DE GRUYTER

KIERKEGAARD AND ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

Edited by Mélissa Fox-Muraton

Copyright 2020. De Gruyter. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via
AN: 2641091 ; Mlissa Fox-Muraton.; Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics
Account: ns335141

Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Kierkegaard Studies

Edited on behalf of the
Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre
by Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart and Karl Verstrynge
in cooperation with Peter Šajda

Monograph Series 41

Edited by
Jon Stewart

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics

Edited by
Mélissa Fox-Muraton

DE GRUYTER

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ISBN 978-3-11-070574-4
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-070713-7
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-070719-9
ISSN 1434-2952

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020946861

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
Detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.dnb.de.

© 2020 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyter.com

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Table of Contents

Mélissa Fox-Muraton
Introduction: Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics for the 21st Century —— 1

Part I: **Ethics And Religion**

Shai Frogel
1 Either Religion or Ethics —— 17

Liam Hughes
2 Reflections on Kierkegaard's Internalist Perspective and Its Relation to Social Change —— 31

Charles Blattberg
3 Kierkegaard's Deep Diversity
The One and the Many —— **51**

Michael Glass
4 Kierkegaard and Interreligious Understanding —— 69

Viktoras Bachmetjevas
5 Clemency over Forgiveness
Kierkegaard's Assessor Wilhelm as a Response to Vladimir Jankélévitch —— **87**

Part II: **Media And Community**

Christopher Black
6 Choosing for Yourself in the Age of the Social Media Echo-Chamber
Some Kierkegaardian Reflections on Online Algorithms —— **107**

Patrick Stokes
7 Kierkegaard's Critique of the Internet —— 125

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Andrzej Słowikowski
8 Can a Refugee be One's Neighbor in an Ethical Sense?
An Attempt to Transpose the Transcendent Category of Love for One's Neighbor from Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* into Immanent Ethical Practice with Reference to the Contemporary Migration Crisis —— **147**

Tomer Raudanski
9 Equality, Mortality and Community in "At a Graveside"
Reading Kierkegaard alongside Nancy and Derrida —— **169**

Part III: **Challenges To Identity**

René Rosfort
10 The Strength of a Fragile Mind
Kierkegaard and Psychiatric Ethics —— **195**

Mélissa Fox-Muraton
11 Existential Ethics and Liberal Eugenics
Kierkegaard and Habermas —— **215**

Jakub Marek
12 Creatures of Habit
On Second Nature, Habitual Behavior, and Ethical Life in Kierkegaard —— **235**

Oliver Norman
13 Despair and Gender Identity
Reading Kierkegaard in a Queer Light —— **253**

Abbreviatons —— 273

Index —— 275

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Mélissa Fox-Muraton

Introduction: Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics for the 21st Century

Periodically brought to the fore in times of social and intellectual upheaval, Kierkegaard's philosophy, and existential philosophy more generally, has often been associated with what Hannah Arendt termed a "willingness to tear down outmoded intellectual structures," and a return to the question(s) of the existing human being.[1] More recently, philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre[2] and Jürgen Habermas[3] have appealed to Kierkegaard's existential understanding of ethics as a way of moving beyond the sterile debates in normative ethics and of opening up the sphere of moral philosophy through an existential turn. Despite this renewed interest, little work has been done on how Kierkegaard could fruitfully be drawn into contemporary ethical debates. Although existential philosophy is perhaps best characterized as a philosophy that focuses on "concrete" existence, it is curious that it has not often enough been challenged with regard to concrete moral issues.

Kierkegaard's philosophy insists on the necessity of taking concrete existence as the starting point of moral philosophy, especially within the context of contemporary existence. As he writes: "The question 'What is the good?' is one issue that comes closer and closer to our age…The good cannot be defined at all. The good is freedom. The difference between good and evil is only for freedom and in freedom, and this difference is never *in abstracto* but only *in concreto*."[4] If Kierkegaard was concerned with the concrete, he was however a thinker in many ways estranged from the concerns of the 21st century. Kierkegaard certainly never envisaged many of the moral problems our contemporary societies are faced with. A vehement critic of the press, he would nevertheless not have imagined the role that social media and information technologies have come to play in modern societies. Although his philosophy brings existence and selfhood to the fore, he would not have imagined that these issues could be radically transformed by the development of techniques of genetic engineering, or by

1 Hannah Arendt, "Sören Kierkegaard," *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1945*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company 1994, pp. 44–45.
2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1981.
3 Jürgen Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur: Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002.
4 *SKS* 4, 413 / *CA*, 111.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-001

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

issues of gender identity. More directly concerned with political issues such as poverty and the relationship of the individual to institutions, Kierkegaard was nevertheless blind to many of the socio-political contexts with which our contemporary societies are confronted, such as dealing with diversity and immigration. However, rather than read Kierkegaard as an outdated thinker, or merely insist on the issues he *did* address, this volume aims to offer an overview of the various ways in which Kierkegaard's philosophy can be drawn into dialogue with contemporary ethical issues. While we cannot of course provide an exhaustive account of all the ways in which Kierkegaard's existential philosophy can contribute to contemporary debates, this volume seeks to illustrate the breadth and depth of Kierkegaardian existential philosophy and to open up new lines of inquiry in Kierkegaard scholarship, putting to the fore frontier fields of research from scholars bringing Kierkegaard into debates where he traditionally has had no voice.

While the fields of applied ethics tend toward increasing technicality and normativity, and existential philosophy is often seen as estranged from the concrete concerns of modernity, focusing uniquely on individual self-realization, the combination of these approaches can offer innovative ways of rethinking our relationship to the technologies and practices that constitute our modern life-world. While remaining within the scope of philosophy, this volume seeks to encourage interdisciplinary and comparative models for the examination of concrete societal issues. Philosophy ought to be able to inform and enable us to better understand our daily life practices and grapple with the serious moral issues that affect our individual existences and shared social and physical environment.

How can Kierkegaard's existential philosophy help us to better understand ourselves and our moral engagement? One of the major contributions of Kierkegaard's philosophy is his reminder that, faced with the many "urgent" tasks of our daily lives, we often tend to forget the essential—that is, ourselves, the meaning of our existence and of our engagements in the world. His insistence upon individual choice and subjectivity is not, however, the apology of the ego or of individualism, but rather an appeal to each of us to become concretely engaged in our existences, our choices and our acts. One might of course object that such a reminder is outdated, and that we live in an essentially individualist world in which everyone is already fundamentally preoccupied with him or herself. The 21st century is the age of "selfies," of Instagram and Facebook, that allow us to put ourselves on display in constant forms of self-representation and (re)invention. We might also be tempted to think that new technologies of information and communication have brought about an enhancement of our possibilities for communication, offering us real-time access to information and events. Never-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

theless, our age is one of paradoxes: whereas the possibilities for expression and representation have never been so extensive in human history, an increasing number of individuals lament the loss of meaning in our modern world. And whereas we have ever greater individual freedom to choose for ourselves how we want to live and to enact our personal choices in the public sphere, an ever greater number of individuals feel that they are losing their individual identity and the recognition of their singularity.

In response to these troubling concerns of our modern life-world, Kierkegaard's existential thought can offer a diagnosis to help us understand these paradoxes. Already nearly two centuries ago, Kierkegaard offered a critique of modernity, suggesting that the modern world is one in which the individual loses himself in imagination or in conformism, and thus loses sight of his most precious belonging: himself. As he writes: "a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having. The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed."[5] How do we explain this forgetting of ourselves? Kierkegaard's response to this question is that the problem is that we have been "tricked out of [our] self by 'the others.'"[6] He writes,

> Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name… does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.…Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world.[7]

Kierkegaard's works invite us to awaken from the disengagement in which we find ourselves with regard to our own lives, and to take notice of the ways in which the social roles that we play in society, our everyday engagements and the institutional contexts in which we live can make us blind to the essential concerns of our selfhood and our concrete engagement in the world with others. While these roles and structures can certainly help us to construct our identity, they can also alienate us from our true duties and responsibilities, and from the

5 *SKS* 11, 148 / *SUD*, 32–33.
6 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
7 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33–34.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

more earnest or authentic modes of selfhood that we could and should strive toward.

One important aspect of Kierkegaard's existential ethics is thus an appeal to learn to see ourselves anew, to reacquaint ourselves with ourselves. While this may seem an outdated approach in an era of egoism and individualism, Kierkegaard's message is that while we may think that knowing ourselves is one of the easiest of tasks, it is in reality the most difficult, and one which requires a specific type of courage: "it takes great courage to dare to look at oneself…One must want only the truth, neither vainly wish to be flattered, nor self-tormentingly want to be made a pure devil."[8] In a world of omnipresent self-representation, Kierkegaard invites us to seriously reflect on the way in which we see ourselves: are we capable of examining ourselves honestly, of seeing ourselves as we really are, and not according to the external representations or filters that society projects back to us? If Kierkegaard suggests that this is no easy task, it is because this requires a (sometimes brutal) extraction from our non-reflexive modes of quotidian engagement, that we be able and willing to accept ourselves as we truly are, with our faults and contradictions. It requires that we ask ourselves difficult questions: are we really the type of person we desire to be? Do we act in accordance with the principles and values that we claim to hold dear? Do our acts and forms of engagement with others really correspond to the meaning we desire to give to our existence?

In response to the critiques of the modern world, and the feeling of lostness or loss of meaning and authenticity in our ways of being and acting, Kierkegaard invites us to introspection as a first step in rethinking our ethical engagement in the world. Defining his task as an author, he notes that his aim is to help others to learn "to exist more capably (*at komme til at existere dygtigere*),"[9] suggesting thereby that our lives can be lead with more or less capability, with more or less competence, and that it is up to us to develop our capacities in order to lead a fulfilling and enriching existence. While Kierkegaard insists on the urgency of learning to see ourselves and to reflect on our own existence, his existential ethics is, however, not a turn toward individualism or subjectivism. An existential ethics, if it must begin with an inward turn, should also enable us to open up to the world and to others, and to the concrete demands that others make upon us. Seeing ourselves, in other words, is a first step toward the recognition of what our existence requires of us. More than just a question of autonomy or

8 *SKS* 24, 425, NB24:159 / *FSE* (supplement), 234.
9 *SKS* 13, 24 / *PV*, 17.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

authenticity, or an "ability-to-be-oneself" as Habermas formulates it,[10] an existential approach to ethics requires that we also learn to be *concerned* about the problems of the world around us. *Seeing oneself as concerned*, caring about the problems and moral issues of our world and those who inhabit it, requires a turn toward subjectivity and inwardness—not because the problems themselves are subjective, but rather because the type of *concern* or *care* that is required of us is not (merely) a matter of objective knowledge, but rather one of subjective appropriation. Kierkegaard offers poignant example of this, speaking of poverty (a problem in his day as of ours), and of how easy it can be for an individual to close his eyes and his door to the poor when, although fully knowing what the problem is, he does not see himself as concerned by it: "After all, a person can shut his door to the poor, and if someone should starve to death, then he can just look at a collection of statistical tables, see how many die every year of hunger—and he is comforted."[11] It is all too easy, Kierkegaard points out, to hide behind statistics, ready-made "pragmatic rules, [or] a calculus of considerations,"[12] and to disengage ourselves from our concrete, practical responsibilities. While seeing ourselves truly may be one of the most difficult tasks, even more difficult is that of learning "lovingly to *be concerned for the others*."[13] Kierkegaard's writings are an appeal to learn to be concerned for others, for each particular other in his specificity and distinctiveness, not "at a distance" or in abstraction, but rather insofar as he is the neighbor, "the person who actually walked by."[14]

We have attempted to sketch out a positive view of Kierkegaard's existential ethics, and what it can offer us today in terms of new perspectives for thinking about our moral engagement. However, it is clear that Kierkegaard's writings also pose a major challenge to contemporary ethical discourse, especially in the Christian texts, and that Kierkegaard also needs to be taken to task for his failure to address some important ethical issues. One of the most important challenges is that, while Kierkegaard saw himself as addressing a homogenous society of his Danish contemporaries, our modern societies are not homogenous. One may of course note that social heterogeneity was already true of Kierkegaard's time, and that Kierkegaard seems to have been strangely blind to the fact that many of his contemporaries—not just those in far-away lands, but those living right next door—had neither the means nor leisure to read his

10 Habermas, *Zukunft*, p. 32.
11 *SKS* 6, 441–42 / *SLW*, 480.
12 *SKS* 8, 67–68 / *TA*, 70.
13 *SKS* 11, 74 / *WA*, 69.
14 *SKS* 9, 85 / *WL*, 79.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

works, nor any voice at all about the concerns he attributes to them. To take just one example from *Works of Love*, we might think of the case of the "indigent, poor charwoman," to whom Kierkegaard says that "Christianity's divine meaning" is: "Do not busy yourself with changing the shape of the world or your situation, as if you…instead of being a poor charwoman, perhaps could manage to be called 'Madam.'"[15] Kierkegaard's intention here of course is to say that Christianity is a matter of conscience, and that the inner relation one has to one's work does not regard the outer social dimension—Kierkegaard sees this as an uplifting and upbuilding thought. At the same time, one might wonder why he assumes that the poor charwoman's aspirations would be merely superficial desires, such as being called "Madam," and not more substantial questions, such as having the possibility to rest her aching feet, receiving sufficient nourishment to be able to carry her through the day, having the time and opportunity to live a life of her own, perhaps with a husband and children, or the opportunity to receive an education and learn to read. Kierkegaard is certainly correct about the fact that wallowing in one's own sorrow and distress about perceived injustices may be not only useless, but also counterproductive. However, his rejection of the idea that one should strive to change unjust situations and failure to adequately understand and address the concerns about those he caricaturizes, should at the very least lead us to call into question some of the positions he defends. Of course, Kierkegaard does not claim that we should merely shut our door to the poor and feel content with the fact that poverty is a wide-spread social reality. He appeals to us to see all others as our (at least spiritual) equals, to become concerned about them in their particular distinctiveness and needs, and to respond to this concern through works and acts. Nevertheless, as the example of the charwoman and many others attest, there are also ways in which the call to understand others in terms of spiritual equality may function as a failure to take into account the real, lived situations in which individuals find themselves and the type of responsiveness that may be required of us in given circumstances.

This is particularly important for our contemporary societies, where the issues we are faced with involve dealing with the diversity of different religious beliefs, social practices and norms, taking others seriously as individuals who make moral demands upon us and to whom we are accountable—not just those who share our world-view and beliefs, but also those who do not or may be radically hostile to them. Questions about how we ought to be attentive to the needs of refugees, for example, require not only that we see them as

15 *SKS* 9, 138 / *WL*, 136.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

human beings just like we are, but also that we be able to understand in what ways their traumatic life experiences, their particular situations, their vulnerabilities when arriving in a new community, may involve specific moral concerns and demand specific types of responsiveness and action. We fail to address these if we presuppose, as Kierkegaard seemingly does of the poor charwoman, that we already know what their concerns are, or that their concerns are trivial ones, such as getting a new iPhone.

The contributions in this volume seek to address both the challenges and insights of Kierkegaard's existential ethics, and their relations to topics of current interest in the field of moral philosophy. We have deliberately chosen to take Kierkegaard out of the context of theology and Christian philosophy, and place his thought in parallel with contemporary issues which were quite alien to his day. The volume is organized into three major sections: section 1 focuses on ethics and religion, a topic of primary importance with regard to the development of religious foundationalism and the challenges of dealing with diverse belief systems within our contemporary communities. Section 2 examines our understandings of ourselves and our relationships to others with regard to issues of media and community. Section 3 more specifically targets questions of identity, and the ways in which the developments of modern science impact identity construction.

The first section of this volume is dedicated to exploring the interactions between ethics and religion. Although Kierkegaard defined himself first and foremost as a religious author, and one dedicated to helping others to become Christian, many of Kierkegaard's readers from the twentieth century onward have taken issue with some of his theological commitments, while nevertheless drawing upon his existential philosophy as a source for rethinking our understanding of morality. The authors of the chapters here seek to do this in novel ways, taking issue with some of what are often seen as Kierkegaard's most fundamental positions, such as the idea that faith places the individual above the general, or that loving the neighbor requires that one not pay attention to the worldly, social circumstances in which we find ourselves. Despite these necessary criticisms, the authors sketch out paths through which Kierkegaard's contributions can help us better understand some of the basic ethical issues of our times, such as possibilities for interreligious dialogue and just war theory.

In the first chapter, Shai Frogel argues for a necessary distinction between the spheres of ethics and religion, and shows how Kierkegaard brings this distinction to the fore in his works by exploring the existential differences between faith and reason (or ethical universality). While there is a tendency to view religious beliefs as relative and thus as a source of ethical dilemma, Frogel insists on the fact that what we often take to be irresolvable ethical questions are in re-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ality not a conflict between different religious viewpoints, but rather a conflict between the religious and the ethical. Showing how issues such as the discrimination against women have their roots not merely in social practices, but also and perhaps more fundamentally in the ontological beliefs inherent in certain religious world-views, Frogel argues that we need to move beyond relativistic models if we are to attempt to understand the issues involved in such forms of discrimination. While Kierkegaard is certainly a thinker who, on some readings, places the religious higher than the ethical, Frogel claims that the real merit of Kierkegaard's writings is to allow us to better understand the distinction between the spheres of the religious and the ethical.

While Frogel insists that we need to distinguish the sphere of ethics from the sphere of faith, Liam Hughes (chapter 2) explores the ways in which a religious perspective may be made compatible with concern for others and ethical duty, focusing on the questions of social change and the limits of the duty of neighbor-love that Kierkegaard developed beginning with *Works of Love*. Analyzing the limits of Kierkegaard's internalist perspective, Hughes shows how a strict Kierkegaardian approach to neighbor-love can lead to a failure to take into account the role of externalities, and factors such as moral luck, in individuals' actions. He suggests that, contrary to Kierkegaard's view that Christianity should not pay attention to social differences, such attentiveness may be fundamental to a Christian perspective that seeks to bring about change in the social realm through policy and concrete actions. While the focus on the singularity and distinctiveness of each particular individual is one of Kierkegaard's most essential contributions to ethical thought, one of the major challenges for contemporary readers is that Kierkegaard himself establishes these notions within a context which, as his 20th century critics such as Emmanuel Levinas, Theodor Adorno and Knud Ejler Løgstrup already noted, places the individual within an isolated, acosmic situation dissociated from concerns of worldliness. Hughes' critical reading of Kierkegaardian neighbor-love seeks to attenuate the sharp dichotomies between the internal and the external, the personal and the social, preferential and neighbor-love, so as to offer alternative readings of how a Christian religious perspective can be compatible with an ethics of social concern.

The following chapters turn to the ways in which we can understand the problem of diversity in Kierkegaard's writings, and the resources this can provide for dealing with contemporary issues. Charles Blattberg (chapter 3) illustrates the deep diversity inherent in Kierkegaard's works, which embraces irreducible and also incompatible understandings of the good. Blattberg terms this position "pluramonism," a means of seizing hold simultaneously of the irreducibly singular and unified nature of being, but at the same time its fragmentation and plurality. Blattberg's careful reading of Kierkegaard's existential stages or spheres

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

works out this understanding of pluramonism, and then shows its limits but also utility for navigating through different situations, such as those of supreme emergency, where the requirement to act is present despite the fact that such action requires the suspension of ordinary moral principles. Michael Glass (chapter 4) focuses on the problem of interreligious dialogue, and shows how Kierkegaard's works provide resources for tackling the difficult problem of how one can hold irreducible religious beliefs as true while simultaneously taking seriously the beliefs of religious others that may be contradictory to one's own. Glass shows that while Kierkegaard is not often read as a thinker with much to say about questions of tolerance (which indeed was not a question for his day), his treatment of epistemic problems surrounding religious claims offers a path for rethinking issues of religious pluralism. In chapter 5, Viktoras Bachmetjevas proposes the concept of clemency as one which can enable us to take up our relations to others in non-judgmental attentiveness to their particularities. Contrasting a Kierkegaardian-inspired understanding of clemency to the notion of forgiveness developed by Vladimir Jankélévitch, Bachmetjevas shows how the notion of clemency can figure as a means of becoming attentive to particular others, of acknowledging the offense that we may feel with regard to their actions or world-views while simultaneously taking them seriously as interlocutors. Drawing upon Kierkegaard's distinction of a first and second ethics, Bachmetjevas then shows how Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship can be read as a means of articulating this distinction outside of a purely Christian framework—in other terms, of showing what type of attitude would be necessary to apprehend another person's world-view without condemning it.

The second section of this volume turns to issues of media, interpersonal relations and community, and the ways in which the configurations of our contemporary societies bring about new challenges upon which Kierkegaard's philosophy may shed some light. A ferocious critic of the public and the ways in which media and institutions impinge upon the individual's possibility for leading an authentic, fully engaged, and earnest life, the Kierkegaardian framework is an obvious one for questioning the ways in which social media, the internet and the development of online life affect possibilities for individual selfhood. Less obvious, though a topic of renewed interest today, are questions about how Kierkegaard's philosophy can help us understand notions of community and our obligations in the shared social sphere, such as accepting and integrating refugees into our communities, or acknowledging human equality.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the internet and contemporary social media, and the ways in which these modify our relations to ourselves and to others, and our possibilities for authentic choice. Christopher Black focuses on the social media "echo-chamber" and the questions brought up by the use of algorithms, which

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

may undercut the very possibility of authentic choice at all. While social media in many ways may be assimilated with the problems Kierkegaard points to about media in general, what is specific within the contemporary context is the mathematically predetermined selections that determine, based upon the users' data and habits, what type of content will be presented to them. While social media users may think that they are choosing the content they access, the reality is more complex: algorithms are programmed to keep the user online as long as possible, by feeding him content that already corresponds to his preferences and interests. Black questions whether this does not impede the very possibility of making authentic choices or of developing one's own life-view, and the ways in which algorithms reinforce the users' already-existing beliefs rather than encouraging them constantly to choose how to live, studying two essential features of these: their intrusive invisibility and their intentional structure. Patrick Stokes examines questions of possibilities for authentic selfhood with regard to the internet more generally, and the evolutions of online life that modify our relations to self and world. While Kierkegaard's critique of the press was one of the "broadcast era," current digital technology has a more interactive structure, yet one which Kierkegaard's categories can help us to better apprehend. Stokes shows how Kierkegaard's critiques of the public, anonymity, and disproportionate communication are still relevant to contemporary digital media, which despite their apparent interactive structure mask the passive structure of reception. As both Black and Stokes show, however, a Kierkegaardian critique of digital media should not be understood as an appeal to reject modern media, but should encourage us to engage with it in fully reflexive ways. Kierkegaard's existential ethics, which places the emphasis on authenticity, earnestness, and decision, can thus provide the tools for becoming active users of these new technologies that expand our possibilities for moral choice and active engagement in the social sphere.

The final two chapters in section 2 turn away from questions of authenticity to notions of community and our moral engagement with others. In chapter 8, Andrzej Słowikowski attempts to sketch out how Kierkegaard's understanding of neighbor-love can be applied to the problems of migration and the integration of refugees. Słowikowski points to the difficulty of applying the transcendental approach to neighbor-love that Kierkegaard develops in *Works of Love* with regard to the sphere of ethical immanence, and the fact that the ethical subject is primarily linked to his world and lived existence, and to conceptions of the good that are inherently socially determined. If community determines the social norms and values that define our moral identity, how then can we deal with and adequately acknowledge "others" arriving from different communities who may have radically different conceptions of the good? If we ought to love our neigh-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

bors as ourselves, the question brought out by migration issues is that of how we can come to see the other *as a neighbor*. Słowikowski argues that this requires a move from immanent to transcendent ethics, and one which is not easily established. Although we may indeed accept that we have a universal duty to accept and aid those in need, we also always understand the good in terms of our community and its conceptions. While Kierkegaard's model of neighbor-love avoids this issue by placing each singular individual before God, it may fail to take into account the differences and particularities of each community and individual—and thus what may be most essential to the status of the refugee forced to flee his home and community. Słowikowski argues that we need to find an intermediary model in order to adequately respond to the demand of others within our communities, to acknowledge them in their particularities and avoid the creation of further forms of exclusion.

Tomer Raudanski (chapter 9) explores Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethico-political or of community, examining how his writings on mortality provide insight into what it means to be responsive to others. If as Kierkegaard suggests a proper understanding of death should lead to a recognition of the inherent equality of all human beings, and offer a challenge to the existing instabilities and disparities of political or institutional order, what type of community could be constructed from this new perspective? Drawing on the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, Raudanski suggests that Kierkegaard's meditations on death open up to a non-economic and in-operative understanding of community that nevertheless transforms our relations to ourselves and others, and instills within the individual a sense of responsibility that goes beyond the realm of mere normative concerns, opening up to a particular kind of earnestness which is necessary for establishing the grounds of our being-with-others.

The final section of this volume is dedicated to questions of identity, and the challenges posed to our understanding of the self both by relatively "new" moral issues, such as transidentity or bioengineering, but also age-old concerns such a suffering and the role of habit or second nature on our selfhood. While Kierkegaard put the concrete, singular self to the fore, insisting on the individual's singularity and inwardness, understandings of human identity are continually being challenged by new scientific discoveries, which involve both theoretical and practical implications for the ways in which we define ourselves in the world.

René Rosfort (chapter 10), focuses on how Kierkegaard's understanding of suffering can be applied in the field of mental health care, with regard to illnesses that have not only a physiological, but also an experiential character. As Rosfort argues, psychiatry today deals with mental illness as an impersonal biological disorder, but as opposed to other strictly physiological ailments, mental illness has as one of its primary characteristics that it is a source of experienced

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

suffering on the part of patients. In an age where one fifth to one quarter of the population is today diagnosed with a mental disorder at some point during their lives, and where current diagnoses and treatments are often unsatisfactory, mental health care professionals need a new way of relating to their patients' ailments. In this field especially, the link between science and ethics requires special attention, and Rosfort shows how Kierkegaard's understanding of what is involved in having a sense of self and of the existential fragility which characterizes human nature as such can help us understand the limits of medical knowledge, and offer a new perspective for psychiatric treatment.

Our own chapter (11) examines how an existential ethics can be applied in the context of liberal eugenics, or the application of bio-engineering to human beings. Habermas famously brought this issue to the fore in *The Future of Human Nature*, asking whether it would still be possible to understand ourselves as moral beings in contexts where humans could intervene in the genetic make-up of other individuals through intentional projects. If others deliberately make decisions about our genetic make-up, will we still be able to understand ourselves as responsible for our own lives and selves? These techniques are already part of our present reality, and the questions which emerge become all the more pressing as our scientific knowledge and technical capabilities continue to expand. While we take issue with the terms upon which Habermas formulates the debate, we attempt to show that an existential ethics can offer an interesting perspective on the topic, bringing to the fore not only concern for autonomy and authenticity, but also the importance of how we relate to others and what our desire to determine the characteristics of unborn children says about our own failure to be concerned for others in the right type of way. We argue that an existential ethics includes not only a question of the way in which individuals can relate to themselves as selves, but also an acknowledgment of the role of social contexts where institutionalized practices determine our norms and preferences.

Jakub Marek (chapter 12) questions the role of habit or second nature with regard to moral agency, and the ways in which habitual behavior affects our understandings of humanity and selfhood. While moral philosophy has traditionally linked ethics to notions such as freedom, autonomy, and independence, scientific perspectives since the 19th century have shown the cultural determinations of these capacities and the ways in which the social sphere and its institutions affect the very possibilities for the development of moral capacities. Offering an overview of the role of second nature in Hegel, Nietzsche and Darwin, Marek proposes that this concept also figures in Kierkegaard's understanding of the human race, where habit or habituality implies a loss of human freedom or agency, leading to the degeneration of the species. As Marek claims, Kierkegaard's account of moral development and the role of second nature can provide

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

a framework for rethinking the relation between mind and body, especially with regard to problems of identity, such as body dysmorphic disorder or transgender identity. In the final chapter of this volume (13), Oliver Norman explores the question of transgender identity from a Kierkegaardian perspective, showing how Kierkegaard's understanding of the self and of anxiety can offer insight into the suffering experienced by transgender individuals, given the misrelation between their assigned biological identity and the gender with which they identify. Currently classified as a form of "gender dysphoria" in the DSM, transidentity implies a misrelation or lack of identification between bodily and psychical identity. Yet as Norman points out, the psychiatric definition is not sufficient to take into account the specificity of the condition from which transgender individuals suffer—which is not merely the feeling of having been born in the wrong body, but more importantly a desire to be and to be recognized as the self that they identify themselves as. Norman explores what this means in terms of Kierkegaard's insightful readings of the self and of despair, and also points to some of the limits of the Kierkegaardian model, especially the risk that understanding the self from a universal or religious perspective could lead to a refusal to take into account the specificities of particular individuals and the ways in which they desire both social recognition and social change.

As the variety of perspectives and multiple themes present in this volume show, Kierkegaard's philosophy contains multiple and invaluable resources for understanding the moral issues faced within our current contexts. Much research has yet to be done, and many important topics have not been dealt with here. What, if anything, would Kierkegaard have to say about climate change and the anthropocene? About the ways in which we ought to take non-human others into account in our moral relations? About the unequal distribution of wealth or the humanitarian crises prevalent throughout the world? While we have not been able to give a complete overview of the ways in which Kierkegaard can be drawn into contemporary debates, what the contributions in this volume show is that Kierkegaard's thought is far from outdated. As a thinker primarily concerned with human existence, with what makes us human beings, Kierkegaard's philosophy is perhaps more pertinent today than ever before, given the challenges that modern society and science pose to our understandings of human nature. While his writings do not contain all the answers, they are nevertheless a constant reminder that we do need to be (or become) earnestly engaged in our existence, and that moral and existential questions are not issues for abstract reflection, but rather questions asked "to *you personally*."[16]

16 *SKS* 10, 243 / *CD*, 236.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Part I: **Ethics And Religion**

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Shai Frogel

1 Either Religion or Ethics

"'No,' said the priest, 'one doesn't have to take
everything as the truth, one just has to accept it as necessary.'
'A depressing opinion,' said K.
'It means that the world is founded on untruth.'"
(Kafka, *The Trial*)

Kierkegaard considers religious existence to be more elevated than ethical existence, that is, a source of a more authentic and meaningful life. This elevation is achieved, argues Kierkegaard, by dialectically negating and overcoming reason and ethics for accepting the paradox of faith. Nowadays, we are facing many conflicts which express the tension between religious faith and ethical demands. Two genuine examples are gender and political criticism. Should one tolerate discrimination against women in the name of religious faith? Should one avoid caricatures of religious figures in the name of religious sensitivity? This paper claims that Kierkegaard's philosophy confronts us with this conflict instead of ignoring it or rejecting it. It uses Kierkegaard's recognition of this conflict to explain the threat for ethics posed by religion, but also in order to reject the superiority that Kierkegaard attributes to religious existence.[1]

1 It is important to note that not all Kierkegaard scholars agree with this claim. Mélissa Fox-Muraton argues that it is doubtful whether Kierkegaard claims for the superiority of faith over ethics. She supports her claim by showing that Kierkegaard rejects the imitation of Abraham and in other works rejects the possibility of moral exceptionalism even in the name of religious revelation. This, she adds, is consistent with his categorical separation between reason and faith and shows that his view cannot be used to defend fundamentalism (Mélissa Fox-Muraton, "There is No Teleological Suspension of the Ethical: Kierkegaard's Logic Against Religious Justification and Moral Exceptionalism," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2018, pp. 3–32). I believe that a book which opens with a "Eulogy on Abraham" and concentrates on the binding of Isaac as the illustration of his greatness by emphasizing his suspension of ethics could hardly be read otherwise than as claiming for the superiority of faith over ethics. However, it is sufficient for the paper that it might be interpreted this way to argue against this claim, by using Kierkegaard's important insight into the dialectical relation between ethics and faith. That is to say, the paper does not claim that Kierkegaard defends fundamentalism, but rather that it might encourage it. This is perhaps Kierkegaard's fear and trembling.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-002

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

1.1 Suspending Ethics?

Fear and Trembling is probably Kierkegaard's most well-known book, published under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio. In this book, he confronts us with his most troubling existential insight concerning the conflict between religion and ethics. Abraham, the father of faith in the monotheistic tradition, was commanded by God to bind his son, Isaac. He obeyed God's command without saying a word (one possible interpretation of the pseudonym: *de silentio*). This terrible act perpetrated by a father towards his son became the paradigm of faith in the monotheistic tradition. Is Abraham a murderer or a believer? Kierkegaard asks this question again and again in the book without giving a clear answer to himself or to his readers. Thus, he rhetorically echoes his terrible recognition of the conflict between ethics and religion.

Kierkegaard suggests that we should not read this story from the end, as we usually do, since this approach prevents us from understanding the unique existential state in which Abraham finds himself, which Kierkegaard defines as fear and trembling. Jacques Derrida interprets this trembling in terms of *Mysterium tremendum:*

> We fear and tremble because we are already in the hands of God, although free to work, but in the hands and under the gaze of God, whom we don't see and whose will we cannot know, no more than the decisions he will hand down, nor his reasons for wanting this or that …We fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is, free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death.[2]

The story apparently has a happy end, since Isaac is saved by the sacrificial lamb, or rather, by God. Therefore, by reading the story from the end we miss out on Abraham's anxiety, which characterized the existential state of faith.[3] It is the anxiety of the individual who suspends his ethical commitment, which is human and rational, in order to obey God's inhuman and irrational command. This story explores the idea that religious faith is rooted in the irrational aspect of human existence, where one is moved by metaphysical fear and desire. Abraham's religious anxiety overcomes his rationality and therefore, he has nothing

---

2 Jacques Derrida, "Whom to give to (knowing not to know)," *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1998, p. 153.

3 Anxiety is, for Kierkegaard, the primary resource of spiritual education. See Gordon D. Marino, "Anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*," *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 308–28.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

to ask and nothing to say. He puts himself in the hands of God and goes off to murder his son, not because he knows something, but because he was moved by his fear and trembling.[4]

Kierkegaard not only recognizes Abraham's anxiety by reading the story from the beginning, but also directs us to Abraham's depression at the end of the story. He does this through the small fragments at the beginning of the book, under the title of "Exordium." These small fragments lyrically compare Abraham's existential state to different ways through which a mother may wean her baby. In the shortest of these fragments, he writes:

> It was early in the morning when Abraham arose: he embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who took away her disgrace, Isaac her pride, her hope for all the generations to come. They rode along the road in silence, and Abraham stared continuously and fixedly at the ground until the fourth day, when he looked up and saw Mount Moriah far away, but once again he turned his eyes toward the ground. Silently he arranged the firewood and bound Isaac; silently he drew the knife—then he saw the ram that God had selected. This he sacrificed and went home.—From that day henceforth, Abraham was old; he could not forget that God had ordered him to do this. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more. When the child has grown big and is to be weaned, the mother virginally conceals her breast, and then the child no longer has a mother. How fortune the child who has not lost his mother in some other way.[5]

"Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more." The price that Abraham had to pay was very high, argues Kierkegaard, even though the son was saved. One can surely wonder also about Isaac's trauma: Did he really "flourish…as before"? But Kierkegaard asks us to concentrate on the father. It is the anxiety before the act of faith and the deep depression he experiences afterwards that Kierkegaard attempts to capture, both lyrically and philosophically.[6] The fact that Isaac would be saved was unknown to Abraham before the event. So, if one wants to understand the anxiety involved in faith, one needs to imagine the feelings of a father who is about to bind his son just because he heard a voice which commanded him to do it.[7] And if one wants to understand the de-

---

4 Green emphasizes that it is important to Kierkegaard to insist on the fact that faith is not grounded in knowledge. See Ronald M. Green, "'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, pp. 257–81.

5 *SKS* 4, 109 / *FT*, 12.

6 The subtitle of the book is "Dialectical Lyric."

7 The fact that Abraham did not have any ethical accuse for his deed, Kierkegaard argues, distinguishes him even from the tragic heroes who sacrificed their children: "The difference between the tragic heroes and Abraham is very obvious. The tragic hero is still within the ethi-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

pression involved in faith, one has to imagine the sense of guilt of a father who intends to murder his son. Kierkegaard imagines that "Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more." God tested Abraham's faith, and Abraham surely passed the test and by this became "the knight of faith." Yet focusing on this fact can cause us to miss out on the troubling aspects of the story: the heavy ethical and psychological price of faith. Abraham suspended his ethical commitment to his son in order to obey God's command. Through this, Kierkegaard argues, he explores a new and more elevated stage of human existence, which is characterized by ethical sin and existential suffering.

Herein, according to Kierkegaard, lies the conflict between the Greek model of existence and the monotheistic one. The Greeks saw the ethical sphere as the superior existence of human beings, and therefore dedicated their thinking and life to achieve this ethical existence. It is Socrates' ideal of a "good life" (eudemonia, εὐδαιμονία), which Plato formulates by the expression "the form of the good" and Aristotle defines as ethics. The Greek view depends on the assumption that human beings are rational beings, and therefore their superior form of existence is the one which is guided by reason. Since reason is our faculty of universalizing, it directs us to prefer the universal over the particular, and thus defines the meaning of ethical life: the more universal your attitude towards human life, the more ethical your existence.[8] The logic is simple and clear: the more you live according to this superior faculty, the more perfect your existence will be. Philosophers, throughout the history of Western thought, provide us with ethical theories that show that the superior human existence is the ethical one, which is guided by reason and is characterized by harmony between the individual's morality and happiness. Kant even argues that if the connection between morality and happiness cannot be proved, morality is in vain: "If, therefore, the highest good [a necessary connection between virtue and happiness] is impossible, according to practical rules, then the moral law which commands us to further this good must also be fantastic and aimed at empty imaginary purposes, and hence itself false."[9]

---

cal...Here there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical itself" (*SKS* 4, 152 / *FT*, 59).

8 In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard's major ethical work, this universalism relates to the Christian command "Love your neighbor as yourself": "There is in the whole world not a single person who can be recognized with such ease and certainty as one's neighbor. You can never confuse him with anyone else, for indeed all men are your neighbor" (*SKS* 9, 58 / *WL*, 51–52).

9 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar, Cambridge: Hackett 2002, p. 145.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

From the ethical perspective, Abraham is a murderer. Kierkegaard agrees with this claim, but nevertheless holds that the religious is the highest existential stage of human existence. Abraham's story explores, according to Kierkegaard, the dialectical relationship between ethics and faith: one needs to overcome ethics to arrive at the existential stage of faith. He names it the "leap" or the paradox of faith, since such a movement requires negating rationality. Kierkegaard agrees with traditional philosophy's claim that ethics is the superior product of our reason. It is by reason that we overcome our mere sensual existence, which he names the aesthetic sphere, to constitute a common ethical life. Reason enables us to universalize our existence in order to share our life with other individuals. From the universal perspective of reason, all individuals are equal, and this equality is the essence of the ethical sphere. Yet, this universalization ignores our unique individuality and therefore detaches us from our real existence.[10] Faith, Kierkegaard argues, brings us back to our individuality —not to the sensual one, but to the metaphysical one. It is the absolute commitment of the individual to God which extends her existence beyond the sphere of humanity. In this sense, the religious existence is for Kierkegaard superior to the ethical one, and thereby in conflict with it. Thus, Kierkegaard directs us to the irrationality of faith and to its conflict with ethics. This is his great contribution to the ethical discussion, and especially when one needs to cope with conflicts between ethics and religion. Yet, the recognition of this conflict does not require that we accept the superiority Kierkegaard gives to religious existence.

Kierkegaard explores the existential power of faith by contrasting it to rationality and ethics, but by this also shows its illusiveness and danger. Faith is necessarily illusive because it is a state of mind in which one is certain about something one does not know. The purpose of the Socratic dialogues, which are the prototype of philosophical thinking according to Kierkegaard, is to confront the interlocutor with the illusive state of mind of certainty, which causes one to imagine that he knows that which in fact he does not know. In his *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard explicitly argues that this is the opposition between philosophy and faith: whereas philosophy rejects the unthinkable as untruth, faith is the capability to accept the unthinkable as truth.[11] Hence,

10 Emmanuel Levinas, although he argue with Kierkegaard's claim on the conflict between religion and ethics, sees in this recognition the unique contribution of Kierkegaard to the understanding of human existence: our being is not correlative with reason. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," *Kierkegaard: A Critical reader*, ed. by Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, Oxford: Blackwell 1998, pp. 26–38.
11 See Shai Frogel, "Acoustical illusion as Self-Deception," *The Authenticity of Faith*, ed. by Jon Stewart and Tamar Aylat-Yaguri, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2013, pp. 12–17

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

philosophically speaking, one needs to deceive oneself to be in faith, and especially in order to accomplish an act of faith; a self-manipulation is required to transform uncertainty into certainty. We can name this, following Jean-Paul Sartre, bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). Sartre uses this term to explain our capacity for self-deception. It is strange, Sartre argues, that one can lie to oneself, since lying requires that the liar be able to hide her intention from the person to whom she lies. His explanation for this apparently paradoxical state of mind is that self-deception is a process in which one intentionally reduces one's critical attitude in order to accept a certain wishful belief.[12] This explanation is very close to Freud's definition of illusion: "Thus we call a belief an illusion, when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation."[13] It is not unimportant to note that Freud uses this definition to explain the possibility of religious faith and its strong hold on the human mind. Religious faith is bad faith or illusion, not only epistemologically, but also ethically, since it directs one's deeds and not only one's thoughts.[14] It might cause a father to bind his son just because his desire for meaning or certainty is overwhelming. This is the reason why it is crucial to reject the superiority that Kierkegaard gives to the religious existence over the ethical one. It is philosophically erroneous, as well as dangerous from an ethical perspective, to see an illusory and deceptive existential state as superior to one which demands human understanding. From an ethical point of view, the binding of Isaac is a terrible story. Kierkegaard agrees with this claim, but argues that from religious point of view, it is a sublime one. Yet, how can a terrible ethical event be considered to be sublime?

Perhaps it is the charm of an old myth, and it may be that this story indeed teaches us something true about human existence. It might teach us that our desire for meaningful life does not stop at the rational or ethical stage, since the origin of this desire is not rational or ethical. Kierkegaard presents this desire poetically at the beginning of the first chapter of the book under the title "Eulogy on Abraham":

> If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath every-

---

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, London: Routledge 1998, pp. 47–70.
13 Sigmund Freud, "Future of an Illusion," *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XXI, trans.by James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press 1961, p. 31.
14 David Hume formulates it shapely and ironically: "Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous." See David Hume, *A Treatise Of Human Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1978, p. 272.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> thing, what then would life be but despair? If such were the situation, if there were no sacred bond that knit mankind together, if one generation emerged after another like the forest foliage, if one generation succeeded another like the singing of birds in the forest, if a generation passed through the world as the ship through the sea, as a wind through the desert, an unthinkable and unproductive performance, if an eternal oblivion, perpetually hungry, lurked for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrench that away from it—how empty and devoid of consolation life would be! But precisely for that reason it is not so.[15]

This illogical argument justifies the existence of eternal meaning in the world by claiming that the alternative is despair. The leap from the psychological need to an ontological conclusion reflects the irrational origin of faith and its deceptive nature. The structure of the argument consists in an ontological "proof" which is metaphysical rather than empirical; it is not based on empirical evidence, but rather on the impossibility of the opposite claim. Does this argument exclude the possibility that "underlying everything there [is] only a wild, fermenting power," or that "a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything"? Is it a philosophical argument or the lyrical fragment of tormented soul? One may agree that human life is unbearable without meaning, but this does not *prove* that the universe has eternal meaning. Faith is a common answer to this distress, but one which involves self-deception and endangers ethics.

This is the reason why it is important to reject Kierkegaard's existential claim of the superiority of religious faith. Religious faith, as Spinoza and Nietzsche argue, may provide metaphysical comfort and could be used to bring about social order, but should not be the lighthouse of our existence. Spinoza, who may be considered to be the founder of modern ethics, argues that since faith is based on emotions and imagination (which are passive aspects of our mind) rather than on reason (which is its active aspect), it cannot not be the source of our superior existence. He recognizes that faith is necessary for those who cannot guide their life through reason, especially for moral reasons, and therefore does not reject it entirely. However, he warns us that faith is often used by the priests for manipulating the common people.[16] Nietzsche goes further by pointing out that faith, especially the Christian one, gives priority to the afterlife over actual life, and by this expresses hostility to life and even implies a desire for death; it is therefore a bad foundation for ethics. He interprets the psychological need for faith as a need for existential stability that must be overcome in order to

15 *SKS* 4, 112 / *FT*, 15.

16 Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. by Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 3–12.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

achieve a good and authentic life.[17] Both Spinoza and Nietzsche agree with Kierkegaard that faith is rooted in the fragility of human existence, but precisely because of this recognition, they see it at most as a life-jacket rather than the lighthouse of human existence.

1.2 Reinforcing Ethics

Common post-modern and relativistic views often ignore the conflict between ethics and religion by wrongly equating religious commands with ethical commitments, and by seeing both as relative. Basically, these approaches were born from the recognition of cultural diversity and are usually justified, as John J. Tilley shows, by three lines of argument: the ethnocentric argument, the tolerance argument and the research argument.[18] The ethnocentric argument asks who is to judge right from wrong, especially when one encounters an old or foreign tradition (which is usually related to religious beliefs or practices). The tolerance argument states that recognition of cultural diversity implies that we ought not to impose our values on other cultures, especially not in conflictual situations. The research argument claims that it is a fact that different cultures have different values, hence it is in vain to speak about universal values. The assumption behind all these arguments is that both religious commands and ethical commitments are nothing but social norms that have developed differently in different societies; the origin of this view is empirical anthropology.[19] Yet is this correct? It is here that Kierkegaard can prove helpful to explain why it is wrong to equate ethics and religion under the general term "values," and why both are not relative. Religion and ethics, he shows, are not sets of values, but rather existential stages of existence. The first is based on faith, which is an irrational attitude toward our existence. The second is based on reason, which is a rational attitude toward our existence. Therefore, it is erroneous to attempt to compare religious commands to ethical commitments. Neither is relative: religious faith is to the contrary absolute, whereas ethical understanding is universal. Therefore, the conflict between religion and ethics ought to be understood as

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufman, New York: Vintage Books 1974, pp. 280 – 290.
18 Tilley suggests a longer list of arguments, but I think that most of them fall under these three categories. See John J. Tilley, "Cultural Relativism," *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2000, pp. 501– 47.
19 Carl Wellman, "The Ethical Implications of Cultural Relativity," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 60, no. 7, 1963, pp. 169 – 184.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

a conflict between, on the one hand, an irrational and absolute attitude toward existence, and on the other hand a rational and universal one; it is not a conflict between relative sets of values.

One example of this can be found in Jules Verne's novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Mr. Fogg and Passepartout, European travelers, save the Indian princess from being burned with the corpse of her husband, the raja, according to their religious faith.[20] Moral relativism might claim that their decision was wrong since they did not respect the religious ritual of this community. Postmodern views might analyze their interruption of the horrible ritual in terms of power relations and claim against their Europocentric arrogance. Are these interpretations ethical? Is the life of the princess a real subject of ethical controversy?

Levinas rightly argues that the universality of the ethical sphere means that everyone is a unique individual.[21] This understanding of the universality of ethics is also emphasized by Kant's third formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means."[22] This is also the way in which Kierkegaard interprets the universal command to "Love your neighbor as yourself" in his *Works of Love*.[23] The princess, from an ethical point of view, ought thus to be viewed first and foremost as an individual human being, and not as a religious object (that is, not the raja's wife).

