsche, Freud or Marx, Kierkegaard himself sought methods for critiquing religion from within, rather than from without (Matušík 2009, 355). In what follows, I lay out the cues that he offers us for interrogating the epistemic, ethical and existential mistakes so often made in the name of Christianity—while also soliciting spiritually lively, non-secularizing approaches to existence.

## 2.2 IT GETS BETTER: MODERN PROGRESS NARRATIVES

Whether we are talking about the religious right or followers of Dan Savage, sex becomes the key to unlocking who we really are as moderns, Foucault explains, *because* sex is transformed into discourse (1990, 78, 21). Sex must be put into words so that it can yield its revelatory insights and implicate us as subjects who are in need of expert medical help. This is why sex-talk requires specialists, people who are paid to listen to everyone sharing the secrets of their sex and to help eliminate the effects of repression (1990, 7).<sup>5</sup> My opening anecdote is an example of such disclosure, a confession about a formative moment in adolescence. While sex was “put into discourse” by our grade nine teacher, I retrospectively recognize her as a dyke and myself as a queer misfit, and such declarations are themselves examples of how we manifest our modern freedom in our present age. To be modern, on these terms, is to square one’s developmental trajectory with the evidentiary accounts of

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<sup>5</sup>According to Foucault, while confessional practices emerged out of monastic Catholicism, the rituals of confession began to function in the nineteenth century within the norms of science (1990, 65). In this way, sex became the *rational* and *scientific* explanation for everything because of the scientific experts (psychiatrists, sexologists, criminologists) who had the skills to decipher and draw out the healing powers of truth (1990, 67).

science. Whether “religious” or “secular,” one instantiates one’s agency as an individual by aligning one’s choices with the rational mandates of experts.

We can read my opening anecdote in another way, however, one more in line with Foucault’s own interpretation of development. Whereas Dan Savage’s sex-talk marks him as “emancipated,” Foucault points out that such discourse emerges from within historically particular situations. We can delimit knowledge practices and the subjectivities they bring forth as immanent within specific contexts, Foucault explains, “instead of legitimating what is already known” (1990, 9). Put differently, we can recognize narratives *as* narrative, identifying the ways in which we tell stories in light of narrative conceits. One such conceit is the progress narrative itself. (I may not be evading this mode of storytelling entirely when I call it out as a narrative lure to be resisted. But, in spite of this caveat, each chapter of this book does attempt to deploy my own tales in ways that undercut, rather than subtend, presumptions about progress and secularity.) The cliché of a dyke gym teacher is another example of “what everybody knows,” the commonsensical scripts of narrative.<sup>6</sup> In writing this book, I’ve become fascinated by the biosocial nature of these kinds of scripts; Chap. 4 in particular, which focuses on placebos, examines the entwined cultural and somatic meanings of commonsensical beliefs.

The act of telling one’s formative story is embedded within contextual, or immanent, scenarios. As Tim Dean puts it, “subjectively we live in time but not in chronology” (2011, 84). While we participate in scripts *about* chronology and development, in other words, these scripts are themselves entangled with specific environs. Musing about the impossibility of capturing the shifting dynamics of development, Kierkegaard writes in a journal entry, “one lives in the moment and at best with the next moment as perspective. One cannot get distance” (1967, 277).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>I thank Rachel Jones for pointing this out. Often, I think, clichés are difficult to recognize without the gentle indications of others.

<sup>7</sup>As David Kangas explains, according to Kierkegaard, self-consciousness does not know itself in its beginning “because in the very act of thinking a process as complete, one steps beyond it” (2007, 75). Making a similar point, Mark C. Taylor explains that “this absence of time is the nothingness that haunts subjectivity” (2012, 414). These insights into the *gap* between knowledge and temporal existence provide the backdrop to much of my analysis.

Kierkegaard, a philosopher whose texts explore the entanglements of subjectivity with temporality, is a thinker who invites the very occasions for double insults that the “moderns” resist. His texts alternately rage against and laugh about the many and varied ways in which “Christians” pass themselves off as persons of faith, upholding and yet existentially undermining the line that separates the faithful from the profane. Baptism, weekly attendance at church: Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors explore case after case of examples in which adherence to social norms enables individuals to dissemble about the dynamics of faith, not only to others but to themselves. These examples are deftly rendered as preposterous in Kierkegaard’s texts, both because of how they deceive individuals about their own behavior and because of how they miss the entire dynamics of faith, freedom and subjectivity.

