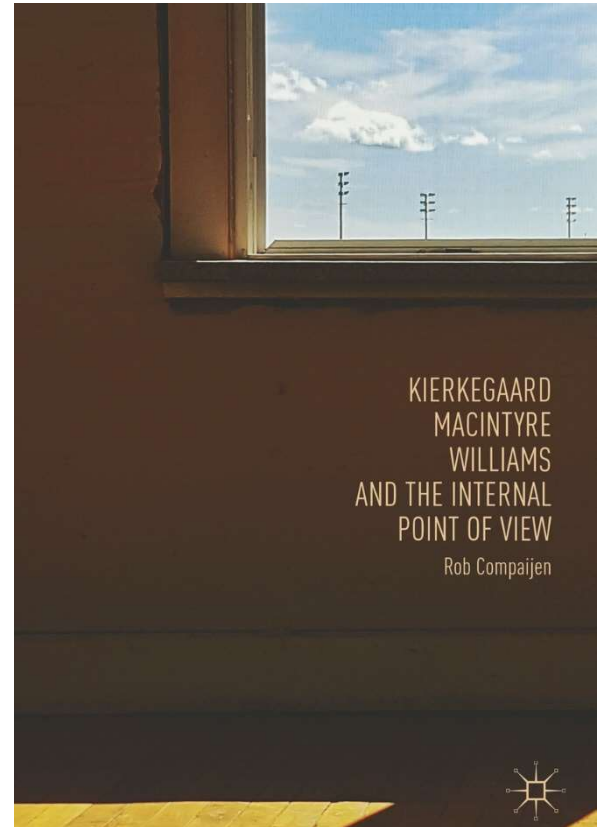


# Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View (2018)

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## **Abstract**

This book takes the debate about the (ir)rationality of the transition to ethical life in Kierkegaard's thought in a significantly new direction. Connecting the field of Kierkegaard studies with the meta-ethical debate about practical reasons, and engaging with Alasdair MacIntyre's and Bernard Williams' thought, it explores the rationality of the choices for ethical life and Christian existence. Defending a so-called 'internalist' understanding of practical reasons, Compaijen argues that previous attempts to defend Kierkegaard against MacIntyre's charge of irrationality have failed. He provides a thorough analysis of such fundamental topics as becoming oneself, the ideal of objectivity in ethics and religion, the importance of the imagination, the power and limits of philosophical argument, and the relation between grace and nature. This book will be of great interest to Kierkegaard scholars in philosophy and theology, and, more generally, to anyone fascinated by the rationality of the transition to ethical life and the choice to accept Christianity.



## **Table of Contents**

### **1. Introduction**

In this chapter I use the confrontation between Socrates and Callicles (in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*) to introduce the key question of this book: can we plausibly ascribe a reason to embrace ethical life to those living outside of it? This question leads me to gloss over several interesting questions and philosophical issues that are important in this book. I show that my approach in this book is twofold: I engage, on the one hand, with Kierkegaard's thought and works, and, on the other, with contemporary moral philosophy.

Key words: Socrates, Callicles, Gorgias, Kierkegaard, amorality

### **2. MacIntyre's Critique of Kierkegaard**

This chapter focuses on Alasdair MacIntyre's influential critique of Kierkegaard. It discusses his argument in *After Virtue* that, on Kierkegaard's view, there are no

reasons to choose to live ethically. I also reconstruct the renewed (and partly revised) critique that he brought forward in his 2001 paper ‘Once More on Kierkegaard’. I show that his critique is grounded in a specific understanding of what it means to have a reason for action, which I reconstruct on the basis of (mainly) *Dependent Rational Animals*. On MacIntyre’s view, one’s reasons for action are directly determined by what is conducive to a realization of the ultimate human good.

Key words: MacIntyre, Kierkegaard, reasons for action, flourishing, ethical life

### **3. Internalism About Practical Reasons**

This chapter places Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of practical reasons in the wider context of the contemporary meta-ethical debate on reasons for action. It explores the key distinction between internalist and externalist views on practical reasons, elaborating Bernard Williams’ discussion of it. I use Williams’ insights to criticize externalism and to defend internalism about reasons for action. The kind of internalism I advocate differs from Williams’ because I believe the latter is grounded in an implausible, idealized conception of practical reasoning. On my account, an agent has a reason to  $\Phi$  only if she could reach the conclusion to  $\Phi$  by deliberating to the best of her ability from the motivations she already has. I use these insights to criticize Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of reasons for action for being externalist.

Key words: Williams, internalism, externalism, reasons for action, deliberation

### **4. Kierkegaard on Being Human**

In this chapter I introduce several fundamental aspects of Søren Kierkegaard’s thought. I discuss his philosophical anthropology and his related thoughts on becoming oneself as the task of human existence as well as on the different life-views. Other important themes are Kierkegaard’s critique on the modern ideal of objectivity, his views on the ethical and the religious, and his complex ideas about communication. The important point I aim to establish is that we should understand Kierkegaard’s authorship as a Socratic attempt to assist modern human beings in becoming themselves: it seeks to motivate them to embrace ethical and (ultimately) Christian existence.

Key words: Kierkegaard, self, objectivity, Socrates, indirect communication

### **5. Embracing Ethical Life**

Bringing the insights of the previous chapters together, this chapter seeks to answer the book’s main question. I develop an interpretation of aesthetic and ethical life, and I show that we should understand the transition between both as qualitative. After criticizing Michelle Kosch’ and Anthony Rudd’s influential arguments for the

rationality of the transition to ethical life for presupposing an externalist view on practical reasons, I develop my own argument. *Contra* MacIntyre's charge of irrationality, I argue that there is reason for some but not for all aesthetes to embrace ethical life. I also reflect on the sort of communication that might be able to communicate to aesthetes that they have reason to embrace ethical life, showing that the imagination is crucial here.

Key words: Kierkegaard, reasons for action, internalism, ethical life, desire

## **6. Entrusting Oneself to Christian Life**

In this chapter I ask whether there can be reasons to embrace Christian existence. I point out that what is at stake here, is a transition between natural life and Christian existence. I show that Kierkegaard understands the relation between the natural and the Christian standpoints in terms of an infinite contrast, and that he emphasizes the absurdity of Christianity. Taking these ideas together, I argue that there cannot be reason to embrace Christian life, because deliberation – no matter how ideal – cannot reach the conclusion that the desire for salvation is fulfilled in the choice for Christianity. This inspires me to criticize the views on the relation between grace and nature that are implied the Kierkegaardian understanding of Christianity.

Key words: Kierkegaard, Christianity, offense, deliberation, reasons for action

## **7. Conclusion**

In this concluding chapter I summarize the book's most important insights and spell out some of the ways in which it contributes to our understanding of the topics it elaborates. I also sketch the implications of the kind of internalism I have defended for the ways we have to think about ethics and Christianity.

Key words: Kierkegaard, internalism, subjective, Christianity, ethics