Burning the raja's wife along with his corpse is a religious ritual. This ritual is based on a faith and is therefore irrational but absolute; it requires obedience rather than understanding and rational justifications. It can be interpreted as relative only by an external observer who does not share this faith. That is to say, the act is absolute for the believer and relative for external observer, but for neither is it rational or universal. Therefore, the believer must suspend his faith and the external observer her distant position in order to judge the situation ethically, that is, from a universal human perspective. Surely, one might prefer one's faith over the universal perspective of ethics, but this does not make one's choice an ethical one. This crucial recognition is the most important contribution of Kierkegaard to ethical discussion. Mélissa Fox-Muraton formulates it sharply and clearly:

20 Jules Verne, *Around the World in 80 Days*, Auckland: The Floating Press 2008, p. 116.

21 Levinas, "Existence and ethics," p. 34.

22 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Allen Wood, New Haven: Yale University Press 2002, pp. 46–47.

23 See footnote 8.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> If faith and reason are to be seen as two distinct categories, this means of course that faith can never be justified by reason, but it also, and more importantly from a philosophical point of view, entails that religion can never be used as a justification in moral reasoning.[24]

The act of burning the raja's wife can be compared to the binding of Isaac, and we can say with Kierkegaard that the act must be understood either as murder or as religious faith. The important point here is however that it is *not* an ethical dilemma that we are faced with, but rather a conflict between ethics and religion. Kierkegaard's conception of religious faith can help us to understand this crucial difference: "Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as a single individual is higher that the universal, is justified before it, not as inferior to it but as superior…that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute."[25]

Faith is an absolute relation of the individual to the absolute with no commitment to humanity; in monotheistic religions it is to God, in other religions is to different kinds of transcendent spirits. Therefore, faith is not a logical paradox but an ethical one, and as such is a paradox only for the religious believer. The paradox is that the most elevated human existence goes against humanity. This is the reason why Abraham is a riddle for Kierkegaard. Unlike traditional religious thinkers, he does not deny the inhumanity of Abraham's deed, although he admires him. Therefore, he rejects thinkers, like Kant and Hegel, who argue that religion remains within the limits of reason. If it were so, he claims, "then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had or what can be deduced from them by consistent thought."[26]

Religion, Kierkegaard teaches us, is not a product of reason, but the product of a desire and quest for a meaningful life. Therefore, it is incorrect to examine a conflict between an ethical duty and a religious one as an ethical dilemma. Whereas the first involves one's commitment to other human beings, the second concerns a commitment to God or to some other trans-human power. Plato already shows it in the dialogue the *Euthyphro*, where Socrates examines with Euthyphro whether ethics is subordinate to religious piety, or vice versa.[27] Spinoza takes a stand in this dispute when he claims that immoral faith is a fake faith. Kierkegaard, then, is not the first philosopher to try to come to terms with the confusing relations between ethics and religion, but he is the first to explore

24 Fox-Muraton "There is No Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," p. 11.
25 *SKS* 4, 149–150 / *FT*, 55–56.
26 *SKS* 4, 149 / *FT*, 55.
27 Plato, *Euthyphro*, in *Plato*, vols. 1–12, trans. by Harold North Fowler, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2001, vol. 1, pp. 7–59.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

the opposition between them. This insight is important for dealing with ethical questions involving religious aspects.

One of the most important contemporary issues involving conflict between religion and ethics is discrimination against women. Ethically, the burden of proof is on one who argues in favor of discrimination, since ethical thinking assumes equality between human beings as a result of its universality. In other words, ethically, all individuals are equal unless it is proven to be otherwise. However, this assumption does not necessarily apply from the perspective of religion, which is not based on our capacity for universalization, but rather on obedience. We are therefore confronted with the difficulty that, if such discrimination is anchored in certain religious commands, one cannot refute it by ethical arguments—since the problem is not, after all, an ethical one—but only by convincing others to change their perspective from religion to ethics. A good illustration can be found in Judaism, in the dawn prayer in which men bless God that they have not been made a woman.[28] This prayer reflects the fact that the discrimination is not only a matter of different social roles or behavior, but is grounded in ontological conceptions. It can be seen in almost every religious ritual and practice, and from these slides into everyday life. The ethical issue at stake is, therefore, *how* this discrimination should be eradicated, and not whether such discrimination is ethical or not (which is unfortunately the terms upon which many today formulate the issue). The most unethical position is to recognize an ethical defect, but to find excuses in order to not be involved in finding a solution for it. Mr. Fogg and Passepartout in Jules Verne's story seem to understand this, as they decided to save the Indian prince from her terrible religious fate.

Another contemporary issue is caricatures of religious figures in art and in the press. The incident of *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, with its tragic consequences, has shown how far the conflict between religious taboos and the freedom of thought and expression can reach. Here again, it is important to recognize that what is at stake is not a case of ethical dilemma, but rather a conflict between the absolutism of religion and the universalism of ethics. Whereas religion demands absolute favoritism for its religious figures, ethics requires that we judge their deeds from a universal perspective, that is, like everyone else. Herein lies Kierkegaard's discontent and ambivalence toward the figure of Abraham (an attitude of both admiration and rejection), which led him to his philosophical

28 "Blessed be You Hashem, our God, King of the world, for not having made me a woman." (From: Tractate Berachot, Chapter 6, Tosefta 23.) In Hebrew:
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. שֶׁלֹּא עָשַׂנִי אִשָּׁה

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

insight into the dialectical relation between ethics and religion. One can also return to Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates confronts Euthyphro with the unethical deeds of the gods. Therefore, from an ethical perspective, no one should *a priori* be outside of the scope of ethical criticism. Surely, in certain cases, sensitivity to religious emotions, like to other human emotions, is the right ethical choice, but this claim itself is grounded in the universality of ethics and not in the absolutism of religion. Accordingly, the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* should be understood not as a result of ethical conflict, but rather of religious faith; its cause was not a demand for universalism, but for absolute favoritism. Kierkegaard's distinction between ethics and faith can help us to deal with such conflict by asking whether the conflict is within the universal human sphere, or whether involves absolute favoritism; in the latter case we are facing religious threat to the ethical sphere, and not a mere ethical dilemma.

Conclusion

With regard to ethics, one may say that Kierkegaard continues the philosophical legacy since Plato, which replaces the authority of the gods by the authority of universal reason. Yet, monotheism adopts this universal approach and relates it to God. This can be seen even in the secular philosophy of Spinoza, who argues that the holy scriptures express the universal moral law, and in Kant's moral philosophy, which argues that God is a postulate of practical reason. It is Kierkegaard's existential thinking, which emphasizes the individuality of every human being, that exposes the conflict between ethical and religious demands: the conflict between the universal aspect and the personal aspect of our metaphysical existence. Both the universal and the personal are metaphysical in the sense that they are spheres of existence beyond the mere biological one. By clarifying this conflict, Kierkegaard thus provides us with three important observations: 1. The Religious stance (faith) is absolute while the ethical stance is universal. 2. The Religious stance (faith) is irrational while the ethical stance is rational. 3. The Religious stance (faith) is inhuman while the ethical stance is human. Therefore, when we consider cases of conflict between ethics and religion, we should assume that these cannot be judged on a common ground; it is *either* religion *or* ethics.

Recognizing that we must choose either religion or ethics means that we should recognize that there is an inherent conflict between ethics and religion. Kierkegaard's philosophy clarifies this by emphasizing the fact that religious faith is absolute and transcends the universality of ethics. When one chooses faith, as was the case with Abraham, one puts oneself beyond ethical demands

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and sees oneself as committed to God rather than to humanity. Therefore, ethical considerations are only secondary, if they come up at all, at this existential stage. On the other hand, when one chooses ethics, one is committed to humanity and must adopt a universal perspective concerning human existence. This might explain why modern ethics developed in secular terms, and was attacked by religious leaders already from Spinoza's day. The conflict is often hidden, since religion was the vehicle of ethical values for a long period of human history—a fact that often leads us to confuse ethical commitments with religious commands.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Liam Hughes

2 Reflections on Kierkegaard's Internalist Perspective and Its Relation to Social Change

Introduction

To say that Kierkegaard is fundamentally a religious writer might be thought unnecessary, particularly with regard to *Works of Love*, where we are never allowed to forget the centrality of God. Indeed Kierkegaard alludes to the matter in his preface to *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, affirming "…that I am and was a religious author, that my whole authorship pertains to Christianity, to the issue: becoming a Christian…"[1] Yet it bears repetition, since it is the key to understanding some of the paradoxical claims he makes in *Works of Love*, especially with regard to the development of his ethics. It is this work, a series of deliberations—as Kierkegaard reminds us, "not about *love* but about *works of love*"[2]—that is the main focus of the thoughts that follow.[3]

Works of Love is essentially an elaboration of the Scriptural injunction: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor, as thyself." It is an examination of what that entails. This central ethical principle of Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, "does not wish to bring about any external change at all in the external sphere; it wants to seize it, purify it, sanctify it and in this way make everything new, while everything is still old."[4] Earlier in the same work he writes in a similar vein that Christianity "…does not want to take away the dissimilarity, neither of high rank nor of lowliness."[5] It seems clear from the above that Kierkegaard's Christianity is not concerned with social change, at least, not in any ordinary sense. Whatever Kierkegaard means by *making everything new* above, it is not the reduction of socio-economic disparities, the easing of social injustice, the more equitable distribution of social goods, such as health, accommodation, education and access to legal representation. The revolution Kierkegaard has in

---

1 *SKS* 16, 11 / *PV*, 23.
2 *SKS* 9, 11 / *WL*, 3.
3 I am very grateful for the comments of one of the reviewers which have enabled significant improvements to the text.
4 *SKS* 9, 146 / *WL*, 145.
5 *SKS* 9, 77 / *WL*, 71.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-003

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

mind bears no relation to the Marxian one. For example, the nostrums of social reformers, politicians and policy-makers, promising a better life for all, is of no interest to Kierkegaard. Moreover, it forms no part of his account of how we should lovingly treat our neighbor. This absence of social implications is not, in my view, an oversight, but an explicit *rejection* of such thinking, believing that this is what Scripture requires.

The point might be summed up by saying that on Kierkegaard's account the Christian is not concerned with "externals," including the objective social world; but rather with "internal" matters, namely, with the individual's relation to God, and flowing from this, the character of his acts and relations with others. "Others" here does not refer to a group, but to singular individuals; the engagement with the neighbor is seen as *personal*, *neighbor to neighbor*, a meeting of two individuals, rather than something with social consequences. The level of his analysis is *psychological* rather than sociological. In any case, the *true character* of our acts is not visible and cannot be judged by others through observation. Underpinning these ideas are sets of contrasts: the subjective/objective, the hidden/the revealed, the impartial/the partial, the temporal/the eternal, or the earthly and the spiritual. These oppositions serve as leitmotivs of what the religious life entails for Kierkegaard, and so they require examination.

If one thinks of Kierkegaard as the philosopher of existence *par excellence,* and one thinks of human existence as being necessarily social, then it seems plausible to believe that the change wrought by adopting the Christian ethic of love would have important social consequences. To put it differently, one would expect the change to affect not merely the individual, transforming him into a true Christian *in his soul,* as it were, but for this to be manifested visibly, *realized in his conduct in the world* at large. Does Kierkegaard's religious analysis, foregrounding the individual's relationship with God, at the expense of the relationship with the neighbor, somehow distort his ethical understanding of human behavior? Without rejecting Kierkegaard's analysis of Christian love, I believe one can re-balance it in such a way that his "internalism" no longer monopolizes the field. With some adjustments one may arrive at quite different conclusions with regard to the consequences of neighbor-love for society.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

2.1 Kierkegaard's Internalism: Subjective/Objective

Kierkegaard has been credited with introducing "the subjective"[6] into modern Western philosophy, which traditionally has focused on epistemological questions, in which "truth" is more or less equated with the objectively known. Thus, if it can be said that I *know* something, then what is known is, *ipso facto*, *true*. One might say rather redundantly "true for everyone," to bring out its third-person character. There is the implication, too, that one can say *how* one knows; since this knowledge is demonstrable.

In the areas that Kierkegaard is concerned with, things are otherwise; here truth is *subjectivity*. For instance, the paradoxes of Christianity, that Jesus was both man and God, that he lived a perfect life, that he died and was resurrected, viewed objectively provoke uncertainty. Since we cannot apprehend God objectively, we must have faith. Faith however, according to Kierkegaard, necessarily involves risk, since in order to engage with these Christian mysteries one must turn away from the objective path and embrace them *subjectively*, which means having a passionate commitment to this way of living. It is only by doing so, despite the uncertainty, that the Gospel message comes to life, becomes *the truth*. Thus the paradoxes of belief are addressed by a further paradox (of truth), which Kierkegaard defines as: "*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth*, the highest truth there is for an existing person."[7] What is crucial for Kierkegaard is *how* we relate to the requirements of Christianity; this is not an intellectual matter, rather it involves a deliberate choice, making them integral to our daily lives and thus becoming part of our *very being*.

One of Kierkegaard's examples helps to elucidate his notion of subjective truth, and the relevant difference between the "inner" and the "outer." It is in the form of a parable and concerns a man, a Bachelor of Theology, who having completed his studies, is now seeking. "Seeking what?" it is asked. Kierkegaard suggests at first, that it is not difficult to guess the answer to this question: "naturally, the kingdom of God (Matt 6.33). But you guessed wrong. No, he is seeking something else, an appointment, a livelihood."[8] He describes, the young man's efforts to get such a position—the flurry of letters of supplication, the carefully

6 William Barrett, *Irrational Man*, New York: Anchor/Doubleday 1958, pp. 149 – 176.
7 *SKS* 7, 186 / *CUP1*, 203.
8 *SKS* 16, 166 / *JFY*, 110.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

crafted statements of his credentials, and so on. He eventually finds a living, which pleases him at first, since he is after all not seeking the Absolute. But he discovers the living is less remunerative than he imagined; life becomes more complicated, he marries and gradually he feels he needs a more secure position. Believing in the injunction, "seek and ye shall find," albeit in a purely worldly sense, he looks for both a job and a wife and his wishes are granted. He decides to become a parson, which means he must give a sermon in the presence of the Dean and the Bishop. After the Dean's powerful address on the words of the Apostle, "We have left all to follow you," it is the new parson's turn. The Gospel of the day happens to be, appropriately, "Seek first the kingdom of God." He delivers the sermon with such passion and panache that the Bishop and Dean are greatly impressed. The denouement of the story is reached when the question is asked: Christianly appraised, "to what extent was there agreement here between the preacher's life and his sermon?"[9] Like the rest of us, the parson cannot be said to have sought *first* God's kingdom. The Bishop disagrees however, saying that what is important is that he has done an excellent job, that the sermon was successful, it moved the congregation, and the doctrine was preached, pure and unalloyed. Kierkegaard's parable brings out the difference between "Christianity," with its concern for the Absolute, which he thinks is absent here, and the values of "Christendom," which are worldly, and on display.

What judgment are we invited to take of the parson? The obvious one is negative: to view him as having the wrong relation to the truth. He professes to put God first but he is insincere, since his actions show something different. The parson, the Dean and the Bishop as representatives of the Danish Church or "Christendom" are all charged implicitly with hypocrisy by Kierkegaard, of setting the wrong example, and misrepresenting what *genuine* Christianity requires. Crucially, the parson, like the Church, is unaware of the distance he is at from the real requirements of "Christianity."

Less obviously perhaps, we should not think of the parson as *especially* corrupt. He is in fact like the rest of us; he wants to have a reasonable standard of living, he wants to marry, to progress, and do his job well by the prevailing standards—not obviously ignoble aspirations. However, he is not *sober,* to use Kierkegaard's term, which is to say his life is not expressing the *unconditioned*. Seeking *first* the Kingdom of God would mean that he "related himself to the unconditioned, or that he was *spirit*—lost to, alienated from, and dead to all temporal, finite earthly considerations." Kierkegaard writes that should he be a contemporary of someone like this: "I would find him unbearable; at every moment

9 *SKS* 16, 168 / *JFY,* 112.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

it would get the better of me, so that I would be tempted to call him intoxicated—him, the only sober one."[10] One might easily agree with Kierkegaard's assessment that such a person would be "unbearable." Personally, I find this version of "genuine Christianity" extreme and morally unappealing, but fortunately, it is not the only interpretation of the Gospel message.

It is possible to consider the parson in a more charitable light. We should agree with the moral of the parable that he is *too* concerned with the material side of his existence and he needs to aspire to living closer in spirit to the substance of what he preaches. Indeed, the parson himself might agree with this assessment. Arguably however, it may not be necessary that he go all the way to what Kierkegaard describes as "being sober," which might prevent him from preaching at all. If we can be spiritually uplifted by reading some of Kierkegaard's discourses, who admits himself that *he* is *not sober* (unless we take that to be Socratic irony), then it seems possible that despite his imperfections the parson too, with his passionate preaching, may call some of his flock to the right path.

It is clear that for Kierkegaard while what we *do* is important, it is the *spirit* in which it is done that is crucial.[11] We therefore need to examine two elements, the thought or intention (the internal aspect) and the act itself (the external aspect), in order to arrive at a true judgment of the matter. Though this is a potentially misleading way of putting it, it will prove useful when we discuss the ethics of actions later, including those relating to love. It is natural here to call Kant to mind for similarity and contrast, for whom, like Kierkegaard, the moral goodness, or otherwise, of an action resides in *the good will.*[12] It is the agent's *intention* that is the focus, rather than what he achieves. The morally relevant question becomes not, "What did X do?" but "what was X *trying* to do?" I think it is Kierkegaard's understanding too, that the moral judgment must focus on the will or the striving to do the right thing, rather than whether it is achieved or not.

---

10 *SKS* 16, 168 / *JFY*, 113.

11 Discussing acts of charity, Kierkegaard remarks that we cannot say of one who does any such act, that he "unconditionally demonstrates love by it. It depends on *how* the work is done" (*SKS* 9, 21 / *WL*, 13).

12 "A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself." Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Ethical Philosophy*, 2nd ed., trans. by James Ellington, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett 1994, p. 7.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

2.2 An Inner Ethic

The view that I am attributing to Kierkegaard (and to Kant) puts the main moral weight of what we do on the intention, an act of will occurring in an inner realm, thus rejecting consequentialism.[13] One does not have to be a consequentialist however, to believe that what we *actually do* is relevant, and often crucially so, to our moral judgments. So although one may agree with Kant and Kierkegaard regarding the centrality of intention to ethics, when we consider certain examples, difficulties arise. It is in such cases that what has been called "moral luck" plays an important role. According to Thomas Nagel: "Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck."[14] Here we are not talking about cases that generally excuse us from moral judgment, such as, involuntary movement, *force majeure* or ignorance of the circumstances, but about a range of other conditions which do not offer such excuse. Nagel gives a few examples, which will serve our immediate purpose:

> However jewel-like the good will may be in its own right, there is a morally significant difference between rescuing someone from a burning building and dropping him from a twelfth-storey window while trying to rescue him. Similarly, there is a morally significant difference between reckless driving and manslaughter. But whether a reckless driver hits a pedestrian depends on the presence of the pedestrian at the point where he recklessly passes a red light.[15]

Nagel gives another example regarding what we may have to face in life—e. g., if we were adults during the rise of Nazism in Germany there was the possibility of moral heroism or failure on a large scale. The point here is that what we have to face *morally* is not exhausted by what our intention was but what *we actually did,* whether we intended it or not. A discussion of moral luck is useful as a reminder of how much of our lives, including morality, is not under the control of the will. It moves the discussion from a purely first-person one to *include* a third-person perspective. Thus, in this respect, it challenges the views of Kant and Kierkegaard. Chance seems to mock man's pretensions of control, and the con-

---

13 This does not mean that "consequences" are *irrelevant* for Kant or Kierkegaard, which would be absurd for any moral thinker.
14 Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979, p. 26.
15 Nagel, "Moral Luck," p. 25.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

sideration of it, like death itself, makes us realize our vulnerability to misfortune. We may be lucky to live a morally blameless life without a great deal of effort due to favorable circumstances, while equally we may be undermined morally through no fault of our own. Kierkegaard, rather than speak about "chance," might talk of "*dissimilarity*," where each will have his/her own cross to bear on the path chosen by God. By embracing it through loving God, which although like the Stoics' notion of *amor fati* involves suffering, one may nonetheless transform and transcend it, and in turn, be transformed by it.

When Kierkegaard speaks of "the inner" in contrast to the "the external," or "the hidden" in contrast to "the revealed," it is the inner or hidden that is the conduit of *the true* or *the real*. Love is hidden and it may or may not be revealed.[16] What is revealed may be a counterfeit. "There is no work, not a single one, not even the best, about which we can unconditionally dare to say: The one who does this unconditionally demonstrates love by it."[17] This is true, insofar as whether it is love or not depends on *how* it is done. And yet "by their fruits ye shall know them," indicates that merely having love in your heart is not enough; it must be manifested in words or deeds. The requirement to "*unconditionally* demonstrate," however, seems too stringent. We cannot make a definitive judgment by considering *one* discrete action; we need to know what follows it to make a moral judgment. The Good Samaritan story is a case in point—there is no discussion about what his intentions or motives are, we are told *how* he responds, what he does, and we are directed to do likewise. Kierkegaard seems to hold the view that because we *can* be mistaken about people's intentions, and thus misjudge the character of their actions, we can *never* correctly judge them.[18] However, we often have no difficulty in judging the evil, or the goodness, of an action, the Samaritan story being a case in point. We routinely make correct judgments regarding the sincerity of the actions of others, where "correct" means borne out over time. While it is true, in romantic or erotic relationships, that we may be particularly prone to being led astray by our feelings, this should not blind us to our ability to discern cases of true from false love; indeed it is this

16 "[J]ust as love itself is invisible and therefore we have to believe in it, so also is it not unconditionally and directly to be known by any particular expression of it" (*SKS* 9, 20 – 21 / *WL*, 13).

17 *SKS* 9, 21 / *WL*, 13.

18 It is not clear whether Kierkegaard thinks there is a "logical" or "internal relation" between the "concept of love" and the "expression of love." It seems not. If there is however, then our understanding of love comes from without, as well as from our reflection on it. Thus, we can learn love from the exemplary behavior of others.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

very ability which underlies the observation regarding our vulnerability in the first place.[19]

The points I make above are not intended to minimize the importance of having good intentions, or to claim that it is only *outcomes* that matter morally; both have a role to play. The point is one of balance, a reminder that it is not simply what occurs at the intentional level that is the *decisive* factor. Furthermore, I accept the possibility of making moral progress in a purely private way, that is, through personal reflection that others are not privy to. Iris Murdoch in her justly oft-quoted essay, "The Idea of Perfection," makes a case for such moral progress, written against the prevailing spirit of behaviorism of the time. She writes:

> A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for the purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind.[20]

Murdoch considers the possibility that M, who wants to be a fair and reasonable person, reflects on her own character and prejudices, aware that she is old-fashioned and somewhat snobbish, and carefully brings to mind aspects of D's behavior, to view it in a more sympathetic light. She gradually begins to shift from her initial judgment. Instead of seeing D's behavior as vulgar, it now appears refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. The example is designed to achieve two things; first, to show that moral development can take place in the private, mental sphere without any behavioral manifestation, and second, that this more sympathetic moral judgment is closer to reality and thus, the example makes sense of the idea of moral growth. Murdoch wants us to see M's behavior as motivated by love or justice, and to realize that her second reflective judgment is *truer* than her first.

19 If we could *never* make correct judgments regarding the expression of loving behavior, the notion of "correct judgments" or otherwise would have no currency.
20 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," *The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1970, p. 13.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

An example of Kierkegaard's, concerning the overcoming of selfishness, has some similarities to that of Murdoch's. "The concept 'neighbor' is actually the redoubling of your own self; 'the neighbor' is what thinkers call 'the other,' that by which the selfishness in self-love is to be tested. As far as thought is concerned, the neighbor does not even need to exist. If someone living on a desert island mentally conformed to this commandment, by renouncing self-love he could be said to love the neighbor."[21] The obvious common features in the two examples is the fact that moral change is wrought in both cases entirely in the mind of the subject and, secondly, both examples are contrived to exclude the possible presence of other people. I want to say that we can accept Murdoch's example in a way we cannot accept Kierkegaard's. Before explaining why, let us turn briefly to M. Jamie Ferreira, and her sensitive reading of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. She discusses the tension between the internal and the external in Kierkegaard's thought and recognizes the fine line that Kierkegaard treads between love being (inner) a matter of conscience, contrasted with the idea that "Christian love is sheer action." She writes that "the combination of messages remind us that the fulfillment of the law in action is not mere outwardness and the centrality of conscience does not reduce love to mere inwardness."[22] In order to defend Kierkegaard's position, she suggests that his "island example" be considered as a thought experiment, which focuses on the unconditionality of the command: "That is, if (counterfactually) there were no people around us, we could still show our obedient conformity to the commandment by renouncing a restrictive self-love, and we can renounce such self-love in these circumstances by determining ourselves to love, as ourselves, such others as may ever come our way."[23] I can see how Kierkegaard can be defended in this way, by saying—insofar as loving the neighbor "in thought" is concerned—this is what is required. However, it seems to me that that very way of thinking about the matter is flawed, namely, that there is a *loving the neighbor in thought*, which in turn will guarantee a loving response to the neighbor *in action*, whenever it arises. Kierkegaard's example seems misconceived; if one is talking about the problem of self-love and then imagines that there are no neighbors, it is unclear how self-love could be a problem—surely, selfishness would be the least concern of a Crusoe-like figure. My disagreement with Kierkegaard rests on the fact that he thinks selfishness *is essentially an inner thing*. Now if his point is simply that an individual can *in his thought* renounce selfishness, then this is possible, and the point of

---

21 *SKS* 9, 29 / *WL*, 21

22 M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, p. 66.

23 Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 35.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

being on an island is just a colorful way to establish that it cannot be expressed to others.

So far, the example roughly parallels the Murdoch case. However, in Murdoch's example, all we have to accept is that a person, by a process of reflection, comes to have a positive view of someone of whom previously they had a low opinion. Loving one's neighbor, however, is quite different; while it is something I can *undertake* to do in private, as a piece of reflection and deliberation, unlike Murdoch's example, it requires evidence that I indeed have done what I resolved to do. Coming to see a person in a different light is rather different in character from renouncing selfishness. Therefore, it remains unclear what *renouncing selfishness in thought* would amount to on its own—though it may well have moral value, in that it is a resolution to strive for something positive. However, the problem is that one does not know one has renounced selfishness until the resolution is tested in the theater of action.[24] So it remains a kind of *promissory note*, whereas morally speaking it must be expressed in *practice over time*. Thus it cannot be a purely private, "inner" achievement of the moment.

2.3 Love: Partial/Impartial and Neighbor-Love

While I have suggested the similarity in the ethical views of Kierkegaard and those of Kant, this only goes so far. They agree on the centrality of the will, and the profound importance of truthfulness and sincerity, however they diverge significantly on the matter of love. Kierkegaard reminds us of the centrality and innovation of the Christian commandment, to love others as oneself; by contrast, Kant believes that love cannot be commanded. He writes: "Love is a matter of sensation, not of willing; and I cannot love because I would, still less because I should (being obligated to love). Hence a duty to love is nonexistent. But benevolence (*amor benevolentiae*), as a mode of action, can be subject to a law of duty."[25] Loving one's neighbor in the Christian sense, like much in the Gospels, is for Kant an ideal to which we should try to approach while realizing that we can never attain it.

Kierkegaard is aware of the apparent contradiction of "seeing love as a duty," but he is not interested in trying to engage with Kant's difficulty; instead he wants to emphasize that this is the mark of Christianity and that it is some-

24 The difference is between *undertaking to do* something and *doing it*.

25 Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, in *Ethical Philosophy*, p. 60.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

thing completely new.[26] The idea is that it is only by being reminded of our duty to love others that we become aware of "the neighbor" as a category, and that an equal concern is required of all. Still, it is one thing to recognize the desirability of mutual care and concern, but the logical problem is with *how* that is to be acquired. André Comte-Sponville touches on the issue of how one moves from acting in accordance with moral convention, or doing what is required, to acting virtuously. So that now one does what is right *because one embraces it as the right thing to do,* and thus, one no longer needs the rules to guide one, "so love in its turn, in already fulfilling through acts of love what morality prescribes as duty, frees us from morality: only he who loves no longer needs to act *as though* he loved."[27] It seems we need *duties* because we do not have love.

How do I overcome my passionate antipathy towards someone whom I know despises me? Though Kierkegaard does not answer that question directly, he does provide helpful guidance to the aspirant to cultivate a loving attitude towards his neighbor. If one succeeds in developing this attitude, as Alastair Hannay puts it, "he or she ignores the evil in other persons just as the child does so naturally, and even refrains from taking steps to understand it."[28] If we look for evil in others we will find it everywhere, and in doing so we add to the existent evil. By not focusing on the evil, we have a better chance of seeing the good in the flawed person, by being willing to excuse him, we find reasons for his shortcomings, and we thereby become more forgiving. This echoes the Scriptural injunction, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." This loving approach of Kierkegaard's to the other may be seen as a more developed stage of the kind of self-reflective judgment explored by Murdoch which sought to overcome one's social prejudices.

"Love for the neighbor has the perfections of eternity—*this is perhaps why at times it seems to fit in so little with the relationships of earthly life*."[29] Kierkegaard contrasts all the natural expressions of love, parental/sibling love, friendship, romantic or erotic love, with the love of the neighbor. In comparison with neighbor-love, all the other manifestations of love are inferior. He treats all forms of natural love as merely aspects of self-love. They are preferential in the sense that people are drawn to one another because of the particular qualities or interests they share. The enjoyment of the other's company adds to one's own sense of self, and the mutual benefit it creates is seen as "selfish" in Kierkegaard's

---

26 *SKS* 9, 32 / *WL*, 25.

27 André Comte-Sponville, *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues*, London: William Heinemann, Random House Group Ltd. 2002, p. 225.

28 Alasdair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1991, p. 256.

29 *SKS* 9, 75 / *WL*, 69.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

eyes. It is "partial" one might say, in a trivial sense, in that the reason you get on well as friends is because you have particular qualities and interests in common, whereas others without them, would be excluded. Similar considerations apply with regard to family; we treat the members of our family in a preferential way compared with non-family members. Thus we give unequal consideration to family and friends *vis-à-vis* others, who do not belong to either group. The objections to such natural relationships between friends or loved ones are that they are exclusive, they keep others out, and secondly, they are often self-serving—we typically like those who are like us. By contrast, neighbor love is impartial; it is not based on preference or on any qualities whatsoever. We are to love each individual we meet, without difference, irrespective of the qualities they have.

In his eagerness to sharpen the difference between neighbor-love and natural love, Kierkegaard ignores the many ways natural love or friendship are tested and the great variety that one finds within each type of love. More importantly, he fails to distinguish selfish from unselfish love, and thus to acknowledge it in the context of natural love. As a result, he does not appreciate that natural love and its expressions can have any moral value.[30] Yet most of us are perfectly familiar with the difference between acts that are selfish, in the sense of self-serving, and selfless ones, directed towards the other person. While admitting that the former are unfortunately the more common, we are still familiar with spouses who show selfless devotion to their partners, or mothers who put the consideration of their children before their own needs. Now Kierkegaard admits that such devotion as I describe above exists between the lover and the beloved, but criticizes it on grounds of its partiality. Such criticism misconstrues the nature of these relationships, as I suggest below.

There are those who think that *all* human behavior is selfish, but this is a confusion. It arises because if a person takes *pleasure* in helping the other, it is assumed thereby that this shows it is "selfish" after all. But this is to confuse the *object* of the action, *to help someone,* with a coincidental (though *natural*) consequence, *feeling pleased* that the person was successfully helped.[31] Should we think less of the Good Samaritan if we learnt that he was pleased when told by the inn-keeper that the man he had helped was getting better? Would his motives now be in question?

30 For criticism see, for example, Martin Buber, "The Question to the Single One," in *Between Man and Man*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith, London: Collins the Fontana Library 1961, pp. 60–108. See also Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, pp. 243–254.
31 Joseph Butler, *Analogy and Sermons*, London: The Religious Tract Society, 1855, especially Sermon XI, "Upon the Love of the Neighbour," pp. 467–482.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Kierkegaard characterizes natural love as partial, temporal and therefore changeable,[32] while by contrast, neighbor-love, because it arises from God's command, has universal reach, is impartial, and brings the eternal with it. On this view, neighbor-love is higher and of a completely different character. He is perhaps right in maintaining the superiority of neighbor-love in terms of the difficulty of its fulfillment. While the love of family and friends, is sometimes difficult, it is perfectly natural; love of the neighbor often goes against the grain. We are after all required to love the dislikeable, including those who hate us, and for many this is impossible. Again, one can feel the force of Kierkegaard's point, when he treats all natural love as involving the self in a *potentially* self-serving way, which contrasts with the way neighbor-love forces one to deny the self, or put it last. Such genuine love may not be open to non-believers; in any case, for Kierkegaard it is by God's grace that it is possible.

Having established the superiority of a selfless, agapeistic love, Kierkegaard proceeds to say there is really only *one love,* namely, neighbor love. Thus all natural expressions of love only become *real love* when transformed, infused with neighbor-love. This means that a married couple's love, for instance, needs to be *mediated* by God. This is the point of the *sacrament* of marriage. God is now the third term, and is at the center of the relationship. Furthermore, Kierkegaard insists that all human relationships must put God at their center, so that what "loving the neighbor" *means* is bringing the neighbor to love God.[33] Knud Ejler Løgstrup suggests that this departs from the teaching of Jesus,[34] citing the Good Samaritan story as a case in point, where there is no question of the injured man being *brought to God*. In loving the neighbor the focus must be on addressing his/her needs. In so doing we *may* bring them to God, but that cannot be the aim. If God is love, in our loving the other, the other may then wish to follow our example and love others in turn; thus, we may say that by loving them, they are brought to love God. Such considerations are not, however, an essential element of our compassion for others; otherwise our compassion would in a sense be diluted, compromised. I share Buber's view that the commandment to love God and love man were brought *together*,[35] such that by loving the one we meet we love God. God and man are not rivals; it is through our engagement with oth-

32 For a different view, see Sonnet 116, "love is not love/ Which alters when it alteration finds," in William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 133.
33 See *SKS* 9, 112–13 / *WL*, 108–09.
34 Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, trans. by Hans Fink and Alastair McIntyre, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1997, p. 225.
35 Martin Buber, "The Question to the Single One," p. 73.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ers that we find God. At times, Kierkegaard sees this, but more often he takes a contrary view. Given his view that all natural love is selfishness and therefore tainted, it must be purged, thus, the route must be via God to the neighbor. On this account our best *human* conceptions of love are mistaken, indeed they are an eternity away from the Godly. Kierkegaard writes that Christianity "teaches to hold fast to the true conception of what love is and then willingly to endure being hated by the beloved as a reward for his love."[36] The "hate" arises from the *collision* between the earthly, human conceptions of love and the eternal, Godly one. The opposition between the human and the Godly is clear: "the person who in love belongs to a woman shall first and foremost belong totally to God, shall not seek first to please his wife but shall first do his utmost so that his love may please God."[37]

Other paradoxes and difficulties arise, one of which has been raised by Sharon Krishek.[38] She addresses the seeming paradox that Christianity requires us to love people impartially, on the basis of their entitlement to an equality of treatment in various ways. On the other hand, it seems morally right, perhaps desirable, to treat different people differently, thus partially. She thinks that Kierkegaard fails to reconcile these opposing tensions. Her starting point is that all love involves feelings; neighbor-love therefore has an emotional aspect, which she calls "compassion." She agrees with Kierkegaard that really there is only *one* love with different manifestations, but does not accept that *the essential form* is neighbor-love. Instead, she regards it as *one strand* in a rich tapestry of loving engagements. The common thread of all love for Krishek is that of "care"; so despite the depth of feeling in an erotic relationship compared with a chance encounter where one helps a stranger, with its very different emotional character and shape, there will nonetheless be some commonality. If these are cases of love, the following will apply: she will want the good for the other, she will consider him valuable, and will have a feeling of care towards him. Although Krishek's account brings in religious faith, it is not essential to her resolution of the partiality/impartiality problem. She provides the "impartial" requirement by locating equality of value in all persons with its attendant duties; this does not imply similarity of treatment, which may be various. At the same time, she maintains the moral importance of ordinary, natural loving relations,

36 *SKS* 9, 117 / *WL*, 113.
37 *SKS* 9, 116 / *WL*, 112–113.
38 Sharon Krishek, "Kierkegaard on Impartiality and Love," *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 25, no.1, 2017, pp. 109–128.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

which are partial, but again need not be homogeneous. Both manifestations of love can be genuine.[39]

2.4 Equality and Social Change

Consider the following statements offered in *Works of Love:* "Christianity is neither blind nor one-sided; with the calmness of eternity it surveys equably all the dissimilarities of earthly life but does not divisively take sides with any single one."[40] Or "Christianity, then, does not want to take away the dissimilarity, neither of high rank nor of lowliness."[41]

To take the first quotation: are there not cases in which Christianity *should* take sides? Where not taking sides is showing indifference; where the calmness of eternity costs people's lives, or their liberty; where not taking away dissimilarities means that people suffer life-long injustice and misery, e. g., the extreme one, of the Dalits,[42] in India. If the Christian can help alleviate social injustice, does she not have a duty to do so? It seems clear that while the story of the Samaritan shows Christian compassion in action, at the same time it shows indirectly the evil of inaction, the indifference of "passing on the other side."

This calls to mind a speech by Vaclav Havel:

> We live in a contaminated moral environment. We fell morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned to ignore each other, to care only about ourselves…We had all become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unchangeable fact and thus helped to perpetuate it. In other words, we are all—though naturally to differing extents—responsible for the operation of the totalitarian machinery; none of us is just its victim; we are all its co-creators. [43]

Havel here, unlike Kierkegaard, brings in the idea of social responsibility—if our society is "sick," its members have some responsibility for its state and by implication its fate. Kierkegaard's vilification of society as simply an evil force seems

---

39 I share Krishek's and Kierkegaard's view that love conceived as *one thing* with many manifestations is a useful conception. The genesis of love however, in terms of its logical and temporal priority, contra Kierkegaard, arises in the context of natural love with neighbor-love emerging later.

40 *SKS* 9, 77 / *WL*, 70.

41 *SKS* 9, 77 / *WL*, 71.

42 The lowest order of the Hindu caste system, also known as "untouchables."

43 Vaclav Havel, "We Live in a Contaminated Moral Environment," in *Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. by Simon Sebag Montefiore, London: Quercus Publishing plc. 2007, pp. 211–213.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

blind to the fact that the state of society is not independent of the actions of individuals. When he attacks newspapers, gossip and the public, though no doubt justified, Stanley Cavell suggests that Kierkegaard's normally acute dialectical acumen deserts him: "[H]e does not consider that what is wrong with them is a function of the age (not the other way around)."[44]

We should bear in mind that Kierkegaard wanted *Works of Love* to address social matters and his notion of equality is the closest we get to that. However, what he means by "equality" is completely different from the various meanings of *social* equality. He means firstly, "equality before God," which is to say that all persons have the same value in God's eyes, and are deserving of love. Secondly, it is the maxim that we must treat all we meet from whichever stratum of society in the same way, namely, in a loving manner. Kierkegaard allows that this may mean treating different people *differently.* Here he is reminding us of a common humanity. However, the multifarious differences in earthly existence should be preserved; Christianity "allows all the dissimilarities to stand but teaches the equality of eternity."[45] There are difficulties here; can we *respect* the humanity of people while ignoring the fact that they are treated inhumanely? If a section of society is systematically exploited or excluded from a range of "social goods," e.g., health, housing, education and so on, what part of Christianity holds that these differences should stand? Contrary to such a view, Christians have often struggled against such "differences" through institutions which care for the sick, provide hostels for the homeless, and provide education for the poor, thus challenging the indifference of their societies. If Havel is correct, and we find ourselves in a society where some are marginalized, we, its members, must bear some responsibility.

To consider the second quotation, Ferreira rightly questions Christianity's advice to the "poor charwoman, who earns her living by the most menial work."[46] According to Kierkegaard, the charwoman (and indeed everyone else) is told: "Do not busy yourself with changing the shape of the world or your situation, as if you...instead of being a poor charwoman, perhaps could manage to be called, 'Madame.'"[47] Ferreira asks whether this example should lead us to believe that Kierkegaard's Christian inwardness implies that we accept passively the status quo, "urging that we (and others) rise above the temporal conditions

44 Stanley Cavell, "Kierkegaard's On Authority and Revelation," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976, p. 174
45 *SKS* 9, 78 / *WL*, 72.
46 *SKS* 9, 138 / *WL*, 136.
47 *SKS* 9, 138 / *WL*, 136.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

we (and others) face rather than challenge them."[48] The answer to that is "yes," as I have argued above. Ferreira wonders if they point to an indifference to physical distress, poverty, and oppression, and perhaps a general indifference to external circumstances. She goes on to say that if this were the case it would be at odds with Kierkegaard recommending the actions of the Good Samaritan. Ferreira is right to claim that it does not show that Kierkegaard does not care about human suffering, though one might say, he *spiritualizes* it and misunderstands it. By characterizing the charwoman's aspiration as the trivial one of being called "Madame," rather than the more probable one of feeding herself and her family, he shows a gulf in understanding. Kierkegaard preserves the idea of a subjective response, like the Samaritan's, believing that when we encounter suffering, which we do as individuals, we have a duty to try to alleviate it. However, as I suggested above, these are encounters are between *individuals*; Kierkegaard does not believe that Christianity should try to remove the ills of society—indeed he thinks that to do so is a complete mistake. I think we have to take him at his word in this matter.[49]

His insistence on the differences or dissimilarities continuing makes one feel that Kierkegaard thinks they are somehow divinely ordained—they are a challenge to the individual no matter where s/he is placed in the social hierarchy. The challenge is, presumably, to love those who are least like us; if we are rich then we must love the poor and *vice versa*. Wherever one finds oneself in this nexus of dissimilarity, it appears we should just accept it and concentrate on the important matter of eternal equality—this is our common humanity, we are all different, but we are all similarly neighbors. The problem is that loving those least like us, e. g., the destitute, seems to be in conflict with the calmness of eternity's equable survey of dissimilarities. Presumably, if we were to follow Kierkegaard's social advice, it is unlikely that such things as the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, child labor and so on, would have been addressed.[50]

48 Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 94.
49 Regarding "dissimilarities," a word Kierkegaard uses to cover all social differences, it is clear he wants us to accept them and not dwell on them, "inasmuch as by being a Christian he does not become exempted from dissimilarity, but by overcoming the temptation of dissimilarity, he becomes a Christian" (*SKS* 9, 77 / *WL*, 70), or "this comparing dissimilarity, does not preoccupy Christianity at all, not in the least—such a preoccupation is nothing but worldliness" (*SKS* 9, 78 / *WL*, 71).
50 This follows from Kierkegaard's notion of Christian *sobriety* which includes being dead to all temporal, earthly considerations (see footnote 10 above).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

2.5 A Community Based on Neighbor-Love

It is not entirely clear whether Kierkegaard thinks that by loving one's neighbor, no change *will* occur in society, or rather that whether it does or not is not the concern of the Christian. It seems to be the latter, that is, even if it did change society this is not the point of loving one's neighbor. While loving one's neighbor does *not* require a social justification, being indifferent to what happens in society is morally dubious. If we take the Good Samaritan as our guide, and we walk around any large city, we will find homeless people, that is, neighbors in need. We have a duty to help them, though precisely what form that will take is not specified. A range of responses from offering money, to buying them a coffee or a snack are common, or our duty may be simply taking time to talk to them. However, while it is *individuals* who suffer, the problem is a *social* one, and can only be solved by policy rather than charity. So the really Christian act of love for the homeless neighbor might be shown by the one who persuades local government to provide hostels, health experts, and drug counselors to tackle the problem. This does not mean that we dispense with acts of kindness, but it is better if people are not dependent on acts of charity.

Let us imagine that a society or a microcosm of a society began to *truly love* their neighbors in the Christian sense. Since the neighbor is the one each of us meets every day, the changes to begin with are small, subtle, but over time momentous. We look in on the frail old man to see if he is all right; we check if he needs his shopping done. A father who stopped speaking to his son because of the latter's addiction finds a way to help him. The lady with dementia in the Old People's Home finally has a visit from her relative. The car-mechanic no longer pretends that the work on the car took two hours when it took only one, because he now sees the customer as a neighbor, just like he is. The educator has more patience with her charges, accepting the variety of difficulties her students may have, while showing them ways to negotiate it. The character of married or intimate relationships improves; couples begin to listen to each other more attentively, become less concerned with themselves and begin to appreciate what the partner does. In the workplace the atmosphere changes—the desire to ridicule or exploit others is replaced by attitudes of co-operation and care. Litigation gradually disappears as people settle their differences though discussion and forgiveness. Treating those who are less intelligent or less well-off with contempt, becomes a thing of the past. The tide of change would be cumulative as respectful benevolence towards others is reciprocated and becomes the norm. Politicians tell the truth to their constituents because the value of truth-telling is an

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

absolute. There are no more false promises—a new real politics, based on truth, begins.

What I have sketched here is a utopian fantasy. It is utopian, not simply because it does not exist, but because it is difficult to imagine a whole community committing itself to and practicing such values, though experiments of this kind have taken place. Insofar as it is a fantasy, one might say the same of *true* Christianity. In Kierkegaard's scheme of things there is a constant challenge to continue to show love to the neighbor, despite the considerable cost to oneself. This persistence and effort to overcome selfish tendencies is crucial, since many who are capable of loving others do so in selfish and conditional terms. What I have outlined above involves nothing that we are not at present familiar with—such acts of kindness and consideration exist. Furthermore, we have made the assumption that *everyone began to truly love their neighbor*, to imagine the kinds of change that might occur. Such a thoroughgoing change, one might think, should be at least conceivable to Christianity, if not indeed *possible*. Kierkegaard would reject it as misguided as we have seen. The change he speaks of is a "spiritual" one focused on *internal matters*. Kierkegaard's division between our normal understanding of love and Godly love is so stark, with its rejection of *temporal* concern, that one may wonder if anyone ever understood *true* love. One would like to think that the chasm he creates is for purely rhetorical purposes, but it seems not, since Kierkegaard *lived* it. His Christianity, unlike the one sketched here, is for the few: a few singular individuals. Thus he expresses it in strong terms: "love of God is hatred of the world."[51]

Conclusion

One could quote Scripture to support Kierkegaard's astringent views. Still, his is not the only valid interpretation; there is enough this-worldly emphasis in the Scriptures of an ethical nature, *which Kierkegaard accepts*, favoring a social understanding of the Christian message. A key element between these differing views rests on an opposition between the love of God and the love of man. But it does not seem necessary to love God *first,* if to love man *is* to love God.[52]

51 *SKS* 9, 364 / *WL*, 370.

52 A reviewer of this text suggested that Kierkegaard's position is: love God first and then *true* concern for society will follow. Kierkegaard's position is indeed, love God *first*, then the neighbor, but he does not draw any *social* consequences from it. Instead of concern for the removal of social injustices, he urges us to rise above them, seeing their irrelevance from the spiritual point

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

There is a philosophical difficulty with criticizing a religious author like Kierkegaard. His language operates at another level from ordinary usage; sometimes blurring, even obliterating, distinctions we ordinarily make. He is not *doing* philosophy or ethics. Criticism may seem a little like taking issue with Jesus, when he teaches: "He who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart"—by objecting that there is an important moral difference between *actual adultery* and *the thought of it,* and this is reflected in our judgments. Though true, it may be irrelevant, if Jesus is understood to be making a moral point about *an ideal of purity.* It may be similar with *some* objections raised against Kierkegaard; the worry being that by speaking in ordinary terms in an objective mode, one fails to connect fully with the subjective character of Kierkegaard's thinking.

of view. (I am very grateful for this and other comments this reviewer made which enabled significant improvements to the text.)