In this way, Kierkegaard is an early proponent of what we might today identify as a queer and post-secular critique—the kind of critique found in work by Jordan and Asad, for example. Refuting the terms by which the religious/secular boundary is drawn, Kierkegaard’s existentialist critique from within Protestant Christianity (he spent his whole life in Lutheran Denmark and participated, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, within the church) is one that resonates with contemporary projects that protest against the secularizing logics of modernity as not only misguided but existentially and politically destructive.

Kierkegaard is also an early proponent of what we might call process philosophy (Raffnsøe et al. 2014). By process philosophy, I’m referring to methodologies that approach *becoming* in materialist and immanent terms. We can think of Alfred North Whitehead, for example, and his contemporary interlocutors like Isabelle Stengers, Brian Massumi and William Connolly. In these projects, becoming is singular, rather than determined or generalizable, and selves are relational, porous and situated. On these terms, becoming is immanent in two key ways: immanent to particular contexts, emerging in *this* ethical community at *this* historical juncture, and immanent developmentally. In contrast to the logic upheld by figures like Dan Savage, the nature of development, according to process philosophy, is itself always a matter of contingency and becoming. Becoming becomes (Massumi 2014, 60), and development develops (Oyama 2000, 9).

Already in the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard explains that concepts like freedom and subjectivity are jeopardized by the scientific representations and timelines of the modern “present age.” This book explores



many examples in which existentialist concepts are taken up by capitalist and neo-liberal frameworks and translated into modern, individualist terms. And I look to Kierkegaard as a resource for reanimating such concepts in ways that sync with critical thinkers who protest against the lures, exclusions and violence of late capitalist life. Instead of upholding choice as individualist and voluntarist, for example, we can think about choice in terms of *events* (Puar 2007, 211), events that are immanent to particular entangled scenarios. I will be making the case that such an approach to choice is what Kierkegaard's own existential project invokes: an immanent, materialist account of existence, in which agency is distributed and in which selfhood is an assemblage.

I am advancing a reading of Kierkegaard's existentialism that runs counter to prevailing interpretations, including those of Latour and Elizabeth Grosz, in which existentialism is understood to be irredeemably humanist.<sup>8</sup> I've found cues for my dissident interpretation in Connolly's post-secular renderings of Kierkegaard, as well as in recent studies that have shifted debates about Kierkegaard in the direction of materialism and temporality.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a humanist thinker who bolsters the anthropocentric conceits of modernity, Kierkegaard is a thinker who takes direct aim at such conceits. Ideals of voluntarist agency and individualism are exposed as just that: ideals, ideals that saturate our present age and that enervate, rather than intensify, relations of becoming. By calling out these ideals as false antidotes for the uncertainty at the heart of existence, Kierkegaard's texts open up what Kevin Newmark identifies as the deepest mystery: "how the self could ever come to discover anything about itself that it doesn't already know" (2012, 69).

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<sup>8</sup>According to the interpretation that I lay out in this book, Kierkegaard's project is entirely resonant with those of Latour and Grosz, despite certain passages in their texts that might suggest that this interpretation is unlikely. Latour, for example, describes existentialism "as a doctrine that represents one of the lowest points in the abandonment of philosophy of the world as it is known to science and experienced by living creatures" (2005, 233). Latour is referring here to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*. Likely referring to Sartre as well, Grosz writes, "we are not free, as the existentialists claim, thoroughly free, free in every act: rather, all living things exhibit *degrees of freedom*" (2013, 226). What I offer in this book is another rendering of existentialism, one that draws out an entangled, emergent understanding of freedom.

<sup>9</sup>See Kangas (2007), Newmark (2011), Hughes (2014), Burns (2015), Assiter (2015) and Shakespeare (2015).

In this book, I am especially interested in drawing out the import of Kierkegaard's existentialist project for prevailing modern scripts about progress, development and freedom. Public figures like Dan Savage, for example, lay claim to the emancipatory promises of sex-talk—exactly as Foucault described—in part by bolstering such promises with the developmental logics of sociobiology, neo-Darwinism and other versions of evolutionary theory. While these theories have been amply undermined by influential scholars, their existential ramifications have not been scrutinized: the ways in which evolutionary theories subtend problematic scripts about what it means to be modern agentive subjects, for example through ideals of whiteness, upward mobility, health and able-bodied/mindedness. Kierkegaard proffers us resources by which to identify and undermine ideologies of development.

As I explore in the following chapters of this book, these existentialist resources resist the lures of progress narratives, including the one to which I myself am prone in which “coming out” coincides with leaving the church and, all things considered, things getting a whole lot better. “It gets better” is a meme first made famous by Dan Savage and his husband Terry. The phrase went viral in 2010 when they began the “It Gets Better” campaign in response to a perceived crisis of youth suicides. The campaign mobilizes a developmental narrative in which the present lays claim to an always-improving future. Kierkegaard's project not only prompts us to recognize that such narratives are themselves tangled up in particular contexts of whiteness, neo-liberal mandates and secularizing scripts. It also prompts us to consider alternative narratives, ones that reflect the existential significance of story-telling itself.

Evolution itself is an existential matter, on my account, replete with existential anxiety about how to place ourselves in time and how to navigate our own “becomings” as temporal, embodied creatures.<sup>10</sup> The moderns have never *been* modern, Latour explains, and individuals have never been individuals, as evolutionary biologists and anthropologists point out (Margulis 1997, 273; Tsing 2012, 144). In fact, organisms in general are better described as “cooperating assemblies” than discrete wholes (Dupré 2015, 69). Vested interests in modernity and

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<sup>10</sup>Kierkegaard's understanding of the being “of time” has been thoroughly discussed (Eriksen 2000; Carlisle 2005; Mooney 2007; Grøn 2011), but discussions of what it means to be “in time” are less frequent in Kierkegaard scholarship.

individuality, however, have wrought centuries of violence, colonialism and accounts of evolution that equate progress with whiteness, secularity and transcendence away from the immanent ecologies in which we live. Embracing our natures as ecosystems, rather than individuals, is an existential, as well as political, imperative, one that requires alternative models for how to engage and make sense of evolution. Moreover, when we acknowledge the ways in which development emerges ecologically, we are no longer able to uphold mechanistic accounts of instinct.

Thinking back to my opening anecdote, for example, it is an all-too-common assumption, one that haunts many religious communities, that boys commit violence because of “instinct” and not intentional destruction. This assumption is likely why judges tend to decrease sentences when crimes are deemed “biological” in origin. (I examine this point in Chap. 3.) It is also why our sex education teacher cautioned the girls in class, specifically, about the teleological arrow of foreplay; it was understood that, if certain lines were crossed, boys would be beset by urges no longer controllable by will, and so girls would need to police the bounds of intimacy and accept responsibility when intimacy went awry. It remains an open question for me whether the banishment of queer eros from this discussion is a latent recognition that queerness undercuts the logics of this hetero-portrait of sexual violence.

What isn’t an open question, however, is the extent to which logics about development are enormously significant for how we live out and endorse social norms. I am sharing this brief anecdote about sex education as a way to draw out this significance, but we can consider the import of evolutionary accounts of development for the wide-ranging and gruesome practices of eugenics as well. Clarence Darrow, the lawyer who worked pro bono to defend John T. Scopes in the infamous trial in Tennessee in the 1920s, became horrified by the close links between evolutionary biology’s assumptions about instinct and eugenics. Recognizing the affinity between white supremacy, forced sterilization and claims about innate propensities for crime, in 1926 Darrow declared that biologists who reinforced such claims were “irresponsible fanatics” (1926, 137; see Marks 2012, 144). While Darrow’s declaration may seem like distant history, it points to the dangers of any biological model that reduces complexity to reified, determinant scripts. In response to such scientific racism, Frantz Fanon declares, “science should be ashamed of itself” (2008, 100). I heed Fanon’s claim by examining the existential and ecological injuries effected by scientific research. But

I also look to recent shifts in evolutionary biology, molecular biology and post-genomic science that hold promise, conceptually and pragmatically, for redressing social injustices. My concluding chapter in particular examines the possibility of decolonizing approaches to scientific inquiry.

## 2.3 EVOLUTION AND EXISTENTIALISM

While they are rarely engaged in conversation with each other, existentialist philosophy and evolutionary theory share intense interests in the nature of becoming. Both areas of research point to processes of change—what Gregory Bateson describes as “difference which occurs across time” (1972, 452)—as a pressing epistemic problem. According to existentialism and evolutionary theory, we can only make sense of becoming—of differences that emerge across time—if we find ways to *differentiate*: discerning and tracking differences, and making decisions about the taxonomies that delineate the differences under scrutiny. Where, for example, does a species begin and end? At what point do developmental differences in degree shift into differences in kind, prompting researchers to categorize such differences in terms of distinct species? After all, as anthropologist John Shea explains, “in evolution, only differences matter” (2011, 128). As we forge ways to differentiate temporal shifts in becoming, we come up against a key evolutionary and existentialist question: How different is “the new”? How does truly new newness emerge out of already established scenarios? How do we surpass the given?