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Charles Blattberg

3 Kierkegaard's Deep Diversity

The One and the Many

Introduction

What if we approached Kierkegaard's philosophy with the classic metaphysical theme of "the One and the Many" in mind? Doing so, I contend, can help us see how Kierkegaard embraces a form of diversity that runs even deeper than the "deep diversity" of which Charles Taylor has written.[1] This is because Kierkegaard's diversity is able to admit values that are not only irreducible but also, at times, incompatible. Indeed, he conceives of their incompatibility as paradoxical, and in a way which supports a creativity that, I shall argue, is able to respond constructively to some of our most intractable ethical dilemmas.

As I conceive of "the One and the Many," it is chiefly concerned with the *degree of connection* between beings: Are they cohesive and so, together, exhibit a oneness, thereby constituting a unity, or are they disconnected and fragmented, thereby constituting a plurality? Or are they, somehow, both? Kierkegaard is drawn to this latter possibility, since it is the one that embodies the kind of paradox he would have us place at the center of our lives. Even though he himself sometimes fails to live up to this ideal, its power should be evident, as I will show by concluding with an examination of perhaps the most difficult issue in contemporary just war theory. The question is as follows: Must we continue to fight justly even when confronted by what Michael Walzer has called a "supreme emergency," that is, when we believe that our community faces an imminent threat to its most fundamental values, indeed to its very existence?

1 Taylor introduced the idea of deep diversity in an attempt to account for how the different national communities within Canada—those of the English-speaking Canadians, French-speaking Quebeckers, and Aboriginals—conceive of their belonging to the country in different ways: "Shared and Divergent Values," in *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, ed. by Guy Laforest, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1993, p. 183.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-004

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

3.1 Kierkegaard's "Pluramonism"

According to Kierkegaard, the kind of reflection characteristic of disengaged spectators has led us to a passionless age of nihilistic leveling, one in which all qualitative distinctions have been undermined. Not that this nihilism is ontological; when it comes to ontology, the age is pluralist rather than nihilist, since it reflects a "*negatively unifying principle.*" It can be considered ethically nihilistic, though, because of its relativism. Kierkegaard recognizes that his contemporaries affirm many different kinds of values, but since the structures necessary for ranking them have been eroded, nothing really matters. And so nothing really happens. True, individuals occasionally exhibit momentary enthusiasms—but sooner or later these all fade, followed by a return to indolence.[2] So it is that, in order to avoid the despair induced by this ranking-free pluralism, people sometimes try to unify their values by making a total commitment to a single sphere of existence. "Purity of heart," writes Kierkegaard somewhat ironically, "is to will one thing."[3]

The first sphere, which he calls "the aesthetic," is where all who look to enjoy themselves are to be found. Yet those who live the aesthetic life to its fullest will eventually discover that it breaks down, throwing them back into pluralism and despair—that is, until they avoid this reality by leaping into the next sphere, "the ethical." This is where people do good by fulfilling their social roles. However, the ethical, too, ultimately breaks down, requiring a leap into "the religious." Its first form, "Religiousness A," embraces both the natural spirituality of ancient Greek paganism and the ersatz Christianity exemplified by Hegelian dialectics. But Religiousness A's monism fails to be true to all of reality, which is why Kierkegaard awards it "second place"[4] alongside, and in tension with, the plural fragments remaining from the aesthetic and ethical spheres. So it is the combination of the unity of the former with the plurality of the latter that produces the paradox of "Religiousness B," which for Kierkegaard is genuine Christianity. Only by embracing it can we achieve the openness to revelation that makes way for God's saving grace. Whether or not Kierkegaard is right about this—and as we'll see, he's not—I want to suggest that we describe the paradox it involves as "pluramonist." Because instead of unifying one and many into some new version of the one, it upholds both, separately and together.

2 See especially *SKS* 8, 76 / *TA*, 81 for "*negatively unifying principle.*"
3 *SKS* 8, 123 ff / *UD*, 7 ff.
4 See, for example, *SKS* 7, 488 / *CUP1*, 559.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Kierkegaard's terminology for supporting these conclusions seems likewise pluramonist. The very idea of "existence-spheres"[5] is pluralist, whether we conceive of them as a plurality of unities, each capable of being metaphorically bounded by a spherical surface, or a plurality of fragments. Either way, there is absolutely nothing situated between them. This is why they cannot be ranked. It is also why the leaps into each of them are necessarily irrational, because discontinuous. Yet Kierkegaard also describes the movement between spheres as a progression between "stages," implying a linear, unified sequence.

Not that this unification is straightforward. True, the aesthetic and ethical spheres (secular, because finite) are associated with the letters A and B, respectively, since this is how the writers defending each existential orientation are identified.[6] But they are followed by the second pair of religious (because infinite[7]) spheres, variations also designated A and B.[8] Why didn't Kierkegaard choose to label the first sphere of this second pair C, and the one following it D? It seems to me that it is because he wants us to see that something has gone wrong with the overall sequence, and that we should avoid assuming the latter pair successfully unifies all that has come before them. For their being A_2 and B_2 implies that they incite perhaps-never-fully-successful struggles to be true to themselves, as well as to the values retained from the previous spheres.

Here is a formula that encapsulates all of this: *spheres (pluralism) + stages (monism) = pluramonist supersessionism*. Needless to say, we should avoid equating it with the monist supersessionism of Hegelian dialectics. The latter advances by virtue of sublimations (*Aufhebungen*), which are supposed to both cancel the worthless and maintain the valuable aspects of the conflicting elements, while the former seems to both progress and regress simultaneously. Think of Judge Wilhelm, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous ethicist, whose prolix claims to have fully incorporated all that is genuine about the aesthetic into his version of the ethical take on a "he doth protest too much" quality. After all, his ethics

5 *SKS* 6, 443 / *SLW*, 476.
6 See *SKS* 2, 15 / *EO1*, 7.
7 See *SKS* 2, 311, 313, 314, 316 / *EO2*, 345, 348, 350, 352. In the last section, "Ultimatum," we are informed that religious life consists of answering "the call of the infinite." And in *SKS* 6, 413 / *SLW*, 443, we read that "faith is expressly the infinite."
8 See SKS 7, 484 ff. / *CUP1*, 559 ff. Before this, the spheres were not clearly distinguished, though the sermon at the end of *Either/Or* about why we are always in the wrong in relation to God can be interpreted as contrasting the wrongness as guilt that has its place in Religiousness A with the wrongness as sin that has its place in Religiousness B. On the latter, see also *SKS* 7, 227 / *CUP1*, 268.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

are so dour that it is hard to see how they have room for much enjoyment; clearly, something valuable has been lost along the way. The judge's claims to embrace Hegelian dialectics while being a genuine Christian also ring hollow.[9]

Many commentators have missed much of the above picture. For example, it is incompatible with Johannes Corrodi Katzenstein's typical claim that "each kind of life-view—aesthetic, ethical, or religious—embodies some 'highest' good(s) valued for the sake of itself."[10] Because the values of the aesthetic are, I would say, not quite "goods," reserving the term for ethics (alas, that ship sailed long ago). And while the aesthetic is indeed valued for its own sake, that is not the case with the ethical; as I'll argue below, valuing goods for their own sake makes them aesthetic rather than ethical. Finally, at least when the religious sphere takes the form of what Kierkegaard sees as genuine Christianity, it too cannot simply be upheld for its own sake. For there's also, it should go without saying, God's sake.

Or consider Hubert L. Dreyfus, who begins by recognizing how Kierkegaard associates despair with pluralism, how fragmentation can become so threatening that one feels confronted by "the impossible task of getting his or her self together."[11] Yet Dreyfus goes on to misconstrue Kierkegaard's Christianity as a means of unifying the self, and so as a way of exchanging the despair of this pluralism for the bliss of monism. Here's how. When Kierkegaard stipulates that "a synthesis is a relation between two," he is referring to the pairs of opposing factors or terms that make up a human being who is nevertheless "still not a self." To explain:

> In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.[12]

Cryptic as this passage is, it should nevertheless be evident that the "third" the relation represents can be *either* a "negative unity" (an expression referring not to the unity of Hegelian dialectics, as many interpreters assert, but, again, to dis-

9 See, for example, *SKS* 2, 20, 237 / *EO2*, 10, 264.
10 Johannes Corrodi Katzenstein, *God and Passion in Kierkegaard's Climacus*, Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck 2007, p. 98.
11 Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Christianity without Onto-Theology: Kierkegaard's Account of the Self's Movement from Despair to Bliss," in *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being*, ed. by Mark A. Wrathall, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017, p. 237.
12 *SKS* 11, 127 / *SUD*, 13.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

unity as plurality) *or* a "positive third" (that is, a unity) when relating itself to itself. So it is only when the two are present together that we get that paradoxical entity "the human self,"[13] which is paradoxical precisely because it contains both the negative and the positive, both the plural and the unified.

Dreyfus, however, interprets negative and positive as two ways in which the relation can relate to itself, and so be a self. He takes the negative to be one-sided and the positive two-sided although impossible[14]—unless, that is, the individual makes an unconditional, defining commitment which exhibits infinite passion for something finite. Dreyfus is correct that, for Kierkegaard, making such a commitment effectively means accepting the paradox of Jesus Christ as one's savior, since only Jesus is both infinite and finite, God and a man.[15] But Dreyfus misses how this paradox is also reflected in the human self's pluramonist structure, since he conceives of the self as unifiable. He takes each of its factors to be ideally "defined in such a way as to support rather than be in conflict with the others"; they are to "reinforce each other" synergistically, "so that the more you manifest one the more you manifest the other."[16]

For Kierkegaard, however, they ought to do both this and its opposite. That is why his Christianity is not merely "so very difficult," it is "the most difficult of all."[17] True, genuine Christians are "always joyful," but they are far from experiencing pure bliss, since they know that they are "always in danger."[18] Otherwise, their religion would constitute no more than another ostensibly unified sphere of existence, which is to say Religiousness A rather than B. And that would lead to a failure to see that "it is up to us human beings to be careful not to become all too positive, for this would really mean being fooled by life."[19]

13 Ibid.
14 See Dreyfus, "Christianity without Onto-Theology," p. 237.
15 See ibid., p. 239; and, for example, *SKS* 7, 176, 182–83 / *CUP1*, 210, 217–18.
16 Dreyfus, "Christianity without Onto-Theology," p. 240, p. 245, p. 241.
17 *SKS* 7, 105 / *CUP1*, 130.
18 See *SKS* 6, 437 / *SLW*, 470.
19 *SKS* 6, 414 / *SLW*, 444. John D. Glen, Jr. also misses how Kierkegaard would have us strive to uphold the tension between unity and plurality rather than aim for the former over the latter: "Kierkegaard is asserting that human selfhood involves certain inherent *tensions*—in this case, a tension between the self's capacity for *unity* through time and the tendency of its existence to be *dispersed* into different moments. In this respect, the self's task is to give its existence a unifying meaning." (John D. Glen, Jr., "The Definition of the Self and the Structure of Kierkegaard's Work," in *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 2003 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 19), revised ed., p. 9.)

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

3.2 Deeper into Kierkegaard's Spheres/Stages of Existence

Let's explore Kierkegaard's spheres/stages of existence in more detail. The first, once again, reflects the aesthete's commitment to enjoyment. I also suggested that this sphere is a unity and, at least temporarily, it is: like the ancient Greek idea of the cosmos, it is "wonderful at uniting what belongs together."[20] Indeed, sensuality follows a principle that manifests itself "as wanting to unite the separated," the desire and the object desired, something that is said to take place in "an instant of enjoyment."[21] So while aestheticians aim to determine how, say, an opera "works" by taking it apart, true aesthetes approach it instead as a unified totality. They aim "not to discuss the individual parts separately but as far as possible to incorporate them into the whole, to see them not as detached from the whole but integrated in it…[For] the unity in an opera is preserved by the dominant tone that sustains the whole."[22] In fact, all classic artistic works are seen as harmonious unities that exhibit a "mutual intimacy" of idea and form[23]—just as the aesthete argues life does, when it is lived as a game is played, unifying theory and practice.[24] This, then, is how the aesthete fulfills the strictly aesthetic values present within this sphere.[25] When it comes to ethics, however, he admits to finding it boring.[26] And while it is true that he occasionally appears to be open to religious values, one would be forgiven for questioning his piety.[27]

As many have noted, we can simplify the five aesthetic stages identified by Kierkegaard by noting how, when he writes in the guise of an ethicist, he identifies two basic kinds of aesthete: the unreflective and the reflective.[28] The former

20 *SKS* 1, 31 / *EO1*, 47; see also *SKS* 1, 32 / *EO1*, 87.
21 *SKS* 1, 62 / *EO1*, 80.
22 *SKS* 1, 96 / *EO1*, 116–17.
23 See *SKS* 1, 32–33, 37 / *EO1*, 48–49, 54.
24 See *SKS* 1, 31, 42, 44, 399 / *EO1*, 47, 58, 61, 432.
25 See *SKS* 2, 243–44 / *EO2*, 271–72.
26 See *SKS* 1, 336 / *EO1*, 367.
27 See, for example, *SKS* 1, 4, 123 / *EO1*, 20, 146. Note, however, that the aesthete doesn't claim to believe in the Christian God (*SKS* 1, 44 / *EO1*, 61), not to mention follow austere forms of religion such as Presbyterianism (*SKS* 1, 54 / *EO1*, 72).
28 See *SKS* 2, 164 ff. / *EO2*, 181 ff. As John Stuart Mill noted, there is "no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation."

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

is natural,[29] in that he savors beautiful, sensuous experiences—albeit in a way that has only been possible since the rise of Christianity, which the natural aesthete nevertheless opposes (despite pursuing pleasures far less psychical than those of the ancient Greeks).[30] Kierkegaard treats music as most conducive to this savoring since, unlike prose language, it is repetitive rather than unfolding and so strikes the ear as both immediate and abstract, which happens to be the central qualities of the Romantic symbol.[31] This symbol is also an organic unity, of which Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* is perhaps the greatest embodiment.[32] Its leading character is a perfect sensualist, as is evident from both his musicality and the fact that he is a deceiver but not a seducer. (As we'll see, because seducers toy with people they should be classed among the more sophisticated, and so reflective, aesthetes.[33])

The unreflective aesthete is also an isolated individual, someone who lives apart from social institutions such as the family and state.[34] Note that this "apartness" is a strictly mereological quality, one concerned with the metaphysics of parts and wholes rather than of the one and many. Despite being socially *unintegrated* (and so not a part of society holistically), the unreflective aesthete is still said to resemble an atom that has been *collected* alongside others within it; in both cases, then, society remains a unity.[35] So we can understand the unreflective aesthete's choice to join such strange associations as The Fellowship of the Dead, which shuns pluralism: "one must always guard against contracting a life relationship by which one can become many....If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom."[36]

Indeed, aesthetes of this sort are what Isaiah Berlin would quickly identify as monist "hedgehogs," since they manage to "acquire in the course of time a single phrase or a single idea with which they are able to signify everything to themselves and to the individual they have initiated into it."[37] It is also worth noting that while the Fellowship's members desire sorrow, each aspiring to the

Utilitarianism (1861), in *Utilitarianism and the 1868 Speech on Capital Punishment*, ed. by George Sher, Indianapolis: Hackett 2001, 2nd ed., p. 8.

29 See *SKS* 2, 119 – 20, 122 / *EO2*, 132, 135.

30 See *SKS* 1, 56 – 57, 62, 66, 85 – 87 / *EO1*, 61 – 62, 67, 72, 93 – 95; and *SKS* 2, 158 – 59 / *EO2*, 181 – 82.

31 See *SKS* 1, 50 – 53, 76, 99 – 100 / *EO1*, 68 – 71, 95, 120.

32 See *SKS* 1, 67, 92, 98 – 99, 112 / *EO1*, 85, 112, 118 – 120, 134.

33 See *SKS* 1, 79 – 82, 340 – 41 / *EO1*, 98 – 102, 372.

34 See *SKS* 1, 126, 194 / *EO1*, 149, 220.

35 See *SKS* 1, 128 – 29, 141 – 89 / *EO1*, 151 – 52, 165 – 215; and *SKS* 2, 245 / *EO2*, 273.

36 *SKS* 1, 268 / *EO1*, 297.

37 *SKS* 1, 176 / *EO1*, 200; and see Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, ed. by Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013, 2nd ed.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

title of "The Unhappiest One,"[38] this is not because they shun enjoyment; on the contrary, they take *delight* in their sorrow as a diversion, a way of going outside of themselves.[39] Evidently, theirs is an aestheticized sorrow, a simulacrum of the real thing. While indulging in it would be considered a "sin" to the ethicist, they can be said to concur instead with Nietzsche that only the very best of us are capable of embracing the "joy" of tragedy.[40]

Sooner or later, however, the threat of boredom induces aesthetes to turn to an increasingly sophisticated, reflective aesthetics, and so away from savoring and towards fantasizing and playing.[41] To be sure, the reflective aesthete still appreciates beauty and immediacy.[42] Yet he is also someone who has decided to live "poetically," according to his imagination, which is why "his diary is not historically accurate."[43] By describing his experiences with great "dramatic vividness," he hopes to be carried away into a "dreamland," a "kingdom of mist" where he can fulfill his erotic fantasies.[44] As a seducer, his prime target is thus a girl who also "lives in a world of fantasy";[45] moreover, he chases her as if he were a player in a game or sport.[46] He plays to play and not to win, however, which is why he hopes to conquer but not to possess her.[47] He also differs from the unreflective aesthete in that he explicitly desires "joy" instead of sadness. That said, while certainly not anti-social, he too has no genuine friends.[48]

Notice that while Kierkegaard's aesthetes savor, play games for fun, and fantasize, they rarely if ever put on shows—that is, engage in spectacle—making this a major aesthetic mode that Kierkegaard appears to overlook.[49] There are impli-

---

38 See *SKS* 1, 192–203 / *EO1*, 217–30.
39 See *SKS* 1, 153, 196 / *EO1*, 175–76, 222; and *SKS* 2, 209–212 / *EO2*, 233–36.
40 *SKS* 2, 171 / *EO2*, 189; Friedrich Nietzsche, "What I Owe to the Ancients," in *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (1889), § 5, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005.
41 See *SKS* 1, 21, 253–72, 299 / *EO1*, 37, 281–300, 328.
42 See, for example, *SKS* 1, 293–96, 348–49, 357, 395 / *EO1*, 321–24, 381, 390, 428.
43 *SKS* 1, 276 / *EO1*, 304. See also *SKS* 1, 358, 362 / *EO1*, 391, 395; and *SKS* 2, 41 / *EO2*, 44.
44 *SKS* 1, 277, 281 / *EO1*, 305, 310; see also *SKS* 1, 277–78 / *EO1*, 306; and *SKS* 2, 33 / *EO2*, 35.
45 *SKS* 1, 311 / *EO1*, 341. See also *SKS* 2, 98 / *EO2*, 105.
46 See *SKS* 1, 278–80, 291, 294, 300, 330, 335, 352, 358, 390, 402 / *EO1*, 307–308, 319, 322, 329, 360–61, 366, 384–85, 391, 423, 436; and *SKS* 2, 71, 95, 98, 102 / *EO2*, 78, 103–104, 107, 112.
47 See *SKS* 2, 118 / *EO2*, 130–31.
48 See *SKS* 1, 395, 339 / *EO1*, 428, 371.
49 In *SKS* 2, 23 / *EO2*, 24–25, the ethicist makes this complaint of the aesthete: "you never give of yourself, never let others enjoy you." However, in *SKS* 2, 167 / *EO2*, 185, one of the stages of aesthetic life is said to be "often found in young people, who…are easily tempted to exalt themselves, especially when they have an audience."

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

cations here for both his conception of ethics and his writing practice, as we'll see below. At this point, I'll simply mention again how he portrays the aesthetic sphere as a finite unity, a collection of immediate moments that, sooner or later, breaks up. This leads to a transition period marked by irony, which is then followed by the leap into the next sphere, that of the ethical.

Where the aesthete is committed to the outer, the ethicist is to the inner; and where the aesthete affirms a "self-contained," non-dialectical unity that requires choosing "only one thing," the ethicist is dialectical.[50] Above all, the ethicist is committed to playing, not games, but the social roles he has chosen, such as dutiful husband ("an ideal husband is not one who is ideal once in his life but one who is that every day") and father ("I am playing a noble father").[51] The choice must be an either-or, all-or-nothing one—a choice, that is, over an "absolute contradiction." And when the duties accompanying the chosen role are willingly performed, they will by no means limit the chooser's freedom.[52] Moreover, at least according to the ethicist, his way of life incorporates not only aesthetic but also (Christian) religious concerns.

This differs from the strictly aesthetic life in a number of ways. In radically choosing his role, for instance, the ethicist avoids the aesthete's deliberation over a plurality of choices.[53] And since it is self-consciously a role rather than a game that he plays, he supposedly enjoys more than the "formal, abstract freedom"[54] that comes from subjecting oneself to a systematically unified rulebook. The ethicist is also a husband who aims to possess his wife, rather than merely conquering her like a seducer.[55] He likewise favors ongoing historical love over Romantic first love;[56] poetry, given its ability to portray the meaning of time, over the supposed spatializing of music;[57] actuality over the imaginary;[58] and sociality over alienated aloneness.[59] Unlike the easily bored aesthete, the ethicist

---

50 *SKS* 1, 23–24, 27 / *EO1*, 39, 43. That this approach is non-dialectical can be gleaned from the assertion, in *SKS* 1, 22 / *EO1*, 38, that: "Tautology is and remains the highest principle, the highest maxim of thought."

51 *SKS* 2, 123, 42 / *EO2*, 135, 46. See also *SKS* 2, 75, 251–253, 267 / *EO2*, 82, 280–83, 288, 298.

52 *SKS* 2, 200 / *EO2*, 223. See also *SKS* 2, 40, 42, 132–38, 160, 192, 198 / *EO2*, 43, 45, 146–53, 176, 214, 221.

53 See *SKS* 2, 149–54, 155, 157, 160–61, 190, 191–92, 198 / *EO2*, 164–69, 171, 173, 176–77, 211, 213–14, 219.

54 *SKS* 2, 161 / *EO2*, 178.

55 See *SKS* 2, 119 / *EO2*, 131.

56 See *SKS* 2, 43, 125–30 / *EO2*, 47, 138–44.

57 See *SKS* 2, 123–24 / *EO2*, 136–37.

58 See *SKS* 2, 112 / *EO2*, 123.

59 See *SKS* 2, 76–77, 235, 245 / *EO2*, 83–84, 262, 273.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

also appears to embrace tedium—at least if his long-winded writing is any indication. And because the ethicist can be expected to give beauty its proper place,[60] integrating a "dethroned" aesthetics within the ethical,[61] he avoids the aesthete's tendency to live for the moment and pursue every mood or idea as an abstraction.[62] Thus does he manage to shun the childishness so characteristic of those ancient aesthetes, the Greeks, who were governed by arbitrariness and did anything but welcome growing old.[63] And where the aesthete is in denial about his pluralism (and so, ultimately, his nihilism, since his life eventually "disintegrates into nothing"[64]), the ethicist supposedly lives in unity.[65] Indeed, it is none other than the ethicist's "unity in a life-view" that allows him to meet "the condition for friendship" with other people.[66]

As for the contrast between the ethicist's life and that of the strictly religious, the upholder of "religious abstraction,"[67] the ethicist still considers himself able to be a good Christian, since Christianity and ethics, God and the good, form a "complete whole."[68] For the ethical not only subsumes the aesthetic, but both may be considered "united" with religion[69]—for this reason, the all-encompassing ethical can be seen as reflecting a self-contained "rational order," one that "has its teleology in itself."[70] This monism is also behind the ethicist's belief that marriage is an institution whose "sensuous love has but one transfiguration, in which it is equally aesthetic, religious, and ethical"[71] and which thereby incarnates an "earthly love" that "ends with loving one."[72] Because those who marry

60 See *SKS* 2, 19–20, 52, 246–47, 289–90 / *EO2*, 20–21, 57, 275–77, 323.
61 *SKS* 2, 202 / *EO2*, 226. See also *SKS* 2, 161, 243 / *EO2*, 177, 271.
62 See *SKS* 2, 16, 163, 205–206 / *EO2*, 17, 179, 229–30.
63 See *SKS* 2, 80, 110, 147, 168, 170, 231 / *EO2*, 87, 121, 162, 186, 188, 257–58; and *SKS* 4, 61, 105 / *FT*, 9, 55.
64 *SKS* 2, 10 / *EO2*, 11; see also *SKS* 2, 46, 81, 82, 146, 153, 173, 204–205 / *EO2*, 50, 88, 90, 160, 168–69, 192, 228.
65 See *SKS* 2, 196, 204–205 / *EO2*, 219, 228.
66 See *SKS* 2, 286, 288 / *EO2*, 319, 321.
67 *SKS* 6, 163 / *SLW*, 172.
68 *SKS* 2, 20 / *EO2*, 21. See also *SKS* 2, 20, 25, 30, 53, 56, 86 / *EO2*, 22, 26, 32, 58, 61, 94; and *SKS* 6, 154, 169 / *SLW*, 162, 178.
69 *SKS* 2, 32 / *EO2*, 34. See also *SKS* 2, 106, 133 / *EO2*, 116, 147.
70 *SKS* 2, 262, 236 / *EO2*, 292, 263. Living the ethical life thus amounts to a "collecting of oneself." *SKS* 2, 232 / *EO2*, 258; see also *SKS* 2, 170, 172, 174 / *EO2*, 188, 190, 193; and *SKS* 4, 104 / *FT*, 54.
71 *SKS* 2, 60 / *EO2*, 65. See also *SKS* 2, 33, 38, 41, 55, 66, 71, 82 / *EO2*, 36, 41, 44, 60, 72, 77, 89. In *SKS* 2, 57 / *EO2*, 62, we are told that "since marriage is an inner harmony in this way, it of course has its telos in itself." See also *SKS* 2, 83 / *EO2*, 90.
72 *SKS* 2, 57 / *EO2*, 62.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

constitute "a unity of contrasts,"[73] their duties are unified rather than plural.[74] No wonder family life can be said to exhibit a "coherence."[75]

Kierkegaard is clearly skeptical about the incorporation of genuine Christianity into the ethical, however. It says a great deal that the latter is presented as sensuous,[76] as dismissing the notion of being born again,[77] and as capable of being captured theoretically, that is, by a theology or "total view."[78] In any case, and more generally, Kierkegaard believes that the ethicist's unity will also eventually break down. Before showing how, however, I want to register the disagreement that I have with him over the natures of both the aesthetic and the ethical.

Essentially, I consider unified being as a gateway to the aesthetic. Ethical seriousness, by contrast, comes from contending with disunity, which is why genuinely unified worlds—paradises—are literally fantastic, so much so that we sometimes call them utopias ("no places"). To conceive of the ethical as "a perfect, self-contained sphere,"[79] then, is to conceive of it as aesthetic rather than ethical, because whenever someone plays a role within a unity, it must itself be unified, and so they must ultimately be doing what they do for its own sake (given that its sake is contained within it). No surprise, then, that their actions tend to be for show, concerned with the impression they give to spectators. As it happens, this is precisely how the sociologist Erving Goffman has urged us to approach the performance of social roles: he argues that we should view such actions "dramaturgically" rather than technically, politically, structurally, or culturally.[80] "Role-players," that is, should be judged according to the standards of performers and, "*qua* performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized."[81] According to this view, rather than actually being virtuous, what matters is one's ability to *signal* virtue. Or one's failure to do so, as in the following startling example:

---

73 *SKS* 2, 56 / *EO2*, 61.
74 *SKS* 2, 228–230, 240 / *EO2*, 254–56, 268.
75 *SKS* 2, 77 / *EO2*, 85.
76 *SKS* 2, 46 / *EO2*, 49.
77 See *SKS* 2, 37 / *EO2*, 40.
78 *SKS* 2, 107 / *EO2*, 118; see also *SKS* 2, 81–82, 99, 106–107, 231 / *EO2*, 88–89, 109, 117–18, 258.
79 *SKS* 4, 117 / *FT*, 68.
80 See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1959, p. 240.
81 Ibid., p. 251.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> [W]hen a surgeon and his nurse both turn from the operating table and the anesthetized patient accidentally rolls off the table to his death, not only is the operation disrupted in an embarrassing way, but the reputation of the doctor, as a doctor and as a man, and also the reputation of the hospital may be weakened.[82]

This amoral, because aesthetic, approach is only to be expected whenever one begins with the assumption that such events transpire within a unity. Genuine ethics, by contrast, often requires responding to a conflict that, potentially, may not be resolvable; this is one reason for its seriousness. Of course, Kierkegaard recognizes that such conflicts will sooner or later arise, if only because ethical requirements are sometimes insatiable. But for him this marks not the essential condition of the ethical but its breakdown. It is because, ultimately, "the individual always goes bankrupt,"[83] that the (so-called) ethicist's "soul is dissipated in multiplicity."[84]

This brings us to religion, the next sphere(s). Like the previous ones, Religiousness A is ostensibly self-contained, albeit in an infinite way reminiscent of an ouroboros: "Religiousness A is the dialectic of inward deepening; it is the relation to an eternal happiness that is not conditioned by a something but is the dialectical inward deepening of the relation, consequently conditioned only by the inward deepening, which is dialectical."[85] As noted, its highest form is that of Hegelian philosophy, which underlies the "Christendom" (in contrast to genuine Christianity) that Kierkegaard believes was incarnated by the Danish church of his day. But as this Christendom amounts to no more than "playing Christianity,"[86] we have here yet again something that Kierkegaard should have identified as aesthetic.

Regardless, Hegelian philosophy claims to be an absolute, and so unconditional, idealism—one which contains all reality. So we need to appreciate how it fails when confronted by events such as the Bible's Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). Hegel would have us view Abraham as a great man for, despite representing an extreme form of alienation from the world, he is the starting-point of a dialectic progression that culminates in the overcoming of all oppositions, including that

82 Ibid., p. 243.
83 *SKS* 6, 443 / *SLW*, 476; see also *SKS* 7, 222 / *CUP1*, 266.
84 *SKS* 4, 93 / *FT*, 43.
85 *SKS* 7, 486 / *CUP1*, 556.
86 *Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom": 1854–1855*, trans. by Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1968, p. 8, p. 44, p. 121, p. 149, p. 179.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

between the world and the God who transcends it.[87] While Abraham's role in this "teleology of the moral" is accepted by Kierkegaard, when it comes to religion, Kierkegaard objects that Hegel "is wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith when he should be sent back to a lower court and shown up as a murderer."[88] Otherwise put, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son for God means that he embodies an unresolvable paradox that Hegel refuses to recognize. Emil L. Fackenheim has raised a similar objection as regards the aporia of the Holocaust: philosophy cannot remain silent about it and do it justice, yet it cannot comprehend it either, since it is inherently incomprehensible.[89] Notice, however, that such irreconcilables do not lead Kierkegaard to claim that Religiousness A breaks down, like the aesthetic and the ethical spheres, into a plurality; rather, his point appears to be merely that it fails to acknowledge the presence of plurality, and so the gaps between itself as a unified religion and the now-shattered antecedent spheres.[90] To Kierkegaard, Hegelian religion's monist denial of these gaps—denial of their very possibility, in fact—leaves it unable to fully account for reality. Indeed, in being merely theological it is, in a sense, faithless.[91]

Religiousness B, by contrast, upholds a genuine, because pluramonist, faith. It is Christianity as a serious, mature religion, one that follows Abraham in having undergone a "rebirth"[92] and weaned itself from the childlike belief in monism, in unity alone.[93] Instead of this, it embraces paradox,[94] affirming both

---

87 See G.W.F. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, ed. by Richard Kroner, trans. by T.M. Knox, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1975, pp. 182–89.

88 *SKS* 4, 105 / *FT*, 55. For helpful commentary, see Mark C. Taylor, "Journeys to Moriah: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 70, 1977, pp. 305–26. See also: Jon Stewart, "Hegel's View of Moral Conscience and Kierkegaard's Interpretation of Abraham," *Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 19, 1998, pp. 58–80. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 305–335.

89 "Indeed, such are the crises which have befallen the Christian West in the last half century that it may safely be said that, were he alive today, so realistic a philosopher as Hegel would not be a Hegelian." Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1967, p. 224; see also his *To Mend the Word: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994, p. 238.

90 See *SKS* 4, 104–105 / *FT*, 54–55.

91 See *SKS* 4, 98 / *FT*, 48.

92 *SKS* 4, 189 / *PF*, 20. Note that this "rebirth" (*Gjenfødslen*) is different from the idea of being "reborn" (*Opvakt*, better translated as "awakened"), which (as a "revivalist") is a target of criticism at *SKS 7*, 189 / *CUP1*, 454. See "A Problem with Hannay's Postscript," in M.G. Piety, *Piety on Kierkegaard*, 16 April 2017, https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/tag/born-again/.

93 See *SKS* 4, 61, 66 / *FT*, 9, 13.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

the unified dialectic of Religiousness A alongside the plural remnants of the ethical and aesthetic—both the infinity of the former and the finitudes of the latter. If we truly want to experience an "ethical and religious personal existing,"[95] Kierkegaard therefore believes, we ought to uphold the unmediatable paradoxes that arise from contradictory truths, not the least of which is the idea that Abraham must both love his son if he is to be an ethical father *and* be willing to sacrifice him if he is to follow God.[96]

3.3 Suspending the Ethical?

Kierkegaard has famously described the latter as entailing a "suspension" of the ethical.[97] But why, especially given the act's "most terrifying"[98] nature, does he not refer to religion "overriding" ethics instead? As Michael Walzer has pointed out, to override a prescription is to violate it while recognizing that it nevertheless still stands; whereas to suspend it is to set it aside, to cancel or annul it temporarily. This is why those who do the former are understood to dirty their hands, unlike those who do the latter.[99] "Suspension" is nonetheless appropriate in Abraham's case, given his certainty that God will ultimately halt the sacrifice. True, Abraham "infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life," but at the same time his boundless faith that he will not lose his son means that, ultimately, he will "not renounce anything."[100] Even if he were actually allowed to carry out the murder, he believes that "God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed."[101] This is the paradox in his case, and it is why he is able to be both at "peace and rest and comfort in the pain."[102] In the end, Abraham assumes that he won't have to violate ethics after all, that his love of God will allow him to act for God's sake *as well as* for his own and his neighbors.[103] And he knows this by virtue of the absurd,[104] his embrace of pluramonist

94 See, for example, *SKS* 7, 34, 76, 84 / *CUP1*, 46, 95, 105.
95 *SKS* 7, 264 / *CUP1*, 308; see also *SKS* 4, 89, 91 / *FT*, 38, 40.
96 See *SKS* 4, 82, 84–85, 106–107, 109, 115–16 / *FT*, 30, 33, 56–57, 59, 66.
97 See *SKS* 4, 104 / *FT*, 54.
98 *SKS* 7, 226 / *CUP1*, 267.
99 See Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, ed. by David Miller, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press 2007, p. 286.
100 *SKS* 4, 98 / *FT*, 48; see also *SKS* 4, 99 / *FT*, 49.
101 *SKS* 4, 87 / *FT*, 36.
102 *SKS* 4, 96 / *FT*, 45.
103 See *SKS* 4, 109, 119–20 / *FT*, 59, 70–71.
104 See *SKS* 4, 97–99 / *FT*, 46–49, 115.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

paradox, not because of the monist, speculative form of reason underlying Hegelian dialectics (even though it, too, claims to suspend any paradox).[105] So we may consider Abraham's preparations for the sacrifice as akin to, say, Jesus' withholding the whole truth about his eventual fate when he knows that his followers are not yet ready to hear it.[106] Because while Abraham's suspension of the ethical indeed constitutes a trial,[107] it is one whose verdict is a foregone conclusion. Or so he believes.

But what about Isaac? What must he have thought? And what must the vast majority of us think, including presumably Kierkegaard himself? For unlike Abraham, we are not knights of faith—if we do believe, then we do so with a degree of doubt; sometimes, with quite a lot.[108] That is why we cannot help but see Abraham as someone who would, at least potentially, have violated one of the most fundamental ethical imperatives. And it is why, even though God did indeed ultimately revoke His sacrificial order, we recognize that serious moral damage was done; hands *were* dirtied.[109] So Kierkegaard should have mentioned that, to most, Abraham indeed overrode, rather than merely suspended, the ethical. Kierkegaard's failure to do so suggests that we have here an example of when his pluramonism has degraded to monism, and so aestheticism. I think we can identify at least two others.

First, there is his Christian anti-Pelagianism: Kierkegaard seems to believe that only Jesus Christ allows access to the paradox that is true religion, and so is the only way of truly overcoming sin. For example, he considers (Rabbinic) Jewish law (*halakha*) "merely a point of transition," the implication being that Judaism's ostensible supersession by Christianity was something that can be considered thoroughly clean.[110] But anyone who takes the history seriously

105 See *SKS* 7, 186–87, 189–90 / *CUP1*, 222–23, 227.
106 See *SKS* 6, 218 / *SLW*, 230. Cf. John 16:4, 12.
107 See *SKS* 7, 222 / *CUP1*, 263.
108 Miguel de Unamuno goes even further: "Those who believe that they believe in God, but without any passion in their heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God-Idea, not in God Himself." *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. by J.E. Crawford Flitch, New York: Dover 1921, p. 193. In *The Agony of Christianity*, trans. by Kurt F. Reinhardt, New York: F. Ungar Publishing 1960, p. 19, Unamuno writes: "A faith which knows no doubt is a dead faith."
109 As I have pointed out in "What's Wrong with Hypergoods," *Patriotic Elaborations: Essays in Practical Philosophy*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2009, p. 132.
110 *SKS* 27, 101, Papir 68:2 / *JP* 2, 2208; see also *SKS* 1, 336–37 / *CI*, 262–63. On *halakha* as a genuine form of paradoxical, revelatory creativity, see my "On the Minimal Global Ethic," in *Patriotic Elaborations*, pp. 168–72.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

will know that the reality was, of course, quite the opposite.[111] The excuse has been offered that Kierkegaard was, after all, "a man of his times."[112] But he was also a genius, in many ways ahead of his time. So why not in this one?[113]

Second, I pointed out above how show or performance is a major aesthetic mode that Kierkegaard tends to overlook. I think his own writing exemplifies this. Emmanuel Levinas has described it as "shamelessly exhibitionist,"[114] and indeed it is hard not to wonder at not only its excessive didacticism and repetition, but also its flashiness. A large amount of the rhetorical superfluity in Kierkegaard's writings seems to have no other end than display. If pressed, I think he would concede the point, admitting (again) that he is no knight of faith. After all, as he himself tells us, a true knight would be silent about his faith, since he would have "no vain desire to instruct others"; furthermore, he would also appear as a typical member of society, of whom "no one ever suspects anything else."[115] So it should be hard to tell knight from ethicist. By his own lights, then, a strictly religious Kierkegaard should have appeared as much like Fritz Schlegel, that thoroughly marriageable man who ended up wedding Regine Olsen, the woman Kierkegaard loved but ultimately spurned.[116] Of course, he himself never married; instead, he chose to live the life of a literary celebrity bachelor, someone often mocked as a flamboyant dandy who, nevertheless, would parade about town in ill-fitting clothes.[117]

It is useful here to contrast Kierkegaard's self-exposure with Augustine's. The latter's confessions are certainly entertaining, but they also reveal his candor.

---

111 See, for example, James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 2001; and David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2013, chapters 2–3, 6–7, 9.

112 Aaron Fehir, *Kierkegaardian Reflections on the Problem of Pluralism*, Lanham, MA: Lexington Books 2015, p. 75.

113 A point made by Peter Tudvad in the first part of the preface to his *Stadier paa Antisemitisms Vej: Søren Kierkegaard og Jøderne* (*Stages on the Way of Antisemitism: Søren Kierkegaard and the Jews*), Copenhagen: Rosinante & Co. 2010); see the translation by M.G. Piety, "Part I of the Preface to Tudvad's book *Stadier paa antisemitismens vej*," in *Piety on Kierkegaard*, 26 December 2011, https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/category/kierkegaard-and-the-jews/.

114 Emmanuel Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," trans. by Jonathan Rée, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1988, p. 34.

115 *SKS* 4, 128, 91 / *FT*, 80, 41; and see *SKS* 4, 159, 160–61 / *FT*, 113, 115 on Abraham's silence.

116 Schlegel has been described as "practically the exact opposite of Kierkegaard: stable, harmonious, healthy, un-ironic, and patient; he was thus made for marriage." Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005, p. 485.

117 See *The Corsair Affair.*

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

There is a thoroughly serious purpose behind Augustine's recounting of lurid deeds. God, of course, already knows all. But through Augustine's confessions, other young men will be able to recognize how low they have gone and so how high they must go. By contrasting the depths of sin with the height of God, Augustine thereby performs an important rhetorical function: the worse the former appear, the better the latter. "As for the good, it rejoices them to hear of sins committed in the past by men now free from them: not because these things are sins, but because they were and no longer are."[118] In short, Augustine's end is the thoroughly serious one of encouraging conversion. I would say that this is also true of much—though not all—of Kierkegaard's writings. By demonstrating to aesthetes, ethicists, and pagans that he knows them better than they know themselves, Kierkegaard effectively communicates the message that they would do better to adopt his version of Christianity. Sometimes, however, he would too.

3.4 Just War and the Supreme Emergency

Faced with a supreme emergency, in which "our deepest values and our collective survival are in imminent danger,"[119] Walzer has argued that we may violate the rules of war and thereby fight unjustly, say by bombing civilians. In allowing for multiple exceptions to the (supposedly) unified theory of just war, Walzer can be interpreted as combining pluralism and monism in the very same paradoxical way as Kierkegaard, albeit in secular terms rather than as a means of achieving openness to revelation.[120] Regardless, the decision-making involved should be characterized as based on a form of creativity that is beyond reason; it is not for nothing that Walzer has had very little to say about how, exactly, we are to determine what we may do. The theory of just war itself certainly cannot coherently tell us when it should be overridden, despite the monist claims of some political philosophers.[121] Indeed, as Jeremy Waldron has written:

---

118 Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. by Michael P. Foley, trans. by F.J. Sheed, Indianapolis: Hackett 2006, 2nd ed., Book 10, Chapter 3 (p. 212).

119 Michael Walzer, "Emergency Ethics," *Arguing About War*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press 2004, p. 33; see also *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books 1977, Chapter 16.

120 For more on Walzer's pluramonism, see my "Dirty Hands: The One and the Many," *The Monist*, vol. 101, 2018, pp. 159–61.

121 See, for example, Richard J. Arneson, "Just Warfare Theory and Noncombatant Immunity," *Cornell International Law Journal*, vol. 39, 2006, pp. 685–88; Nathan R. Colaner, "How Just War

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> There is a sense in Walzer's discussion that in certain circumstances, *the bottom drops out of our ability to argue our way legally or morally through a problem*, because the assumptions that normally underpin such arguments have been shaken or have otherwise evaporated… When the circumstances of justice fail in this way, the result is not a neat *alternative* set of moral prescriptions, but rather some radical uncertainty about whether we can think normatively at all.[122]

We are, it seems to me, supposed to rely on something like "inspiration"—a term that not only has connotations of irrationality and mystery but, especially when it comes to actions during wartime, should make us particularly attentive to the grave dangers involved. Be that as it may, it *is* necessary to decide, since to do nothing is still to do something, even if this is best described as suicidal. Otherwise, we shirk our responsibilities to face up to a genuine ethical dilemma. Thankfully, Walzer—and Kierkegaard before him—have helped us to identify one approach we might take.

Theory May Survive Without the Supreme Emergency Exemption," *Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 30, 2010, pp. 1–12; and William R. Lund, "Reconsidering 'Supreme Emergencies': Michael Walzer and his Critics," *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 37, 2011, pp. 654–78. For a good summary of the issue, see Daniel Statman, "Supreme Emergencies and the Continuum Problem," *Journal of Military Ethics*, vol. 11, 2012, pp. 287–98.

122 Jeremy Waldron, "Reflections on 'Supreme Emergency'," NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper nos. 17–45, 14 November 2017, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3064952, pp. 14–15.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Michael Glass

4 Kierkegaard and Interreligious Understanding

Kierkegaard's writings are not often referred to in debates surrounding religious pluralism. Often the proposed solutions to the problems religious pluralism raise require that belief that one faith is correct and others are false must be eschewed. However, this is at odds with much of orthodox Abrahamic religion, which renders this solution infeasible as a method for dealing with traditional religious belief. However, Kierkegaard's writings provide a basis for dealing with the problems of religious pluralism. George Connell and Carl Hughes have both provided analyses of Kierkegaard with a mind toward using his writings to provide a framework for the problems of religious pluralism.[1] I am specifically interested in what Connell refers to as the epistemic problem—what does it mean to sincerely hold exclusive religious beliefs while respecting the beliefs of others that seem, ultimately, to be wrong? Both Connell and Hughes provide solutions that wish to let go of the second horn of this dilemma—they want to let go of religious doctrines as exclusive.

However, an essential element of much of Christian and Jewish thought is the belief that there is only one god, and that belief in other gods is idolatrous and wrong. Therefore, a traditionalist Christian or Jew will be forced to reject such solutions. Instead, I wish to push forward Kierkegaard's existential ethics in a way that accepts both horns of the dilemma—believing in the exclusive rightness of one's own religious views while accepting the value of views that are, strictly speaking, believed to be wrong. An understudied text in Kierkegaard scholarship, *The Book on Adler*, is central to this, suggesting the importance of this text for applications of Kierkegaard's insights to contemporary problems. By taking it in context and applying Hughes' insight that it is a valuable text in this field, while arguing against his analysis of the text, I put forward a new analysis of Kierkegaard's applicability to contemporary issues of religious pluralism.

1 George Connell, *Kierkegaard and the Paradox of Religious Diversity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdman's 2016; Carl Hughes, "The Constructive Value of *The Book on Adler* for Christian Theology in the Age of Religious Pluralism," *The Book on Adler*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 2008 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 24), pp. 193 – 215.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-005

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

4.1 Disagreement on Doctrine

Over Easter weekend of 2019, the *New York Times* published an interview with Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York.[2] In the interview, Dr. Jones described belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus as unnecessary to Christianity, as something that has no bearing on the religion. She went so far as to say that if the body of Jesus were found in the tomb today, this would have no bearing on Christianity. The timing of this was viewed on social media as intentional, and it resulted in a great deal of outrage. This outrage interestingly included members of more traditionally liberal Christian denominations.[3] Whatever the precise nature or source of disagreement, one thing was clear in the response: a variety of Christians viewed Jones as wrong, and wrong in a way that referred to some objective fact of the matter. However, it is not just liberal and postliberal theologians that disagree with orthodox Christians on the issue of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Members of other religions, including Judaism and certain interpretations of Islam, believe that this did not happen. The same could be said for numerous other Christian doctrines. As such, the disagreement, which at times became vitriol towards[4] Jones, would also apply. This is even more so the case with certain doctrines like the Incarnation and the Trinity. There are claims that religions make which are correct or incorrect, which further implies that the claims of other religions are incorrect or correct. Two religious doctrines that imply contrary views cannot be brought into agreement with each other without severe compromise, leading to an apparent impasse.