This book’s title refers to one substantive difference in particular: the difference between the long-standing neo-Darwinist account of evolution and the “post-genomic,” systems-attuned account of evolution found across science, social science and science studies. I am interested, in this book, in drawing out the existentialist resonances of this difference. It is a difference between linear stories about change [what Michelle Wright describes as a Grand Unified Theory that imposes an “A to B” chain of causal events (2015, 110)] and dynamic stories about change, ones that bear recursively upon the very ontological matter under discussion.

This shift towards ecological, developmental thinking (summed up in the current vernacular as “eco-evo-devo” science (Abouheif et al. 2014) undercuts the twentieth-century neo-Darwinist modern synthesis incisively. Whereas the modern synthesis integrates Darwinian natural selection with Mendelian genetics in ways that render “development” as a

predictive, teleological trajectory, eco-evo-devo researchers emphasize the fact that developmental mechanisms themselves develop. We cannot delimit development by referring back to genetic scripts because these scripts, themselves, are expressed in relation to environmental and experiential factors—factors that cannot be reduced to inherited, genomic mechanisms. Indeed, “our experiences influence what our genomes do,” which means that there are existential implications for how we place ourselves in the world and seek to make sense of our actions within it (Moore 2015, 98).

Consider the paradigmatic neo-Darwinist formula, made famous by Ernst Haeckl: “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” From the vantage point of eco-evo-devo thinking, in such a story about evolution there is no actual *ontogeny* or recognition of the flux of developmental change: if the ontogeny of an individual organism simply *echoes* the phylogeny of its species, then its development reflects potentials that were always already there. One’s phenotype is a direct expression of one’s genotype, itself a product of inherited species-typical scripts about evolution. There is no contingency, in other words, and no possibility-of-possibility, only predictive consistencies and determinant causative logic. Cast in Kierkegaard’s terms, there is also no existential anxiety to beset us, since anxiety *undoes* rather than affirms our portrayals or stories of change-across-time. And if there is no such anxiety, there is no freedom. As Michael O’Neill Burns puts it, “freedom,” for Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, “is not just a pure possibility but a possibility haunted by a nothing that reminds us that things could always be otherwise” (2015, 52).<sup>11</sup> Things could always be otherwise because, ontologically, “every moment that a self exists, it is in a process of becoming” (1980, 3). This claim, asserted by Kierkegaard’s most religious pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, invites us to forge stories about becoming that invoke—rather than deny or ignore—the live possibilities for leaps into the new.

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<sup>11</sup>Bettina Bergo notes that Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous *Concept of Anxiety* was published in the 1840s when debates about evolution preoccupied many thinkers. She writes, “he did not take the evolutionists’ blows to destroy the essence of faith; he utilized the logic of their discoveries” by elaborating an “immanentist” approach to the inner life of faith (2003, 150). Bergo’s account, which I agree with wholeheartedly, echoes that of Deleuze and Guattari, who read Kierkegaard’s existentialism as an immanent portrayal of “belief in this world” (1996, 73–75); I examine their interpretation in more detail in Chap. 6.

We find such stories in the writings of systems theorists, eco-evo-devo scientists and science scholars who study this work: stories about how we live in “a dynamic world, where symbiosis and phenotypic plasticity are the rules, not the exceptions” (Gilbert et al. 2015, 611). Things could always be otherwise, when life’s developmental activities express the dynamic interactions between hosts and symbiotic micro-organisms, between organisms and environment. While this scientific research calls for “a shift in how we think evolution works” (Gilbert et al. 2015, 620), it also cues us to the essentially existential ramifications of developmental change. Existentialist texts, often taught as if they reflect a now-past era of philosophy, are directly relevant to such shifts in thinking. Bringing Kierkegaard—sometimes called the first existentialist—into these conversations about “becoming” cues us, in turn, to ways of telling stories that are non-secularizing and not complicit with progress or other A-to-B narratives.

## 2.4 MISPLACED CONCRETENESS AND THE NATURE OF BECOMING

Neo-Darwinist thinking is an example of what we might call out as “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” This marvelous phrase by Alfred North Whitehead is one that flags the dissonance between variation, on the one hand, and the conceptual models devised to make sense of variation, on the other (1967, 51). In the case of neo-Darwinism, the instability of biological development is belied by maps and formulas that lay out determinant trajectories of change, formulas like “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.”