It is here I wish to turn to Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's influence on the theological imagination of orthodox Protestantism is beyond calculation. With his influence on contemporary theology, he is a natural choice for resources when considering theological problems. However, Kierkegaard's theoretical approach to other religions, especially to issues of doctrinal difference, is understudied. Here, *The Book on Adler* becomes important. A close study of this text, combined with other texts from Kierkegaard's writings, can help to reveal an existentially appropriate attitude to the problems of religious difference

---

2 Nicholas Kristof, "Reverend, You Say the Virgin Birth is 'a Bizarre claim'?" *The New York Times*, April 20, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/20/opinion/sunday/christian-easter-serene-jones.html.

3 For example, Ben Crosby, April 20, 2019, https://twitter.com/benjamindcrosby/status/1119713027350306819.

4 https://twitter.com/SereneJones/status/1120686820268871680

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that addresses individual Abrahamic[5] religions' exclusive beliefs with sensitivity. It reveals a basis for understanding the other as other on the other's terms, and a use for irony to enable respect. An ironic attitude that has a serious core can be understood as an essential element of tolerance within a Kierkegaardian framework.

The way Kierkegaard's writings can deal with inter-religious difference requires some exegetical work. In *The Book on Adler*, one finds that the attitude of offense (rejection of the claims of revelation or faith) is tied with all appropriate responses to claims of the divine. Any claim to divine authority can result in offense if it is taken seriously. Not all forms of offense are good, but self-aware offense is worthy of respect from within the context of those who have faith in the relevant religious claim. When taken together with the fact that nobody can objectively prove the claims of faith to another, this leads to dealing with differing types of faith by way of irony. While there are alternate interpretations of Kierkegaard, I respond to these as being inadequate.

4.2 Preliminaries to *The Book on Adler*

The unpublished manuscript of *The Book on Adler* contains themes that appear throughout Kierkegaard's signed and pseudonymous writings. Parts of the text were published in one of the *Two Minor Ethical-Religious Essays* under the pseudonym H.H. Given that it expands upon themes in the published writings, *The Book on Adler* can be considered important for a deeper understanding of Kierkegaard's positions. What is pertinent to the current discussion is how Kierkegaard approached the case of his contemporary, Adolph Peter Adler. Kierkegaard considers what it would mean to take Adler's claim to a revelation seriously and asks: What would taking seriously someone's claim to having had a revelation entail? I will show that Kierkegaard's response to this question can lead to ways of dealing with issues of conflicting religious claims, or dealing with those contrary to one's own beliefs.

Adler is only tangentially the subject of the book. He is the subject "only in a certain sense" and "[t]he whole book is basically an ethical inquiry into the concept of a revelation, into what it means to be called by a revelation."[6] In light of

5 The current paper is primarily concerned with the Abrahamic religions due to the focus on revelation in Kierkegaard's writings. These religions are important to many contemporary political problems, and therefore I have chosen to address them specifically. The current project may later be expanded to include more religions.

6 *Pap.* VIII-2 B 27, 75–6 / *BA*, 3.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

this, the problem still stands: what if Adler had "held fast" to his claim? Or what if there were some other person would say that he was an apostle and held fast to that claim? Such individuals have existed historically. The question is thus: How is one to respond to these apostles or claimants to divine knowledge, whether in person or by means of the writings left behind by those claimants? Here we return to the earlier response: faith or offense.

Kierkegaard does not agree with giving religious claims the most "rational" or naturalizing interpretation. Such interpretations do not respect revelation-claims or those claiming them, as those claims are categorically different from all other claims. Attempting to bring religious claims into line with other sorts of claims means that one is not taking those claims seriously. This lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's polemics against Hegelian theologians and against the concept of Christendom. Both of these serve to make Christianity too easy, whereas true Christianity, as Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus states, is really the most difficult thing of all.[7]

These limits to the standard forms of critique are captured when Kierkegaard refers to the critic as powerless before the claims of the apostle, who has received the revelation. Kierkegaard claims that "[t]he most eminent critic who has ever lived is inactivated in relation to a man who holds firm in appealing to a revelation-fact."[8] This is because the critic relies on criteria such as elegance and how well the subject responds to the claims other thinkers consider relevant. However, this is a category mistake, because "*divine authority* is the category" and what marks this category is "*the possibility of offense*."[9] Offense, or at least the possibility of it, is necessary for arriving at an understanding of what is actually going on in a revelation. Offense that one could dare to claim divine authority is always a possibility when one takes revelation-claims seriously.

This difference between the realm of the critic and the claims of the revelation is also captured by the difference between the genius and the apostle. In describing this distinction in his essay on the difference between the two, Kier-

---

7 *SKS* 12, 106 / *PC*, 99: "Alas, for Christ himself understood as no human being can understand how difficult it is to become a believer. He is suffering here also; he wants to save all, but in order to be saved they must go through the possibility of offense—ah, it is as if he, the Savior who wants to save all, came to stand almost alone because everyone is offended at him!" Note that while Kierkegaard is interested in Christianity, and he may think it is more difficult than other religions, the contrast between different religions is not his focus. Whether or not the same difficulty may be said to be found in other religions is not clear.

8 *SKS* 15, 107 / *BA*, 22.

9 *Pap.* VIII-2 B 15, 66 / *BA*, 33.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

kegaard (H.H.) considers the concepts of "Brilliance" and "Spirit,"[10] saying that these have become confused, treated as "just about one and the same" because "the paradoxical-religious is not abolished or is explained back into the esthetic," making an apostle "neither more nor less than a genius."[11] This distinction indicates the deep concern that Kierkegaard has for the problem of people treating the apostle as answering to the same standards as a creative or an intellectual. Considering the apostle in those terms is tied to a denial of what is essential to Christianity (what H.H. is referring to with the term "the paradoxical-religious"[12]), and is essentially the same as denying what the apostle says. If one responds to claims with a category mistake, that is the same as denying that what is said belongs to that category.

So how can we cope with the claims of the supposed apostle? Is there some way to outright deny them? Kierkegaard shows that there is, and does in fact deny that Adler received a revelation. He affirms that one must argue *e concessis* (accepting the principles of the supposed revelation) unless the recipient "does not hold fast" in which case, the claimant "must reconcile himself to having it established by his own words that he himself does not believe that he has had a revelation, or that in any case he is so confused about the categories that he does not know what he is saying because he does not connect any well-defined thoughts with the words."[13] That is, if the claimant does not behave and speak as though he has had a revelation, he makes the same category mistakes as the aforementioned critic, and we must then conclude that he has not had a revelation. A true revelation is so overwhelming that one cannot help but be transformed by it permanently. Kierkegaard therefore concludes, based on Adler's vacillations, that Adler has not had a revelation.

4.3 Knowing and Ignorant Offense

Not all offense is created equal. Remember that trying to take the apostle out of his specific category, bringing him into the categories of the philosopher or the artist, is to deny the apostle's claim by saying that the apostle does not even belong to their claimed category. It is to say: "You do not mean what you just said." This kind of offense does not even respond to the existential problems of reve-

10 The concept of "Brilliance" is attached to the genius, while the concept of "Spirit" is attached to the apostle.
11 *SKS* 11, 98 / *WA*, 93.
12 This evokes themes present in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.
13 *SKS* 15, 177 / *BA*, 53.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

lation's call. Rather, it seeks to circumvent the problems of what Climacus terms "Religiousness A." This type of religiousness "is the dialectic of inward deepening," the process of appropriation, concern with the problems of the eternal, and is not unique to Christianity.[14] It consists in taking the problems of the eternal, of death, to heart.[15] By attempting to domesticate the revelation claim and understand it in terms of philosophy or poetry, the person who comes to understand it in this way is denying the prominent existential difficulties posed by issues of the divine. That is, by interpreting a claim to divine authority as something else, one is denying that the claimant even means what he says.

As a result, there is something missing from this response to claims of divine authority. While those who have faith may prefer that others also have faith, offense masquerading as faith does not even have the preliminary religious concern with the eternal, and attempts to deny that the followers of a faith really believe what they believe. As such, it is less desirable than the type of offense that recognizes itself as offense, that takes the risk of rejecting the apostle on the apostle's terms. This is not to say that one must be religious in order to reject the behavior of particular religious people. Rather, in entails that the claims of religious people must be understood on their own terms—if one denies the basic premises of their beliefs, it needs to be understood as a rejection of the whole world-view, rather than a mere re-interpretation.

This sort of response can be seen in the *Philosophical Fragments*, also published under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. The text draws a strict distinction between the Socratic mode of life and another, opposing mode of life that remains unnamed, but is clearly Christianity. What characterizes this difference is the problem of answering questions about the origins of knowledge of the truth. How are we to live our lives? In the Socratic, in some way the truth is already always present in an individual human being, and any teacher is actually "only an occasion…because I can discover my own untruth only by myself,"[16] just as the teacher brings out truth, rather than imparting it. In the case of the Christian, this truth is only known because of an outside force, which provides the conditions necessary for learning.

14 *SKS* 7, 506 / *CUP1*, 556.

15 Climacus describes the "development or remaking of the subjectivity" as the "concentration in itself under a conception of the infinite's highest good, and eternal happiness" (*SKS* 7, 122 / *CUP1*, 130).

16 *SKS* 4, 223 / *PF*, 14.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

All of these considerations are the preliminaries for Climacus' critique of Hegel.[17] Climacus suggests that Hegel tried "to go beyond Socrates" but that he "nevertheless says essentially the same as him, only not nearly so well" and "that, at least, is not Socratic."[18] When Climacus describes Hegel as saying essentially the same thing as Socrates, he means that Hegel is committed to the Socratic assumption that the conditions necessary for the truth are already present in a given human being. As such, if this is what defines the Socratic (in relation to the Christian), Hegel is really saying the same thing as Socrates, and has not been able to sublimate Christianity into philosophy. Hegel fails to reinterpret the Christian into the Socratic. This sublimation is an analogous project to that of the critic, who attempts to understand the apostle in terms of the genius. Doing so falls short of the Socratic and the genius, and falling short of those is taken as an offense. Why would not being Socratic be an insult to Hegel, unless the Socratic were not viewed as worthy of some respect? If the Socratic, which is categorically distinct from the Christian, is deserving of greater respect than the more covert Hegelian offense, then it stands to reason that there is something to self-understood offense that is worthy of some respect within Kierkegaard's framework. Therefore, the offended one that feels offended demands some level of respect from those with faith, because he still takes the claims of faith as demanding some response.

One might respond with the fact that various sorts of knowing offense have been used to justify violence. While Kierkegaard was not interested in this issue himself,[19] there is at least some hope available to those who want to use Kierkegaard's work as a basis for interreligious dialogue and tolerance, based on what was described above. We can see this in aspects of Kierkegaard's authorship which provide detailed analyses of the appropriate attitudes for one to take

17 He may have had in mind the Hegelian theologians of Denmark more than Hegel himself, but for simplicity's sake, I will continue referring to Hegel. See: Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 336–377. Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard's Criticism of Martensen in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*," *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie*, vol. 45, nos. 1–2, 2001, pp. 133–148. Climacus attacks Hegel at length in the later *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Kierkegaard used certain Hegelian forms of thought, but was critical of Hegel, often for the same reasons as those discussed by Climacus in the *Postscript*.

18 *SKS* 4, 306 / *PF*, 111.

19 An exception to this is Peter Tudvad's work on Kierkegaard's anti-Semitic writings, from which he concludes that anti-Semitism is a pervasive problem in Kierkegaard's writings. I believe that the problem of Kierkegaard's anti-Semitism is ultimately at odds with the implications of his views. See Peter Tudvad, *Stadier på antisemitismens vej Søren Kierkegaard og jøderne*, Copenhagen: Rosinante 2010.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

with respect to certain existential predicaments. Specifically, we must look at irony and how that affects how we cope with our world.

4.4 Irony and Religious Tolerance

Irony, for Kierkegaard, is when the inner and outer are opposed in such a way that rules that apply to one's outer life are not treated as binding for one's inner life. A figure that illustrates this concept is Socrates. He lived in Athens, and lived according to its rules. However, he did not view the rules as having any weight of their own. In fact, he was not concerned with putting forward something that would have such weight, but was satisfied to simply "refute any view that was put to him."[20] This granted him a kind of freedom because "no relationship was strong enough to bind him."[21] Irony is not inherently negative for Kierkegaard. He portrays many ways of life, each of which could be said to have some value. The ironic approach makes sense in many cases. Nevertheless, as Anthony Rudd points out, Kierkegaard does not advocate thoroughgoing irony with respect to every issue. Irony can serve specific purposes, but there is still a core of earnestness that serves to drive the ethical and religious person.

This can be related to George Connell's analysis of how Kierkegaard deals with different religions. He examines a few ways in which religious individuals interact, and what Kierkegaard would have to say about each of them. One of these types of interactions (and the most relevant to our discussion) is about the truth and salvific status of other religions. This question is tied to what attitude people should take when their religious claims contradict another person's. Connell divides up the relevant attitudes into three types: serious, ironic, and humorous. The humor to which Connell refers is Kierkegaard's concept of humor, which is tied to Christianity as an intermediary between the ethical and the religious spheres of life.[22] This humor is based on contradiction, and is a "suspension of seriousness" which "is, paradoxically, grounded in seriousness."[23] Connell concludes that this is the appropriate attitude for one to take

20 Anthony Rudd, "Kierkegaard's Critique of Pure Irony," *Kierkegaard and the Self in Society,* ed. by George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare, New York: St. Martin's Press 1998, p. 83.

21 *SKS* 1, 229 / *CI*, 182.

22 John Lippitt, "A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to Salvation: Climacus as Humorist in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*," *Religious Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1997, pp. 181–202.

23 George Connell, *Kierkegaard and the Paradox of Religious Diversity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdman's 2016, p. 98.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

when dealing with other faiths. However, he also says that this is not what Kierkegaard himself would have suggested.[24] He says that "[w]e look in vain for the sort of open, empathetic encounter with contemporary religious Others that Volf describes."[25] The subjective certainty of faith in Kierkegaard's sense prevents, on his account, the ability for one to have such an encounter.

However, Kierkegaard's careful examination of Adler leads to such an encounter. Adler is not exactly a religious "other," as his views stem from a Christian milieu, but Kierkegaard nonetheless treats Adler as such. Adler's revelation claim is viewed as a substantive difference, one worth examining—and notably, one that must be understood on its own terms. The examination of the case of Adler provides us with the opportunity to further flesh out Connell's views. This also indicates that Connell's interpretation of Kierkegaardian resources can be found more directly in Kierkegaard's work.

From here we can look to why one might turn to irony. Insofar as Kierkegaard's pseudonyms are related to him, they are related to him ironically. They are not him, and can be repudiated without repudiating him. Since Kierkegaard disavows the pseudonyms as different from himself and readily discarded by him,[26] these outer expressions of Kierkegaard are not reflections of what is inner.

In his study of Adler, Kierkegaard relies on the dialectic between ironic response to the other and the sincerity and seriousness of one's own religious convictions. Irony may be the only sincere way of taking both the convictions of oneself and the other seriously when those convictions are in contradiction. It is only by taking a sort of *distance* from what the believer believes to be true, that it is possible to believe in exclusive claims, and simultaneously take the exclusive claims of the other seriously. Yet this cannot be just any ironic distance. Many (indeed, perhaps most) ways of ironically distancing oneself are incompatible with taking one's own faith seriously. Consider the irony of Socrates, discussed above. He could not serve as an example of properly religious irony. He did not have an ultimately serious approach to the laws.[27] So the explanation for the irony must be located more specifically if it is to serve our present purpose.

Irony results from two important aspects of religious experience. The first is the fact that there are two responses to claims of divine authority. The second is

24 Connell, *Kierkegaard and the Paradox of Religious Diversity*, p. 103.

25 Ibid., p. 105

26 *SKS* 7, 569 – 573 / *CUP1*, 625 – 30.

27 This is at least somewhat questionable through the lens of the *Crito*, as Socrates appears to treat the laws more seriously within that dialogue. However, for the purposes of this example, this is not ultimately relevant.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

the fact of the objective uncertainty of faith. This combination is the spring from which a specifically Kierkegaardian irony flows. For the first factor, it is important to remember that authentic responses to an appeal to divine authority are offense and faith. There is no third option: "The possibility of offense is the crossroad, or it is like standing at the crossroad. From the possibility of offense, one turns either to offense or to faith."[28] This is to say that, when presented with Christian dogma of the Incarnation, offense and faith are the only available options according to Kierkegaard. This can be extended to all appeals to divine authority.[29] People trained in Christian concepts must know that one can be offended by the Christian faith. Offense—unbelief—is still an authentic response. When, for example, a Jew hears a Christian missionary speak, understands the Incarnation-claim, and then says: "No, I reject this," that is an authentic response, although it is offense, since a knowing rejection responds to all of the existential problems put forward by claims of divine authority. This rejection is not merely intellectual, but takes an existential stand, willing to accept all the consequences for being wrong.[30]

This is connected with the idea that faith is based on objective uncertainty. We are incapable of objective demonstrations of faith.[31] If we were capable of such demonstrations, it simply would not be faith. It would lack the dimension of existential *concern* which characterizes Religiousness A. This concern, which is transformative, is at the basis of any faith worth being called such. Without this concern, the claims of faith are made into a system which cannot qualitative-

28 *SKS* 12, 91 / *PC*, 81.

29 *SKS* 11, 108 / *WA*, 105: "'You, my listener, must now in your own mind consider whether you will submit to this authority or not, accept and believe these words or not. But if you refuse, then for God's sake do not accept the words because they are brilliant or profound or wondrously beautiful—because this is blasphemy, this is wanting to criticize God.' As soon, namely, as the dominance of authority, of the specifically paradoxical authority, is established, then all relations are qualitatively changed, then the kind of appropriation that is otherwise permissible and desirable is an offense and presumptuousness." That is to say, any response to claims of divine authority aside from accepting that authority are, by definition, offense.

30 We can see here why Kierkegaard's writings are often dismissive of apologetics; see, for example, *SKS* 7, 37 / *CUP1*, 31.

31 Michelle Kosch summarizes this as follows: "Kierkegaard agreed with Kant that there can be no immediate, sensibly apprehensible marks of divinity or divine manifestation, and he agreed with Hume that the sort of mysterious or improbably events that might seem to constitute indirect evidence should be regarded with skepticism in direct proportion to their mysteriousness or improbability (that is, in direct proportion to their suitability as evidence for divine revelation)." Michelle Kosch, "Kierkegaard (1813–1855)," *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Michael N. Forster and Kristin Gjesdal, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, p. 142.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ly change one's subjectivity. Since this uncertainty is central to ones' own faith, it must therefore lie behind any claims made comparing one's own faith with others'. An understanding that no one can objectively demonstrate for another the truth of his own faith encourages a sense of humility about what demands one can make. One understands the possibility that one is incorrect, *in an objective sense*, about such essential matters.

A person who admits objective uncertainty knows that one can be wrong about claims of faith, and when one encounters the religious other, who has authentically rejected one's faith, this possibility becomes a livelier option. That is to say, if a Christian says that God became human, meeting someone who says that this did not happen makes them more likely to recognize the possibility that their claim is incorrect. *To hold to the claims of faith is to hold that they are correct, which necessarily means that one cannot hold claims counter to these to also be correct.* As such, there is no possibility of seeing both claim and counter-claim as correct. Yet Kierkegaard shows that this can be seen to have positive repercussions: it forces one to set aside self-assuredness, and it means that the Christian has something to which he can be related through the possibility of struggle, which is at the core of the Christian faith (see *Practice in Christianity*).[32] Beyond these more personal considerations, this epistemic positions offers resources for coexisting with religious "others." When confronted with the fact that neither oneself nor the religious other can conclusively prove his beliefs, there is something inherently comical about the situation. Those who relate to their faith in an authentic manner know that life goes on, and that they must find some way to continue to live with one another. Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the actual existence of human beings is essential here—one who has faith does not cease to be a human being, and human beings must live amongst others. It is here that ironic distance becomes necessary.

The most obvious initial criticism of this is that it makes Kierkegaard's views seem no different from a religiosity that does not affect one's life, something against which Kierkegaard would protest. If the religious is limited to what is inner, this does not leave room for the outer expressions of the faith that are so central to Kierkegaard's thought, as we can see in texts like *Practice in Christianity.* However, what I have in mind here is not an inner-outer divide that would make religion an entirely private affair. If religious seriousness belonged to this

32 *SKS* 12, 123 / *PC*, 114: "They go to the Word to seek help—and then come to suffer on account of the Word. And with this suffering it is not as when one takes a medication or undergoes a treatment in which healing can involve some pain, to which one submits and in which there is no contradiction. No, tribulation and persecution come upon one because one has turned to Christianity for help."

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

sort of “inner life,” it would undercut Anti-Climacus’ idea of religion as treating Christ as prototype. Rather, I mean that the inner is an underlying current that determines behavior in the outer. Its effects are still seen—it determines how one can and does act. Yet, when confronted with situations of competing and irreconcilable belief systems, irony enables one to distance himself from his *visible* religion by acknowledging the validity of disagreement.[33]

4.5 Lindbeck and Hughes

Is this, however, a misinterpretation of how Kierkegaard thinks about religion? This possibility is most pressing when one considers the work of Carl Hughes, who comes to a very different conclusion about Kierkegaard’s theory of other religions. Specifically, Hughes takes Kierkegaard to be promoting a view of religion that downplays the importance of first-order propositions. This is interesting and worth considering in depth, because Hughes agrees that:

> If, in Kierkegaard’s thought, Christians stand in ‘offense’ in relation to the claims of other traditions, this should be understood as implying an enormous degree of respect for those traditions. Only a revelation that cannot but be assumed to be authentic can occasion the possibility of offense.[34]

The fact that Hughes comes to a different conclusion about the nature of Kierkegaard’s views on other religions despite having a similar starting point requires that we examine his views in detail.

Hughes connects Kierkegaard’s ideas most with George Lindbeck’s postliberal view of doctrine. Lindbeck was interested in the various conciliatory docu-

33 Another potential criticism is that Kierkegaard never laid out this methodology. However, that is unsurprising, because Kierkegaard’s concerns would not have led him to consider laying out a method for dealing with non-Christian revelation-claims. He was too busy dealing with the claims of Christianity to consider the claims of other religions, which he did not consider live options in his own context. Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, even jokes about this perceived homogeneity. When a man is asking himself whether he is Christian, his wife replies, “How can you not be a Christian? You are Danish aren’t you? Doesn’t the geography book say that the predominant religion Denmark is Lutheran-Christian? You aren’t a Jew, are you, or a Mohammedan? What else would you be, then?...So of course you are a Christian” (*SKS* 7, 56 / *CUP1*, 50–1).

34 Carl Hughes, “The Constructive Value of *The Book on Adler* for Christian Theology in the Age of Religious Pluralism,” *The Book on Adler*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 2008 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 24), p. 208.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ments between Christian denominations, defending them not as a smoothing over difference, but rather as trying to account for the change in meaning of doctrinal claims. His work begins with the premise that doctrines which were in fact at one time opposed, are not any longer. He does not view this as contradictory or incoherent. Rather, he claims that this is based on a more appropriate reading of what doctrine is. To do this, he first claims that there are three main historical positions on what religious doctrine conveys. The first is propositional truth. The second is "symbolic efficacy" (the ability of doctrine to adequately convey experience symbolically). The third is "categorial adequacy" (the ability to determine a conceptual space in which claims can be treated as true or false). The theories that embrace these he terms cognitive, experiential, and cultural-linguistic, respectively. The former two are also called propositional and emotive-expressivist.

Lindbeck embraces and defends the cultural linguistic theory, which labels doctrinal claims second-order, rather than first-order.[35] These second-order claims determine which claims a theologian can make, but do not determine the truth or falsehood of any particular first-order claim. Rather, they determine meaningfulness. The Nicene Creed becomes an expression of what it is considered acceptable to say in most branches of Christianity.[36] These limitations are defining for theology—more so than the first-order claims made based on these limitations. There are important differences between theological vocabularies, but these vocabularies can converge over time. This is how Lindbeck explains the shift in problems of ecumenism—theological differences which were formerly insurmountable are overcome due to the change in how past claims are parsed.

Carl Hughes takes up this framework and applies it to Kierkegaard's work in *The Book on Adler.* Hughes views the cultural-linguistic model as preventing cross-talk between differing views.[37] However, he also claims that it is the closest to Kierkegaard's own views[38]—as religion is not merely propositional for Kierke-

35 "To say that doctrines are rules is not to deny that they involve propositions...These are, however, second-order rather than first order propositions and affirm nothing about extra-linguistic or extra-human reality." George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Westminster: John Knox Press 1984, p. 80.
36 Ibid., p. 94
37 Whether this is the case for Lindbeck is not important. However, it is unlikely, since Lindbeck spends the majority of *The Nature of Doctrine* discussing ways for cultural-linguistic theorists to engage in evaluation of other systems.
38 In this he is in agreement with Steven Emmanuel. See Steven Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1996, p. 96.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

gaard, but entails an entire, self-contained form of life.[39] That is to say, the Kierkegaardian Christian (according to Hughes) is to live his life according to the precepts of Christianity, and these are totalizing—they encompass all of life, and are the primary concern underlying all action for the Christian.[40] This totalizing form of life is largely self-contained. In this form, doctrinal claims are second-order claims, which form the basis upon which true or false first-order claims can be made. These claims form a self-contained network, which cannot be judged to be correct or incorrect. Similarly, for the one claiming a revelation, the revelation-fact is supposed to shape one's life. Adler fails to comport himself according to the revelation-fact he claims, and therefore his claim is false—he is confused about what his own claim means.

Since Kierkegaard demands that Adler live according to the revelation-fact, this would indicate that an authentic response to revelation requires more than assent to its propositions. Therefore, Hughes is correct in saying that Kierkegaard would likely disagree with the propositional model. However, I contend that the first-order content of the Incarnation claim means that the move to second-order propositions cannot be a complete picture (though it is nonetheless necessary). The doctrinal claims of Kierkegaard's idea of faith and religion have explicit first-order propositional content, which cannot be set aside without doing violence to Kierkegaard's texts.[41]

Merold Westphal points out that the appropriation of Christianity—which Hughes views as fundamental for Kierkegaard—begins with the propositional revelation-claim of the Incarnation.[42] Following this claim, there are further

39 This is somewhat akin to what Stanley Cavell says about Kierkegaard and Positivism, suggesting that Kierkegaard would agree that religious claims are cognitively meaningless, though Cavell takes it further than Hughes. Stanley Cavell, "Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*," *Debates in Nineteenth-Century European Philosophy: Essential Readings and Contemporary Responses*, ed. by Kristin Gjesdal, New York: Routledge 2016, p. 240.

40 For example, Anti-Climacus states: "No, Christ's life here on earth is the paradigm; I and every Christian are to strive to model our lives in likeness to it, and this is the primary subject of preaching, since it is to serve this-to keep me up to the mark when I want to dawdle, to fortify when one becomes disheartened" (*SKS* 12, 115 / *PC*, 107).

41 Michelle Kosch even refers to these claims as "epistemological." Michelle Kosch, "Kierkegaard (1813–1855)," p. 141. These doctrinal claims are centered, for Kierkegaard, around the Incarnation, the claim that God became human in a particular moment in history. While Kierkegaard is not a systematic theologian, he is nonetheless concerned with particular parts of Christian Creedal content.

42 This idea is also expressed by Hannay, who suggests that fact-finding and religious belief can compete with one another, and that religious believers will claim that the way to understand the world appropriately is by way of their religion, making their responses to the world appropriate. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*, New York: Routledge 2003, p. 128.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

claims about what sort of life the Incarnate Christ lived, which provides the basis for Religiousness C (the sort of religiousness upon which Hughes focuses).[43] Adler goes wrong in his understanding of the revelation because he lacks the necessary "Christian concepts"—he does not understand the dogma necessary to place his experience in the broader context of his religion. Therefore, he mistakenly categorizes a spiritual experience of some sort as a revelation. In so doing, he provides an unintentional parody of the fundamental misunderstandings of his contemporaries.[44]

The fact that part of Adler's misunderstanding comes out of his lack of Christian concepts suggests that the propositional content of religion must play a significant role in Kierkegaard's understanding of religion. The claim of the Incarnation, as presented in Kierkegaard's writings (both signed and pseudonymous) is a first-order claim. It is a claim about historical facts-of-the-matter, and therefore cannot be treated as a second-order claim in the way Lindbeck treats doctrinal claims.[45] It is not just a limiting factor on what can be said theologically. Climacus rejects the attempts to move away from the historical claim of the Incarnation. For example, he accuses speculative theologians of explaining away the Christianity as "a relative difference between more and less gifted and educated people"[46] and through "mediations."[47] However, as Climacus strenuously emphasizes, "[t]he absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc. has come into existence exactly as an individual human being."[48] That is the absurd, the absolute paradox, the claim that lies at the center of Religiousness B, and therefore all proper Christianity.[49] While this claim is not supposed to be merely a proposition for assent, the fact remains that this claim is clearly a first-order

43 Religiousness B is "paradoxical religiousness" which "qualifies the eternal happiness more specifically… by qualifying more specifically the eternal happiness, yet not as at task for thinking but as paradoxically repelling." *SKS* 7, 505 / *CUP1*, 556. This is what defines Christianity—the paradoxically repelling is the claim of the Incarnation, of the eternal God become finite Man. Westphal expands on this, proposing a "Religiousness C" which treats Jesus as the paradigm to be imitated. Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Religiousness C: A Defense," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2004, p. 535.

44 *Pap.* X-6 B 55, 58–59, *Pap.* VII-2 B 235, 218–20 / *BA*, 132–33.

45 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 80.

46 *SKS* 7, 201 / *CUP1*, 220.

47 *SKS* 7, 346 / *CUP1*, 379.

48 *SKS* 7, 193 / *CUP1*, 210.

49 *SKS* 7, 346 / *CUP1*, 379: "If Christianity is the opposite of speculation, then it is also the opposite of mediation, since mediation is speculation's idea—what, then, does it mean to mediate it? But what is the opposite of mediation? It is the absolute paradox."

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

one about history, not a second-order claim which limits what first-order claims can be made.

A possible objection to this line of reasoning is that there is no better representation of Kierkegaard's views than Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic paradigm, especially if one takes Lindbeck's tripartite distinction as largely definitive. The propositional model does not account for the fact that Christianity must be a way of life. The emotional-expressivist model does not allow for the degree of exclusivity that Kierkegaard would claim for Christianity. The cultural-linguistic model captures the fact that religion must be a way of life and provides exclusivity. All of this is true. However, the idea that the cultural-linguistic model is the only option left is based on a false trilemma. It is possible to come up with other theories of religion that place full emphasis neither on second-order propositional content nor on the existential dimension of Kierkegaard's approach to Christianity. However, any theory that takes the propositional content of religion seriously will run into the problem of exclusivism. When considering other religions, the problem of evaluation based on first-order claims remains important.

Another objection is that the interpretation of Religiousness B presented here is not one which Kierkegaard would accept. There are two ways such an argument might run for critics of this interpretation. The first is akin to how John Lippitt interprets James Conant's reading of the *Postscript*, namely his understanding of the final revocation as a rejection of the Christian Religiousness B as mere nonsense, an indication that the entire *Postscript* was a satire.[50] However, John Lippitt accurately rejects this reading as a failure to understand the peculiar type of humor being used by Climacus in the *Postscript*.[51] The idea of Religiousness B present there is recapitulated in Kierkegaard's non-pseudonymous writings, as well as by the explicitly Christian Anti-Climacus.

The other version of this objection is that Kierkegaard did not claim the pseudonymous writings as his own. In light of this, it would be a mistake to claim that the idea of Religiousness B espoused by Climacus is something that Kierkegaard himself would embrace. However, as noted above, Kierkegaard embraces the idea of religiousness espoused there, condemns Christendom, and engages in polemic against the Danish Church through writings under his own name and under the guise of other pseudonyms (such as Anti-Climacus). He also states that the intention of the texts was always religious in *The Point of*

50 Lippitt, "A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to Salvation," pp. 182ff.
51 Ibid., pp. 189ff.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

View.[52] While this is not the only possible interpretation of the texts, it does indicate that at least the later Kierkegaard had some similarities with Climacus.

It may be argued here that I am placing too much emphasis on Kierkegaard's claims and intentions. The author does not have privileged access to the meaning of his texts. However it at least appears to me that Kierkegaard's intentions and my concerns coincide. Kierkegaard's focus on a first-order claim, a claim about the world (the Incarnation) addresses those concerns well. As such, it makes sense to ask how Kierkegaard might have addressed other religions consistently with his own work. This response opens up another line of criticism against my views. One might say that the paradox of Religiousness B should not be read as concerning a claim about historical matters-of-fact. Rather, it should be read as a claim about the Christian form of life. However, this is contrary to the plain meaning of the text, as well as the spirit of the *Postscript*, which is concerned with showing that re-interpretations of the Incarnation are contrary to the essence of Christianity. In light of these facts, I believe that the safest interpretation of Religiousness B is as making a claim about the world, rather than about the form of life that follows from it.

Conclusion

A Kierkegaardian approach to interreligious understanding is difficult to pin down. However, by referring to *The Book on Adler*, we can sketch out his approach to understanding the religious "other"—albeit an other that is not in fact so different from him. This approach is based on an understanding of what it is to truly believe a claim of divine revelation, and to accept divine authority. While revelation may not be a definitive part of all religions, this provides a basis upon which to build. The analysis of divine authority in *The Book on Adler* in particular provides a way of understanding religious disagreement: in terms of offense. While the term "offense" may bear negative connotations, in this case, it refers to the rejection of claims of divine authority. Disagreement that is based on genuine understanding is to be preferred to supposed agreement that rejects the claims of divine authority.

What is then left open is the question of how to approach one who disagrees. Historically, this approach has often been one of force. However, for a Kierkegaardian, religions are understood as deeply internal questions. These questions may dramatically affect how one lives, but conversion by force is

52 *SKS* 16, 11 / *PV*, 23.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

not a route open to the Kierkegaardian Christian. Rather, understanding the possibility of being wrong, as well as the fact that Christians are, first and foremost, meant to suffer, means that conversion by force and attempting to make the world entirely Christian by any means necessary cannot the Christian's goal.

Rather, one must rely upon irony, which includes an understanding that one can be wrong. This can involve acting as though one does not hold given religious beliefs, while continuing to hold one's religious beliefs to be correct. That is to say, a Christian should, when facing the religious other, ironically act as if the Incarnation were incorrect, for all purposes where the Incarnation is not fundamental to dialogue. Sitting down and eating together does not rely upon the existence of the God-man, and therefore the disagreement can be suspended, while still understood to be fundamental. An acceptance of genuine disagreement as a sign of respect, of taking other religions seriously, is a valuable first step towards interreligious understanding.

While Kierkegaard may not be the first thinker who comes to mind when discussing tolerance in a religiously diverse world, especially considering the differences between the Abrahamic religions, his work on Adler indicates a method for the sensitive treatment of other revelatory religions. This allows for an expansion of the ideas of George Connell on Kierkegaard, by offering an example of a religious other, leading to the idea that Kierkegaard is both concerned with the "true religion," and with ways in which one might be sympathetic towards other religions.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Viktoras Bachmetjevas

5 Clemency over Forgiveness

Kierkegaard's Assessor Wilhelm as a Response to Vladimir Jankélévitch

Vladimir Jankélévitch has recently emerged as one of the most insightful moral thinkers on the problem of forgiveness. His work influenced Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida in France and, since the 2005 English translation of his work *Le Pardon* (1967),[1] the theoretical outline of forgiveness he had proposed has been gaining recognition and importance world-wide. In this paper I propose an overview of Jankélévitch's position on forgiveness, with a particular attention to the difference between forgiveness and clemency that Jankélévitch articulates. In addition, I offer a critical assessment of this difference, especially with regard to the priority that Jankélévitch assigns to forgiveness over clemency. In order to illuminate the limitations of Jankélévitch's position I make use of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Assessor Wilhelm and his ethical views,[2] as presented in Part II of *Either/Or*. I propose an interpretation of Assessor Wilhelm as an ironic ethicist and provide a sketch of what ironic ethics entails, drawing on Kierkegaard's magisterial thesis *The Concept of Irony* and a pseudonymous work, *The Concept of Anxiety*. I conclude that although Jankélévitch presents an elaborate and insightful account of the concept of forgiveness, his account of its neighbor concept of clemency is unnecessarily one-sided.

5.1 Forgiveness and Clemency in Jankélévitch

Jankélévitch wrote two major texts on forgiveness: a full-length book, *Le Pardon* (1967), and a polemical essay, *Pardonner?* (1971). *Le Pardon* is a philosophical treatise, in which Jankélévitch sets for himself the task of carefully clarifying the concept of forgiveness. Undoubtedly, the question for him arises in the context of the historical moment in which the book is written, namely, the debate

1 Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. by Andrew Kelly, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2005.

2 The standard rendering of the Danish *Assessor Wilhelm* in English is Judge William, popularized by the Hong Princeton edition. I believe there are significant conceptual reasons to avoid translating *assessor* as judge, which I offer in "Ethics Without Ideality: Why Assessor Wilhelm Is Not a Judge" (*Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2020, forthcoming).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-006

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

about the need to forgive the perpetrators of the Holocaust which was underway at the time in France. It is this context that Jankélévitch has in mind when he says that "[i]t is not difficult to understand why the duty to forgive has become our problem today."[3] The problem he has in mind is a rather simple one: on the one hand, one of the cornerstones of the whole of Western moral tradition is a duty to forgive, but, on the other hand, the crimes of those responsible for the Holocaust are so outrageous, inhumane, and unprecedented that the imperative to forgive seems to trivialize the crimes committed. A vast field of varied questions arises from this tension: political, legal, psychological, and moral, but also questions about memory, history, legacy, and so on.

While Jankélévitch tries to address the political questions in a later text, *Pardonner?*, *Le Pardon* remains a purely philosophical treatise, as acknowledged by Jankélévitch himself.[4] There has been some debate regarding the discrepancies between these two texts, as Jankélévitch seems to propose two conflicting positions regarding one's moral obligation to forgive. I have tried to address this discrepancy elsewhere.[5] However, because our present interest is essentially the philosophical concept of forgiveness, and we wish to address its existential rather than political implications, in what follows I will focus solely on *Le Pardon*. The treatise in question is, in equal measure, a book about what forgiveness is and what it is not. In addition to formal definition of forgiveness, Jankélévitch devotes as much, if not more, space and attention to delineate what forgiveness should not be confused with. It is also evident that he presupposes a certain givenness of the concept. He speaks of conceptual "constitution," or a kind of inner logic that a concept possesses. This suggests that what a concept represents is more than a mere arbitrary denoting. By following this inner logic, Jankélévitch attempts both to tease out what he regards to be fundamental aspects of forgiveness, and to distinguish forgiveness from its related phenomena.[6]

---

3 Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 1.

4 "In *Le Pardon*, a purely philosophical work that I have published elsewhere, the answer to the question, Must we pardon? seems to contradict the one given here." (Vladimir Jankélévitch, "Should We Pardon Them?," trans. by Ann Hobart, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1996, p. 552).

5 For discussion on the discrepancy see Jacques Derrida, "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and The Imprescriptible," *Questioning God*, ed. by John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 21–51, and Viktoras Bachmetjevas, "Deconstructing Forgiveness: Jankélévitch's Influence on Derrida," *Athena*, no. 13, 2018, pp. 184–198.

6 There are numerous examples of both definitions of forgiveness and distinctions from its related phenomena throughout the book. Here is just one of the examples: "Temporality, intellection, and liquidation, however, do not constitute in themselves all the distinctive marks by

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

In many ways, Jankélévitch's procedure could be compared to the understanding of philosophy as the process of construction of concepts, proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari see philosophy as an engagement with concepts. Philosophy, they claim, is "the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts."[7] And although they see the work of philosophy as constructivist, this does not mean for them that it is arbitrary. The fundamental aspect of any concept, according to them, is that it is complex. By that Deleuze and Guattari mean that (i) there are no simple concepts and (ii) every concept is composed of various, non-uniform components.[8] Importantly, components are not accidental parts of a concept—they are its *constitutive* elements. In other words, a concept is defined by its components. Therefore, although concepts have limits—contours or demarcation lines—these are not what distinguish them from other concepts. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is perfectly possible for different concepts to overlap. What makes a concept distinct from another concept is its components. The contours of a concept are established by its components, and only with the help of these components can the overlapping concepts avoid being confused with each other. Finally, for Deleuze and Guattari it is important that the components of any concept themselves can be concepts, that is, they might be complex and be composed of components of their own. Thus, in addition to the field of meaning, in which components are situated and form a concept (Deleuze and Guattari's technical term for this is the plane of immanence[9]), a concept also has a fractal structure, within which these components are unfolded. This complex understanding of a concept also implicates a certain methodological approach. A concept is investigated both by digging up its components and components of its components, and also by delineating the contours of a concept and in this way carving out the plane a concept takes up.

This framework is helpful to understand the philosophical work Jankélévitch undertakes in his book. He proposes what he regards to be fundamental components of forgiveness (fabrication of the concept), undertakes a careful analysis of these components (digging up), and, finally, devotes a lot of attention to distinguishing forgiveness from other, similar or neighboring concepts (carving out). For Jankélévitch, forgiveness has three components. Forgiveness is (i) interperso-

which true forgiveness is recognized. Here are three aspects that are most characteristic: …" (Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 5).

7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press 1994, p. 2.

8 Ibid., p. 15.

9 Ibid., pp. 35–60.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

nal, (ii) transformative, and (iii) undeserved.[10] And although he uses a less rigorous language (he speaks of characterization rather than definition), the subsequent content of the book allows us to see these three elements as fundamental. That is, for Jankélévitch they serve as components in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari: he uses them both to dig up new components and to carve out the underlying structure of forgiveness, which allows us to demarcate it from other concepts. Let us take a closer look at these components.

(i) "Interpersonal" for Jankélévitch implies at least two things. First, it states the obvious fact that forgiveness is possible only among persons. Although Jankélévitch makes extensive use of the term "person," he neither defines, nor develops it. However, at least two qualifications can be made with a degree of confidence. Firstly, as the whole discussion takes place within ethical sphere, it can be assumed that *person*, for Jankélévitch, means a moral agent, that is, someone who is capable of assuming responsibility for his or her actions. Secondly, *person* possesses what Jankélévitch terms "ipseity," a selfhood that comprises both the autonomy and uniqueness of an entity in question.[11] Therefore, for Jankélévitch forgiveness can occur only between autonomous moral agents. Another implication of understanding forgiveness as interpersonal has the consequence of denying the possibility of collective forgiveness. For Jankélévitch, forgiveness can occur only between two individuals: only an individual can be forgiven; and only an individual can forgive. The reason for denying the possibility of collective forgiveness might be related to the idea that moral agents must possess selfhood and, therefore, that collectives cannot be moral agents. It also might be related to the long tradition, at least in the West, of denying if not the possibility, then at least the viability of the notion of collective guilt. And if there is no collective guilt, it could be reasoned, then there is no collective forgiveness either.

(ii) By the "transformative" component of forgiveness, Jankélévitch means that it is always an event. In other words, it occurs at a specific moment in time, is situated and can be located there: "It happens at such and such an instant of historical becoming."[12] More importantly, this instant signifies that both parties to forgiveness emerge from the event different from what they were before the event. Or, more precisely, something happens to both of them that changes them. That something is forgiveness itself.

(iii) Finally, by "undeserved" Jankélévitch means that forgiveness is a gift—a gracious gift to the offender, the for-giving of the offense. Forgiveness has to be

10 Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 5.
11 In contrast, "Clemency, which does not imply any determinate event, is still less a true relation to the ipseity of the other person." (Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 6)
12 Ibid., p. 5.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

undeserved, Jankélévitch argues, because if forgiveness could be earned, then it would become something else: it would move into the order of exchange and economy. The very fact of being earned makes forgiveness superfluous and unnecessary. In other words, a deserved forgiveness, Jankélévitch claims, is a contradiction in terms.

All three of these components of forgiveness are for Jankélévitch necessary and qualifying. That is to say, if any of the three is lacking, there is only a semblance of forgiveness. In Jankélévitch's terms, forgiveness, lacking at least one of the components, as opposed to pure forgiveness, is impure, or contaminated. Examples of impure forgiveness are non-personal forgiveness, such as collective forgiveness, non-transformative forgiveness, such as forgiveness in advance like clemency, and deserved forgiveness, that is, forgiveness, gained in exchange for something.

While Jankélévitch spends time defining these necessary components of forgiveness, the main portion of his treatise, however, is what we termed a carving out. It is an attempt to delineate forgiveness, based on the three components, from its neighboring concepts, with which it is often confused. The three concepts in question are forgetting, or temporal decay; understanding, or intellection; and liquidation, or annulment. Forgetting, which is often understood as a transitional concept on the way to forgiveness, or even its correlate, is understood by Jankélévitch as anything but that. In order to be able to forgive, he claims, one has to be fully aware and conscious of the offence caused. Forgetting accomplishes the opposite—with the passing of time one stops remembering the details of the offence, its context and circumstances diminish and become foggy. The work of temporal decay eventually makes one forget the deed itself. Altough Jankélévitch does not question the therapeutic value of forgetting the offence, he is adamant that it renders forgiving impossible. If the offence is no longer present, there is nothing to forgive. Thus, if we consider forgiveness to be morally desirable, then it has to be acknowledged that forgetting and temporal decay in which the offence disappears work against it. Therefore, the old adage of "forgive and forget" has to be replaced with an alternative: either forget, or forgive. And in order to forgive one must *not* forget. One must remember. The details of the offence must remain vivid and present. The true meaning of forgiveness, Jankélévitch claims, is to remember the offence that has taken place, but to treat one's offender *as if* it had not.

Similarly, for Jankélévitch forgiveness should be carefully distinguished from understanding. Understanding minimizes the offence—to understand the reasons for the offence is to relativize or justify it. In other words, understanding diminishes the offence, makes the offence less of an offence. The less the offence, the less the need for forgiveness. To strive to understand the reasons

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and circumstances of why and how the offence took place, Jankélévitch argues, is to neutralize the offence. In that case forgiveness becomes redundant. To be sure, Jankélévitch does not advocate against attempts to understand the offence. Rather, what he, in addition to drawing a demarcation line between understanding and forgiveness, is interested in is the situation where all attempts at understanding fail. For him, these are precisely the situations where forgiveness is required. It becomes necessary *only* when the offence cannot be understood, when the atrocity committed is so incomprehensible, that the only thing that can be done is to forgive. As a gift, forgiveness is only possible when, strictly speaking, it is impossible to substitute the offensive aspect for an explanation that would make it justifiable. Therefore, Jankélévitch concludes, it is possible to truly forgive only what is unjustifiable.

Finally, forgiveness should not be confused with "liquidation." By liquidation Jankélévitch means any kind of annulment of the offence. To liquidate, for him, means to resolve that the offence never happened. This involves a sort of transaction both on the part of the offender and on the part of the offended person. Initially, the offender excuses himself and rules that no harm has been done: "At first, the offender, forestalling his offended, spontaneously excuses himself inasmuch as he is certain to obtain that for which he asks. He does not wait until the offended person finds mitigating circumstances for him."[13] A similar procedure takes place on the other side: "As for the offended person, he decided expeditiously that the sin is null and has not come to pass, that is all there is to it!"[14] Liquidation, an agreement or a deal that no offence took place, is not forgiveness, for it does not recognize the gravity of sin and the existence of evil. Jankélévitch notes: "Forgiveness acts 'as if,' at the price of superhuman effort; and the person who liquidates, on the other hand, acts 'as if' out of thoughtlessness."[15] Thus, to annul the offence is not to achieve forgiveness, but rather to prevent the very possibility of it.

These three forms of semi-forgivenesses—forgetting, temporal decay, and liquidation—attract most of Jankélévitch's attention. However, perhaps most controversially, Jankélévitch also makes a distinction between forgiveness and clemency. For Jankélévitch, *clemency*, which he understands as a sort of prior forgiveness, or forgiveness in advance, does not qualify as pure forgiveness, because it does not meet two of the three fundamental criteria. First, it is not transformative. Jankélévitch argues, that while "the event is certainly the decisive mo-

13 Ibid., p. 99.
14 Ibid., p. 99. Here Jankélévitch seems to equate, or at least not to see a substantial difference between, sin, a religious term, and offence, a moral term.
15 Ibid., p. 99.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ment of forgiveness,"[16] that is not the case with clemency. The sage, who for Jankélévitch is a representative example of clemency, "is exempted from the meritorious effort and from the harrowing sacrifice that permit the offended to surmount the offence; for this invulnerable person almost nothing occurs and nothing comes of it; the injuries of the offender do not affect him at all."[17] Clemency, it seems, does not even fully register the offence. The attitude of the sage, who is inclined to forgive in advance, minimizes the offence—it is as if the offended person does not experience the offence at all, does not become truly offended. In other words, he or she is not affected—anger and rancor are absent in this case. Second, clemency is not personal. Because it has been forgiven in advance, the offender as a concrete indivdual for the sage does not even come into consideration. Precisely because clemency has done its work before the offence, the offender here becomes just an irrelevant circumstance, a mere nuisance.

For these reasons, Jankélévitch sees clemency as less morally valuable than forgiveness. He associates clemency with Stoicism and claims that it is desirable only as a form of Stoic virtues, for it promises *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance), *analgesia* (freedom from pain), and apathy (freedom from passions). Yet, he claims, these come at a cost. Clemency necessarily minimizes the offence: "By disregarding evil and wickedness, clemency minimizes the injury at the same time; in minimizing the injury, it renders forgiveness useless. There is no forgiveness because, so to speak, there was no offense and absolutely no offended party."[18] More importantly, Jankélévitch says, it disregards the offender, too: "Clemency, which does not imply any determinate event, is still less a true relation to the ipseity of the other person. From the height of his altitude the magnanimous person is much too big to see the gnats and lice who harass him."[19] The sage or the stoic, Jankélévitch claims, is so preoccupied with his own magnanimity that the offender does not enter the picture. "Actually, he does not even care for the person whom he absolves! He does not even perceive the existence of the gnat! Be it magnanimity or magnificence, *megalopsychia* or *megaloprepeia*, clemency excludes every truly transitive or intentional relation with the next person."[20] In other words, Jankélévitch's concern is that a person with the attitude of clemency is too egocentric and self-enclosed. The other person is a mere inessential circumstance, the offence itself had been waived away before it took place, the offended remained untouched and did not even become offended.

16 Ibid., p. 5.
17 Ibid., p. 6.
18 Ibid., p. 6.
19 Ibid., p. 6.
20 Ibid., p. 7.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Clemency is neither transformative nor personal. It minimizes the offence, disregards the offender, and is concerned only with the moral state and advancement of the clement person.

Although Jankélévitch proposes an insightful account of forgiveness, I contend that the picture of clemency he proposes is unnecessarily one-sided. In what follows I attempt to show that clemency is not necessarily ignorant of the other individual, but, rather, the opposite—a clement person is clement precisely because he or she is attentive to the peculiar circumstances of the other person. In order to illuminate this point, I draw on Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Assessor Wilhelm and the position he represents.

5.2 Assessor Wilhelm's Ironic Ethics

Part II of *Either/Or* contains three letters, addressed to a Young Man, or A, and are essentially words of advice to a person whom Assessor Wilhelm clearly considers to be in need of some moral orientation. Having said that, although the ethical nature of the letters is not in question, the same cannot be said about their precise content. Not only do scholars disagree about what Assessor Wilhelm's ethical framework truly is, but more significantly, their suggestions sometimes go in opposing directions. Arguments have been put forward to see in Assessor Wilhelm a follower of Hegel,[21] a Schilerian,[22] and even an Aristotelian.[23] Textual evidence allows for all of these readings, which in turn raises the question as to whether there is any coherent ethical view behind Assessor Wilhelm's advice, or conversely whether it should be seen as just a series of unconnected, fragmentary moral musings that mirror the unconnected, fragmentary nature of the first part of *Either/Or*.

My contention is that various advice and ethical views expressed by Assessor Wilhelm are guided by a single, consistent, and coherent ethical sensibility, and that his deliberations, as varied as they might seem, follow the same vision of ethics. I propose to call this vision of ethics "ironic," and in what follows I sketch what this type of ethics might entail, based on textual evidence from

---

21 Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge, New York et al.: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 225–237.

22 Paul Cruysberghs, "In Search of a Second Ethics: From Kant to Kierkegaard," *The Marriage of Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. by Stephane Symons, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2015, pp. 110–150.

23 Norman Lillegard, "Passion and Reason: Aristotelian Strategies in Kierkegaard's Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2002, pp. 251–273.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

two other texts by Kierkegaard, namely, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Concept of Irony*. I proceed to show that such an ethics, exemplified by Assessor Wilhelm, proposes a much richer and more nuanced vision of clemency than that offered by Jankélévitch.

In the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis distinguishes between two kinds of ethics. The most basic distinction between the two seems to be genealogical, as Haufniensis claims that the first ethics is superseded by the second, after the first ethics is shown to be insufficient and lacking. Haufniensis establishes this order by stating that the second ethics emerges only after "the first ethics is shipwrecked."[24] The first ethics, according to Haufniensis' description, is a science. And as such, this ethics "proposes to bring ideality into actuality."[25] In other words, ethics constitutes a theory of ideal norms, and these norms are then applied in concrete circumstances of individual existence. In this regard ideality is seen as desirable ("the more ideal ethics is, the better"[26]), because the norms that are provided by ideality are not corrupted by actuality. Such an ethics is oblivious and indifferent to the particularities and peculiarities of actuality—as a theory, ethics is interested only in establishing universal norms that determine a system of ends and provide criteria for assessing the moral significance of human behavior.

Human existence for ethics as a science is a field of application. Its claim on actuality is based on the presupposition of a certain moral uniformity of men. Haufniensis notes that as a science "ethics assumes that every man possesses the requisite conditions"[27] to meet ideal ethical norms. And herein, according to him, lies the fundamental internal contradiction of this kind of ethics: as a normative theory, ethics requires something that, by definition, for a concrete individual it is impossible to accomplish. In its idealistic isolation, normative ethics comfortably ignores the fact that "it is useless to require the impossible."[28] In other words, ethics as a theory that imposes norms of behavior and conduct encounters a difficulty every time these norms are transgressed.

Violation of ethical norms puts one outside of ethics. At the same time, by virtue of doing so, it poses a problem for normative ethics, namely, that as an ideal discipline it is capable of prescribing norms, but does not have the means to deal with the violation of those norms. It seems that the only thing it can do in the latter case is restate the norms. And this, according to Haufnien-

24 *SKS* 4, 328 / *CA*, 20.
25 *SKS* 4, 323 / *CA*, 16.
26 *SKS* 4, 324 / *CA*, 17.
27 *SKS* 4, 324 / *CA*, 16.
28 *SKS* 4, 324 / *CA*, 17.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

sis, merely exacerbates the problem: “The more ethics remains in its ideality, and never becomes so inhuman as to lose sight of actuality, but corresponds to actuality by presenting itself as the task for every man in such a way that it will make him the true and the whole man, the man κατ’ ἐξοχήν [in an eminent sense], the more it increases the tension of the difficulty.”[29] Thus, concludes Haufniensis, if ethics is supposed to incorporate actuality, the human being’s concrete existence, and to attend to his or her fundamental incapacity to live up to the ideal (which ethical theory postulates), then ethics implodes under its internal contradiction: “If ethics is to include sin, its ideality comes to an end.”[30] In other words, Haufniensis claims, if ethics takes violations of ethical norms seriously, it will have to give up or at least compromise on ethical ideality. Haufniensis suggests that such an ethics is possible. He calls this type of ethics “the second ethics” and, although he does not provide a full elaboration of the concept, he at least sketches out a few of its characteristics. Such an ethics, he claims, would be neither a science, nor a theory; it “does not have its ideality in making ideal demands.”[31] Moreover, it would incorporate the human incapacity to adhere to ethical norms at all times as a constitutive element of ethics itself; or, as Haufniensis puts it: “It does not ignore sin.”[32]

Ideality is not the starting point of this type of ethics. Here ethics comes not from ideal demands, but rather from “the penetrating consciousness of actuality, of the actuality of sin.”[33] In other words, here the ethical horizon consists not in universal principles that are cast upon human existence as some sort of a system of measurement, but in the very fact that a human being is a finite, imperfect being. The very finitude of a human being is the basic fundamental starting point of this type of ethics. Thus, if the idealist ethics is shipwrecked upon the concept of sin and its incapacity to explain it away, the second ethics takes this concept as a starting point. It “sets ideality as a task not by a movement from above and downward but from below and upward.”[34] The second ethics starts with the fact of human finitude and builds the new ethical ideality around this fact.

29 *SKS* 4, 325 / *CA*, 18–19.
30 *SKS* 4, 324–325 / *CA*, 17–18.
31 *SKS* 4, 328 / *CA*, 20.
32 *SKS* 4, 328 / *CA*, 20. Although here Haufniensis employs a religious notion of sin, it is clear that he does not make a distinction between sin and moral fault. And although in other contexts there are good reasons to maintain a difference between sin and moral fault, for our present purposes of delineating the concept of second ethics we will follow Haufniensis.
33 *SKS* 4, 328 / *CA*, 20.
34 *SKS* 4, 328 / *CA*, 20.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Importantly, this does not mean that there is no positive content, or theory, in the second ethics. In this case, however, according to Haufniensis, the positive content is provided by another science, namely, dogmatics. In other words, the contradiction inherent in the sinfulness of man can be solved only by postulating religious truths. Only with the help of dogmatics can, on the one hand, sinfulness as a fundamental human condition be explained and, on the other hand, a new ideality be posited: "In the struggle to actualize the task of ethics, sin shows itself not as something that belongs only accidentally to the accidental individual, but as something that withdraws deeper and deeper as a deeper and deeper presupposition, as a presupposition that goes beyond the individual."[35] To conclude, Haufniensis provides us with two kinds of ethics: the first ethics starts with ideality and then is applied to actuality, while the second starts from actuality and attempts to move towards ideality with the help of dogmatics.

An obvious objection to such an outline is to ask what to make of this view of ethics if one does not adhere to the theological presuppositions. I contend that Kierkegaard's authorship, and, more specifically, his pseudonymous authorship, is an attempt to deal with precisely such an objection. Indeed, one of the recurring central themes of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is an existential situation in which religious faith is absent. Faithlessness, a lack of faith, the possibility of and conditions for acquiring it are questions that keep emerging in various forms throughout Kierkegaard's texts. One of the many aspects of absence of faith is that from the point of view of religion it is characterized by a breakdown in communication. Religious truths are of no help in the situation of the absence of faith, because they simply do not come through in full force. A non-believing interlocutor is incapable of grasping the full meaning of religious truths, precisely because the full meaning of these truths is comprehensible only to those who possess faith. Paradoxically, in order to be able to understand the meaning of the concepts of faith, faith itself is necessary. Therefore, in a situation of faithlessness, faith as a rational, direct discourse (in other words, dogmatics) is of no use. What is needed is a means of communication that, instead of proposing something, first destroys the presuppositions the non-believer holds. This is what Kierkegaard calls indirect communication. This type of communication does not teach religious truths in sermons and religious discourses, but starts from the position of the non-believer and explores its inner contradictions without recourse to religious truths and only by means of the convictions the nonbeliever holds. A concept in Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* to denote this method is *irony*.

35 *SKS* 4, 325–326 / *CA*, 19.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

In his dissertation *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard borrows Hegel's description of irony as "absolute infinite negativity" and turns it into a definition. What Kierkegaard means by this definition, is that (1) the work of irony is negation, i.e., it has no positive content; (2) it does so absolutely, i.e., there are no conditions to make irony stop this work; and (3) it is infinite, i.e., it neither has an end, nor intrinsic goal or, in other words, the movement it creates is on its own endless. Irony, then, produces a movement, which destroys a previous position without creating a single novel one, but rather opening up a field of infinite new possibilities. In addition, Kierkegaard proposes a typology of irony. According to him, irony can be employed as (i) a figure of speech, as (ii) a position, and as (iii) an element. (i) A figure of speech denotes irony used for rhetorical means, either as a singular occurrence of irony in language, or a series of occurrences. (ii) Irony as a position describes an individual for whom irony is not a mere rhetorical device, but, instead, is a determining principle of his or her existence. For Kierkegaard, the German Romantics are exemplars of this type of irony. And because he sees them as subsumed under the negative force of irony, he is highly critical of both them and of this type of irony. (iii) It is the last type—irony as an element—that is the most enigmatic, but also the most interesting. As opposed to irony as an existential position, Kierkegaard suggests that irony also can be just an element in one's existence. In that case, irony does not overwhelm the individual, but, conversely, is mastered and controlled by him or her.

In the last brief, but dense chapter of his dissertation, which is devoted to irony as an element, Kierkegaard notes that this type of irony is encountered primarily in aesthetics or, more precisely, in literature—he mentions Shakespeare, Goethe, and Heiberg as examples of mastered irony. According to Kierkegaard, the great poets, as opposed to the German Romantics, are not subsumed and led by ironic negativity, but rather make use of it for their poetic means. However, this is not the only use of irony as an element. Significantly, it has a similar role in existence: "After all, what holds for poet-existence, holds also in some measure to every single individual's life."[36] That this is not a mere rhetorical turn of phrase is proven by further elaboration: "To be controlled in this way, to be halted in the wild infinity into which it rushes ravenously, by no means indicates that irony should now lose its meaning or be totally discarded. On the contrary, when the individual is properly situated—and this he is through curtailment of irony—only then does irony have its proper meaning, its true validity."[37]

36 *SKS* 1, 354 / *CI*, 325–326.
37 *SKS* 1, 354 / *CI*, 326.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Irony, then, instead of all encompassing, becomes an instrument, a tool. Significantly, it is not just one tool among the others. Kierkegaard says, "What doubt is to science, irony is to personal life."[38] In the same way as doubt is the main instrument for modern science[39], irony is the main instrument in personal life. Its function is to provide existential balance: "Irony is a disciplinarian."[40] Precisely in this way, it belongs to ethics. How does irony work as an existential tool? As an absolute infinite negativity, it can be used instrumentally as a destructive force in order to expose inner contradictions in any position. In other words, it is extremely useful to avoid a person's becoming stuck in a particular predicament. Its purely negative character can be employed when an individual finds himself or herself in a negative or unwanted spot.[41] An ironic glance at one's predicament can work auto-therapeutically. But it also can be employed outwardly—to drag an individual out of his or her position when he or she is seemingly satisfied with it. Irony, by its absolute force of negation, can shatter that position by exposing its limitations. And it is this capacity of blowing up from the inside that is extremely useful when a direct discourse is of no use, as it is certainly the case in the situation when one does not possess faith. To conclude, irony as a controlled element, according to Kierkegaard, belongs to the field of ethics insofar as it enables one to expose the limits of any given position, importantly, without the necessity of proposing an alternative. In other words, the ironist has the luxury to execute a meaningful, productive, communicative act without having to formulate his own position and by merely exposing the inner contradictions of the position in front of him.

I believe that Assessor Wilhelm is doing exactly that. He does not write an ethical treatise. He writes letters which have a concrete, particular addressee, whom the reader is supposed to have met in the first part of *Either/Or*. Therefore, Assessor Wilhelm's writings are a specific, purpose-built communicative act, directed at a specific person. Only two of the letters are written in their entirety by Assessor Wilhelm, and in both of them the points of departure are the categories that are crucial to A. In other words, Assessor Wilhelm intends to work from within A's position rather than propose his own. And in both cases Assessor Wilhelm sees as his goal to show inner limitations of A's position, by exposing A's lack of understanding of the things he seeks.

38 *SKS* 1, 355 / *CI*, 326.

39 At least for Kierkegaard, as the unpublished manuscript of *De omnibus dubitandum est* attests.

40 *SKS* 1, 355 / *CI*, 326.

41 For example, Jonathan Lear suggests that irony could be used as a therapeutic tool. See Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony*, Abingdon, NY: Routledge 2018.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

In the first letter, Assessor Wilhelm takes up the category of love and tries to show A's lack of understanding of this category. Marriage is at the center of the disagreement. In "The Rotation of Crops," A presents a passionate and persuasive case against marriage. According to him, marriage is a deception, for it promises eternal love—a promise which cannot be given, for love is accidental by nature.[42] Marriage deprives individual of his individuality, as it requires separate individuals to become one.[43] And, finally, marriage should be avoided as any other form of commitment like friendship and taking up official posts. It is fair to say that for A, marriage is a secondary issue—his concern is love, inasmuch as it is erotic, or sensual. In A's eyes, the sensual allows the individual to enhance his experiences, therefore, only the erotic love is of relevance. In such a context the institution of marriage is no more than just a an irrelevant detail at best, or a nuisance at worst: "Just because one does not become involved in marriage, one's life need not for that reason be devoid of the erotic."[44] To the contrary, if the essence of love is the erotic, then it is essential not to contaminate it with other, additional issues: "When two people fall in love with each other and sense that they are destined for each other, it is a question of having the courage to break it off, for by continuing there is only everything to lose, nothing to gain."[45]

Assessor Wilhelm's plan is rather cunning—he sets out not to convince A of the merits of the ethical commitments of marriage over the esthetic appeal of erotic love, but to show that within the commitment that marriage demands there is space for the esthetic. He repositions the opposition—it is not a choice between erotic love and marriage. The question, rather, is a distinction between the two types of love: romantic love and reflective love. Romantic love is "immediate," "based on beauty" and "the sensuous," "momentary" and is "noble by virtue of the eternity," but that eternity is little eternity, as it does not have temporal continuity and remains merely a feeling of the passing moment.[46] Reflective love, on the other hand, is a mere civic partnership, in which commitment is conditional rather than absolute.[47] Only marriage, properly understood, reconciles and fulfills these two: it provides erotic love with temporal continuity, while erotic love provides unconditionality to the civic commitment. According to Assessor Wilhelm, erotic love is not an outlier, but is essential to marriage:

42 *SKS* 2, 285 / *EO1*, 296.
43 *SKS* 2, 286 / *EO1*, 297.
44 *SKS* 2, 286 / *EO1*, 297.
45 *SKS* 2, 286 / *EO1*, 298.
46 *SKS* 3, 28–30 / *EO2*, 19–21.
47 *SKS* 3, 35 / *EO2*, 27.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

"The substance in marriage is erotic love."[48] Therefore, A, in his estimation, is right to be after love, but is wrong in dismissing marriage as the place where love is not found.

Exactly the same procedure is followed in the second letter, but in this case with regard to the category of choice. Assessor Wilhelm takes A's position to be that the aim of an accomplished existence is to provide a situation where the individual will have an ever-increasing number of choices. For A, the more choices an individual has, the better. In his second letter to A, Assessor Wilhelm sets out to demonstrate that the infinity of choices is an illusion and that, strictly speaking, there is only one choice, namely, a choice between the aesthetic and the ethical.

Once again his procedure is to reposition the category. As it was with seeing the fulfillment of erotic love in marriage, choice, Assessor Wilhelm claims, is not an aesthetic, but rather an ethical category: "Your choice is an esthetic choice, but an esthetic choice is no choice. On the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical. Wherever in the stricter sense there is a question of an Either/Or, one can always be sure that the ethical has something to do with it."[49] Thus, when A attempts to increase the intensity or variety of his sensual experiences, he still remains within one existential plane: the esthetic. To remain within the sphere of the sensual does not require choice—the sensual is a given. One does not choose to feel. The choice, then, is of a different order, namely, the ethical.

> If a man esthetically ponders a host of life tasks, then he, as is the case with you in the preceding portion, does not readily have one Either/Or but a great multiplicity, because the self-determining aspect of the choice has not been ethically stressed and because, if one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment.[50]

The multiplicity of aesthetic choices are of no relevance, as they have only momentary validity. The next moment, one does not even care about the choices that have been made. The only choice that lingers and, therefore, is worth caring about is the choice that has consequences for the future. In other words, the only choice that matters is a choice that is existentially determining. It is the choice that Assessor Wilhelm terms the "absolute choice."

48 *SKS* 3, 42 / *EO2*, 35.
49 *SKS* 3, 163 / *EO2*, 166.
50 *SKS* 3, 163 / *EO2*, 167.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

The absolute choice is irreversible—one cannot choose "something else the next moment." The absolute choice is bipolar—the irreversible choice made eliminates the previously held alternatives. Therefore, this choice, according to Assessor Wilhelm, has only one form: "The only absolute choice Either/Or is the choice between good and evil, but this is also absolutely ethical."[51] In one sense, it is a reduction of choices: instead of an apparent multiplicity of possibilities one is confronted with only one Either/Or, but this choice is "much more meaningful,"[52] as only this choice has existential consequences for the individual. Thus, in the second letter Assessor Wilhelm again starts with a category that is crucial for A by the latter's own admission and proceeds to show that A lacks full appreciation of what he is after. A, then, is left with a possibility of either dismissing this category altogether, or adopting a fuller, more sophisticated understanding of it. In both cases A's position, as it was previously, becomes untenable, at least in Assessor Wilhelm's view.

Whatever be Assessor Wilhelm's success in achieving his goals (in order to know for sure we would to need to know A's reaction to the letters), purely methodically it is precisely the way the greatest of ironists, namely, Socrates, would go about conducting his own conversations. Both Socrates and Assessor Wilhelm are more interested in their interlocutor's position than their own. Furthermore, for both of them the express goal is to show the inner contradictions of the position in front of them. And both of them attempt to achieve that without taking up any definitive positions of their own. As a consequence, a situation of cognitive dissonance in their interlocutor is produced, which, without proposing any position to ascribe to, creates a negative dynamic out of the interlocutor's current position.

In another parallel to Socrates, whose "real" teaching remained as foggy to his immediate successors as it still is to us (a number of diverse Ancient schools, claiming to be direct disciples of Socrates, is a testament to that), Assessor Wilhelm includes a third letter, which consists almost entirely of someone else's text. If the full purpose of this text remains unclear, it is nevertheless safe to assume that delegating the authorship of the last text and in this way the authority of the last word to someone else is an indication that Assessor Wilhelm does not intend to have the last word. There is no ethical theory proposed or to be uncovered. In a direct echo of Vigilius Haufniensis' understanding of a human condition as sinful, the Pastor from Jutland's sermon is entitled "The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong." Here

51 *SKS* 3, 163 / *EO2*, 166–167.
52 *SKS* 3, 164 / *EO2*, 167.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

both sinfulness and dogmatics come hand in hand. And although Assessor Wilhelm sends the text, the text is not authored by him. In a little preface of his own, however, Assessor Wilhelm once again stresses the situational, contextual character of his letters: "If I were to write to you now, I perhaps would express myself differently."[53] At the same time stressing that this would be so not because he has changed his mind: "As far as the thought is concerned, however, it is and remains the same."[54]

To sum up, all three of Assessor Wilhelm's texts are letters, addressed to a particular individual, who is understood to be in the wrong, and they are meant to elevate him out of his confusions. Irony as a means of absolute negation is employed for educational purposes in order demonstrate to the individual the shortcomings of his position with the categories that he is able to grasp and views as positive. The whole endeavor is seen by Assessor Wilhelm as a kind of ethical work, a type of existential moral education. It is evident that such an approach requires a thorough understanding of the moral shortcomings, or sinfulness, of the individual in question. Lack of appreciation of the intrinsic subtleties of his or her world will result in didactic failure. At the same time, ethical judgment of those shortcomings will be of no use either, as it will merely condemn the individual within his position without elevating him out of it. Assessor Wilhelm does not judge A. He assesses A's predicament and looks for remedies that would work. He does not write a treatise with arguments about the universal ideal ethical norms. He writes letters that address particular circumstances of one's actual existence, and tries to create movement out of it toward ideal ethical norms.

Such a stance, then, requires an attitude which would incorporate appreciation of sinfulness without condeming it. In other words, such a stance *requires clemency.* However, in this case clemency, unlike in Jankélévitch's interpretation, requires a full appreciation of the other individual. As we have seen, Assessor Wilhelm adapts his arguments to the individual. A and his world is at the center of Assessor Wilhelm's thought, rather than a mere irrelevance, as, according to Jankélévitch, is the case in clemency. Assessor Wilhelm is not egotistic, he does not appear as self-centered. To the contrary, he is empathic, and at the same time remains respectful of the position A finds himself in and his existential autonomy. Contrary to Jankélévitch's interpretation, Assessor Wilhelm is capable of clemency not because of his own virtues, his long preparation in advance, his isolation from outside circumstances. Assessor Wilhelm's clemency is the oppo-

53 *SKS* 3, 317 / *EO2*, 337.
54 *SKS* 3, 317 / *EO2*, 337.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

site—it is directed at a particular individual and is situated in time. He is capable of clemency *because* of another person rather than in spite of him. He is aware of A: his limitations, his unique, particular stage of moral development, and his capacity at this particular stage to undertake certain steps toward his own moral betterment.

Contemporary continental ethics has been shaped and continues to be influenced by the Holocaust. Not only Jankélévitch, but also thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and more contemporary ones like Gianni Vatimo, Richard Kearney and Simon Critchley, just to name a few, see the experience of the Holocaust as the reference point for all ethical thinking. Not the last among the considerations is a question of the origin of ethical normativity. On the one hand, contemporary continental ethics is unwilling to succumb to the calls of ethical relativism and still seeks out ethical norms that are, in Kantian terms, universal, that is, binding to each and every moral agent. On the other hand, contemporary continental ethics in search of this universal normativity does not seek recourse either in divine transcendence (for the fear of being dismissed as theology), nor in the collectivity of society (for the fear of opening a gateway to totalitarian ideologies). Instead the answer of contemporary continental ethics has been the emphasis on the other person. Seeing another person, or another moral agent as the source of any morality altogether has been a tradition and a unifying thread in post-Holocaust continental ethics. Indeed, as we have seen, Jankélévitch's argument *pro* forgiveness and *contra* clemency is guided by this very concern for another person. Keeping in mind this central concern of contemporary continental ethics, Assessor Wilhelm's ironic ethics seems not only to correct the dynamic of clemency and forgiveness, proposed by Jankélévitch, but also to enhance it, by providing an even more profound ethical emphasis on the other person. In this light Assessor Wilhelm and his ironic ethics can be a fruitful debate partner in contemporary continental ethics.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Part II: **Media And Community**

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Christopher Black

6 Choosing for Yourself in the Age of the Social Media Echo-Chamber

Some Kierkegaardian Reflections on Online Algorithms

Since Hubert Dreyfus' Kierkegaardian reflections on the suppressive effects that the Internet has had on individuality and on the ways in which it is structured to promote anonymity and conformity,[1] a moderate amount of scholarship has appeared that considers the existential dangers of online life from a Kierkegaardian perspective. Relevant and compelling papers have been written that connect Kierkegaard's thinking to social media via topics ranging from surveillance and social control,[2] concerns about the "post-truth" era,[3] the "existential dialectics" of online social life,[4] ephemerality,[5] or the Kierkegaardian category of recollection as applied to social media,[6] to name a few. However, this paper will address a topic that has not yet been addressed by Kierkegaard scholarship, the social media algorithm, and it will argue that the self-obscuring echo-chambering effect of social media algorithms threatens to undercut that which serves as the foundation of Kierkegaardian ethical subjectivity: authentic existential choice. In short, this paper will argue that the dangers of the crowd, inauthentic selfhood, and mass media that Kierkegaard warned about in *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *The Point of View*, and other works have in many ways been taken over and rearticulated by the insidious, abstract force that is the online algorithm. What appears to the social media user to be an array of options amongst which to freely choose, is instead a mathemati-

---

1 Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs Commitment in the Present Age," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1999, pp. 96 – 109.

2 Jeremy Weissman, "P2P Surveillance in the Global Village," *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 21, 2019, pp. 29 – 47.

3 Soraj Hongladarom, "Anonymity and Commitment: How do Kierkegaard and Dreyfus Fare in the Era of Facebook and 'Post-Truth'?," *AI and Society*, vol. 34, 2019, pp. 289 – 299.

4 Karl Verstrynge, "Being and Becoming a Virtual Self: Taking Kierkegaard into the Realm of Online Social Interaction," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2011, pp. 303 – 319.

5 Christo Lombaard, "Fleetingness and media-ted existence. From Kierkegaard on the newspaper to Broderick on the Internet," *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2009, pp. 17 – 29.

6 Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson and Karl Verstrynge, "'Marvel at Nothing': Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Category of Recollection through Social Media Services," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2015, pp. 191 – 217.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-007

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

cally predetermined set of options tailored to mesh with preferences or interests that they have already explicitly or implicitly selected.[7] This leads to what is often referred to as a feedback loop, echo-system, or echo-chamber. When immersed in such a loop the user is never (or at least rarely) challenged to consider new or alternative possibilities, but is always already being reinforced in his or her view of the world. The user's perspective on reality, at least as it is presented through online content,[8] is essentially preformed and ever-ossifying, and the presence of this force is often unknown to the users themselves. The potential existential consequences of these algorithms are dire, especially if the free act of choice is the bedrock of our ethical lives. At its most extreme it would mean that—at least to the extent that one lives in and through social media—there is no possibility for authentic self-choice, only the illusion of choice, and therefore only limited possibilities (if any) for robust ethical subjectivity on algorithm-using social media sites and online platforms.

It will be argued that Kierkegaard would be opposed to this infinite reinforcement of pre-held views on first principles; that risk, possibility, and challenge are necessary conditions for authentic choice to occur, and that the capacity for authentic choice is a condition for the possibility for ethical subjectivity in the first place. Kierkegaard's authorial method modeled the nature of ethical choice by presenting the reader with a wide range of pseudonymous authorial voices to choose among, and this praxis in existential choice will be used as a model for thinking about existential choice online. Towards the end of displaying the existential danger of social media algorithms in a Kierkegaardian light, first social media algorithms and their function will be described, then Kierkegaard's thoughts on authentic choice and ethical subjectivity will be presented, and finally this way of thinking will be applied to the ethical subject insofar as he exists as a denizen of algorithm-using social media platforms.

7 James N. Cohen, "Exploring Echo-Systems: How Algorithms Shape Immersive Media Environments," *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2018, pp. 139–151. Pages 139–143 are particularly helpful towards understanding algorithm creation methods.

8 "Content" here refers to features such as advertisement, news feed content, recommended videos, etc.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

6.1 Social Media Algorithms: Intrusively Invisible, Intentional, and Insidious

Attentive users of social media platforms, and digital media platforms more generally,[9] have likely noticed uncanny events occur during their time online. They may notice that advertisements for a product that they considered purchasing yesterday are now appearing on the Facebook News Feeds today, or that their recommendations on Netflix and YouTube are disconcertingly similar—if not identical—to content that they, their friends, or people in their demographic class have recently consumed on that same platform (or other platforms). It is almost as if a unique "genre" had been created and tailored in order to appeal to their expected tastes and preferences. The individual who gets this uncanny sense is not succumbing to the delusions of the paranoid, but is instead perceiving the visible effects of the way that algorithms tailor content that is presented to the online user based on their past activity, their perceived preferences, and their likely interests. The content that is presented to them is curated and calculated in such a way as to maximally appeal to their likely pre-existing sensibilities, thereby increasing the probability that they will stay active on the platform as long as possible and thus ultimately generate more revenue for the platform. The user is "quantized"[10] by these online services in such a way that their online and offline (i.e., GPS tracked location and spending habits) activity may be mapped and tracked in order to render them as predictable as is mathematically possible. However, the active interference of algorithms in curating one's digital life remains opaque to most online users, and a recent study of Facebook users even showed that "more than half of the participants (62.5%) were not aware of the News Feed curation algorithm's existence at all."[11] Recent issues, such as Cambridge Analytica's data harvesting operation, have possibly made people a bit more cognizant of online "dataveillance" practices, but a noteworthy lacuna

---

9 Nick Srnicek defines digital media platforms most broadly as "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects." This definition, which will be used in this paper, includes algorithm-using platforms such as Netflix and Hulu, and not just traditional algorithm-using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017, p. 43.

10 This term is borrowed from Cohen, "Exploring Echo-Systems," p. 141.

11 Motahhare Eslami et al., "'I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her]': Reasoning about Invisible Algorithms in News Feeds," *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Seoul: CHI, 2015, pp. 153–162.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

still exists in popular awareness as well as in the Kierkegaardian literature on this topic.

The targeted advertisements and recommendations that users experience online are but one outgrowth of the larger contemporary phenomenon of "dataveillance," but one that should be especially worrisome when thinking in a Kierkegaardian register. Two features of online algorithms will be discussed—their intrusive invisibility and their intentional structure—and then in the following sections these considerations will be overlaid onto a Kierkegaardian examination of the primitive nature of ethical subjectivity as such.

First, dataveillance techniques geared towards algorithm creation are intrusively invisible in that they surreptitiously monitor elements of one's life that the individual is often not aware of. A recent survey indicates that teenagers spend almost nine hours per day on social media,[12] and the majority of online activity during this time is activity that is tracked and used to generate predictive algorithms. This tracked activity includes all views, likes, reads, searches, comments, shares, amounts of time viewing certain pages, and so on down to the tiniest interactions, sometimes even including supposedly "private" messages.[13] All of this information is compiled into large mathematical databases. Beyond this, negative media use time, or time spent away from social media platforms, is also often factored into predictive algorithm generation. This can include travel habits, offline spending habits, sleep patterns, and so on, all to create a more complete profile of the individual as a media-consuming entity. This concerted compilation and mathematization of user data is the intrusiveness that is also essentially invisible to the one being intruded upon. Algorithms, even as depicted in the movie *The Social Network* (2010), are presented as shadowy forces that only those initiated into the esoteric world of technology (those we might offhandedly call "techies") can hope to understand and control.[14] The rest of us are merely encompassed by it and subject to its mysterious guidance.

The intended purpose of these algorithms is more existentially interesting, and perhaps even more troubling, in that they function to effectively impose a limit on the possibilities of choice that an online user can make or perceive, and all the while purporting to generate a more "authentic" or "positive" display

12 Common Sense Media, "The Common Sense Census: Media Use By Tweens and Teens," 2015, p. 13, https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/census_researchreport.pdf. See also the article "Teens Spend Nearly Nine Hours Every Day Consuming Media" written by Hayley Tsukayama and published by the *Washington Post* on November 3, 2015.

13 Cohen, "Exploring Echo-Systems," p. 141

14 Cohen makes a similar observation on p. 140.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

of a user's interests or desires. The goal of the algorithm is to predict "likely choices"[15] and to generate a "positive response," that is, the goal is to present users with options that they already identify with or are deemed likely to identify with, so that they remain on the platform and begin to use it as a location for identity expression and formation. For example, a person of a certain age living in a certain location may have a certain product or a certain political campaign continually advertised to him, because the algorithm indicates that such a person who satisfies certain categories should be interested in certain purchases or certain political views.[16] Clicking on one of these targeted bits of content reinforces the loop. If this is the algorithmically-generated world (however it may look) that is continually broadcast to the user online, it may gradually become the perspective on the world that they fall into; the life-view that they begin to identify with. There is a serious existential issue presented here. Did they ever authentically choose this online life-view as their own in any robust sense? Did they ever even have the chance to choose for themselves how to live online? Were their "choices" morally relevant, passionate choices in the Kierkegaardian sense? These are the questions that need to be considered. In order to address these questions we need to understand the significance that Kierkegaard places on authentic choice in his thinking about the nature of ethical life.

6.2 The Fundamental Significance of Existential Choice in Kierkegaard's Ethics

Kierkegaard, both in the general nature of his polyvocal authorial method as well as in many of his writings, emphasized the absolute significance of free, authentic choice as a necessary constitutive element of ethical subjectivity as such. Indeed, some basic concepts that even the most fledgling Kierkegaard reader will associate with him are "passion" and "commitment," ideas funda-

15 Ibid., p. 142

16 The algorithmic methods employed in determining what products ought to be marketed to which people evokes thoughts of the father who, in 2011, learned that his daughter was pregnant because Target began sending pregnancy related items advertisements to their household. Their algorithm determined that because she was purchasing large amounts of scentless lotions and soaps, among other indicator items, that she was likely pregnant, and began sending germane advertisements to the address linked to their spending account. See "How Target Figured Out a Teen Girl was Pregnant Before Her Father Did" on Forbes.com, author Kashmir Hill, date of publication February 16, 2012.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

mentally bound up with ideas of authenticity and existential choice. Consider first the polyvocal, pseudonymous method that Kierkegaard employed throughout the course of his authorship. If one takes the time to scour through the Kierkegaardian corpus—including both published and unpublished[17] works—one finds references to or usages of at least 27 different pseudonyms. It is generally agreed that the purpose of Kierkegaard's use of this pseudonymous authorial method is to connect with his target audience—the single individual—via "indirect communication."[18] This method of communication is intended to "goad his readers into pursuing lives of greater inwardness and intensity, precisely so that they might begin or resume the painful, solitary task of self-examination."[19]

It can be seen, then, that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorial method itself, even before we consider the particular content of what the pseudonyms themselves had to say, functions as an existential praxis in authentic choice-making. Kierkegaard, as we know most prominently from his impassioned, polemical non-pseudonymous *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, wrote much of what he did in response to the widespread existential languor and cultural malaise that he perceived to be afflicting his society. But beyond this, he perceived that members of his society were living spiritless lives that denied the freedom and passionate inner life that was available to each one of them; a capacity that, for Kierkegaard, is always available to any spirit-endowed human. In an indictment of his society that still seems germane today, Kierkegaard claimed that the revolutionary, passionate spirit of his contemporaries had been replaced by a mathematical spirit of calculation, and that this calculative ethos undermined the development of passionate inwardness. He writes about how his contemporaries were beguiled by "spellbinding mirages,"[20] "chimerical exertions,"[21] the

17 Here, for example, one would include Petrus Minor, the author of the unpublished *Book on Adler*, or Felix de Saint Vincent the considered (although unused) author of "The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actor," among other unpublished or unused pseudonyms. See Julia Watkin, *The A to Z of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press 2001, pp. 396–406 for a more detailed list of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and the texts that each pseudonym was "responsible" for writing.
18 Daniel Conway, "Disclosing Despair: The Role of the Pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's Existential Approach," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2017, p. 131. See also Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*, Tallahassee: Florida State University Press 1986, pp. 171–182; also Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1993, pp. 140–148 and pp. 254–263; and Jon Stewart, "Søren Kierkegaard and the Problem of Pseudonymity," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2011, pp. 407–434.
19 Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132
20 *SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69.
21 *SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

"seductive ambiguity of reflection,"[22] and "the calculating sensibleness of the age,"[23] but that beneath this beguilement there was a deep existential hollowness: they sacrificed passionate inner lives; lives of risk and radical self-choice. They relied on external measures, common standards, and mass media (i.e., the press) to tell them how to live their lives, and thus never claimed authentic existential identities for themselves. For to have a true identity, one must claim it for oneself not receive it secondhand. Kierkegaard provides an anecdote to this effect, suggesting that those beguiled by the calculative sensibility of his age failed to possess the intensity of spirit needed to claim one's own identity, which occurs through decisive action and authentic decision:

> Action and decision are just as scarce these days as is the fun of swimming dangerously for those who swim in shallow water. Just as an adult, himself reveling in the tossing waves, calls to those younger: "Come on out, just jump in quickly"—just so does decision lie in existence, so to speak (although, of course, it is in the individual), and shouts to the youth who is not yet enervated by too much reflection and overwhelmed by the delusions of reflection: "Come on out, jump in boldly." Even if it is a rash leap, if only it is decisive, and if you have the makings of a man, the danger and life's severe judgment upon your recklessness will help you to become one.[24]

In this anecdote, similar to in his later parable of the ice skater,[25] we see risk and uncertainty presented as necessary elements of decisive choice, and decisive choice being a sufficient condition (i.e., "Even if it is a rash leap, if only it is decisive…") of one claiming a robust, authentic identity. Those who stay in the "shallow waters" referenced earlier never achieve this fullness of identity because they play it safe and only ever go where pragmatic rule-followers[26] deem prudent or expeditious.

---

22 *SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69.
23 *SKS* 8, 68 / *TA*, 70.
24 *SKS* 8, 69 / *TA*, 71.
25 *SKS* 8, 69 / *TA*, 71–72: "If the treasure that everyone covets lies far out on a very thin crust of ice, guarded by the great danger to anyone venturing so far out, whereas (let us assume this oddity which after all is odd only in the illustration) closer to shore the ice is thick and solid–in a passionate age the crowd would loudly cheer the bold, brave person who skates out on the thin ice. They would shudder for him and with him in his perilous decision, would grieve for him if he meets his death, and would idealize him if he gets the treasure. This situation would be entirely different in a reflective age devoid of passion. In mutual recognition of shared prudence, they would sensibly agree that it certainly would not be worth the trouble to skate out on such thin ice—in fact it would be foolish and ridiculous."
26 See, for critical comments on "pragmatic" thinkers, this quotation: "Just as weapons were freely distributed in the age of revolution and the insignia of enterprise was conferred publicly

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

As a thinker deeply opposed to spiritual lassitude and existential languor, Kierkegaard sought to provoke an alternative mode of living, and thus adopted the pseudonymous method in order to intervene and disrupt the internal quietude that had befallen his contemporaries. As has been pointed out, through his authorial style Kierkegaard "aims to discourage his readers from reducing themselves to quantifiable bundles of desires, predictable patterns of behavior, or utilitarian preference functions. He is particularly alert to the ways in which his readers attempt to renounce, discount, or curtail their own freedom."[27] In keeping with this resistance to categorization, there is no ready-made path through which to interpret the Kierkegaardian oeuvre, and Kierkegaard—in his own voice—pleads with his readers not to assume that his pseudonymous voices came from the same source, or that they represented a coherent, discreet life-view:

> What has been written, then, is mine, but only insofar as I, by means of audible lines, have placed the life-view of the creating, poetically actual individuality in his mouth...thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them.[28]

This is a profound and challenging disavowal, and one that has been questioned by some scholars.[29] However, the intended philosophical function of this method —the aforementioned existential praxis—is clear, even if imperfectly implemented.[30] Assuming continuity and coherence would betoken a lazy heuristic of inter-

during the crusades, so today we are everywhere lavishly regaled with pragmatic rules, a calculus of consideration, etc." (*SKS* 8, 67 / *TA*, 69–70).

27 Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132

28 *SKS* 7, 569–570 / *CUP1*, 625–627.

29 Consider, the example, the following question raised by Josiah Thompson: "He implores us to forget about him and to pay attention to his characters—but he *is* his characters in so many ways...what is it that in spite of Kierkegaard's claims to the contrary makes the paternity of the pseudonymous works so clear?" Josiah Thompson, *Kierkegaard*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1973, p. 139.

30 On the question of the success of Kierkegaard's attempt to completely separate himself from the identities of his pseudonyms see this passage from C. Stephen Evans in *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript:* "Kierkegaard tells us we are to regard the pseudonymous authors as independent beings whose views are their own. However, it by no means follows from this that Kierkegaard does not some of their views, still less that he rejects their views... As a matter of fact, it is not hard to show that a good many of the opinions expressed by the pseudonyms were held by Kierkegaard himself. The method whereby this can be done is simply to compare the pseudonymous works with works that Kierkegaard wrote under his own name and with his opinions as expressed in his *Journals and Papers*....This identification is particularly tempting in the case of

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

pretation, and would be inconducive to facilitating the necessarily individual task of self-confrontation and self-examination. His maieutic method, akin to Socrates', requires the individual reader to struggle through the life-views propounded by the pseudonyms and—in critical self-confrontation—"give birth to themselves as authentic individuals."[31]

But even beyond the literary methodological praxis, wherethrough Kierkegaard demonstrated the fundamental significance of authentic choice as being a necessary condition for ethical subjectivity, we also find an abundance of instances whereupon Kierkegaard—both pseudonymously and non-pseudonymously—argued that authentic choice is the fundamental groundwork of ethical life. Some passages from Climacus and Anti-Climacus' respective authorships will be presented in order to lend support to this point, as well as a passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*. As will be addressed in more detail later, this Kierkegaardian point should motivate us to be concerned about any forces, such as social media algorithms, that may threaten to undermine our ability to make our own authentic choices. For, if authentic choice is as ethically foundational as Kierkegaard insists that it is, then our very ethical subjectivity would be at stake in any such loss.

With regard to references to passages by the pseudonyms, we will focus on Climacus and Anti-Climacus' writings because, as C. Stephen Evans has noted, Kierkegaard's own views tend to most closely align with these two pseudonymous figures.[32] Indeed, Kierkegaard even described himself in relation to these two pseudonyms, and spoke about Anti-Climacus—one of the "higher" pseudonyms—as an idealized spiritual exemplar that he strove to emulate. He says of them, that "Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus have several things in common…I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus."[33] While Kierkegaard saw himself as more religiously advanced than Climacus, and less so than Anti-Climacus, they are still both outlets through which we can gain insight into Kierkegaard's own self-avowed thought.[34]

Johannes Climacus, who more than any other pseudonym (except Anti-Climacus), seems to express ideas that lie at the core of Kierkegaard's own thought." C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 1999, pp. 7–8.

31 Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132

32 Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, pp. 7–8.

33 *SKS* 22, 130, NB 11:209 / *JP* 6, 6433.

34 Jan E. Evans helpfully addresses the question of how we can attribute pseudonymous views (specifically of Climacus and Anti-Climacus) to Kierkegaard and concludes that "We can safely assume, then, that we can ascribe to Kierkegaard the views of Anti-Climacus in *Sickness unto*

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

We will first look at some thoughts on the ethical significance of authentic choice offered by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*, especially in light of the fact that it has been shown that Anti-Climacus' views closely mirror Kierkegaard's own. In Anti-Climacus' legendarily opaque outline of the nature of the self, we see the full measure of the preeminence that Kierkegaard places on consciousness and self-awareness with regards to self-constitution. In order for a person to be a self at all—and thus in order for a person to be an ethical subject—one must first existentially choose how to live within a context of self-consciousness and freedom, both of which are factors that are absolutely relevant to our examination of the function of algorithms in life online. Consider the following passage from *The Sickness unto Death:* "The self is freedom...The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self."[35] In this passage Kierkegaard clearly and directly addresses the significance of conscious awareness of our own freedom. The stakes are clear: one is not a self unless one is aware of his own freedom, and one must take responsibility—via the will—for his condition as a radically free being. Anything that obfuscates this consciousness, or cuts against this willful capacity, cuts against the basis of existential selfhood altogether.