The mistake here is not the creation of abstractions: abstractions like proxies, formulas or even stories themselves. Rather, the mistake of “misplaced concreteness” is a fallacious *application* of abstractions, “born of our own analytic attempts to establish a baseline of commensurability” (Ingold 2013b, 4). As a representative example of this mistake, *the gene* often prompts cases of misplaced concreteness because, in the context of neo-Darwinist frameworks, genes *stand in* for the dynamic systems that they purport to explain. And evolution itself is another such example, Ingold explains: we project idealized images of ourselves onto the evolutionary past, presuming already existing potentiality for who and what

we are today, “such that the whole of history appears as but a naturally preordained ascent towards their realization in modernity” (2013b, 4).

Kierkegaard dramatizes the quandaries of misplaced concreteness across his writings: cases in which the relative is mistaken for the absolute, the universal is mistaken for what is higher than the universal, numbers are mistaken for actual events, causes are mistaken for their effects, and selfhood is mistaken for the dynamic processes by which selves-become-in-the-world. Abstractions such as “the religious” can lead to the mistake of misplaced concreteness. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus explains, for example, that “the secular mentality is nothing more or less than the attribution of infinite worth to the indifferent” (1980, 33). Misplaced concreteness is judged by Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms to be a *secular* mistake, not in terms of the modern religious/secular divide that this judgment actually undermines, but because it reifies the oscillations and variations of passion, reducing them to static models. More than simply a category mistake, the mistake of misplaced concreteness involves over-extending the differentiating activities of abstracting to such an extent that difference loses its salience all together. In this example by Anti-Climacus, the activity of differentiation is that of *valuation*. By presuming that the value of “infinite worth” stands in for what it purports to measure, “secular” approaches replace an attentiveness to difference with static, partial and bounded abstractions. We might call the mistake of misplaced concreteness “bad faith” or describe it as a kind of despair that does not recognize itself as such. It might manifest as a longing to be a full and completely actualized thing or, perhaps the converse of the same desire, a longing to be a “god” (Colebrook 2010, 62). Put differently, it is a mistake that denies what we describe, existentially, as “becoming.”

We learn from eco-evo-devo scientists that, contrary to neo-Darwinist models, ontogeny exceeds the term of phylogenetic evolution.<sup>12</sup> Rather than asking abstractions like “the gene” to stand in for development, we need “an evolutionary equivalent of the general theory of relativity that would allow our human trajectories of growth and becoming—including

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<sup>12</sup>A key text here is Stephen J. Gould’s 1977 *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, which challenged Haeckel’s famous biogenetic law that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” by emphasizing the development of developmental mechanisms themselves.

those of growing and becoming knowledgeable—to be re-woven into the fabric of organic life” (Ingold 2013b, 10). Indeed, “the gene” is better understood as a concept: an epistemic abstraction that, while useful, often over-reaches its bounds (Fox Keller 2000; Moore 2015, 24–26), especially in light of epigenetics. Rather than genomic scripts, developmental processes reflect “time and tissue regulated expressions” (Neumann-Held 2001, 72). Our bodies are biosocial and mutable, reflecting macro- and micro-interactions with our environments that, at times, produce heritable modifications. On these terms, “becoming” is a process of differentiation in which nature and nurture, biology and social forces, entangle in what Susan Oyama calls “ontogenetic chronicles” (2010, 417). Life itself, in other words, can be reduced only to stories: there is no “becoming” without stories of becoming. There are stories, all the way down.

In terms of navigating the epistemic challenge of sorting out differences from each other, Oyama points out that “what makes a difference depends on what question is being asked” (2000, 161). She continues, “a difference that makes a difference at one level of analysis, furthermore, may or may not make a difference at another. This is, in fact, the key to understanding apparent spontaneity” (2000, 162). According to eco-evo-devo thinking, there *is* no stable site from which to represent the shifting dynamics of evolution, no vantage point from which to evade the flow of agentive actants. Even questions about what differences make a difference are implicated in the flow of change-across-time. Evolutionary theory, on these terms, is a project that seeks to make sense of complexity, abstraction and development in ways that recognize, explicitly, the recursive qualities of such sense-making practices. Not only do we not stand apart from evolutionary becoming, in terms of our own species membership, but our very conceptual mappings are themselves “ontogenetic,” impinging upon and affording new possibilities of becoming. There is a perspectivist hue to such research, evinced, for example, by Margaret Lock’s recent call for post-genomic research itself to be contextualized explicitly (2015, 163). As Kierkegaard might put it, we are always in the process of becoming, immersed within situations that are themselves in flux; indeed, we are *relations* rather than discrete selves, and we are hailed—existentially—to forge relations with these constitutive relational dynamics (1980, 13–14).