A few pages later Kierkegaard describes spiritless, secular society's tendency to replace the freedom of the self, through a process called "finitization,"[36] with a reductive numerical conception of what it means to be a self. The parallels that this critique shares with our contemporary algorithmic online societies and click-based cultures are glaring and obvious. Not only does this mathematical reduction of the self to a number lead to "ethical narrowness,"[37] it also "emasculates [one] in a spiritual sense"[38] insofar as it robs one "of one's primitivity."[39] In other words, this form of mathematical thinking about the self isolates one from one's actual, primitive selfhood, which ought to be thought of in terms of conscious-

Death, though Kierkegaard would not want us to think that he had achieved the lofty goals of which Anti-Climacus speaks." With regards to Johannes Climacus Evans says: "So how should we evaluate what Climacus has to say in light of Kierkegaard's own views? That must be done on an issue by issue basis. But it is clear what Climacus says about Christianity must be seen as an outsiders view." Jan E. Evans, *Unamuno and Kierkegaard: Paths to Selfhood in Fiction*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books 2005, pp. 41–44.

35 *SKS* 11, 145 / *SUD*, 29.

36 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

37 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

38 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

39 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ness, freedom, and the will. The "dialectic inherent in the self"[40] requires existential space in which to express its dynamic being; "finitization" reduces the possibilities for understanding the self as dynamic freedom, and thus necessarily entails ethical and existential narrowness. The self must not be thought of as an algorithmic "preference function"[41]; it is much more—and radically other—than that. At its most primitive, expressed through the activity of existential dialectics,[42] it is the freedom of choosing how to live and the appropriation of one's own freedom through conscious, willful choice. To gain a more complete sense of how Kierkegaard describes the reductive narrowness of finitization, we can look at an extended excerpt from "Finitude's Despair Is to Lack Infinitude,"[43] in the first part of *The Sickness unto Death*. Note how Kierkegaard describes finitization and quantification as fundamentally opposed to the free, energetic activity of the authentic self:

> To lack infinitude is despairing reductionism, narrowness. Of course, what is meant here is only ethical narrowness and limitation…The secular view always clings tightly to the difference between man and man and naturally does not have any understanding of the one thing needful (for it is to have spirituality), and thus has no understanding of the reductionism and narrowness involved in having lost oneself, not by being volatilized in the infinite, but by being completely finitized, by becoming a number instead of a self, just one more man, just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei* [one and the same]…Despairing narrowness is to lack primitivity or to have robbed oneself of one's primitivity, to have emasculated oneself in a spiritual sense.[44]

This self-denying, despairing mathematical reductionism is something that Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus vociferously warns against, and Anti-Climacus' warnings should be taken very seriously, especially given his status as an ideal spiritual individual in Kierkegaard's eyes. It is hard not to think of this sort of mathematical reductionism when we consider today's online algorithms. But

40 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
41 A use of this term in a similar context may be found in Conway, "Disclosing Despair," p. 132.
42 Karl Verstrynge's use of the term "existential dialectics" inspired its use here. He defines it variously as Kierkegaard's analysis of the "balance between being dissolved from oneself, the other or actuality on the one hand, and merely distancing or abstracting from them on the other hand." Karl Verstrynge, "Being and Becoming a Virtual Self," pp. 303–320. He, along with Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson, also defines it as an attempt to "grasp Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the human self, and the task of finding a proper relation of the self to itself." Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson and Karl Verstrynge, "'Marvel at Nothing': Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Category of Recollection through Social Media Services," p. 197.
43 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.
44 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

we also find similar warnings made by Anti-Climacus' less spiritually developed counterpart: Johannes Climacus.

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus propounded an equivalent line of attack, and directly alleges that the mathematizing of society renders the individual "accidental"[45] and existentially inert. More to the point of this paper, though, this mathematization—as stated in the middle sentence of the following selection—makes it such that the individual is no longer capable of the free inward movements needed to make his own existential decisions, and therefore loses his subjective selfhood. *Eo ipso*, he also loses his ethical subjectivity:

> The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, *just like the decision*, is subjectivity. The way of objective reflection now leads to abstract thinking, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of various kinds, and always leads away from the subjective individual, whose existence or nonexistence becomes, from an objective point of view, altogether properly, infinitely indifferent.[46]

This passage, like so many others from the *Postscript*, is exceedingly rich. The notion that the individual might come to see himself as "accidental" is pertinent, and is related to the aforementioned task of existential dialectics. This objective, mathematizing mode of self-relation sees all selves (including oneself) as "quantifiable bundles of desires"[47] that are passively embedded in reality, at the cost of forgetting (or denying) the initial uncertainties and ineffables that exist at the heart of being, and at the cost of forgetting (or denying) the originary activity of free, dynamic self-relation that undergirds all human experience in the first place. In this schema the self is reduced to its function of predictability and its most basic structure of quantitative intelligibility; it leaves no space for freedom, consciousness, or other constitutive elements of robust selfhood. "The single individual" could be anyone, "just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei*."[48] His or her preferences are related to as mere accidents, and are thought to have nothing to do with the individual himself, for the self is merely a Humean bundle in this model of thinking. Accordingly, everyone and everything is fundamentally interchangeable, and there is nothing distinctly unique about any one individual, insofar as all "individuals" (if we may call them that)—at least within

45 *SKS* 7, 177 / *CUP1*, 193.
46 *SKS* 7, 177 / *CUP1*, 193 (emphasis added).
47 This term is borrowed from Conway, "Disclosing Despair," 132.
48 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

this attitude of relating to existence—exist in the same fungible, quantitative grid of flattened meaning. Individuals do not passionately choose for themselves how to live, but they instead—by dint of a deterministic ethos—passively accept what happens in their life as representing how it simply is or must be. It is this manner of existence that Kierkegaard refers to as "levelled" in *Two Ages*. In levelled existence one gets the sense that individuals truly do not exist, for the qualitative differentiations between individuals—those marked by heroic strivings, faithful convictions, and the like—have been corroded by an assembly of homogenizing forces (the press, broadly systematic thinking, Christendom, etc.) and subsumed within a quantitative grid. Kierkegaard—using the helpful metaphor of a "coiled spring"—compares the enervated, homogenized character of leveled existence with the dynamic, heterogenous character of passionate existence in a challenging passage from *Two Ages:*

> The coiled springs of life-relationships, which are what they are only because of qualitatively distinguishing passion, lose their resilience; the qualitative expression of difference between opposites is no longer the law for the relation of inwardness to each other in the relation. Inwardness is lacking, and to that extent the relation does not exist or the relation is an inert cohesion.[49]

The existential threat of the quantized model of existence is not only that it will lead to leveling writ large, but that individual relationships—to oneself and to others—will be rendered "inert." For a relationship to have resilient and animating "coiled springs" requires that the self not be thought of as predictable, quantifiable bundle of desires, but instead to be always related to as the kind of entity that has a free, active, and ongoing choice in the question of how to live.

This matter—the question of the individual's capacity to choose for himself how to live—is precisely at the core of Kierkegaardian ethics, and is also at the core of the question of what role predictive algorithms play in our lives online. Due to the pressing nature of this contemporary ethical issue we should take some time to consider, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, what ought to be done in light of it.

6.3 How Should We Live Online?

Given the above descriptions of how social media algorithms function, and given the outline of the ethical significance of authentic existential choice in Kierke-

49 *SKS* 8, 75 / *TA*, 78.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

gaard's thought, it is obvious that a significant reevaluation of how we live online is in order. First, a few more reflections on the existential dangers of online algorithms will be presented, and then a few thoughts on how we might live online in the face of all of this will be offered.

Algorithmically determined content presentation on online platforms seem to undercut the existential capacity for authentic choice in two ways. First, through infinite reinforcement of already selected preferences, and secondly, through the presentation of an abstract crowd (or a "target market," "phantom public," etc.) that the user is predicted to be likely to align with. On the first matter, it seems clear that Kierkegaard would be fundamentally opposed to the way in which—through the harvesting of users' earlier activity—algorithms blindly reinforce users' preferences and beliefs. Instead of challenging the online individual to continually decide for himself how to live, algorithms used in this way only encourage the user to hear something that he has already heard, or to see from a perspective that he has already seen from, or to affirm a position that he has already affirmed. These algorithms are programmed to present users with options that it thinks that they already want to see; the user is never rattled by uncomfortable new possibilities, but is instead swaddled in the comfort of being infinitely reinforced within his own cozy echo-chamber. This cuts against the Kierkegaardian practice of free choice being enacted via the rigorous and unguided examination of various mutually exclusive possible life-views, and instead tries to make "choice" as easy as possible for the user. In attempting to make it easy, it essentially erases the possibility of existential choice altogether. As has been shown throughout this paper, Kierkegaard was fundamentally opposed to the passive inheriting of life-views, but instead implored his reader to be challenged by new possibilities and to experience the inner tension of engaging with alternative life-views. This sort of painful self-examination is a precondition for authentic choice, and authentic choice is discouraged by the passive life-view reinforcement mechanism that is characteristic of the social media algorithm. Kierkegaard exemplified existential self-examination through his poly-vocal authorial style and promoted it with many of his pseudonyms as well as promoting it directly, but algorithms provide no such poly-vocality. Only one kind of voice answers back in the online echo-chamber, and the algorithmic feedback loop provides no space for new existential possibilities and no latitude for authentic choice-making. Alternatives, by definition, are systematically excluded.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

On the second matter, online algorithms formulate a "phantom public"[50] meant to seduce the user into a false, easy[51] sense of identity. One is presented with a mathematically-generated online experience, rife with targeted advertisements, as if the user were no more than a predictable bundle of desires. The self —as Kierkegaard might say—has been reduced to a number, a probability. These targeted advertisements present a contrived reality meant to capture the user for various economic or political purposes, but the inattentive user may think that these targeted advertisements simply represent the views and opinions of the crowd and that they reflect what everyone else is seeing and thinking, and thus casually go along with it. As Kierkegaard displayed throughout his work, the crowd has a way of seducing and eliminating the individual. The user may simply slide into the fabricated, ready-made identity that has been contrived for him without ever having made his own free, conscious existential choice about how to live online in the first place.

We have seen how online algorithms pose a dire existential threat to the contemporary ethical subject, but we have yet to address how one might live in light of this threat. Instead of proposing a flight from society in search of the self, a solution akin to Thoreau's famous experiment in solitude, this paper will argue that severing the relation to the online world is not what is called for. Such severance, if it were even possible, would amount to a refusal to address a fundamental contemporary question of meaning, and to engage with a fundamental condition of contemporary existence. Instead, awareness and invigoration are avenues by which the self, as a self that exists online, may preserve—and perhaps even intensify—his ethical subjectivity.

First, and most importantly, is the matter of awareness. From awareness, online existential invigoration should follow. Recall the previously mentioned quote from *The Sickness unto Death:* "The self is freedom....The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self."[52] This quotation provides an important model for thinking about how we ought to exist online. What does it mean to have "consciousness" online, and especially in the context of online algorithms? To be sure, this must be an individual task, and a task that takes the form of a continual activity of recogni-

50 For Kierkegaard's use of the idea of the "phantom public," see *SKS* 8, 86 / *TA*, 90.

51 A Kierkegaardian example of an "easy" sense of identity might be the follower of "Christendom." These people identified as Christians, and treated Christianity as the ready-made task of following the rules and conventions of the Danish State Church. Kierkegaard repeatedly lambasted these people, and largely on the grounds that they treated their claims to identity casually and unscrupulously.

52 *SKS* 11, 145 / *SUD*, 29.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

tion and self-awareness. The online ethical subject should recognize that while online, he is continually within a system of "finitizing"[53] dataveillance techniques that are not intended to cultivate individual ethical subjectivity, but are instead intended to entrap and extend time spent online. In other words, one ought to take extra care to guard one's inner life while online. One should recognize that this existential entrapment is often effected through echo-chambering and targeted content presentation, and take measures to be sure that one has not slipped into an identity or milieu without first going through the rigorous self-examination that necessarily precedes authentic commitment.

This activity of online self-awareness requires a reconsideration of how it is that we relate to our lives online. Instead of relating to the online world as a "digital dualist"[54] would, that is, as one who thinks of the online and offline worlds as ontologically disconnected, the contemporary ethical subject must recognize that existentially relevant activity also occurs online, and that this activity pertains to the selfsame subject. Moreover, this online self-awareness should lead to a newfound existential invigoration. This invigoration may take place when we realize that our online world, and the algorithmically-generated interpretation of reality that it presents us with, calls for our close and ongoing attention. This sequence falls in line with Kierkegaard's above-mentioned identification of consciousness, will, and self. The online subject, now acutely aware of the existential danger of online algorithms, may start to carefully examine the nature of his relation to online platforms, and to each of the tiniest choices he makes while online. This attentiveness will intensify his relationship not only to the platform, but also to himself; in these algorithmically augmented social media worlds, there is only a hazy difference. The algorithmic platform presents the self with a certain impoverished version of his own self; the conscious user needs to the assess the content that is targeted towards him and examine why it is *this* type of content that is continually presented to him rather than other possibilities, and to continually ask whether this targeted content authentically represents who and how he is. Instead of a passive, enervated[55] relation to life online the conscious user will ideally take a more active relation to his online life; he will recognize that online algorithms often push users into echo-chambers and feedback loops, and thus he may seek out opportunities for feedback loop disruption and consequently experience authentic choice-making. These disruptions may take place by the user intentionally stepping outside of his online

53 *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33.

54 Joke Bauwens and Karl Verstrynge, "Digital Technology, Virtual Worlds, and Ethical Change," *Techne: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2013, p. 125.

55 See *SKS* 8, 69 / *TA*, 71 to see Kierkegaard use "enervation" in a similar context.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

echo-chamber and attempting to find that which is hidden from him, and in so doing go through a process of deciding truly for himself—in light of all this—how it is that he will live while living online, and examine why he chooses to live this way. There are certainly other ways through which this consciousness may lead to invigoration, but what is really of utmost importance is that this invigoration lead to authentic existential choice-making while online, especially as this paper has shown that—at least for Kierkegaard—existential choice-making is a fundamental condition for the existence of ethical subjectivity at all.

Kierkegaard, in his time, recognized how certain features of his culture—including the press, the Danish State Church, systematic "objective" thinking, and a general crowd-like sensibility—negatively impacted the ability of his contemporaries to exist as authentic subjective individuals. They largely neglected their freedom to consciously choose for themselves how to live, and thus failed to perform the most basic movement of ethical subjectivity. Today we have our own contemporary set of problems, including algorithmically generated online echo-chambers. The nature of this problem is close to much of what concerned Kierkegaard, and it shares similar features to many of the issues that he addressed. Thus, we should consider what he had to say in relation to these questions of online existence. If our very ethical subjecthood is at risk—as has been shown—we must consciously guard against falling into online echo-chambers, and we must take great care to preserve our own freedom to choose how to live while online.[56]

56 Many ideas presented in this chapter were initially presented at "Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics" conference at ESC Clermont in Clermont-Ferrand, France, which took place on May 2nd-3rd of 2019. I would like to thank the participants of that conference for the abundance of helpful advice they gave me on this topic. I also received several insightful comments from an anonymous reviewer of this chapter, and for that I thank them. Additionally, George J. Stack's 1977 book *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics* was helpful in the preparation of this chapter, and the third chapter of the book titled "Existential Choice" was particularly helpful. George S. Stack, *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press 1977.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Patrick Stokes

7 Kierkegaard's Critique of the Internet

To live in the "Global North" in the twenty-first century is to live a large part of one's life on the internet. But "living on the internet" already means something very different to what it meant at the start of this century. It no longer means sitting at computers "surfing the web," as one of the older structuring metaphors of the digital era put it. Rather it means that how we face the world and how we communicate with others is increasingly electronically mediated, in ways that are embedded more or less seamlessly into our everyday existence. The internet is no longer a place we visit, but part of how we move through the world. This new aspect of our embodied existence has thrown up new ethical challenges: what is the ontological and ethical status of online actions and relationships—are they *real?* How should we engage with others in online environments? Is an ethically authentic, engaged life possible online, or does the internet turn us all into mere spectators?

Perhaps surprisingly, Kierkegaard has already been invoked multiple times as a figure with something to teach us about these issues. We read in the literature of Kierkegaard's "trenchant and almost prophetic insight into the current situation of the constantly connected individual."[1] Most notably, the late Hubert Dreyfus enlisted Kierkegaard as a fellow critic of the internet as early as his 2001 book *On the Internet*, seeing the long-dead Dane as a fellow online-curmudgeon who would have had no time for emerging new forms of online communication.[2] Almost from the start of the online era, Kierkegaard has been conscripted to a form of scholarly cyber-pessimism that judged internet-mediated forms of sociality as "nothing but a vague and defective reflection of the solid forms of 'real' sociability."[3]

There is indeed, as I will make clear, much in Dreyfus' application of Kierkegaard's thought to the internet that is still very much valid. Yet by the time Dreyfus came to write a second edition of the book in 2008, he already had to admit that some of his earlier claims had been overtaken by technological developments. The internet has grown and developed at a speed that confounds the

---

1 Gudmundur Bjorn Thorbjornsson and Karl Verstrynge, "'Marvel at Nothing:' Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Category of Recollection through Social Networking Services," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2015, pp. 191–2.

2 Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 2nd ed., New York: Routledge 2008.

3 Karl Verstrynge, "Being and Becoming a Virtual Self: Taking Kierkegaard into the Realm of Online Social Interaction," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2011, pp. 304–5.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-008

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

slow work of philosophical analysis. What, then, would Kierkegaard make of the internet of today, and in particular, what would the great critic of the crowd and the mediated public say about the ethical dangers and possibilities of social media? As we will see, many of Kierkegaard's criticisms of his contemporary media environment are presciently applicable to our own. His concerns over *anonymity*, *communicative proportionality*, and the construction of *abstract publics*, all hold important implications for how we understand online life today, and for how we develop new ethical stances for online communication. Yet as we will see, we can also find in Kierkegaard an indication of what a more ethical life on the internet might look like. Kierkegaard may not, or at least not entirely, be quite the incorrigible techno-curmudgeon he's been presented as.

7.1 Kierkegaard's Technological Context—and Ours

It is easy to forget that Kierkegaard's life overlaps with the start of the electronic communication era. Yet it is just as easy to overplay this fact. A casual glance at Kierkegaard's writings reveals many tantalizing instances of the word "telegraph" (both as noun and verb) and of "telegraphic" as an adjective. However, most of these are not references to the electric telegraph of Samuel Morse, but to the "optical telegraph," a system of long-distance communication using flags or lanterns.[4] Hence when Kierkegaard describes the actor Joachim Ludvig Phister as comically conveying the drunkenness of Captain Scipio "telegraphically" rather than directly,[5] he means simply that the communication is done without words, by cryptic non-verbal gestures. The electric telegraph, which comes to public consciousness in the 1840s, does however appear in *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) in an analogy for eschatological responsibility:

> The situation of the guilty person traveling through life to eternity is like that of the murderer who fled the scene of his act—and his crime—on the express train: alas, just beneath the coach in which he sat ran the electromagnetic telegraph carrying his description and orders for his arrest at the first station. When he arrived at the station and left the

4 *SKS* 4, 133 / *FT*, 39: "I move a little closer to him, watch his slightest movement to see if it reveals a bit of heterogeneous optical telegraphy from the infinite, a glance, a facial expression, a gesture, a sadness, a smile that would betray the infinite in its heterogeneity with the finite."
5 *SKS* 16, 139 / *CD*, 340.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> coach, he was arrested—in a way, he had personally brought his own denunciation along with him.[6]

The anecdote is striking in that it suggests a lack of familiarity (understandable in the late 1840s) with how Morse's telegraph actually works. From this point onwards, Kierkegaard mentions the new telegraph mostly in tandem with the railroad as signifiers for the "great discoveries" [*Opdagelser*][7] of the modern era—an era of which Kierkegaard is deeply critical. For Kierkegaard, in the present era, "the speed of communication stand[s] in an inverse relationship to the dilatoriness of irresolution."[8] In one particularly excoriating journal entry from 1854, he writes:

> How deserved, therefore, the mockery over the human race, this nauseating almost daily telegraph-lie. Rejoice, O human race, that you have invented the telegraph; be proud of your discovery which is so appropriate to the times, calculated to lie on the greatest possible scale. Just as the Romans branded slanderers with the letter C, so the telegraph is a brand upon the human race—you liars.[9]

Kierkegaard could already see the world was being sped up by electronic communication and rail travel. Two centuries on, society has been radically transformed by waves of new electronic media. Most recently, how we live, communicate, make friends, fall in love, have sex, raise children, buy and sell goods, engage in politics, and even how we die have all been altered by the coming of the internet. Kierkegaard died too early to see the genuinely transformative effects of the telegraph come to fruition; how, then, could he be a useful critic of or guide to the era of the digital revolution? What I want to suggest here is that it is insofar as Kierkegaard was writing at the start of the *broadcast* era, an era in which he viewed human communication as beginning to stray outside of its normative boundaries of proportion and reciprocation, that he is able to sound a useful warning to the internet age.

We tend to think of the newspaper as "old" technology. Yet in a sense, the coming of the newspaper is the start of the broadcast era: an era characterized by information being transmitted rapidly from a small number of producers to a large number of passive listeners. While Danish newspapers had existed right

6 *SKS* 11, 235 / *SUD*, 124 (trans. modified). The Hongs translate *elektromagnetiske Telegraph* as "telegraph wires." This is charitable to Kierkegaard, but perhaps covers up a lack of understanding of the new technology.
7 *SKS* 26, 123, NB32:9.
8 *SKS* 8, 62 / *TA*, 64.
9 *SKS* 26, 150, NB32:47 / *JP* 6, 531–2.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

through the 18th century, it wasn't until 1834 that a liberal press appeared in Denmark that emphasized news items over opinion pieces, while nonetheless campaigning for what became the lasting liberal reforms of 1848 and the dismantling of the Danish absolute monarchy.

We, by contrast, appear to be living at the *end* of the broadcast era. Traditional forms of broadcast survive of course, but these are increasingly asynchronous[10]—instead of sitting down to watch or listen to a broadcast program simultaneously, we individually choose what to watch or listen to, and when—and the old one-broadcasting-to-many paradigm has increasingly been replaced by more interactive forms of media. Individuals now are not merely passive receivers of media content, but are themselves re-mediators and content creators thanks to the affordances of social media. The interactive function of news media is now far more important than previously too: stories are created not merely to be read but to be shared and commented on. Yet as we'll see, it is remarkable how much of Kierkegaard's critique of the broadcast press still applies in this more interactive environment.

7.2 Kierkegaard's Critique of Mass Media

To say that Kierkegaard had a low opinion of journalists would be almost laughable understatement. Kierkegaard may ridicule the professors for their abstraction and lambast the clergy for selling what he took to be an unacceptably watered-down version of Christianity, but even by his standards his contempt for the newspapers and those who worked for them is noticeable for both its vitriol and stamina. While Kierkegaard's involvement with the press dates back to his student days, the problematic status of the press for ethical and spiritual life seems to have been a preoccupation of Kierkegaard's from around 1843 onwards.[11] He tells us that: "The tyranny of the daily press is the most wretched, the most contemptible of all tyrannies,"[12] and that "The daily press is and remains the evil principle in the modern world," that "[i]n its sophistry it has no limits, since it can sink to ever lower and lower levels of readers" and that

10 Newspapers are certainly asynchronous compared to broadcast electronic media, e.g., radio and television. However, they are broadly synchronous compared to the media that came before them; unlike books, newspapers are typically consumed on the day of their publication.

11 Nerina Jansen, "The Individual versus the Public: A Key to Kierkegaard's Views of the Daily Press," in *The Corsair Affair*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1990 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 13), p. 1.

12 *SKS* 20, 33, NB:30 / *JP* 2, 478.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

it "stirs up so much foulness and meanness that no state can cope with it."[13] In 1854 he compares journalists unfavorably to garbage collectors[14] and enthusiastically endorses Schopenhauer's description of journalists as "renters of opinions."[15] In speaking of the "recklessness and callousness" of journalists he even tells us at one point in 1849: "If I were a father and had a daughter who was seduced, I would not despair of her. I would hope for salvation. But if I had a son who became a journalist and remained one for five years, him I should give up."[16]

Much of this antagonism to the press clearly has biographical roots. In 1846 Kierkegaard picked an ill-advised fight with *The Corsair*, a satirical newspaper which presented itself as a lampoon of the upper classes on behalf of the masses, but which was in fact largely a vehicle for middle-class resentments and snobbery. In an attack piece on the *Corsair*'s impresario P.L. Møller, Kierkegaard has "Frater Taciturnus" complain that he and his fellow pseudonyms are the only Danish authors *not* to have been attacked in the *Corsair*, and begs the paper to restore his honor and dignity by disparaging them: "Would that I might get into *The Corsair* soon. It is really hard for a poor writer to be so singled out in Danish literature that he (assuming that we pseudonyms are one) is the only one who is not abused there."[17] Arguably worse, Kierkegaard publicly named Møller as being behind *The Corsair*, a revelation which Møller later blamed when he was passed over for the professorial chair of literature vacated upon the death of the poet Adam Oehlenschlager.[18]

Møller and his associate, editor Meir Goldschmidt returned fire in brutal fashion. Over several months, the paper lampooned Kierkegaard mercilessly, mocking his clothes, his voice, his curved spine, and presenting him as ridiculous and self-important figure. He appeared in a series of crude caricatures, mocking the length of his cuffs, presenting him riding on a woman's shoulders, and leading an army made up of the lowest echelons of Copenhagen street life. For Kierkegaard, whose daily routine involved extensive walks through the city, the results were devastating. Children began to openly taunt him in the street,

13 *SKS* 20, 152, NB2:29 / *JP* 2, 479.
14 *SKS* 26, 14, NB31:14 / *JP* 2, 491.
15 *SKS* 26, 233, NB32:137 / *JP* 4, 35.
16 *SKS* 22, 422, NB14:136 / *JP* 2, 485.
17 *SKS* 14, 84 / *COR*, 46.
18 Though as Howard and Edna Hong note (*COR*, xxviii-ix), Møller himself had previously noted his connection with *The Corsair* in print. Møller was, simply, never in contention for Oehlenschlager's old job; blaming the now-dead Kierkegaard for his failure was no doubt less painful than admitting this.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and he no longer felt he could interact with people as he had before. Within the year *The Corsair* had folded and both Goldschmidt and Møller had left Denmark; Møller would never return. Yet whatever vindication Kierkegaard may have felt, the episode had a significant impact on his authorial output over the following years and arguably sharpened his view of himself as agonistically opposed to his wider society. While the relationship between the "single individual" and the "crowd" had always been a key feature of Kierkegaard's writings, the *Corsair* Affair clearly personalized this for Kierkegaard in a distinct and distressing way.

Kierkegaard's condemnation of the press is not, however, simply a matter of resentment or pique. Rather, for Kierkegaard, the media generates genuinely novel forms of relationship between individuals and the wider society, relationships which are inimical to the ethical task of integrated, responsible selfhood. We'll now consider the ways in which this is the case under three headings: *anonymity*, the *public*, and *proportionality*, and will discuss how his thoughts on these fronts might be applied to our contemporary situation in the internet age.

7.3 The Public

Kierkegaard's concern about the media is ultimately ethical, but it is also ontological. Both as an author and as a theorist of authorship, Kierkegaard is both keenly aware of the three-part structure of communication—speaker, hearer, and the "in-between-being" (*mellemværelse*) of the content communicated between them[19]—and the ways in which the entities implicated in that structure relate to each other. As an author, he is particularly anxious to set the conditions for just the right sort of relation between author and reader to arise. But the press, in Kierkegaard's view, volatilizes the terms of this ontology by generating a new category, "the public," and thereby moves away from the fundamental structure of human communication in a way that is inimical to proper ethical responsibility.

Much of this criticism is developed in the work typically known in English as *Two Ages*, a book-length review of a novel published anonymously by Thomasine Gyllembourg-Ehrensvärd. In that work, Kierkegaard develops a critique of what he calls *leveling*, a tendency of the age to reduce all persons, opinions, and practices to the same level of esteem or epistemic weight. Kierkegaard's critique of leveling is, at least on the surface, distinctly anti-egalitarian in a way

19 Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: Interest, Self, and Moral Vision*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010, pp. 47–8.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that, in our age, we'd be rightly suspicious of. His distaste at the removal of absolute monarchy in favor of constitutional democracy in 1848 speaks to a certain persistent Toryism which, however, is less grounded in ideas of natural aristocracy as in a reflexive regard for the individual over "the crowd." However, his critique certainly has important resonances for our era, in which all sources of information are reduced to a common level—a fact which in very large measure derives from the structure of the internet. In the online age, an unprecedentedly large quantity of information is easily accessible. But the tradeoff is that this information is given in forms that don't intrinsically differentiate between the credibility or epistemic status of that information. Hence a paper on climate change by a leading scientist, despite being a product of a uniquely privileged process of knowledge-generation, is the same number of clicks away as a climate change denialist blog. Our current "post-truth" situation is arguably at least in part a function of this leveling character of the internet.

For Kierkegaard, however, the problem with leveling is not simply that it promotes an equality of views and opinions, but that it does so by generating a wholly abstract entity to which to attribute those views or opinions. As Dreyfus puts it, "the new massive distribution of desituated information" produces "a desituated, detached observer."[20] For Kierkegaard, in the age of mass media, views are not ascribed simply to individuals, but to *the public*. The public is fundamentally unreal, "a kind of colossal something, an abstract void and vacuum that is all and nothing."[21] This public is, Kierkegaard says, simultaneously "the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless."[22] A public is not a community or a society, which for Kierkegaard are collections of concrete individuals capable of taking responsibility and holding each other to account. Those in a community have defined, reciprocal relationships and responsibilities to each other; the public, by contrast, contains no such internal responsibilities or relationships. Indeed, there is no longer even the *possibility* of interpersonal relationship within the public.[23] While life with others generates concrete situations and communities, "the existence of a public creates no situation and no community" because there is no genuine contemporaneity between individuals, only a relation to an abstract category.[24] Instead, the public "obstructs the kinds of communica-

20 Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, p. 75.
21 *SKS* 8, 88 / *TA*, 93.
22 *SKS* 8, 89 / *TA*, 93.
23 Pat Cutting, "The Levels of Interpersonal Relationship in Kierkegaard's Two Ages," in *Two Ages*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1984 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 14), p. 78.
24 *SKS* 8, 87 / *TA*, 91.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

tions and relationships that positively build up individuals and communities."[25] Accordingly, Kierkegaard tells us:

> Only when there is no strong communal life to give substance to the concretion will the press create this abstraction "the public," made up of unsubstantial individuals who are never united in the simultaneity of any situation or organization and yet are claimed to be a whole. The public is a corps, outnumbering all the people together, but this corps can never be called up for inspection; indeed, it cannot even have so much as a single representative, because it itself is an abstraction.[26]

The public may believe or demand particular things, but it does not believe any of these in any essential way, and hence "the public can become the very opposite and is still the same—the public"[27] for which reason "to adopt the same opinion as the public is a deceptive consolation, for the public exists only *in abstracto.*"[28] It is fickle, not because it is changeable, but because it has no real substance to begin with. This in turn enervates the possibility of action, which requires diachronic commitment. The public is, Kierkegaard tells us, an "abstract aggregate ridiculously formed by the participant's becoming a third party."[29] The public is not composed of individuals; instead, the category of the public turns individuals into mere bystanders. As nobody relates as an individual to the world of concrete reciprocal action, but instead relates as a spectator to an abstract category of "public opinion," moral and social action become impossible. The public does not act; it merely watches and comments on events it does not itself take part in.

How much of this ontology transfers to new media? At first blush we might think that the largely interactive character of social media and internet communication leaves us in a very different position from the one Kierkegaard describes. The 19th century journalist claims to speak both *to* and *on behalf of* an abstract public to whom nobody in particular actually belongs, thereby volatilizing the speaker-listener dialectic at both ends. The 21st century journalist, by contrast, often finds out very quickly precisely who their readers are, through comments, retweets, and so forth. While broadcast media creates a public as the implied viewership of what is broadcast, narrowcasting suggests fragmentation into "publics," while social media allows for direct individual agent-to-agent

25 David Lappano, "A Coiled Spring: Kierkegaard on the Press, the Public, and a Crisis of Communication," *Heythrop Journal*, vol. 55, no. 5, 2014, p. 783.
26 *SKS* 8, 87 / *TA*, 91.
27 *SKS* 8, 88 / *TA*, 92
28 *SKS* 8, 87 / *TA*, 92.
29 *SKS* 8, 89 / *TA*, 94.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

interaction. Moreover, a large amount of internet infrastructure is given over to providing personal opinion and feedback on a range of experiences—though in fact Kierkegaard foresees this "review everything" imperative emerging even in his own era:

> Evaluation by newspapers will gradually be extended to cover subjects never dreamed of. The other day one of the provincial newspapers reported that a man had been executed by executioner John Doe, who performed the job with fine precision; executioner David Roe, present to whip someone publicly, also performed satisfactorily.[30]

All of that would seem to tell against Kierkegaard's media critique holding in the current era. Yet Dreyfus insisted that Kierkegaard would have seen the internet, "full of anonymous information from all over the world…where one can discuss any topic endlessly without consequences" as "the high-tech synthesis of the worst features of the newspaper and the coffeehouse."[31] Dreyfus' paradigm instance of this vacuity is blogging, which is still a somewhat more broadcast-style medium than contemporary social media. Yet despite how much the internet has changed even since Dreyfus was writing, much of what he says applies to social media too. We do in fact frequently reify "the internet" into a new public, albeit one with overlapping sub-publics—and sometimes, as in the case of "echo chambers," non-overlapping ones. Very often we ascribe views or actions to these sub-publics. Very often too we become absorbed in a spectatorial role, where we both consume and remediate stories, pictures, memes and videos in a way that defers any agential relationship to what we read and share. Events from the global to the local become mere meme-fodder, occasions for demonstrations of wit within and for, to use Kierkegaard's phrase, "[t]hat sluggish crowd which understands nothing itself and is unwilling to do anything, that gallery-public, now seeks to be entertained and indulges in the notion that everything anyone does is done so that it may have something to gossip about."[32] As spectators, deprived of mutual reciprocity, as Nerina Jansen sums up Kierkegaard's view of the public, "the crowd's union rests on a joining together of trivial things that are irrelevant to people's lives."[33]

30 *SKS* 18, 289, JJ:445 / *JP* 2, 487.
31 Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, p. 77.
32 *SKS* 8, 89–90 / *TA*, 94.
33 Jansen, "The Individual versus the Public," p. 7.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Hence there is still something uncannily accurate in Kierkegaard's description of the public generated by the media, one that anticipates in many ways the critique of spectacular society developed a century later:[34]

> If I were to imagine this public as a person (for even though some superior individuals temporarily are part of the public, they still have an intrinsic coordinating connection that stabilizes them, even if they do not reach the highest level of religiousness), I most likely would think of one of the Roman emperors, an imposing, well-fed figure suffering from boredom and therefore craving only the sensate titillation of laughter, for the divine gift of wit is not worldly enough. So this person, more sluggish than he is evil, but negatively domineering, saunters around looking for variety.[35]

Despite the much greater capacity to engage, post, and share, the public generated by the internet is still, like that of the media, more consumer than agent, more driven by a need for distraction than a commitment to collective action. Actions are sometimes imputed to "the internet" or to subsets thereof, but responsibility for these actions is dispersed to the point where nobody in particular is accountable. That is also how Kierkegaard saw the media, conceptualized as an attack dog:

> And the public is unrepentant, for after all it was not the public—in fact, it was the dog, just as one tells children: It was the cat that did it. And the public is unrepentant, because after all it was not really slander—it was just a bit of fun…And the public will be unrepentant, for it actually does not keep the dog, it merely subscribes; neither did it directly goad the dog to attack nor whistle it back. In the event of a lawsuit, the public would say: The dog is not mine; the dog has no owner. And if the dog is apprehended and sent to the school of veterinary medicine to be exterminated, the public could still say: It was really a good thing that the bad dog was exterminated; we all wanted it done—even the subscribers.[36]

This passivity and lack of responsibility is, I think, at least in part a product of the mechanics of social media's "attention economy." Platforms like Facebook and Twitter reward users with "likes" and "retweets," shifting the focus of online interaction from the content of communication to the popularity of those units of content. Communication from both individuals and media outlets becomes tailored to achieve the maximum "clicks" regardless of intrinsic value or importance. Virality—a measure of nothing but what the internet public is attentive

34 On Kierkegaard's view of the spectacular, see, for example, George Pattison, *Poor Paris!: Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1999 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 2).
35 *SKS* 8, 90 / *TA*, 94.
36 *SKS* 8, 90 – 1 / *TA*, 95.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

to, regardless of what they think about it—becomes an end in itself. Behind all this stand commercial imperatives to keep users on websites for as long as possible. These mechanics produce leveling because all information is reduced to "content," regardless of its intrinsic value or importance. As Dreyfus puts it: "Nothing is too trivial to be included. Nothing is so important that it demands a special place."[37] In social media the trivial or surreal comes to take over much of the communicative bandwidth. What interests the public may be very far indeed from what we would objectively consider to be the public interest. Yet, as we will discuss in the final section, and contra Dreyfus, this need not be the final word on the ethical value of the online public. We may in fact be able to overcome the ways in which the affordances of the internet push us towards leveling and the generation of an irresponsible public.

7.4 Anonymity

As we know, social media is a site of frequent and particularly brutal abuse. "Trolling" behaviors are both common enough online as to be daily events for many people, and serious enough as to have ruined lives and led to deaths. From time to time, commentators have suggested that the problem is the ability to remain anonymous online, thereby evading responsibility for one's actions and comments. Early in the social media era, it was noted that "nonymous" social media identities are more strongly anchored to the offline identities of network users than in previous online environments.[38] Yet it is still possible to hide behind a fake name and fake image in these contexts; and to be anonymous, the thinking goes, lets people avoid consequences and so makes engaging in abusive behavior easier. Accordingly, some platforms such as Facebook have considered enforcing real-name policies, to discourage trolling. These policies have been pushed back against by groups of users who would be made vulnerable if forced to use their real names online. Moreover, there is emerging empirical data to suggest that trolling is increasingly not anonymous anyway,[39] and so insisting on real names is unlikely to reduce abusive online behavior. Yet intriguingly, Kierke-

37 Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, p. 79.

38 Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin, "Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships," *Computers in Human Behavior,* vol. 24, no. 5, 2008, pp. 1816–36.

39 Katja Rost, Lea Stahel, and Bruno S. Frey, "Digital Social Norm Enforcement: Online Firestorms in Social Media," *PLoS One*, vol. 11, no. 6, 2016, pp. 1–26, https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155923&type=printable.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

gaard suggests that the problematic nature of anonymity is not ultimately a matter of using one's real name at all.

That Kierkegaard decries the anonymity of the news media of his era may seem stunningly hypocritical, given that Kierkegaard himself published so much of his work under pseudonyms. However, it is important to understand here what Kierkegaard means by anonymity, and how it differs both from the sort of pseudonymity he offers and from the anonymous/nonymous difference as it plays out in social media today. Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms is not, primarily, about hiding the true author of the works. He sometimes puts his own name on the works as editor, and at the end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he stresses that he is legally answerable for all that the pseudonyms say and do. Rather, the reason for pseudonymity is to defer the authority that comes from authorship, to avoid the reader simply ascribing the views they read to Magister Kierkegaard. By confronting the reader with well-rounded personages, each with their own, radically incompatible life-views (*livsanskuelser*), Kierkegaard forces the readers to examine their *own* relation to these life-views. An author can present a unified life-view, a coherent and personally responsible outlook on existence, even without putting his legal name to the document. Indeed, his review of *Two Ages* lauds the author of that novel for her unified life-view, whereas earlier in his career he had berated the nonymous H.C. Andersen for lacking such a life-view in his novel *Only A Fiddler.*

The anonymity that Kierkegaard complains of—indeed which he thinks has "an almost epigrammatic significance"[40] for his era—is thus not a matter of whether one uses his or her legal name, but rather a matter of whether communication is suffused with a sense of the communicator. Communication is fundamentally and properly between *persons*, but the anonymity of the press is both symptom and exacerbator of a situation in which communication has become *impersonal*,[41] that is, devoid of a strong sense of communication between persons. Much of the communication of the era is, Kierkegaard claims, bereft of precisely this *even when real names are used:*

> Not only do people write anonymously, but they write anonymously over their signature, yes, even speak anonymously....Nowadays it is possible actually to speak with people, and what they say is admittedly very sensible, and yet the conversation leaves the impression that one has been speaking with an anonymity...But the sum-total of all these com-

40 *SKS* 8, 98 / *TA*, 103.
41 *SKS* 20, 314, NB4:58 / *JP* 2, 480.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> ments does not amount to personal human discourse such as can be carried on even by the most simple man who is limited in subject but nevertheless does speak.[42]

The idea of someone speaking anonymously yet under his or her own name or in person suggests their speech lacks the property Kierkegaard elsewhere calls "earnestness" or "seriousness" (*alvor*): "the acquired originality of disposition"[43] that distinguishes willed action from mere habit. Earnestness is not a matter of tone, but of first-personal, deliberate occupation and ownership of what one says and does. The era's anonymity is not about persons appearing under the wrong name or no name, but about what appears under *any* name not being a *person* at all. Indeed, Kierkegaard adds that:

> In Germany there are even handbooks for lovers; so it will probably end with lovers being able to sit and speak anonymously to each other. There are handbooks on everything, and generally speaking education soon will consist of knowing letter-perfect a larger or smaller compendium of observations from such handbooks, and one will excel in proportion to his skill in pulling out the particular one, just as the typesetter picks out letters.[44]

The problem with anonymity, then, is not simply the familiar one that no locatable person is in fact tied to a given communicative act, but the deeper one that communication becomes depersonalized. The press facilitates this lack of earnestness precisely because it reduces the *risk* attendant to earnestly committing oneself to a view. The risk in earnestness is not holding the wrong view, but being isolated in whatever view one does hold: one makes a commitment, takes a stand, and thereby invites ridicule or worse. The press' contribution to reducing earnestness, on Kierkegaard's view, is "the depraved guarantee it furnishes that there probably are a goodly number who say the same thing and make the same value judgments; just being printed in a paper is, of course, sufficient guarantee for that."[45]

That risk remains for the online era, regardless of whether social media users are forced to use real names. The problem is that even nonymous users can participate in discourse in an essentially anonymous way, a way that lacks *alvor.* Structurally, the mechanics of social media collapse the diversity of human relationships and conative responses into a narrow set of preset options. Someone is either your "friend" or not, someone you "follow" or not,

---

42 *SKS* 8, 98 / *TA*, 103–4.
43 *SKS* 4, 448 / *CA*, 149.
44 *SKS* 8, 99 / *TA*, 104.
45 *SKS* 22, 62, NB11:110 / *JP* 2, 484.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

who is in your professional network or not, and so on.[46] You either like a tweet or don't; Facebook currently offers six different "reaction" options, but "dislike" is not one of them. Beyond these stereotyped and constrained gestures, however, even our more discursive responses can be impersonal in the way Kierkegaard describes. "Memes" have created a brilliant and creative language for commenting on events using remediated content, organized in new ways. Memes establish stable rhetorical patterns that allow for new jokes to be continually refashioned from old ones. But precisely this makes them somewhat anonymous. Memes appear to come from nowhere in particular, and in sharing them, we implicitly become conduits for content that has no real origin and no answerable author.

In short, while social media has created new opportunities for expression, it is also arranged in a way that channels these expressions into forms that tend to depersonalize them, assigning the contents of these communications implicitly to an anonymous public instead of concrete, responsible individuals. As with the press, the affordances of the internet can tend to push in depersonalizing directions.

7.5 Disproportional Communication

One interesting strand of Kierkegaard's critique of the media is that it somehow violates a normative human scale on which communication is meant to operate. In his journals, Kierkegaard declares that "God really intended that a person should speak individually with his neighbor and at most with several neighbors," and that very few people are so gifted as to be able to use a mechanism like the press to communicate successfully with vastly more people at once. The press, then, almost invariably gives "bunglers" who have "nothing to communicate but nonsense" access to a "disproportionate" (*uproportioneret*) form of communication.[47] He goes so far as to suggest the government might, in the same way as it bans private people from having dangerous weapons, ban the daily press for being "a much too gigantic means of communication."[48] And in a particularly prescient example for us in the internet era, he adds: "Suppose someone invented an instrument, a convenient little talking tube which could be

---

46 Danah M. Boyd, "Friendster and Publicly Articulated Social Networking," Conference on Human Factors and Computing Systems (CHI 2004), Vienna: ACM, April 24–29, 2004; Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin, "Identity Construction on Facebook."
47 *SKS* 20, 156, NB2:38 / *JP* 2, 480.
48 *SKS* 20, 152, NB2:28 / *JP* 2, 479.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

heard over the whole land—I wonder if the police would not forbid it, fearing that the whole country would become mentally deranged if it were used. In the same way, to be sure, guns are prohibited."[49]

This is not the only time Kierkegaard imagines this fantastic talking trumpet. In another entry, he explicitly connects the material structure of this form of broadcast with the way it evacuates the individuality of the speaker and instead assigns the content to the public at large:

> If someone wanting to speak had a speaking-trumpet so strong that it could be heard throughout the whole country, he would soon create the impression that he was not a single person (but something much more—for example, the voice of the age, etc., an abstraction) and that he was not talking to an individual or to individual human beings but to the whole world (the race, etc., an abstraction). Thus with the invention of the art of printing and especially its growth.[50]

The communicative disproportion being spoken of here is twofold. Firstly, in the disproportion between the speaker as individual and the multitude of listeners, Kierkegaard seems to see something antithetical to the purposes of human communication. Kierkegaard dedicates a number of his books to "that single individual, whom I with joy and gratitude call my reader." This is both an indirect reference to his former fiancée Regine Olsen, and an attempt to single out the reader as an individual engaging directly with the text rather than being subsumed into the problematic ontological category of the "reading public." Communication, for Kierkegaard, is meant to occur in an encounter between persons, whereas broadcast media volatilizes the reciprocity within which this communicative encounter happens, and thereby its reflexivity. Kierkegaard's books deploy a number of authorial strategies, such as the aforementioned dedication to using pseudonymity as a means of deferring authorial authority, to bring the reader back to an awareness of him or herself as individual reader. From the point of view of the author, however, the risk remains of addressing not simply individuals, but "the public," "the readership," "the age," "posterity" and so forth. Worse, there is a risk of the reader coming to see *herself* as such an abstraction: "Instead of men, everywhere fantastic abstractions. Book-world—the public—as soon as one writes he is no longer an individual human being himself, nor does he think of a reader as an individual human being, either—here the means of communication is at fault; it is much too ambitious."[51]

---

49 *SKS* 21, 144–5, NB8:3 / *JP* 2, 483.
50 SKS 27, 400, Papir 366:2 / *JP* 1, 278.
51 *SKS* 27, 400, Papir 366:2 / *JP* 1, 278.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

So there's a concern here that is familiar from many contemporary anxieties about internet-mediated communication: namely, that it is somehow not *real* communication. Dreyfus provides a clear example of this claim, arguing that the sort of telepresence achieved via online interaction lacks certain key phenomenal features—for instance, the vulnerability that comes with being physically co-located with someone.[52] As discussed below, I suspect that the Kierkegaardian concept of *contemporaneity* (*samtidighed*) can allow us to overcome this sense of absence in cases of telepresence. Yet what Kierkegaard seems to be concerned about here is that the specific forms of mediation involved in the daily press make this sort of co-presence harder, precisely because the addressee is ontologically diffuse. The writer and her readers are separated, so to speak, by the material specifics of a medium that simply addresses too many people at once for interpersonal communication to be possible.

Secondly, Kierkegaard thinks the press involves disproportionate communication in that the *content* of the communication is unworthy of the scope of what is communicated. Kierkegaard gives an example that is quite familiar from the contemporary tabloid press, of the media focusing on trivia in a way that ends up being humanly destructive:

> Attention must be directed to the disproportion in the medium of communication itself. For example, by telling in print of a young girl (giving the full name—and this telling is, of course, the truth) that she has bought a new dress (and this is assumed to be true), and by repeating this a few times, the girl can be made miserable for her whole life. And one single person can bring this about in five minutes, and why? Because the press (the daily press) is a disproportionate medium of communication.[53]

We can easily compare this example to the contemporary media's obsession with trivial details of celebrity lives, or random stories that are entertaining but superficial. Accordingly, Kierkegaard says, the press "is evil simply and solely through its power of circulation" as this gives it a disproportion leading to "a kind of insanity which tends to make society into a madhouse, just as crisscrossing a square mile area with trains would be crazy and, far from benefiting, would confuse everything."[54] The claim that publishing this innocuous story about a girl buying a dress "would amount to an attempted assassination of the young girl which could be the death of her or drive her out of her mind"[55] has a particular resonance with the ways in which social media can visit a sudden and destruc-

52 Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, p. 69.
53 *SKS* 21, 144, NB8:3 / *JP* 2, 482–3.
54 *SKS* 25, 428, NB30:53 / *JP* 2, 490.
55 *SKS* 25, 428, NB30:53 / *JP* 2, 490

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

tive sort of fame or notoriety on people, in ways that are often undeserved and out of proportion to the topic.

Sometimes this is simply absurd, as when a meme "goes viral" and sweeps a real person up with it. Indeed, Kierkegaard takes triviality to be a hallmark of what holds the public's attention (as well as a key feature of the aesthetic sphere of existence).[56] Certainly Kierkegaard thought *The Corsair* thrived on trivialities, in a way he found somehow distinctive of Denmark more broadly.[57] In his talking-trumpet example, Kierkegaard claims that even if what the speaker says is "utterly unimportant, completely stupid, even if it is the shouting of prosit [cheers], the communicator becomes self-important and has a fantastic notion of who it is he is talking to."[58] Compare the way the internet ecosystem spreads and amplifies topics from the trivial (such as a voice recording that some people hear as "yanny" and others as "laurel") to the outright dangerous (the "Tide Pod Challenge" which saw teenagers eating dishwasher detergent tabs).[59]

On other occasions, this disproportion takes forms that are distressing rather than nihilistically amusing. Particularly common is the phenomenon of the "pile-on" or "dogpile," where a backlash forms against someone's comments or behavior which, even if initially deserved, is distorted dangerously out of proportion simply by the sheer number of individual voices involved. Perhaps not all criticisms of "call-out culture" are entirely valid, but it is nonetheless the case that the internet often produces harmfully disproportionate outcomes that, as with the misery of Kierkegaard's dress-buying girl, are a consequence of precisely the outsized scope that Kierkegaard condemns in the press.

7.6 A Positive Vision?

Our discussion to this point has made it seem as if Kierkegaard's moral evaluation of the internet would be entirely negative. On the story told so far, social media partakes of some of the most ethically dangerous features of the press: it encourages people to irresponsibly take refuge in the "public," passively absorbing and remediating information instead of forming commitments and tak-

56 See, for example, Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, p. 23.
57 Jansen, "The Individual versus the Public," p. 11.
58 *SKS* 27, 400, Papir 366:2 / *JP* 1, 278.
59 I'm conscious that these references will likely mean nothing to a reader in five, or even two years from now. That too probably tells us something about the triviality in question! It also explains why, as you may have noticed, I'm avoiding getting too deep into the specifics of internet culture.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ing action, and perverts communication by its sheer scale in a way that makes people ridiculous and exposes them to real harm. Just as the press united its readership "in a mere abstract fusion...where individual reflection and personal initiative are obstructed if not annihilated,"[60] so too it appears the internet, and particularly social media.

Yet as Karl Verstrynge has suggested, beyond these negative assessments Kierkegaard may also offer at least an intimation of how an existentially authentic life may be available online. Verstrynge and Thorbjornsson note that Dreyfus' critique of Kierkegaard leaves no room for the possibility that "online the individual actually might be able to enrich his existence and benefit from his connectivity rather than losing himself in the midst of it all."[61] While Kierkegaard is critical of the media for its construction of de-individuating publics, he also sometimes, albeit obliquely, offers a vision of what a positive relationship between individuals in society might look like—and here we can perhaps see where a more positive vision of a world characterized by the "disproportionate communication" of the internet might be attained.

Kierkegaard's critique of the media is clearly of a piece with his broader critique of any form of social organization which involves de-individualizing collectivism—and hence with his critique of the democratic reforms of 1848. There is a widespread assumption in the literature that, as David Lappano puts it, Kierkegaard snobbishly "dismisses the liberalizing momentum in nineteenth-century Europe, and that he leaves no room for the possibility that corporate life or collective action can produce positive societal results."[62] Kierkegaard takes it that action is fundamentally an individual undertaking; to be absorbed into the public is to be nothing but a spectator to action. As someone concerned to offer a corrective against his era, Kierkegaard is primarily interested in stressing this negative point. Yet as is often the case with Kierkegaard, his negative case allows us to glimpse a positive description in relief. Consider this from *Two Ages:* "Not until the single individual has established an ethical stance despite the whole world, not until then can there be any question of genuinely uniting; otherwise

---

60 Verstrynge, "Being and Becoming a Virtual Self," p. 316.

61 Thorbjornsson and Verstrynge, "'Marvel at Nothing,'" p. 196. It is worth reiterating that Dreyfus' late 1990s/early 2000s internet is the internet of the "cyberspace" era: a place we go to, usually through a fixed terminal, generally to visit specific websites. Our internet, by contrast, is woven into how we move through the world, via mobile devices that function more or less as extensions of our body and both react to and influence the environment around us. A decade from now, no doubt things will have changed yet again, just as they did after Dreyfus.

62 Lappano, "A Coiled Spring," p. 783.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

it gets to be a union of people who separately are weak, a union as unbeautiful and depraved as a child-marriage."[63]

While the point here is primarily to emphasize the necessity of individuation *against* the crowd, Kierkegaard here gestures towards the possibility of community action. This is only possible where people relate *as themselves* to a coordinating idea rather than simply subsuming themselves in the abstract category of the public or the crowd:

> When individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative. Individually the relation separates them (each one has himself for himself), and ideally it unites them…Thus the individuals never come too close to each other in the herd sense, simply because they are united on the basis of an ideal distance.[64]

It is only under these conditions that we can avoid a situation where "gossip and rumor and specious importance and apathetic envy become a surrogate for each and all" and people "mutually turn to each other in a frustrating, suspicious, aggressive, leveling reciprocity."[65] This mutuality does not allow for solidarity, whereas a supportive solidarity can be attained when we remember that others are "actual human beings."[66] So even under the condition of a media-driven, highly spectatorial and reflective age, genuine community and genuine collective ethical action are possible *if* each person takes a self-reflexive attitude that attends to their own relation to the content of the ethical.

What might be the implications for the era of new media? One answer might be that even taking the inbuilt risks of the medium into consideration, the interactive possibilities of new media might well *expand* our scope for genuinely moral action, including collective action. Kierkegaard is acutely aware that unlike the ancient *polis*, which could gather, debate, and make decisions in the *agora*, the contemporary, press-mediated public cannot assemble.[67] It's on that basis that Dreyfus dismisses the notion that instead of an anonymous public sphere, the internet could provide a mooted "worldwide electronic agora"; such a thing would be "a nowhere place for anonymous nowhere people…it is dangerously dystopian."[68] We can certainly join interest groups online, but,

63 *SKS* 8, 100 – 1 / *TA*, 106.
64 *SKS* 8, 61 / *TA*, 62 – 3.
65 *SKS* 8, 61 – 2 / *TA*, 63.
66 *SKS* 8, 87 / *TA*, 92.
67 Lappano, "A Coiled Spring," p. 785.
68 Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, pp. 138 – 9.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

says Dreyfus, we can leave them again just as easily and without loss.[69] The internet might not make genuine ethical commitment impossible, but its structure nonetheless undermines such commitment.[70]

Yet provided that we relate to overarching goals in a way that does not elide or dissolve our *personal* relationship to those actions or those goals, becoming a mere conduit for anonymous content or comment, then the internet may be redeemable for Kierkegaard in a way that he felt the daily press simply was not. Indeed, here we might take advantage of the way social media, at least superficially, individuates its users in a way the press does not. Each of us online is a name, an avatar, a node within an ever-shifting network of connections and allegiances. A node isn't much, but it's a node nonetheless, and it provides a site that we can take individual, ethical, practical ownership of. We can see our social media profiles as a place where we engage with and work through the world, not, as Dreyfus seems to assume, a mere locus of distraction. But to achieve this will take a very particular stance.

Lappano focuses on Kierkegaard's exhortation to "contemporaneity (*samtidighed*) with actual persons, each of whom is someone, in the actuality of the moment and the actual situation."[71] But *samtidighed* is, I've argued previously,[72] both a theological *and* a phenomenological concept in Kierkegaard, an experienced sense of imaginatively-mediated co-presence with others. We are contemporary with others not by sheer historical or geographical accident—indeed, we can become contemporary with historically distant events such as those depicted in scripture—but rather because we are confronted by other people and situations as making normative demands of us. We are contemporary precisely in situations that call us to earnestness and action.

Equally, the fact that we are human beings dealing with *other* human beings is essential for maintaining the integrity of communication that Kierkegaard saw the daily press as violating. If we forget that we are talking to other human be-

---

69 Ibid., p.83. Here as in several places, Dreyfus does not seem to anticipate just how much genuine risk and harm online engagement can involve. He takes physical co-location to be a precondition of harm and thereby of vulnerability. That wasn't true, on any reasonable construal of "harm," even when Dreyfus wrote on these topics—had he somehow never heard of anyone having her heart broken by a phone call?—and it is even less true now given that the contemporary internet is drastically harder to avoid. At the risk of a certain technological determinism, Dreyfus' internet, located mostly as it was on desktop computers, was much easier to switch off or simply walk away from than the pervasive internet we have today.

70 Ibid., p. 87.

71 *SKS* 8, 87 / *TA*, 91.

72 Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ings, as we implicitly can when we take our audience to be "the internet" (or more likely some platform-specific part of the internet, e. g., Twitter) then we can lose the depth of communicative reality and thereby lose touch with its ethical concretion. Indeed, a great deal of the abuse we encounter online—though by no means all of it—seems to be a function of just this sort of abstraction from interpersonal communication, losing sight of the (Levinasian) face behind the avatar, so to speak. Simply using real names won't work, but seeing other users as our genuine contemporaries in the full Kierkegaardian sense just might.

Ironically, it's not hard to imagine that Kierkegaard, a writer with a particular knack for finding new and creative uses for pseudonymous publishing, would have done intriguing and highly original things with social media had he had the chance.[73] He would no doubt have been critical of this new medium, as he was of the press—but then, Kierkegaard still published in the press. If we too are to make full use of the extraordinary affordances of the online age, including its liberative ethical and political potential, its capacity for connecting people and providing platforms for organizing, we will need to actively work against some of the obstacles built into the architecture of social media that, as I've shown, Kierkegaard's critique can allow us to see. That in turn will involve making the effort to see ourselves as Kierkegaard would have us see ourselves, as concrete beings interacting with other concrete beings in a situation that makes strenuous ethical demands of us. The internet is not going away. The ethical challenges it poses will be at once novel and uncannily familiar. In learning to live well in the digital era, we could do far worse than take Kierkegaard as a guide.[74]

73 Perhaps we can get just a glimpse of what this might look like via @kimkierkgaardashian, a high-profile Twitter account that mashes Kierkegaard quotes with tweets from celebrity Kim Kardashian to outstanding effect, and whose tweets have now been published as a book.

74 A version of this paper was first presented at the Kierkegaard Society of Japan's 20th anniversary event in Kyoto, July 2019 and will appear in Japanese in the society's journal *Kierkegaard Studies*. I am deeply grateful to the Society for the invitation to address this gathering and for allowing the paper to appear here in English.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Andrzej Słowikowski

8 Can a Refugee be One's Neighbor in an Ethical Sense?

An Attempt to Transpose the Transcendent Category of Love for One's Neighbor from Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* into Immanent Ethical Practice with Reference to the Contemporary Migration Crisis

Introduction

The starting point of this text is the conviction that the content of Kierkegaard's thought relating to transcendent, paradoxical Christian religiosity cannot be directly translated into an immanent, ethical reality.[1] The former relates to man's intimate relation with God and has the task of revealing, in the individual's life and actions, Christian truth concerning the meaning of man's life and his calling on Earth. The latter concerns the universal-human and is about the establishment of norms in human relations, in addition to the development of both individual and societal practices for shaping the common good. These are two separate realities, set apart by an insurmountable, absolute qualitative difference. Ethical existence is expressed and limited to the psycho-sensate complexity of man, whereas Christian existence goes beyond this complexity and finds its proper medium in spiritual existence before God. In his writings, Kierkegaard presents many dialectical phenomena capturing this difference such as anxiety, suffering, and love.

In light of the above, it seems that a transfer from the content referring to transcendent, paradoxical Christian religiousness into immanent, ethical reality can only have an indirect dimension, and every attempt to apply content taken from Christian revelation directly to the temporal life of man carries the risk of cognitive aberrations in the intellectual sense and all sorts of fundamentalisms in social life. The question thus arises whether the category of love for one's neighbor, presented by Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*, can be inspiring and originative in an ethical sense. To find out, the task of this article is to build a model

1 This article was completed thanks to funding by the National Science Centre, Poland; project no. 2016/23/D/HS1/02236.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-009

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that would allow the transcendent understanding of love for one's neighbor to be indirectly transposed into a person's ethical practice in the modern world. Thus, the matter concerns isolating certain formal elements connected with the attitude of loving one's neighbor and then proceeding to fill them out with concrete ethical content.

If it is to have any explanatory power, the proposed model must reference some concrete phenomena from the area of contemporary life. For this reason, the general question about the usefulness of the attitude of loving one's neighbor in ethical practice will be presented through the prism of the contemporary migration crisis and the attitudes people living in politically stable societies have towards refugees arriving from war-torn countries where inhabitants face various forms of persecution.

In this sense, the aim of this paper is, first of all, to show the difference between immanent and transcendent ethics in Kierkegaard's thought, and second, to present a difference in the way an ethical subject and a religious subject relate to the refugee problem in today's world. Third, with reference to this example, I will demonstrate the impossibility of directly transferring the content of transcendent ethics into the domain of immanent ethics.[2] Lastly, an attempt will be made to construct a preliminary model in which one could undertake a formal transposition of the elements of Kierkegaard's transcendent ethics, as expressed in the attitude of loving one's neighbor, into the contemporary relation between an ethical subject and a refugee.

2 Recent years have seen an increase in the importance of research concerning Kierkegaard's political philosophy and political theology, especially in reference to *Works of Love* (see, for example, *Kierkegaard and Political Theology*, ed. by Roberto Sirvent and Silas Morgan, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publication 2018). Scholars, however, typically perform a direct transposition of Kierkegaard's transcendent thought into the immanent, socio-political reality of a person's life. This gives rise to an impression that there exists a certain common goal between Christian requirements relating to the spiritual development of man, on one hand, and the functioning of the individual in democratic society on the other. The task of this paper is not to engage the thought of particular scholars in a critical discussion of this problem, but to bring attention to the methodological dubiousness of approaches of this kind.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

8.1 The Individual Dimension of Kierkegaard's Ethics: The Ethical Subject versus the Aesthetic Subject

In order to define what ethics is in Kierkegaard's account and what role it plays in a person's life, it is first necessary to determine the most important, general traits of the ethical subject as presented in the Danish philosopher's thought. The ethical subject is that through which what is ethical is realized in existence and in the world.[3] The most important general characteristic of the ethics propounded in Kierkegaard's works is their individual dimension.[4] On the Danish philosopher's account, ethics has no external object, and thus cannot be an object of theoretical knowledge, nor can it be communicated directly.[5] The ethical always occurs inside a person, where the subject's fundamental existential relation to good and evil is decided.[6]

Ethics has a progressive dimension, which means that the ethical subject develops himself by means of making choices.[7] Ethics is not a code of behavior which one can learn by heart and apply in appropriate life situations, for it consists in the subject's committing himself to the truth of his existence.[8] In this way, the fundamental object of ethics becomes the freedom of the individual,[9] and every act of the individual determines his ethical shape as a subject in

---

3 Despite there being many critical analyses of the problem of ethics in Kierkegaard's thought, made from very different points of view, it seems that what is still missing is the presentation of a coherent vision of the ethical subject based on the content of Kierkegaard's works. This paper does not intend to go so far as to fill this gap, but instead to offer a sketch of the idea of the ethical subject, the full treatment of which goes beyond the scope of this endeavor.

4 *SKS* 3, 249–250 / *EO2*, 262; *SKS* 7, 291–292 / *CUP1*, 320–321.

5 *SKS* 7, 274–328 / *CUP1*, 301–360; *SKS* 27, 434, Papir 371:2 / *JP* 1, 307–308. This means that, on Kierkegaard's account, the object of ethics is not constituted primarily by objectively existing objects or phenomena like politics, medical practice, or the world of nature. The essence of ethics is not established here by the individual's relation to an external object, but by his relation to himself. It is only based on this self-reference that man's relations to the external world are formed. Thus, for Kierkegaard, ethics is an object not of knowledge, but of existence, and its content cannot be communicated directly, but requires mediation within the individual's interiority, in his own relation to this content.

6 *SKS* 3, 165–166, 173, 214–215 / *EO2*, 169, 177–178, 223–224.

7 *SKS* 3, 160–166, 209–210 / *EO2*, 163–169, 218–219.

8 *SKS* 7, 274–328 / *CUP1*, 301–360; *SKS* 3, 172–173 / *EO2*, 176–177.

9 *SKS* 3, 205–208, 214–215, 239–240 / *EO2*, 214–217, 223–224, 250–251.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

whom spirit gradually reveals itself in existence (where spirit is ideally understood as the essence of the individual established in God).[10]

The basic vehicle of ethics in Kierkegaard's account is the self as the center of the individual's existence.[11] Only a subject that is a self can be ethical, and a subject is a self when he has self-consciousness of what constitutes him in existence.[12] Therefore, only a person who makes choices in a state of existential consciousness can be an ethical subject, where this consciousness consists in purposefully shaping one's ethical personality in light of the existential truth one attests to.[13] In this sense, Kierkegaard speaks of ethical choice as a choosing of one's self—this is a particular relation in which the subject becomes, for himself, an object of choice (he designates himself and decides his own fate).[14] Every subject has an ethical status, but not every subject is ethical in an existential sense. Most subjects remain in a state of ethical potentiality (they do not choose themselves), meaning they remain in a state of existential indifference in relation to good and evil, finding themselves in a continuous situation of a lack of decision; they make choices not out of consideration for the existential truth they themselves have recognized, but as a matter of incidental life preferences.[15]

In this place a distinction should be made between the intellectual relation to good and evil as ideally defined knowledge of good and evil, and the existential relation between them consisting in one's relating to good and evil as an individual, in one's taking a stance toward good and evil. Someone might know what good and evil mean without acting on it in his existence.[16] In this situation, the individual's relation to good and evil is aesthetic, meaning he identifies the good with good fortune in life, generally understood, and evil—with the absence thereof, without the existential awareness that good and evil essentially concern first and foremost the sphere of human spirit and its freedom and only secondarily concern, on this foundation, temporal existence.[17]

10 *SKS* 3, 209 – 210, 246 – 247 / *EO2*, 218 – 219, 259; *SKS* 4, 349 / *CA*, 43 – 44.
11 *SKS* 3, 205 – 210, 213, 246 – 247, 249 – 250 / *EO2*, 213 – 219, 222, 259, 262; *SKS* 11, 129 – 130 / *SUD*, 13 – 14.
12 *SKS* 3, 241 – 242, 246 – 247 / *EO2*, 253 – 254, 258 – 259; *SKS* 11, 145 – 146 / *SUD*, 29 – 30.
13 *SKS* 7, 125 / *CUP1*, 134.
14 *SKS* 3, 160 – 161, 172 – 173, 205 – 215, 236 – 240, 245 – 247 / *EO2*, 163 – 164, 176 – 178, 213 – 224, 247 – 251, 258 – 259.
15 *SKS* 3, 161 – 164, 221 – 222 / *EO2*, 164 – 167, 230 – 232.
16 *SKS* 3, 215 – 217, 251 – 252 / *EO2*, 225 – 227, 264.
17 Aesthetically, it is possible to relate to the world of values in various ways: one can admire them or one can despise them, one can completely identify with them or reject them, or one can also simply be indifferent towards them. What is of greatest importance in such an aesthetic relation is the fact that man does not choose himself as a subject of his existence but instead ac-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

The freedom of the aesthetic subject remains unactualized possibility, which is equivalent to spiritual dormancy.[18] The choice of the first man, Adam, in the sense in which Kierkegaard considers it in *The Concept of Anxiety*, was an ethical choice, meaning one which leads the subject out of existential ignorance (indifference) and makes him ethically knowledgeable, real, and aware of himself.[19] What this means is that people who do not make this choice in their life remain in a state of imaginary innocence and are not subjects who can act ethically, independently shape themselves, and purposefully influence the actions and behavior of others. As a result, good and bad moral acts of a person can exist independently of his ethical status. In an existential sense, a person can act morally unaware, not because he wants something in light of his freedom as a subject, but because he wants something in light of what others advise or command, in light of external circumstances and a certain spontaneity in his behavior in connection with life situations that arise.

On Kierkegaard's account, ethics does not primarily concern the objective norms of man's behavior, nor does it say how one should act at a given moment, such that he acts properly. Kierkegaard's ethics concerns the problem of becoming oneself, that is, how to become an ethical subject.[20] In this most general sense, ethics as propounded by Kierkegaard is universal as well as independent of historical epochs and the norms tied to them, for Kierkegaard's is an ethics of becoming the subject of one's existence—a self-aware individual who shapes his life in the world.[21]

---

cepts his personality that is shaped by that which comes to him from external world. His personality has no mark of individuality. It is the reflection of a certain idea or vision of the world which he does not consciously choose, but which is imprinted in him under the influence of some event and which responds to his feeling of security or is accepted by him on the basis of a purely aesthetic preferences for certain values. The aesthetic subject has a tendency to both remain indifferent to the world of values (skepticism, nihilism) and to radically appropriate values (devotion, fanaticism).

18 *SKS* 4, 347–349, 354 / *CA*, 41–44, 48–49.

19 *SKS* 4, 341–357 / *CA*, 35–51.

20 Only the ethical subject may possess originative power within normative ethics, in the sense that he may not only reconstruct such ethics, but create them as well—in view of his relation to good and evil.

21 On this principle, the prototype of immanent ethics as Kierkegaard propounds them is Socrates, whose existential attitude exceeds all historical, social, and cultural norms.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

8.2 The Ethical Subject in the World: Immanent Ethics

It is only upon this first, internal understanding of ethics as a subject's relating himself to himself in existence that an external understanding of ethics as life in the world of norms and ideals can be superimposed. The ethical subject does not, after all, function in an imagined world, but in a human reality in which his references to good and evil have specific referents. What this means is that a person chooses himself, becomes an ethical subject, and discovers the truth of his existence only by referencing an external, general good in which he can constitute himself.[22] This good must be higher than (stand above) the particular interests of the individual in temporality, and at the same time relate to the good of other people who create some type of community. This good most often takes the form of some objective value (or an amalgam thereof), which the individual decides to devote himself to (such as justice, family, the motherland, etc.).[23]

In an obvious way, this value will be connected with what is important for the community in which a person was raised, or which he feels part of. The tradition of the community designates the normative horizons of what the individual defines as a common good (a value). Within this community, the actions of the ethical subject acquire a universal-human (immanent) dimension. They acquire ideality in relation to which the subject can realize himself, in which he can become himself.[24] The individual, when realizing a specific good through himself—and when realizing himself in this good—bears witness to it, making it become real in an external reality. The ethical subject thereby proves to be a vehicle for the good, communicating it to others by means of his actions.[25] Without this ethical subject, the good remains only an abstraction, an ideal which, when not realized, can lose its value for the public and cease to be important.

Thus, on Kierkegaard's account, immanent ethics has the objective power to unite people in relation to commonly held values and to designate norms of behavior to be followed in the world. Such formally defined ethics has a Kantian character, as it is founded upon natural law and characterized by rationality and the equality of people in the law. It is imprinted with a categorical impera-

22 *SKS* 3, 243–244, 248–253, 261 / *EO2*, 255–256, 261–266, 274–275.
23 *SKS* 3, 305–306 / *EO2*, 323–324.
24 *SKS* 4, 148–150, 160–162, 172–173 / *FT*, 54–56, 68–69, 82–83.
25 *SKS* 3, 214–215, / *EO2*, 224.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

tive which does not allow one to pursue one's own interests at the cost of another member of the community.[26]

This ethics, however, plays out at the existential level, which means it requires an ethical subject that consciously realizes the common good and, at the same time, realizes himself in this good. In this sense, every instance of the individual's complying with general norms that do not originate in him, that are not a consequence of his own choice, prove to be non-ethical (aesthetic), and constitute that which blocks the individual's freedom, preventing him from developing existentially.

8.3 The Transition from Immanent Ethics to Transcendent Ethics and the Irreversibility Thereof (Immanent Ethics as a Starting Point for Transcendent Ethics)

Immanent ethics so understood already contains, from the existential point of view, two of the most important features of transcendent ethics: it requires a subject that is aware as well as a reality that is higher, greater than him, where, by relating to this higher reality, the subject acquires his existential identity. This reflects a certain spiritual continuity of the subject and speaks to the fact that, in a crucial sense, one who has not chosen himself immanently at an earlier point in life cannot become a subject of transcendent ethics.[27]

In Kierkegaard's thought, the transition from immanent ethics to transcendent ethics is attributed to religiousness A, in which the individual voluntarily renounces himself as an ethical subject having the meaning and purpose of his existence in what is universal (immanence).[28] This is tantamount to renouncing the highest good that man has served thus far, on the basis of which he has shaped his self. This renunciation is made because of the absolute good that the

---

26 The relationships between Kierkegaard's ethical thought and Kantian ethics have been explored many times. See, for example, Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1992; Ulrich Knappe, *Theory and Practice in Kant and Kierkegaard*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2004; Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good: Virtue, Happiness and the Kingdom of God*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014.
27 *SKS* 7, 505–510 / *CUP1*, 555–561.
28 *SKS* 7, 352–504 / *CUP1*, 387–555.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

individual discovers in his individual relationship with God.[29] Kierkegaard describes this moment of transition using many terms, including the leap,[30] the moment, and rebirth[31] or the break.[32]

At the heart of this radical break from one's ethical subjectivity lies an awareness of the fact that it is impossible to remove one's life sin immanently.[33] From the religious (Christian) point of view, even the highest, most imperishable universal-human value proves to be untruth (evil)—if it becomes man's ultimate and singular goal in existence. For then, the individual is prevented from opening up to the presence of transcendence in his life and is imprisoned in that which is universal-human, which becomes a foundation on which the individual, in his rebellion against God, builds his substitute reality.

The change that occurs in the subject is an existential-ontological change, which means it concerns a change in the reality in which a person lives and fulfills himself.[34] This reality ceases to be a universal-human reality, and becomes an eternal reality mediated in Jesus Christ as the Pattern for being turned toward God, for life in God.[35] This is a radical, complete, and irreversible change that consists in an inner transformation of the being of a person, something Kierkegaard calls death to oneself and to the world.[36] The individual who becomes a Christian loses complete contact with the universal-human aims of life and of the world, just as in the case of one who physically dies. In this way, the individual transforms from an ethical subject into a religious one, from an immanent subject to a transcendent one, from a temporal subject to an eternal one.[37]

29 *SKS* 4, 140 – 144 / *FT*, 45 – 50.
30 *SKS* 7, 92 – 103, 238, 269 / *CUP1*, 93 – 106, 262, 295.
31 *SKS* 4, 226 – 228 / *PF*, 18 – 19.
32 *SKS* 7, 519, 520, 523, 526 / *CUP1*, 571, 573, 576, 579.
33 *SKS* 4, 227 / *PF*, 18 – 19; *SKS* 7, 530 – 532 / *CUP1*, 583 – 585.
34 *SKS* 7, 518 – 529 / *CUP1*, 570 – 581; *SKS* 9, 293 / *WL*, 295 – 296.
35 *SKS* 12, 182 – 187, 231 – 234 / *PC*, 182 – 186, 238 – 241.
36 *SKS* 7, 418 – 452 / *CUP1*, 460 – 500; *SKS* 10, 155 – 156 , 183 / *CD*, 146 – 147, 171 – 172; *SKS* 11, 96 – 105 / *FSE*, 74 – 85.
37 If one is to fully accept the uncompromising nature of Kierkegaard's ideas, then it seems impossible for the individual who has become a transcendent subject to somehow be able to become an ethical subject again, to regain the status he completely renounced. Of course, he builds his subjectivity anew in place of the ethical subjectivity he renounced, making use of the internal power he acquired in his existence up to that point. The radical change in being which takes place in individual nevertheless makes it impossible to sensibly return to the previous state. Negating one's transcendent relation to the truth (before God) could in this case mean only a fall into absolute evil, a demon taking over one's spirit (an example of which might be the fall of Saruman in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

8.4 Transcendent Ethics: The Religious Subject as the One Who Loves (Love for One's Neighbor)

The center of the religious subject's life becomes, in a Christian sense, love for one's neighbor,[38] the goal of which is to spread love, that is, to make others aware of God's love and to help them in loving God, in becoming Christians.[39] Love of one's neighbor, as Kierkegaard describes it, has absolutely nothing to do with any universal-human forms of love based on preferences.[40] Its essential feature is that its subject is love itself, in the form of God,[41] before whom all people are absolutely equal, regardless of the diversity of their temporal life.[42] As a result, a Christian whose name becomes "the one who loves," is meant to be independent of temporal connections, to treat another person as one in whom love itself is revealed to this one who loves, as one in whom God established love the same way He established love in the one who loves.[43]

On Kierkegaard's account, the relations of love so understood are always three-dimensional, meaning they require a middle term—when the one who loves desires, in his love, to refer to God, he must do this through another person—his neighbor, and when he refers to another he must do so through God.[44] An ethics based on love for one's neighbor has an entirely spiritual dimension, meaning that there is no universal-human aim for it.[45] The purpose of loving one's neighbor is not to help this other person with any life problems connected with his temporal existence (such as health or financial problems, psychological hardships, persecution by others: these are ethical aims)—the aim of such an ethics is to open him up to God's love by means of spreading forgiveness and mercifulness in the world.[46] This is the only way for the one who loves to affirm himself and to become himself in this love.

This does not mean that ethical goals stop concerning the religious subject. It does mean, however, that they are not the proper reason for his actions and

38 *SKS* 9, 24–95 / *WL*, 17–90.
39 *SKS* 9, 103–104, 111, 300 / *WL*, 99–100, 106–107, 301–302.
40 *SKS* 9, 59–65 / *WL*, 52–58.
41 *SKS* 9, 124, 132–133, 263–264 / *WL*, 120–121, 130, 264–265.
42 *SKS* 9, 64–67, 74–75, / *WL*, 58–60, 67–68; *SKS* 12, 281 / *WA*, 165.
43 *SKS* 9, 219–226 / *WL*, 216–224.
44 *SKS* 9, 110–113 / *WL*, 106–109, see also *SKS* 9, 64, 74, 83, 122, 144 / *WL*, 58, 67, 77, 107, 119, 142.
45 *SKS* 9, 141, 145–149 / *WL*, 139, 143–147.
46 *SKS* 9, 312–338 / *WL*, 315–344.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that his accomplishing them does not exhaust his religious goals. They can become for him a medium through which he communicates his rightful message. Thus, it is not the case that the religious subject is unethical—this subject is hyper-ethical. What this means is that his actions fulfill all ethical requirements while simultaneously giving them new meaning in the world on the principle that love is the fulfillment of the law.[47] In transcendent ethics, all immanent values maintain their power while at the same time being referred to the higher value of love for one's neighbor—that which reveals the proper sense of these immanent values as well as their place in God's plan.[48] All matters of conflict between transcendent ethics and immanent ethics, as Kierkegaard presents them, result not from the fact that transcendent ethics directly negates immanent ethics, but from the fact that the former deprives the latter of the possibility of being ultimately decisive in human affairs, which gives rise to contradiction and disagreement in immanent ethics itself.

8.5 The Difference between the Ethical Subject and the Religious Subject

Stating things most generally, the difference between the ethical subject and the religious one can be expressed as follows: the ethical subject acts on behalf of the good of individuals by means of realizing the immanent, common good (the good of the community), while the religious subject acts on behalf of the transcendent good of all people (in the sense of humanity) by means of activating the good in individuals. In other words, the ethical subject wants to change the world by making it ethically consistent with his vision of the common good—he thus acts on the basis of authority, and, through his behavior, provides new patterns of behavior for the community. The religious subject, however, is tasked with changing particular people in accordance with God's vision of the good—he acts in a way that is distinguished by its lack of publicity, by its invisibility.[49] He provides particular people with a new way of understanding themselves by means of turning them towards God's love. The actions of both subjects are characterized by selflessness. However, while the ethical subject divests himself of his particular interests and acts selflessly to achieve the common good, thereby

47 *SKS* 9, 96–136 / *WL*, 91–134.
48 *SKS* 9, 145–146 / *WL*, 143–144.
49 *SKS* 9, 335–336 / *WL*, 340–341.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

gaining significance in the world as well as the recognition of the people[50]—the religious subject divests himself of all significance in the world—both material and moral—to achieve the absolute good which makes him a useless servant, a tool in the hands of God.[51]

In effect, the good of the community will always be at the heart of the ethical subject's actions, where what this good is will be most strongly identified with whatever is culturally closest to him (family, country, cultural field, lastly—the good of mankind), and where, at the same time, the ethical subject faces the duty to oppose what he considers harmful toward his vision of the community. The good is what he considers to benefit the community, and evil—what harms it. The one who loves, however, will always put the good of a particular person first, regardless of who this person is for him in an earthly sense. In this way, he does not differentiate between his friends and enemies, between his family and people from other cultural fields. What is most important for him is to help this particular person enter into the perspective of Divine love, to activate this love in him. Here, the good means everything that brings a person closer to God, uniting them, while evil means everything that separates a person from God and blocks him from answering his spiritual call.

8.6 The Ethical Subject and the Refugee Problem

The question thus arises as to how these two subjects behave in the situation where a stranger appears in their environment—a figure which in the contemporary world takes on the form of a refugee, that is, a person forced to abandon his place of living because of danger (or life difficulties), natural causes, or political conflicts. On Kierkegaard's account, the individual builds his self, or chooses himself, with respect to certain specifically defined values. Immanently, a person cannot be independent of the tradition and culture in which he is raised. On the one hand, the universal aspect of Kierkegaard's ethics states that the individual must choose himself independently of external circumstances in order to become himself, yet on the other, he chooses himself in the context of the world of values he finds himself in, and that is precisely why he cannot, in immanence, transcend the socio-cultural reality in which his identity is originally defined. For this reason, the ethical subject's commitment to the good of his community,

50 *SKS* 4, 151–152 / *FT*, 57–59.
51 *SKS* 9, 356–360 / *WL*, 362–365.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that is, to the truth on which he built his identity, means he cannot reject this truth while at the same time remaining a member of his community.

For the true ethical subject, the question arises as to what place the refugee can occupy in his community. In advance, he holds that a persecuted person or one in need should be helped—undoubtedly, however, the appearance of a group of refugees disturbs the inner stability of the ethical subject's community and their relationship to this group poses a challenge. Regardless of the ethical subject's ideological position, the most important thing here is that, in relation to the refugee group, he clearly puts himself in the position of dominance, that is, it is he who to a certain extent has the power to decide their fate. Such a right is given to him by the good of his community, that on which he has built his identity. The way one understands this good affects how one relates to refugees, yet there is always someone subordinate, someone who asks, someone who must weigh the possibility of being rejected by the other. Even if the ethical subject accepts the refugees with open arms, even if he is glad about their presence, he will inevitably regulate their presence out of consideration for the good of his community (and within the legislature of his community), which he cannot negate.

A natural conflict thus arises between the truth of the community that accepts, and the truth of the community that is accepted, one which manifests itself on both sides. Thus, from the immanent point of view, there is no possibility to act on behalf of a universal-human good understood as the good of all humanity, with the exclusion or suspended consideration of the goods of these particular communities. Firstly, each community has a tendency to see the universal-human good in its values, that is, a good which is just for each individual irrespective of one's origins or views. Secondly, each ethical subject is going to act within the good of his community and only then, on this basis, will he take a position concerning the values of other communities and a vision of the good of all humanity. Hence, thirdly, even a global project that assumes the equality of all communities and their values relative to each other is not capable, in a real sense, of making these values such that they do not contradict one another, such that they do not come into conflict with one another. In short, it is not possible, immanently speaking, for an ethical subject to suspend his relation to the good of the community which he originally identified with and to look at it from the outside, to place it side by side, on the basis of full equality, with the goods of other communities, to create an ideally balanced vision of the universal-human community.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

8.7 The Religious Subject and the Refugee Problem

According to Kierkegaard, becoming a religious subject consists firstly in one's ability to renounce immanence as that which decides one's identity. Such renunciation is tantamount to losing one's relation to those values of one's community which designate the self-awareness of the subject. This renunciation does not mean that these values stop counting for the individual or that he begins to explicitly oppose them—it means that he does not treat them as an element that decisively shapes who he is or how he acts. What appears in this place are religious values connected with the personal reference of the individual to transcendence. Henceforth, the individual does not mark his place on Earth by referencing the immanent truths of his community, but by his relating to a transcendent truth that shows him his individual, spiritual, existential calling in the world.

This calling is fulfilled by the individual in the immanent world, where he bears witness to transcendent truth and, in this truth, develops his personality (self-awareness). As a result, the religious individual (in terms of paradoxical-dialectic religiousness) looks at others not as members of his community, but as people individually called to realize both Divine good and Divine truth in his existence. He is completely convinced that man is not able to fully realize himself in the common good and that this good threatens him if it veils the possibility of his relating to the transcendent good. As a result, the religious subject will react whenever the ethical subject appropriates the right to decide who man is and what his existential aims are.[52]

This relating to transcendent truth gives the subject the possibility to go beyond an immanent relation to the world that is characterized by its traditions and community. He is able to transcend immanent truth and to look upon another independently of his socio-cultural ties. He sees in this other person not a follower of another religion, a person shaped by a different value system, but a sub-

52 That, in general, is the source of conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees. Pharisaic ethics is immanent since, rather than relating its goal to the individual's relationship with God, it concerns the general—the chosen people and their relationship with God, of which the Pharisees feel they are intermediaries. The Pharisees are not concerned with the salvation of individuals, but with community life, which is supposed to appeal to God, who, in their view, is a guarantor of the chosen people's successful fate in this world (of immanence). This is why Jesus, in his transcendent message directed towards particular individuals called to realize the Divine good in their lives, shatters the Pharisees' ethical-religious scheme and triggers their objection and offense.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ject who, just like him, is an object of God's love. This second subject requires that the first intervene so that he, the latter, be able to perceive this love within himself and begin to realize it in his existence.

In consequence, the religious subject's love for neighbor does not distinguish whether a refugee is a person from his socio-cultural community or not. Of course, immanently speaking, he sees all manner of earthly differences, but the transcendent truth orders him to disregard them and to love each as if they were his closest kin. Thus, for the religious subject, the refugee is as much a neighbor as his mother, wife, or friend. He is absolutely the same person—equal to the religious subject in spirit and is similarly called forth by God to realize himself in Divine love.[53]

8.8 The Impossibility of Transferring Transcendent Truth to Immanence

The religious subject whose actions stem from the idea of love for one's neighbor cannot, in immanence, create a value that would become supracommunal and unite all people despite socio-cultural divisions. Such a value exists for the religious subject only transcendentally, and therefore one can only relate to it individually.[54] For this reason, the Christian will not, according to Kierkegaard, be able to convert entire groups of people. He can only convert others on an individual basis by means of meeting with a particular person and conveying to

53 *SKS* 9, 141–145 / *WL*, 139–143. This of course is about the religious subject in the sense in which Kierkegaard speaks of the true Christian, not in which one speaks of some person who considers himself a Christian. Religiousness is also a way to relate to immanence. Religious values are very strong in immanence and with them as a foundation one can constitute oneself both as an aesthetic subject and as an ethical one. What is of great importance here, however, is one's ability to relate to oneself and to the world through the truth of transcendence, which can come to the subject only when he renounces his immanent relation to the world and accepts the grace of God's love as a living reality. Such a person is the opposite of the religious fanatic, as the former's neighbor is absolutely every person to whom he cannot convey the value of transcendental love in immanence and who at the same time is persecuted by him in immanence in some way. Fanaticism as such is basically an aesthetic way of relating to religious values—in other words, fanaticism arises when the individual is not ethically conscious of who he is, when he does not internally establish himself as a subject of his existence and completely identifies with a certain type of value which for some reason impresses him in the external world.
54 *SKS* 24, 32, NB21:34 / *KJN* 8, 28–29; *SKS* 25, 317, NB29:32 / *KJN* 9, 320; *SKS* 26, 30, 39, NB31:41, NB31:54 / *KJN* 10, 26–27, 35–36.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

him God's love.[55] There is, therefore, no possibility for transcendent truth (which requires an individual relation) to become the truth of a community. In this sense, a community does not have a transcendent calling—only individuals do.

The encounter that the ethical subject and religious subject have with the refugee thus looks quite different. The former recognizes the socio-cultural difference between his community and that of the refugee's, he tries to recognize the refugee's intentions and to determine if the refugee is a threat for his community (in both a physical and ideological sense), and thereafter decides whether to include him in his community's ethical-legal order, that is, to replace his status as stranger with a closer one. The religious subject, however, though immanently seeing in the refugee a person from a different socio-cultural circle, sees in him—transcendentally—an object of God's love identical to himself. He does not consider his main task to be offering him assistance in an immanent sense (to feed, clothe, and to shelter). He considers it to be awakening the refugee to Divine love. All manner of immanent gestures made by the religious subject, however selfless, serve as a medium for the conveyance of transcendent truth with the aim of awakening another's inner life. This does not mean that the religious subject absconds from offering a person in need help in an immanent sense, but that this help lacks a transcendent dimension, that it is the duty of every ethical subject, though not of the religious one. The religious subject fights not for the well-being of other people, however that is understood, but for the possibility of opening them up to God's transcendent love. For this reason the religious subject can help another even when, immanently, there is nothing left to be done for him.

What ought to be stressed here is that the ethical category of the "close one" is not the same as the religious category of "neighbor."[56] Neighbor means the same as me or just like me, whereas close one means similar to me or resembling me. Ethically, the possibility arises for this close one to participate in the host's value system, together with the chance to become a part of it—within the boun-

55 *SKS* 20, 126–129, NB:215 / *KJN* 4, 126–128; *SKS* 24, 418–419, NB24:152 / *KJN* 8, 424–425.
56 This distinction between religious neighbor and the ethical close one does not come directly from Kierkegaard. The Danish philosopher never considers the situation in which someone who was a stranger to us in a sensate sense becomes close to us in some other sense. He only speaks about the difference between persons close to us (relatives, family, dear friends), who are objects of our erotic love (*Elskov*), and one's neighbor, who is an object of our spiritual love (*Kjerlighed*). In the English language there are no related words with which one could express both the similarity and difference of these two terms (the close one and the neighbor). This can, however, be done in French, for example by saying that "*un proche dans le sens éthique n'est pas le prochain compris religieusement*." In this meaning, someone can become close to us ethically (*un proche*) while remaining someone who is not our neighbor (*le prochain*).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

daries of reason.[57] Religiously, the matter concerns the inner transformation of another person, that he become a subject of transcendence identical to the one who loves, that he become one who loves. Religiously, each individual is loved by God as much as the one who loves, therefore each individual can become the one who loves.

8.9 The Intermediary Model

Based on what has been argued thus far, the refugee cannot become a neighbor, ethically, in the religious sense of this word. In effect, none of Kierkegaard's claims that refer to the category of spiritual (transcendent) love should in this case directly inform immanent ethics, nor be applied to them. It should be assumed that this lack of common ground concerns all ethical problems that can be considered from the point of view of either immanent or transcendent ethics.[58] The question thus arises as to whether one can build an intermediary model which would allow certain elements of transcendent love for one's neighbor to be formally transposed into immanent ethics. And most importantly, would such a move generally be ethically meaningful?

The most important element one needs to pay attention to in such an endeavor is the three-dimensionality of Christian love in Kierkegaard's account.

57 If the refugee himself is an ethical subject within his own system of values, the possibility of ethical reconciliation is much greater than when he has only an aesthetic relation (external, not internal) to himself and the world.

58 The position advanced herein goes against many critical accounts of ethics in Kierkegaard's thought, accounts which imply that a direct transposition can be made between the content of transcendent ethics and immanent ethics (see, for example, M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, New York: Oxford University Press 2001; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*, New York: Oxford University Press 2004; John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2013). An interesting attempt to connect these two spheres is offered by Sharon Krishek in her book *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009). On her account, there is no contradiction in man being simultaneously a subject of love for one's neighbor as well as a subject of love for one's beloved (romantic love). In doing so, however, she does not equate the content of immanent ethics with that of transcendent ethics, but instead shows merely a lack of contradiction in being a subject of both these ethics simultaneously. On principle, this position is compatible with the account presented in this paper—provided that one acknowledges the secondary nature of being a subject of immanent ethics relative to being a subject of transcendent ethics as captured by the principle: love (transcendent ethics, the second ethics) is a fulfillment of the law (immanent ethics, the first ethics).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

What this means is that one cannot relate to another without this relation's being mediated in God. It is precisely God who proves to be the ultimate relation and source of love. This mediation in God has numerous consequences. First, by relating to transcendent love, all subjects make themselves spiritually equal to one another. As a result, it has no bearing whether the external world features any diversity, be it cultural, related to class, wealth, or anything else. People are for one another neighbors, equal to one another, loved equally by God as individuals above these earthly divisions.[59] Secondly, the Christian, upon discovering in himself God's love and accepting it, has the duty to spread this love to all people. In relations with others that take in this case the form of the relation between the one who loves and the sinner, the one who loves has the duty to humble himself so as to not show the other person his spiritual advantage or to feel superior. The one who loves must know that this other person is as important as he is, regardless of how serious a sinner he may be. He must know that he needs the sinner as much as the sinner needs him.[60] Without reconciling with another person, or without at least striving for reconciliation, one cannot speak of participating in the redemptive plan of God's love. Lastly, the one who loves cannot cease to love, he cannot become disheartened or discouraged even if the other person clearly acts in a way that harms him—that is, even if the other, instead of accepting the former's love, does everything possible to hinder his efforts to spread it.[61]

On the ethical account, an interpersonal relation—regardless of its level of generality (a relation with someone close, with those in one's immediate environment, within one regional community, a cultural one) always has a two-dimensional form—what matters is that there are two subjects, two communities, which stand face to face. Of course, in the relation between two ethical subjects there is mediation in a higher world of values, in a higher immanent truth they attest to, in a common good they both work towards. Ethically, this good cannot be appropriated, it must be equally available for all subjects in a given community.[62]

59 *SKS* 12, 281 / *WA*, 165.

60 *SKS* 9, 334 – 338 / *WL*, 339 – 343.

61 *SKS* 9, 259 – 262, 330 – 331 / *WL*, 260 – 263, 335.