## 2.5 KIERKEGAARD AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

In this book, I draw Kierkegaard into conversation with thinkers of the post-genomic age in five distinct ways. First, Kierkegaard proffers an account of self that attends to the import of what evolutionary theorists call “ontogeny” and what he describes as *becoming*: “to become oneself is to become concrete,” Anti-Climacus writes (1980, 30), but to become concrete is to *become* a synthesis between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and the necessary. Anti-Climacus is careful to resist the mistake of misplaced concreteness in his own abstractions about becoming-a-self. “Yet every moment that a self exists,” he continues, “it is in a process of becoming, for the self [in potentiality] does not actually exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence. Insofar, then, as the self does not become itself, it is not itself; but not to be itself is precisely despair” (1980, 30). There is a gap at the heart of existence, one that can never be covered over by static representations of selfhood, despite our best efforts.

Just as evolution evinces a time lag or a nick of time, in which “cause” and “effect” are dissociated, the process of “becoming” evinces what Kierkegaard calls the “instant.” Each present is a departure, a beginning. In the leap of faith, “all things are made new” (Kangas 2007, 152). While our epistemic tendencies might incline towards positing origins or outcomes, life’s “beginning” is an origin that is not one (Grosz 2004, 26). Its differentiation can only be recognized retrospectively. And so, just as evolution faces the non-originary origins of life’s beginning, existential reflection faces the anarchic origins of faith (Kangas 2007, 156). To leap, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Silentio explains, “is to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up” (1983, 18). And such holding fast is a precarious, utterly exposed kind of enterprise (Kangas 2007, 185). As we *become* and experiment with our own accounts of our becoming, we must always begin and begin again. “Every synthesis is ‘new,’” writes Isabelle Stengers in her book on Whitehead, “and everything must be started all over again every time” (2011, 258).

Second, Kierkegaard proffers an account of existence in which *becoming* itself can be differentiated: there are differing degrees of passion in existence, he argues, differing modes of existence that we can identify, inhabit and solicit. Existence is modal. This is one of Kierkegaard’s most significant and over-looked philosophical contributions. His taxonomically precise portrayals of existence-modes, dramatized by the first-person enactments

of his pseudonyms, confirm that existence emerges through abstraction.<sup>13</sup> This is a key claim in this book. Whitehead makes this point, and so do Massumi, Grosz, Connolly and others: abstraction is how life emerges and differentiates.<sup>14</sup> Instinct has mental powers, as Massumi puts it (2014, 32). In his existentialist staging of abstractions, Kierkegaard insists that they manifest differing degrees of creativity, interest and “ontogenetic” vitality. At its most extreme and secular, for example, existence is entirely indifferent to its own abstractions. Such spiritlessness evades the significance of its own ecological contexts (there is no *becoming* of becoming in spiritlessness existence). In such scenarios, it actually “makes no difference at all” who is speaking or acting, Kierkegaard explains, because existence has been so enervated (1978, 104). This is why Kierkegaard describes such existence as secular, indifferent to its own mode of becoming. In contrast to spiritless indifference, though, there are modes of existence that leap and spark, demonstrating qualitatively more intense degrees of spirit of passion. They also express more degrees of interest *in* becoming, as such.

There are therefore differing degrees of misplaced concreteness. Referring to the *aesthetic* mode of existence, a mode that Kierkegaard and his pseudonym depict as fairly impoverished in spirit, Anti-Climacus declares, for example, that “if what is spirit cannot be defined aesthetically, how can the aesthetic answer a question that simply does not exist for it” (1980, 45). The aesthetic, on this account, lacks the spirit by which to participate in existential projects like differentiating between degrees of passion. Commenting on this passage in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Clare Carlisle points out that any solution to the problem has to

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<sup>13</sup>How to interpret Kierkegaard’s categories of existence is one of the most contentious and creative questions in Kierkegaard scholarship. I am following interpretations in which the existence-modes are differentially related: they co-implicate each other. Newmark makes this point, referring in particular to Adorno’s rendering of Kierkegaard (2011). Similarly, Catherine Pickstock argues for interpretations that attend to the resonances, rather than the contradictions, between the existence-modes: “the religious, one might say, integrates the aesthetic sublime with the aesthetic-ethical beautiful” (2014, 134).

<sup>14</sup>Whitehead writes, for example, that “abstraction expresses nature’s mode of interaction and is not merely mental. When it abstracts, thought is merely conforming to nature—or rather, it is exhibiting itself as an element in nature” (1985, 26; cited in Massumi 2014, 28). This emphasis on life’s creative abstractions leads to accounts of evolution that disallow human exceptionalism. Grosz explains that “there is only a difference in degree, not in kind, between the mental and moral capacities of man and those of animals ... The development of language is not just *like* evolution, it *is* evolution” (2004, 48, 29).

happen *through* the problem itself (2011, 269). Just as evolutionary biologists point out that there is no god's-eye view from which to adjudicate existence, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms remind us that abstractions emerge from within immanent contexts and so, too, do our attempts to make sense of abstraction. And so this is why thinkers like William Connolly claim that “to amplify the experience of becoming is one affirmative way to belong to time today” (2011, 8). Connolly's claim sounds very Kierkegaardian, and it prompts us to consider the question of *how* becoming might be amplified. (This question is the main focus of Chap. 6.)

And so, third, Kierkegaard points us towards *becoming* as an existentialist practice. As his pseudonyms dramatize the varying kinds of existence-modes, they prompt us, their readers, to intensify our own modes of existence. They act as teachers, in other words, and their examples suggest that we can approach teaching and reading as existential practices. Jacques Derrida reflects this Kierkegaardian insight when he describes his own books as pedagogies “aimed at forming its reader” (2007, 31). Teaching is an existential corrective, Kierkegaard explains, which means that it must recognize the contingent context of its own activities. “It is an unhappy mistake,” he comments in a journal entry, “if the person who is used to introduce the corrective becomes impatient and wants to make the corrective normative for the others, an attempt which will confuse everything” (1967, 332).

There is a humility to the pedagogy that Kierkegaard endorses and models in his own texts—a humility that he describes as Socratic, indirect and maieutic and that, in Chap. 5, I describe as resonant with the Buddhist slogan “self-liberate even the antidote” Trungpa (2005, 19). If the teacher or a text is only an occasion for prompting intensified passions in another, then that teacher's methods must somehow reflect the partiality of their role. Kierkegaard's own pseudonyms exemplify this kind of self-consciously partial pedagogy. They stage drama after drama in ways that undo rather than secure their own claims to verity and validity. The pseudonyms emulate the varying passions of existence-modes, thereby describing but also *eliciting* becoming (see Hughes 2014, 6–11). As readers of these texts, we're invited to inhabit the role of pupil, rather than teacher or apostle (Kierkegaard 1998, 79).

Fourth, as a way to draw out the implications of this existentialist approach to pedagogy, we can consider how Kierkegaard's insights resonate with the ecological emphases of evolutionary theory. According to

Kierkegaard and to eco-evo-devo theories, we cannot point to one efficient cause when we are thinking about development and the movement of becoming. Instead, evolutionary theorists Richard Lewontin and Stephen Jay Gould point to the “integrated developmental blocks” by which change-across-time occurs (1979). Similarly, Henri Bergson explains that all parts in a situation coordinate and correlate in order for changes to evolve (1998, 65–76). Design is a key term in these discussions, a term that science and technology studies scholars deploy as a way to point to the situated, ecological dynamics of development (see Dow Schüll 2014). While change cannot be predicted nor precise forms of becoming coerced, we are drawn into the entanglements of design with ecology when we reflect on developmental processes. This is a point that disability studies scholars, in particular, emphasize as essential for any critical thinking about temporality, nature and the limits of progress narratives (I examine this import of disability studies more closely in Chaps. 5 and 6).

If we are going to focus on a unit whose changes we are tracking, Bateson, Gregory explains that we should leave behind the neo-Darwinist units of the breeding organism, family line or even society itself. Instead, Bateson explains, the unit of change is the *flexible* organism-in-environment (1972, 450), what Massumi calls life-in-the-making (2014, 46). There is no untangling ourselves from our environs, on this account, but we can both *indict* inflexible designs for how they inhibit becoming and *cultivate* more flexible relations between organisms and environments. (Flexibility is one of the principles of universal design, and I explore its existential significance in Chap. 5.) By engaging with design as an element of existentialist teaching, however, we face the challenge of distributing agency across the many interactants that participate in our environments. Objects do not transmit our force faithfully, Latour reminds us (1996, 240): they are mediators and actants, just as we are.

Finally, fifth, by turning to Kierkegaard as an ally for evolutionary theory, I make the case that existentialism is relevant to becoming in all forms, not simply the becoming of our own species. *Life itself* exhibits passionate propulsion towards the new, Massumi explains (2014, 18), demonstrating a natural upwelling of the qualitative and the subjective across nature’s continuum (2014, 17). While we are accustomed to restricting terms like “passionate” and “subjective” to qualities that our species alone manifests, Massumi is pointing us towards an existentialist, materialist rendering of evolutionary development. Abstraction is how

life emerges, which means that story-telling, as Latour puts it, “is not just a property of human language, but one of the many consequences of being thrown into a world that is, by itself, fully articulated and active” (2014, 13). Life is reducible, ultimately, only to stories. And if abstraction is an attribute of life itself, we can no longer lift up our own species as somehow exceptional or more valuable. In terms of evolution, there are only differences in degree, and not in kind, “between the mental and moral capacities of man and those of animals” (Grosz 2004, 48).

The distinctive contribution that Kierkegaard adds to such understanding is his attention to *despair*. In this book I seek to bring Kierkegaard’s account of despair into concrete discussions of biosocial life. One of my motivations is to reflect on the tensions between “lived abstraction” and “lived importance,” Massumi’s terms for passion and the felt imperatives of the given. Massumi is adamant, and beautifully persuasive in his adamance, that life inclines towards the non-scripted and the new. (I explore Massumi’s claims in detail in Chap. 5.) But Massumi’s own exuberant account of life’s creative passions understates, perhaps, the force of despair in how life emerges and develops. And I wonder if this very point is a way to understand Kierkegaard’s conviction that *spirit* always involves suffering. The tensions between the new and the given, in other words, are replete with despair, existential anxiety and uncertainty. As Fanon explains, “understanding something new requires us to be inclined, to be prepared, and demands a new state of mind” (2008, 75). Each chapter in this book stages different scenarios that explore these tensions at the heart of developmental stories (and the abstractions that seek to make sense of such stories).

Kierkegaard’s writings invite us to contemplate and respond to the *how* of existence: the style by which we express becoming. Style is adverbial, as Massumi puts it (2014, 25); it can be modified, qualified and parsed taxonomically. Throughout the book, I am following Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion about Kierkegaard’s import. Kierkegaard dramatizes the very immanence of existence, they explain, and, moreover, his texts show us that there are only *immanent* criteria by which to adjudicate (and categorize) different modes of existence. And so our most difficult task—“the task of a mode of existence still to be discovered”—involves the task of believing in this world, in this life (1994, 75). “Belief in this world” is how we might recharge the immanence of existence, they explain (1996, 74–75). Kierkegaard’s texts do not challenge us “to get out of the world but how we are and how we are to be in

it” (Pattison 2012, 212). Examining Kierkegaard’s relevance to pressing debates about development, each subsequent chapter points to examples of “belief in this world”: to non-secularizing approaches to practices of becoming. As each chapter demonstrates, we find such examples across disability studies, queer theory, critical race and decolonial theory: projects that attend, in particular, to the *how* of becoming.

Each chapter examines a case of misplaced concreteness: Chapter 3 considers the Human Genome Project and its aftermath (in which the genome aggregate stands in for individual developmental scripts); Chap. 4 investigates the role of the placebo effect in modern biomedicine (in which the “effect” is mistaken for entangled co-actants); Chap. 5 looks at teaching practices (in which the “outcome” is taken for processual becoming and practice); and Chap. 6 reflects on the purifying practices of scientific inquiry (in which “data” poses as epistemic authority). In each of these four cases, the abstractions by which we parse differences and chart out trajectories about change-across-time hold existential import. While they exemplify the temptations of misplaced concreteness in our present age, they proffer possibilities by which to recharge immanence, spark leaps of faith and tell new ontogenetic chronicles.

René Rosfort points out that “for more than fifty years now, [Kierkegaard’s] name has been conspicuously absent from most of the astonishing scientific developments in psychology, sociology and psychiatry” (2014, 79). Given the recent turn towards biosocial, systems-level research in evolutionary biology and its resonance with science studies and new materialist philosophies, this seems like an opportune moment for remedying this absence. We are ecosystems, not bounded individuals; we are embedded creatures, porous and symbiotic participants in complex systems. And our abstractions are practices that are not limited by the skin (Bateson 1972, 454); they are *how* we participate in our ecologies. While Kierkegaard’s project, like evolutionary theory, offers its own abstractions by which to parse and adjudicate differences, its existentialist methods invite each of us, as readers, to “recharge the immanence” of our own existence-modes. Such recharging depends upon our willingness to confront our own propensities for misplaced concreteness. Whether it is the curative logic of health, the normative logic of community or the modern logic of genomic science, the lures of the present age challenge us—but also, on Kierkegaard’s terms, compel us into more impassioned, critical, ecologically attuned relations.

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