62 A relation like this may occur at the individual level, when in court, for example, the claims two parties have towards one another are objectively and justly judged, just as it may occur at the universal-human level, when in the contemporary western world, for example, it is granted that everyone has an equal right to life and to decide about one's life. Each ethical subject should be able to adhere to rights of this type, recognized by his community, and thus be able to define his own being (the good) within the higher being (the good) of the community.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Ethically, however, the stability of relating to this higher good is impermanent and unsteady, for to a large extent it depends on the good will of all the participants in the relation. It is a certain convention, a kind of contract on the basis of which a community of good (of business) is formed. Immanently, this mediation does not have an absolute character.[63] Within such a relation there are inevitable perturbations arising for instance from a different interpretation of certain basic principles or from different needs belonging to the relevant subjects. Groups based on world-view and ideology emerge which quarrel amongst themselves over a better understanding of the idea of the common good as well as the best way to realize it in reality.

In a three-dimensional relation, such perturbations cannot occur, since the relation's point of reference is not a shared point of interest, not a good, which one could conclude it would be better to understand or realize in relation to other people. In relation to God, who loves all equally, there is no possibility for one subject to love God more than the other subject does—this relation is decided individually: one either loves God or not. If then one loves Him, one loves Him to the same degree and in the same way as every other person who loves God. Thus the question arises whether one can transpose the three-dimensionality of this relation into immanent ethics in a way that minimizes the possibility of perturbations that give rise to inequality in the relations various subjects have to one another and their communities.

With this aim—and in reference to the refugee problem—one can attempt to generalize every community down to the level of neighbor, that is, to acknowledge every community as essentially the same in its claims to truth and to acknowledge that each one is true to the same degree as long as one does not try to impose this truth on other communities. In this case, it would not be the content of a community's truth that would be subject to spreading, but instead a formal agreement concerning the equal value of the truths of particular communities. Just as God's love for man favors no particular individual, so too one should refrain in this case from ethically favoring the truth—in terms of what reality is—of any community as more important than the truth of any other communities.

In other words, as in the case of transcendence, where each individual has to realize the individual truth of his calling, which is part of a higher truth in God and cannot undermine the truths of other subjects striving to realize their truth

63 Even in the case of natural law, this mediation is more of an intellectual convention than something which would actually result from some objectively existing human nature recognized by all.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

in God—so it is in the case of immanence, where every community represents the individual, ethical truth of its vision of the world, one which constitutes a part of a general, immanent truth that is connected with a multiplicity and diversity of people's relations to the reality of their lives, with the result being that no community should come out against the truths of other communities. In this sense, it should be of greater importance to ensure that the members of a given community become actual, active ethical subjects therein, than to seek the general truth of all communities, for it is ethically aware subjects that are the medium for the general, immanent truth of humanity: that one be the subject of one's own existence. Becoming such a subject seems to be something independent of socio-cultural divisions and is achievable within every community that is not ethically adulterated.[64]

Just as an ethical subject has a duty to care about the development of other subjects in his community so that they become ethical subjects[65]—so does he have the duty, as a representative of his community, to create conditions for another community that would enable it to develop in its own truth just as his community develops in its own truth. On such an account, the ethical subject that encounters refugees representing a different community cannot judge them either from the point of view of his own truth or in terms of the possibility of conforming them to it, but should at least make an effort to understand this other

64 Ethical untruth always appears when the interests of a given person or group take precedence over the good of the community. Likewise, ethical untruth also appears when the truth of a given community takes precedence over the good of another community in the form of a desire to dominate it and exploit it for the other's purposes. In such a situation, what takes place is an aestheticization of the truth, i.e., its appropriation and relativization, in view of the specified goal to be served by this truth. Ethical truth as a common good, however, cannot be subordinated to anything that is particular; it must constitute the element which designates man's relation to the world and to which man subjugates himself selflessly, meaning out of a willingness to participate in this truth, to be part of it.

65 At the same time, the ethical subject cannot enter into direct conflict with an aesthetic subject, the former should strive to bring about the latter's inner transformation. This means that the ethical subject must want to understand this other person and to help him become a subject of his community's ethical truth, even if this other person does not want to understand him or takes a hostile stance toward him. If the ethical subject happens upon a person or group of persons who have an aesthetic relation to the truth, then the ethical subject should humble himself in his truth with the goal of winning back this other person for the truth. This does not mean negating the truth in order to appeal to this other person, it means being capable of hearing him out and understanding his relation to the truth for the purpose of leading him out of untruth. Thus, in relation to another person, the ethical subject should have a maieutic approach, meaning he should have the ability to create an existential space in which this other person begins to understand himself, in which he begins to become himself.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

person out of concern for the latter's own truth. Therefore, the ideal solution would be to create a possibility for refugees to develop the truth of their communities within the host community as equal ethical subjects. To this end, it should be accepted that their truth is no less important than the host community's truth and that they have the same right to express it in the world—on the understanding that both truths are respectful of each other and that neither aspires to be superior or more correct than the other. On such an account, the refugee as a guest in the host community could feel akin to a kind of substitute for one's neighbor in the religious sense—a person as important as the host within a common field of reference to the equality of human truths in immanence.

It should be remembered that, on this account, firstly, the refugee has the same ethical duty as the host—both communities must acknowledge the equality of the other's relation to the truth and to foster the ethical development of their own community. Secondly, analogous to the refugee in the ethical subject's own community are people who have been socially excluded or marginalized for certain reasons, often not due to their own fault. Thirdly, the ethical subject should know how to respect the multiplicity of ways to relate to the common good in one's own community so as not so aestheticize the truth of a common good or to appropriate it, thereby creating new exclusions.

Conclusion

The model presented here is of course possible only in the case of an ethical relation between representatives of two different communities. When two aesthetic subjects meet or when one ethical subject encounters an aesthetic one, such an equality is impossible to achieve. Two aesthetic subjects will strive to appropriate the right to truth and to the proper understanding of human reality, while at the same time trying to limit the possibility that a different truth may spread. Yet when encountering an aesthetic subject, the ethical subject would have to first try to induce a transformation in the aesthetic subject so as be able to communicate with regard to the equality of the truths they profess.

It seems that the model presented here is quite difficult to implement in the contemporary social world, where the ways in which communities relate to their truth are dominated by aesthetic relations. In view of the priority each community acknowledges to provide its own members with the possibility to become ethical subjects within its own truth, the implementation of this model would require truly ethically strong communities which would know how to communicate with one another in regard to this priority.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

This model may be unacceptable, however, when it comes to the ethics itself, since, as indicated earlier, it is very difficult to go beyond the natural procedure of identifying the truth of one's community with the good of all people, just as it is very difficult to go beyond the attempt to show other communities that one's relation to the truth is the proper one. The development of such a model of behavior requires one to actually be inspired by transcendent ethics, which is an ethics of absolute equality between subjects in relation to a higher-order truth. Ethically, it is very difficult to identify such a higher-order, supracommunal truth that includes all of humanity, one which no one would object to and which no one would understand in his own way.

Realistically, within immanence itself it is not possible to create an ideal immanence, since this would require going beyond its limits. Such a possibility is granted only by entering the transcendent perspective. Such an immanent mediation in transcendence is possible only intellectually, since existentially, no one can have his life goal in both realities simultaneously. What this means is that, on one hand, the religious person who, by means of relating to transcendence, understands the ultimate meaning of the immanent world, cannot become the ethical leader of his community. Yet on the other hand, intellectual mediation in transcendence is, to a great extent, limited to the mere ideal modeling of immanence. Implementing such a model in universal-human reality requires very well-developed ethical subjects, and thus it is difficult for this model to become a universal project. Such a model cannot be put into practice from the top down, as then it would undergo an aestheticization and be subject to various distortions arising therefrom.

Thus, this model is most appropriate for ethical subjects that would want, in some way, to overcome limitations in their own attachment to a vision in which a community's truth is the predominant truth in a universal-human sense. However, their opening up to equality in terms of relating to the truth on the scale of both their own community and the world could contribute, in the long run, to a change in the perception that the majority of ethical subjects have of themselves as vessels of truth, and in consequence to a change in the general model of relating human communities to themselves.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Tomer Raudanski

9 Equality, Mortality and Community in "At a Graveside"

Reading Kierkegaard alongside Nancy and Derrida

It is common knowledge among Kierkegaard scholars that winds of change are blowing in the research field. Kierkegaard is now liberated from being regarded as a radical "individualist" and an "irrationalist." It thus may come as a surprise that contemporary scholarship is either silent or skeptical towards Kierkegaard's ethico-political stance in "At a Graveside."[1] Exploring two different understandings of equality through mood and earnestness in Kierkegaard's treatise on death, this paper argues that Kierkegaard's account of mortality can help us open and be responsive to other people. The article is divided into three parts. The first section addresses Kierkegaard's notion of mood, and its improper, so-called economical attitude towards death; it explores Kierkegaard's discussion of social equality and inequality through death consciousness alongside John D. Caputo's and Jacques Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard. The second section hermeneutically invokes Jean-Luc Nancy's deliberations on the inoperative community as a theoretical backdrop to explore the nature of earnestness. I follow this with some concluding remarks.

Introduction

In "At a Graveside," Kierkegaard writes time and again that the earnest thought of death ought to involve a "retroactive power over life"[2] by awakening the "re-

---

1 For example, while Theunissen appreciates Kierkegaard's insistence on the impossibility to symbolize or personify death, he argues that Kierkegaard is inconsistent in applying the standards he himself demands. See in Michael Theunissen, "Das Erbauliche im Gedanken an den Tod. Traditionale Elemente, innovative Ideen und unausgeschöpfte Potentiale in Kierkegaards Rede. An einem Grabe," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 2000, pp. 42–43, p. 53. According to Marino, in "At a Graveside" "there is scarcely a word about the relationship between our death awareness and the ties that bind us...on that score...the discourse seems inhuman." Gordon Marino, "A Critical Perspective on Kierkegaard's 'At a Graveside,'" in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. by Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2011, p. 159. This collection of essays *Kierkegaard and Death* is the most recent ontology on the topic of Kierkegaard and mortality.

2 *SKS* 5, 466 / *TD*, 97; *SKS* 5, 467 / *TD*, 98; *SKS* 5, 468 / *TD*, 99, 100.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-010

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

sponsibility (*Ansvar*) that always remains."[3] However, Kierkegaard does not articulate what this responsibility amounts to. Moreover, in the discourse, Kierkegaard draws an analogy between the work of death and political revolution. Kierkegaard argues that in analogy with the manner in which death unexpectedly annuls all worldly differences by reducing everyone to nothing, the earnest thought of death makes our hearts and minds turn inside out in a way that resembles a political revolution. That is, just as political revolution erupts unpredictably, removes the political leadership and sets up a new social order, so in earnestness, our lives, practices and beliefs are forced into a fundamental reform, which challenges the existing order. "Death," Kierkegaard remarks, "has been able to overthrow thrones and principalities, but the earnest thought of death has done something just as great."[4]

Now, if this is true—if the earnest meditation on death can undermine the legitimacy of the status quo—then why should the social order persist rather than be replaced by another, perhaps better one? In what follows I will explicate, firstly, what the earnest meditation on death might mean, and, secondly, I will explore the relation of earnestness to questions of ethical responsibility and community. My main contention is that earnestness entails an ambiguous notion of responsibility: while the proper relation to one's demise is a personal task that isolates the individual from human association, earnestness points to an original dimension of communality within the individual, a shared space in which the person is called to be responsible towards her neighbor.

9.1 Mood's Economics of Death

We will delve into the discussion of "At a Graveside" by setting up few theological and literary background remarks. Kierkegaard's authors' disparate references to mortality constantly shift along Paul's distinction between physical, natural death and spiritual death, or sin. In this paper I focus mainly on the relation to physical, biological death in earnestness, as was set forth by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside." The text was published under Kierkegaard's name, and not pseudonymously like many of his early writings. It opens with a brief, fictional sermon, before it begins with the actual discourse.[5] Moreover, the trea-

3 *SKS* 5, 447–448 / *TD*, 77; *SKS* 5, 449 / *TD*, 78; *SKS* 5, 452 / *TD*, 82; *SKS* 5, 457 / *TD*, 87; *SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 88.
4 *SKS* 5, 459 / *TD*, 89–90.
5 Kierkegaard's introductions often play an important role by positioning the reader to what is going to be maintained in the main text. In our case, the sermon tells about the life of a small,

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

tise regards death non-clerically and not in an exclusively Christian sense. Traditional Christological themes such as sin, predetermination, grace or the afterlife are casually mentioned, but not further thematized. Kierkegaard's discourse treats death realistically, namely exclusively in terms of the termination of biological life. The text focuses on the practical question of how to live in this life, where we are now living, and it seems to be silent about the relation between death and the afterlife.[6]

Nonetheless, "At a Graveside" explores death religiously. The presence of God, it says, "give[s] infinite significance to even the most insignificant,"[7] and it pleas to the reader "to seek before God the equality in which all are able to be equal."[8] Moreover, I take it that the Christian notions of sin and grace are assumed throughout the discourse. Kierkegaard does not treat physical death as if it were merely an ontological problem. Although the treatise takes a realistic and a naturalist approach to death that refrains from any accounts of the beyond, Kierkegaard assumes an eschatological hope on the basis of the Christian notion of equality and eternal blessedness, in conformity with the Pauline egalitarian message and emphasis on the universality of redemption.[9] In this way, it will be argued, Kierkegaard implores the reader, between the lines, to embrace responsibility toward the neighbor by confronting spiritual death (i.e., sin, despair); that is, he calls upon the reader to come to terms with the improper inclinations of self-centered, egoistic love (and thereby to be reborn to eternal life in Christ).

As mentioned above, "At a Graveside" focuses on physical, natural death. There, Kierkegaard laments that most people deny, repress or simply ignore death's inevitability. Kierkegaard refers to this attitude as mood (*Stemning*), an improper relation to death, and he contrasts it with earnestness (*Alvor*). Mood

---

unknown merchant in Copenhagen, and how he is remembered by his loved ones after his death. To anticipate what will be argued later on, it is not only the relation to my own death that provides an authentic relation to my existence (as suggested by Heidegger), but, rather, my the relation to my death teaches me about human kinship and my fundamental solidarity with other people. Cf. George Pattison, "Kierkegaard, Metaphysics, and Love," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2013, p. 193.

6 According to Theunissen, Kierkegaard's consistent rejection of the Christian terminology is exceptional amongst the upbuilding production that argues in a directly Christian tone. Cf. Theunissen, "Das Erbauliche im Gedanken an den Tod," see in particular pp. 58–62. See also Eva Birkenstock, *Heisst philosophieren sterben lernen? Antworten der Existenzphilosophie: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Rosenzweig*, Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber 1997, p. 27, p. 57.

7 *SKS* 5, 448 / *TD*, 78.

8 *SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 89.

9 Cf. Rom 11:32; Theunissen, "Das Erbauliche im Gedanken an den Tod," p. 63.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

is the name for an attitude that designates one's relation to a death that is not one's own; for instance, when we witness someone else dying. Although mood fills our heart with sheer sorrow, this is still a *representation* or an *image* of actual death. Analogous to a vapid feeling which fleets away, mood can be regarded as a bland or transitory interest, a bemused acceptance of some fact or an avoidance of something unpleasant. Mood hardly motivates us to act; it lacks the profound self-examination that is at the core of earnestness.[10] Earnestness, to the contrary, thinks of the encounter with death as a personal one. As we shall see, seriousness involves an inner tension between an intense wakefulness, sense of urgency and commitment to what is at stake at the present, as well as serenity, calmness and peacefulness with how one really is.[11]

The failure of mood according to Kierkegaard lies in its blindness to the essential evil of death; namely the uncertainty of its "when." Although death is certain and ineluctable, we do not know *when* it is going to happen. In this sense Kierkegaard infers that death entails an ambiguity: death is inevitable and decisive, yet likewise it is uncertain when death will strike the living. While most of us desire a long and full life, no one knows when the grim reaper is going to knock at her door.[12]

Moreover, according to Kierkegaard, death involves an absolute alterity. Any attempt to grasp the meaning of death shall amount to a contradiction, since life and death are opposites that exclude each other: while I am, death is not, and vice versa. We always arrive too early or too late to the instant in which death intervenes in life; there is no mediating term between life and death. While

10 *SKS* 5, 446–445 / *TD*, 75. Cf. Charles Guignon, "Heidegger and Kierkegaard on Death: The Existentiell and the Existential," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. by Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben, pp. 188–189; Marino, "A Critical Perspective on Kierkegaard's 'At a Graveside,'" p. 153.
11 *SKS* 5, 444 / *TD*, 73. *SKS* 5, 445 / *TD*, 74. *SKS* 5, 446 / *TD*, 75. *SKS* 5, 459 / *TD*, 90. *SKS* 5, 467 / *TD*, 98. In his authorship, Kierkegaard refers to different kinds of moods such as irony, melancholy, anxiety and despair. In "At a Graveside," mood is to be regarded as a feeling in itself. The use of the term in our treatise is consistent with the above mentioned sub-types of moods—all of them express aesthetic states of mind. That is to say, they lead the person in the immature path of selfhood, where the person is wholly absorbed in time. However, mood in "At a Graveside" is not always consistent with its deployment in the other writings. For instance in *The Concept of Anxiety* Haufniensis writes that "[t]he mood that corresponds to sin is earnestness" (*SKS* 4, 322 / *CA*, 15), while in the discourse on death at hand mood entails a deficient, reduced form of earnestness. There is a clear hierarchy between seriousness and mood. My analysis thus qualifies readings such as McCarthy's, who assumes that Kierkegaard's dialectic of moods form a systematic unity. Cf. Vincent A. McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard,* Springer 1978. p. 4, p. 34, p. 120, p. 124, p. 125. My position on that score is closer to Theunissen, "Das Erbauliche im Gedanken an den Tod," p. 51.
12 *SKS* 5, 463 / *TD*, 93.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

death is a decisive force to which all earthly powers succumb, death cannot, as it were, get at its victim: "there is a contradiction, that death, as it were, tricks itself."[13] Unlike sorrow which hits its object—those who live—death always misses its mark. "[W]hen death's arrow has hit, then indeed it is over…but when death tightens the snare it has indeed caught nothing, because then all is over."[14]

Kierkegaard thus infers that the meaning of death constantly escapes thought's attempt to represent it by means of a concept, image or metaphor. As he writes, "death has no notion and pays no attention to notions."[15] Furthermore, Kierkegaard concludes, in a way that seems to contradict our basic intuitions (since it is impossible to grasp death in the very moment of its occurrence), death *as such* does not exist for the dying person. "[I]n this sense…death is not something actual, and as soon as one is dead it is too late to become earnest."[16] While death is an irremovable fact of existence, it cannot be ordered in the sequence of all other events. In this way Kierkegaard puts into question the idea of a temporal threshold that supposedly marks the limit between life and the moment of death's intervention. Instead of setting a clear and distinct boundary line that supposedly separates life from the beyond, the earnest thought of death can be characterized, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, as running up against the limitations of reason and language. Death is the transition, the passage itself from being to non-being.[17] That is to say, death is a departure into something mysterious and unknown; it posits a pure question mark but provides no opportunity for a response. As a transition, death is never given in the pure present. It is always between past and future. It either appears as the other's death that *was* or the death that *will be*, but it itself never *is*.

Insofar as death is non-conceptualizable, Kierkegaard speaks of mood as "a false flatterer" [*en falsk Smigrer*].[18] Flattery marks the flight to an objective attitude toward death. In this idle talk, one acknowledges the inevitability of death and is satisfied with an empirical certainty of it. Indeed, there is nothing more certain for the living than the necessity of death – just not now. In this way Kierkegaard holds that death's radical uncertainty is mitigated. "There is a consolation in life, a false flatterer; there is a safeguard in life, a hypocritical deceiver—it is called postponement."[19] Death is conceived as something that fundamentally

13 *SKS* 5, 444–445 / *TD*, 74.
14 *SKS* 5, 445 / *TD*, 74.
15 *SKS* 5, 449 / *TD*, 79.
16 *SKS* 5, 445 / *TD*, 74.
17 *SKS* 5, 457 / *TD*, 86; *SKS* 5, 462 / *TD*, 92; *SKS* 5, 466 / *TD*, 97; *SKS* 5, 467 / *TD*, 99.
18 *SKS* 5, 449–450 / *TD*, 79–80.
19 *SKS* 5, 449 / *TD*, 79.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

belongs to "the human condition,"[20] but not to one's own situation. Death is regarded as a neutral public event, as if it were a news item.[21]

Mood is therefore the name for a state of mind that thinks about the end of life while locating death outside of itself. Mood either denies, represses or ignores the difficulty of life: namely that death can whimsically occur *to me* at any given moment without any justification or explanation. Mood denies, represses, or simply ignores my dependency on a power greater than myself: the love that created me, that called on me to *be*, and which provided a *telos* to my existence. In this sense mood denotes a low level of self-consciousness. It prevents the self from choosing herself in the concreteness of her actual circumstances—accepting one's self with all her potentialities, talents, difficulties and limitations. The self in mood ceases to be the dialectical force of her life; instead, the subject is wholly absorb in time, succumbing to the dictates of others, the state and social norms.[22]

Mood's conception of mortality suggests that life has the structure of a narrative or a story, where death is the last period on the last page. The coming of death (insofar as this phrase makes sense at all) appears as a matter of reaching the final stop in the chronological succession of days and nights, minutes and seconds. Similar to what Heidegger calls vulgar time and Levinas understands as the time of the same, mood's kind of temporality unfolds in conformity with lines of teleology: the automatic, instinct-driven, mechanical yielding of possibility to necessity that is stuck within the horizon of the same; the programmable, business-as-usual time, the void repetition of the same that makes a lot of noise but doesn't move an inch. As Kierkegaard writes: "[A]h, if anyone ought to be tired of repetition, death certainly ought to be, which has seen everything and the same things again and again."[23]

To illustrate mood's flight to an objective attitude toward death, it is appropriate to explore Kierkegaard's discussion of the meaning of social equality and inequality through the consciousness of death. For instance, Kierkegaard presents the image of death as that which erases all dissimilarity of earthly life:

---

20 *SKS* 5, 444 / *TD*, 73.

21 Despite his reluctance to admit this, Heidegger most likely takes his notion of *das Gerede* (this endless chatter that characterizes the sum of all the trivial matters of our everyday lives that distract us from impending death) from Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside."

22 Haufniensis describes this condition by regarding the self as being similar to an animal, confined to instincts and sensual inclinations, becoming a slave to life's constantly changing, largely inconsistent circumstances. See *SKS* 4, 349 / *CA*, 44; *SKS* 4, 395 / *CA*, 92 (footnote); *SKS* 4, 454 / *CA*, 155.

23 *SKS* 5, 449 / *TD*, 79.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

death brings equality with it since it is blind to circumstances and preferences—rich and poor, old and young, generous and selfish—death comes to all equally. The thought of death's equality seems to be a great relief, especially to the poor and unfortunate strata of society, knowing that in the end this world's hierarchies and discriminations will not continue to reign.[24]

Then, however, Kierkegaard reverses the image. To find comfort in death's perpetual sleep as the remedy to life's injustices is inconsistent: it is true that the disparities of this world will be done away with in death, but those who are supposed to benefit from the negation of this world's differences will not be there to enjoy it when they are dead. Death does not create justice for the poor when it annihilates everything, for death knows neither allies nor preferences; it is stronger than any human affiliation.[25]

The next step of the argument examines another perspective on equality through the thought of death. Kierkegaard now proposes the image of death as the grand equalizer of life's multifarious dissimilarities. The claim is that in seeking to avoid death's horror, when facing imminent death, the anxious individual is ready to make peace with the material conditions of her life, unfortunate as these may be. The self learns to imitate the other, and find relief in her lot: the poor person learns to rejoice over the good fortune of the rich; the oppressed forgets the affront and delights in the advantages of the distinguished; the old who is weary from life hurries on with the youth's confidence of hope.[26]

This notion of mortality seems reasonable, and it even appears to denote progress in the thought of death. While in the above image of death's equality, the person who is disappointed by life's hardships places her faith in the hereafter, the individual now seems to make peace with the material conditions of her existence; hope is orientated toward this life, where we are now living. In face of death's absolute annihilation, the person chooses life over death, in spite of how unfortunate or intolerable the circumstances may be. Material scarcity is indeed bad, but death is worse.

However, Kierkegaard refutes this image as well. He raises the rhetorical question—is the difference between life's earthly dissimilarities (e. g., difference of status or age) really so great? Life's prolific dissimilarities indeed constitute a

24 *SKS* 5, 457 / *TD*, 86.
25 "It is forgotten that death is the strongest; it is forgotten that it has no preferences, that it does not make a pact with anyone" (*SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 88). See also Laura Llevadot, *Kierkegaard Through Derrida: Toward a Postmetaphysical Ethics*, Aurora, CO: The Davies Group 2013, p. 87 and Pattison, "Kierkegaard, Metaphysics, and Love," p. 188.
26 *SKS* 5, 460–461 / *TD*, 90.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

difference, but this is merely a worldly difference, a difference of an inferior order compared with the difference which is taught by the earnest of death.[27] The nothingness of death consists in aporia, the enigma that neither concepts, notions nor images could represent or give full meaning to death for the living. The aforementioned image of death's equality conflates earthly, immanent differences with the fundamental human equality and solidarity of the blessed before God.[28] This is despair, when the person makes life's earthly dissimilarities her guiding ideal to strive for, i.e., her condition for happiness and well-being.[29] In this thought of equality—as above mentioned—the person imitates the other. That is, instead of choosing one's own self in the circumstances in which the individual finds herself—with all her potentialities, hardships and limitations. This is not earnestness but mood, a compensation for what the individual could not achieve in this life. This is cowardice, for it forgets in the course of it the fact that in the end all people die.[30]

Finally, to make the picture even more complex, Kierkegaard proposes the definition of death through inequality. By inequality Kierkegaard means that death can hasten to the baby recently born, whereas the old man can wait in vain for death year after year; in times of peace and material security, death comes and sweeps everything away, while "when there is want, it [death] stays away."[31] However, the identification of death with inequality is dismissed since, in the last resort, it remains true that "death makes no distinctions…it recognizes neither status nor age."[32] Rich or poor, young or old—death cuts us all short; in the final analysis, death is indifferent to the particularities of the individual. Kierkegaard thus concludes that while before death we are all equal, this equality is immeasurable because it cannot be pinned down in any definitive manner. Our equality in mortality is not *qua* some trait or predicate that we share, because death, insofar as it is indefinite, has no defining properties.[33]

---

27 *SKS* 5, 460 – 461 / *TD*, 90. Kierkegaard repeats this argument in *SKS* 9, 340 / *WL*, 346.
28 *SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 89: "In this way the earnest thought of death has taught the living person to permeate the most oppressive dissimilarity with the equality before God."
29 *SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 89: "Ah, how often, when death came to a person, the equality of annihilation taught him to wish the most oppressive dissimilarity back again, taught him to find the terms desirable now when the terms of death were the only ones!"
30 *SKS* 5, 461 / *TD*, 91: "Alas, no, then a person needs no compensation, least of all the kind that deceitfully suppresses the fact that he himself becomes nothing." See also *SKS* 5, 457 / *TD*, 86.
31 *SKS* 5, 461 / *TD*, 91.
32 *SKS* 5, 461 / *TD*, 91.
33 According to Kierkegaard, "just as death's decision is not definable by equality, so it is likewise not definable by inequality" (*SKS* 5, 461 / *TD*, 91). The indefinable decision of death is "the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is certain" (*SKS* 5, 461 / *TD*, 91).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

According to Kierkegaard, in all of the above cases of death awareness follow an economical logic of exchange; they presuppose one temporal totality that encompasses life and death in one system, as if the meaning of death were visible from the outside.[34] In tandem with Derrida, we suggest that speculating about the indeterminate equality of death postulates a principle or a common denominator for comparing the equality of all human beings qua mortals with the existence of the dying person. Meditating about death in this way moves us away from the concreteness and ineluctability of death, and is driven by some ego-motivated desire or resentment towards what could not be achieved in this life. Death *per se* and death's images fall within the same price range; instead of an absolute loss that is irreversible, dying is to be regarded as something exchangeable, something understood in terms of economic transaction in which two parties share more or less equivalent value. Rather than a complete indefinite that has no defining qualities, dealing (with) death becomes a basic stock in the market, a business for all intents and purposes.[35]

Stated otherwise, the aforementioned ways of being conscious of death belongs to rationality (in the sense of calculation), to the give-and-take of investment and return. Death is understood as something positive, in a way that cannot genuinely acknowledge irreversible loss. Instead of something that comes as a complete surprise, something indefinite that we do not see coming, death's unmeasurable presupposition of equality is regarded in teleological terms, as a means that can be used to achieve some subjective, ideological, or existential goal. In brief, death is *considered a tool to the realization of what the self perceives to be right and just in this world*.

In light of the above reflections, Kierkegaard laments that mood reduces the *religious* paragon of humanity's blessed equality to *formal* equality in annihilation. Instead of the power of death to retroactively give hope to this life, where we are now living, our shared humanity is considered with respect to the grave, the

---

34 Kierkegaard alludes to Epicurus ("a pagan"), arguing that "this is the jest by which the cunning contemplator places himself on the outside" (*SKS* 5, 444 / *TD*, 73).

35 My reading is inspired by Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Willis, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1992; Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying—Awaiting (one Another At) the "Limits of Truth,"* trans. by Thomas Dutoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1993; Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, New York: Fordham University Press 1997 (see especially the relationship between gift, justice and economics, pp. 15–19, 142–145); John D. Caputo, "Instances, Secrets and Singularities. Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida," *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. by *Martin Matuštík and Merold Westphal*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995, pp. 216–238, see in particular pp. 217–218. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. by Bettina Bergo, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000, pp. 13–14, p. 21).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

bad or sad leveling of all differences. According to Kierkegaard, pinning one's hopes on the equality of the grave offers a deceptive consolation in which the person, like in a game, roams "around in fantasy in the silent kingdom of the dead, itself playing that it is death."[36]

To conclude, Kierkegaard's discussion of social equality and inequality distinguishes between equality from the perspective of death, and the humble equality of the blessed from the viewpoint of God. According to Kierkegaard, the equality of the blessed is transcendent and immeasurable, and needs to be inferred from the equality of death. However, as we saw above, the equality of death cannot be derived from experience. Consequently, blessed equality cannot be deduced from the equality of death either. In other words, Kierkegaard's appeal to the reader to extrapolate religious equality from the equality of mortality is self-defeating. From the human point of view, the equality of the blessed is invisible and, indeed, unrealizable. Equality implies identity, but *this* world is characterized by differences and dissimilarities; while all human beings were created equal and are worthy of the same graceful love, it is only from the standpoint of God that the indeterminate equality of the blessed is attainable. In this sense Kierkegaard's discussion applies the irony of the Socratic midwife. "At a Graveside" avoids any positive production of knowledge of what this undefinable equality of the blessed before God might mean. Instead, Kierkegaard explores the meaning of death only negatively, so that it is up to the reader to create, in earnestness, the sense that the text cannot give. What is the content of the notion of blessed equality that is to be learned by earnestness, and what are its socio-political implications? In order to address this question, in this next section I hermeneutically use Jean-Luc Nancy's deconstruction of the community's conceptual apparatus as a guiding horizon for exploring Kierkegaard's deliberations on earnestness, equality and community.

9.2 Earnestness' In-operation: The Community of Christians in Love

The so-called deconstruction of the community invites us to rethink the very idea of the "social" in a way that does not ground it in some individual subject or subjectivity. By revisiting Maurice Blanchot and George Bataille's readings of Heidegger's category of Being-with (*Mitsein*), Jean-Luc Nancy maintains that while *Being and Time* offers a phenomenological key to the unfolding of *Dasein's* ap-

36 *SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 88.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

propriations of her life's possibilities in time, it neglects the human being's spatial and communal aspect, dedicating to it only a few pages in the *magnum opus*.[37] The fundamental thrust of Nancy's critique, as put forward in works such as *Being Singular Plural* and *The Inoperative Community*, is that Western philosophy has not properly addressed the aspect of "being-together" which is at the root of every human collective project. Being, according to Nancy, is always "being-with," "I" is not prior to "we," existence is essentially *co-existence*. Metaphysics, according to Nancy, errs in conceiving of the community along the structure of subjectivity as its organizing principle. It presupposes that the community is constituted by an identity, principle or set of properties that are immanent to it, and that these immanent qualities "belong" to the subjects as their deepest and most proper root, as if they could be added up and join the members of society together in some kind of greater good, substance or higher totality (i.e., the nation, homeland, class, race, ethnicity, religion etc.).

Nancy suggests an alternative conception of the community, one that lacks those immanent qualities that constitute the identity of the collective. Instead of a community that pivots on having "something" in common (shared value, interest, identity, etc.), Nancy proposes a view of community in which the subjects "have nothing in common"[38]—nothing in the sense that the subjects are unable to fully secure or occupy the community's immanent essence or identity. For Nancy, togetherness entails our exposure to the "whylessness" of existence, namely to the abysmal lack of a sufficient ground of the communion.[39]

The two facets of the community—having something or nothing in common—cannot be separated one from another; they are manifested by two impulses or beats that oppose and nourish each other at the same time. These are the love-drive and the death-drive. The love drive is to be seen by the commitment of the members of society to some preferred difference—the community's shared project, identity, or interest. The members of the community are dedicated to defending and struggling for this difference. This commitment however can backfire: it

37 For a short account of Nancy's reading of Heidegger's category of Being-with, see Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Being-with of Being-there," *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–15.

38 I am paraphrasing Alphonso Lingis' *The Community of Those who Have Nothing in Common*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

39 Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community" (especially p. 9, pp. 36–40) and "Shattered Love" (especially pp. 251–255, p. 273), both in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. by Peter Connor et al., London and Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 1991. See also with Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010, especially pp. 1–19.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

subsumes particularities, and demands self-sacrifice for the sake of the communal good. Thus the love drive incoporates within itself the death drive as seen by the whittling down of the individual's private sphere by the public one. The community is constantly threating its members to reduce their singular identity to the generality of the pure, homogenous "in common" concept of being (e. g., the nation, religious identity, sacred soil, fatherland, etc.).

According to Nancy, the dynamic described above is self-destructive and ultimately nihilistic. Traditionally, metaphysics contrasts community with nihilism. Nihilism is what escapes shared meaning and agreed criterion for distinguishing good from evil. The community, in this view, contains and opposes the nihilist drift: community is a shared essence, identity or a body that suffices for itself and that opposes the vortex of nullity, namely the fall of the individuals into the "nothing in common" we all share. Yet Nancy claims that the nihilistic logic of death and sacrifice has always stood in close contact to the community. For him, nihilism does not designate the flight from shared meaning, but, to the contrary, nihilism expresses the inherent tendency of politics to recognize the essence of the community, to occupy it, and put it to work. Indeed, while the community is hospitable and apt for coexistence (certainly, the community is the sole dimension suitable for association), it produces not only effects of collaboration, shelter and home, it is also the most hostile, disintegrating impetus for a nihilist drift. In other words, manifestations of integration, association and diffusion in the community simultaneously disintegrate togetherness from within, thereby revealing the impossibility of establishing a common immanent essence. The community "assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject."[40] The community has the structure of immunization, it is as though it vaccinates itself by clearing away all subjective contours.[41] The community is thus constituted by a paradox, it un-works what it makes possible. The condition of possibility of the community—being-with, association, convergence—is at the same time the condition of its impossi-

40 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 13.

41 Cf. Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 8, pp. 135–149. Nancy suggests that the establishment of the Nazi state ought to be understood less on the basis of how the "Aryan" community differentiated itself from the external other, but rather first and foremost on the basis of the reduction of German society into an immanent *pure*, *homogenous* conception of meaning: "[T]he logic of Nazi Germany was not only that of the extermination of the other, of the subhuman deemed exterior to the communion of blood and soil, but also, effectively, the logic of sacrifice aimed at all those in the 'Aryan' community who did not satisfy the criteria of *pure* immanence...the suicide of the German nation itself might have represented a plausible extrapolation of the process" (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 12).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

bility. The community is calibrated by death and self-sacrifice, just as much as death is calibrated by the community: "[d]eath is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself—and reciprocally."[42] With these thoughts in mind, we would like to explore how Nancy's aforementioned distinction between having something and nothing in common can be applied to Kierkegaard's deliberations on earnestness.

How then, does earnestness' relation to death (*in*)operate? Earnestness' unwork entails a difference without a difference.[43] This means, first, that death crosses out the entirety of the world's differences regardless of preferences and circumstances. Death removes all predicates by reducing everyone to nothing: rich or poor, distinguished or oppressed, young or old—all of these otherwise important earthly differences make no difference for death. Hence, death implies equality, since where there is no difference, there is identity, i.e., human beings are equal qua being mortal. However, Kierkegaard thinks, this equality of death corresponds with mood. In this perspective, death implies a merely formal, biological and material equality. It is an example of the sad or bad leveling of differences, which *separates* us one from another. In the moment of acknowledging impending death, the self is alone. No one can die in my place. The properties that individualize me such as age, gender, profession or social status disappear.[44] Earnestness is established only in the solitude of inwardness, through my relation to my own inevitable end, "where the multitude of the dead do not form any kind of society."[45] In this sense, earnestness' "responsibility that always remains"[46] lacks a strong *normative* aspect. Death's earnestness is in-economical, it does not "work"—it does not prompt us to make any material change in the world. However, while the relation to imminent death does not cause any material change to be found *in* the world, Kierkegaard insists that in earnestness our perspective on everything *about* the world is fundamentally reformed. It necessitates the transformation of all values.[47] Materialistically speaking, everything remains the same, for the presupposition of death that all people are

42 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 14.

43 Kasper Lysemose applies this neologism to *Works of Love* in "The (im)proper Community: On the Notion of 'Eiendommelighed' in Kierkegaard," paper delivered at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre's annual conference, August 15 – 17, 2018, the University of Copenhagen.

44 *SKS* 5, 455 / *TD*, 85: "[T]he rich man is just as poor as the poor man…the voice of the ruler is not heard, nor the cry of the oppressed."

45 *SKS* 5, 459 / *TD*, 89.

46 *SKS* 5, 452 / *TD*, 82.

47 Cf. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Rom 12:2.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

equal lacks a commensurable property. This equality cannot be grounded—it is rather an object of faith.

Let me unpack a bit more the ambiguity of the incommensurable property of death's equality. Notice how the threshold of death is the meeting point in which mood and earnestness meet, to the degree that they depart from one another. In both earnestness and mood, with the intervention of death the meaning of all predicates is annulled and we are all reduced to nothing. In this we are equal; it is the "same" nothing. Both attitudes imply that we all share the void from which we come and toward which we head, willingly or not. Hence both mood and earnestness presuppose equality. Where there are no differences, everything is equal. In this sense Kierkegaard says, as we saw before, when death strikes, it is too late to become earnest.[48] Kierkegaard expresses this thought about the seeming identity between mood and earnestness, by the kind of refrain which recurs throughout the discourse: "Earnestness…understands the same thing about death but understands it in a different way."[49] This "different way," however, entails a difference of eternity which cries out to heaven: a difference of inwardness, *a difference that is not shared by the members of the collective*. That is, a difference without difference—*a difference which lacks a shared predicate, substance or identity—a difference of an incommensurable quality.* As Kierkegaard summarizes it, while earnestness presupposes the equality of all mortals, this equality is indefinable: "death does indeed make all equal, but if this equality is in nothing, in annihilation, then the equality is itself indefinable."[50]

In this way Kierkegaard's notion of mortality evokes a concept of the proper without the proper. What is proper to the equality of mortals is improper, and this works in two ways: first, there is something proper to mortality, but it is in-appropriable; second, there is nothing proper to mortality, but this is precisely what is most proper to it.[51] Through this tension between the proper and the im-

---

48 *SKS* 5, 445 / *TD*, 74.

49 *SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 89. See also *SKS* 5, 452 / *TD*, 82; *SKS* 5, 463 / *TD*, 93.

50 *SKS* 5, 455 / *TD*, 85.

51 Cf. Lysemose, "The (im)proper Community," p. 5. In Kierkegaard's other edifying works the tension between the proper and improper of mortality is more explicit, so that death's uneconomic nature is even more evident. Anti-Climacus for example argues that death is not what comes in the final instant of time *after* the termination of biological life. According to him there is something more tormenting than physical death, and that is spiritual death, i.e., death immanent to life—sin or despair. The person in despair wants to die, but the anguish consists precisely in the fact that she cannot die: "the torment of despair is precisely this inability to die" (*SKS* 11, 134 / *SUD*, 18). Physical death in this sense is uneconomic (or non-dialectical) in the sense that life does not have the structure of a narrative in which death is the last stop in the journey. Death neither annihilates nor completes the self. In place of the horrifying power

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

proper of mortality, Kierkegaard conveys the following idea: while the proper relation to one's ultimate demise is a personal task assigned to us as individuals (no one can substitute herself for me by dying in my place), Kierkegaard maintains that—in contrast to Heidegger's *Being-towards-Death*—living with a genuine recognition of death's vicinity cannot be grounded solely on the confrontation with death itself.[52] For Kierkegaard, there is another aspect to be taken into account, one that is more original and that we have not constructed ourselves. That is, the members of the Christian community share in the gift of divine love. Put otherwise, while Heidegger minimizes the influence that the deaths of the others have on our formation of selfhood,[53] Kierkegaard maintains that mediating on my singular mortal identity cannot be separated from my being-with-others.[54] Lysemose provides a heuristic depiction of what I take to be at the heart of Kierkegaard's understanding of equality and community. Lysemose likens the love that is shared by the ideal Christian community to a vigorous and slippery fish. According to Lysemose, the members of community cannot get a firm hold on the fish which slips and is passed from one member to another. The fish goes from hand to hand without anybody ever having it. "We have it—yet no one can get a grip of it."[55]

Put otherwise, only God can get a hold on his blissful love in the fullest sense of the term, while man cannot be anything but receptive. When being is given to the subject, it withdraws from her at the same time. That is, when the

that is stronger than all human instances—from the solemnness and serious perspective of Anti-Climacus—physical death is only a minor event that does not change anything in the world. Cf. "[c]hristianly understood...death is by no means the last of all; in fact, it is only a minor event within that which is all, an eternal life, and, Christianly understood, there is infinitely much more hope in death than there is in life" (*SKS* 11, 124 / *SUD*, 7–8).

52 While Heidegger is easily pulled into ontological language, Kierkegaard is a good gadfly who makes us hesitate before the tempting ontological leap. Kierkegaard is very dubious about the idea of moving from inwardness to some kind of systematic or "fundamental" ontology of the human as such.

53 According to Heidegger, the death of others offers a false consolation. We are not "with" the deceased in every sense of the word: "The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just there alongside." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 282.

54 In *SKS* 5, 461 / *TD*, 90–91 Kierkegaard argues that for the earnest person worldly differences are merely trivial with comparison to the undefinable equality of death. In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard repeats this argument, *SKS* 9, 349 / *WL*, 346.

55 Lysemose, "The (im)proper Community," p. 3. Applying Lysemose's vivid metaphor on Kierkegaard requires a reservation. Kierkegaard's vision of the ideal Christian community avoids any predetermined notion of community. The kind of (Christian) community he has in mind appeals to humanity's fundamental equality and solidarity before God.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

members of the Christian community reach out for the common love that binds them together—the essence of their being—they discover that it slips away by the very same gesture. The love that the self shares with her fellow Christians can be said to be hers only on the condition that she pass it along, in conformity with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the Prototype.[56] In this sense we have in common that which *withdraws* us from our own subjective property. What individuals share, the gift of divine love that Christians have in common, can be said to be synonymous with having nothing in common. From the perspective of mood/death, what we share is nothing, the void of the subject from which we all come and towards which we are heading.[57]

Analogous to Nancy's and Esposito's analysis of the being-with of the community, Kierkegaard reverses the relationship between ethics and ontology. Kierkegaard problematizes, or at least calls into question, the traditional (indeed intuitive) subject-orientated structure of the common that is based on the opposition between singular/universal, and private/public, in favor of another conceptual area that points to the notion of infinite debt. Instead of the traditional semantics of inter-subjectivity in which community is conceived as the accumulation of properties that are added up to make an absolute subject, totality or a shared essence, Kierkegaard's notion of community evokes an endless circle of givers-to and given-by, an exposure to our common non-belonging that interrupts the seemingly continuous endurance of ordinary time.

In other words, when God bestows upon the individual the gift of love, He calls her to be in love, to realize her *conatus essendi* in the way she really is, with her aptitude, talents, downsides and shortcomings. However, the person who endeavors to preserve her being does so not in the ontological-teleological sense of merely actualizing one's potentials or preserving one's life. This is a limited mode of being, a low level of self-consciousness, the automatic duration of the same that is confined to the immediate, corporal elements and instincts. In this mode of existence, the category of necessity bows down to actuality in conformity with the earthly law of *kinesis:* that whatever comes into being perishes.[58]

56 As Kierkegaard puts it in *Works of Love*, "love is not a being-for-itself quality but a quality by which or in which you are for others" (*SKS* 9, 225 / *WL*, 223). And: "The one who loves...is completely squandered on existence, on the existence of others" (*SKS* 9, 290 / *WL*, 279).

57 The subject cannot fully coincide with herself, she is split between the finite and the infinite: "In this endeavor the earnest person discovers a dissimilarity, namely, his own dissimilarity from the goal that is assigned to him" (*SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 89). See also Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 10.

58 Kierkegaard here evokes—in this case somewhat incidentally similar to Nancy, Agamben and Esposito, unlike Levinas and Derrida—an originary ontology that is one with ethics. The position

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Now, in place of the immobility of existence's earthly rule—to speak in Paul's language, "the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone"[59]—earnestness adheres to the law of eternity: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."[60] The relation to death in earnestness is an attitude which captures (if it captures anything) "this amazing enigma…the inexplicable eruption of the sudden."[61] Earnestness is a relation to something that arrives (if it can ever "arrive") after all human rational resources have been exhausted, an event that comes as a complete surprise brought about by the realization that God calls us to Himself either too soon or too late—then comes the moment when the person is ready to open herself by giving up whatever is meaningful to her, ready to let God make something new in her, something which contains a residue of transcendence that she is incapable of by herself.

Earnestness' responsibility is the event which is excessive to the horizon of the possible, programmable flux of time. That is, it claims to interrupt the *ego-centered economic relationships of give-and-take and of investment and return*. Earnestness upsets the everyday causality of time; in resigning from worldly attachments the subject is liberated from ordinary, foreseeable causal relations, for the material conditions of becoming and annihilation do not apply to her anymore. This does not mean that through this attitude there is no causality at all, but that things are set in a different order, an order in which in every moment everything is possible. Namely, in place of the tit-for-tat causality of this world, when the agent in earnestness is ready to give up everything meaningful, she simultaneously seems to be receiving everything in return, and to an even greater degree. "To think that all was over, that everything was lost along with life, in order then to win everything in life—this is earnestness."[62] For only by the breakdown of human categories of immanence, only if the individual is ready to infinitely resign from everything that she finds dear and meaningful—including her own life—when the thoughtless, mechanical, instinct-driven repetition of the

holds the somewhat odd idea that duty is not a category of ethics but rather of ontology. In this trajectory, it is not the case that there are first beings/entities and only later duty. Rather, when human beings come into existence, they already share with other people the love that simultaneously draws them together and pulls them apart. However, the members of community consistently come either too early or too late to appropriate that shared love that comes and goes in the here and now of the present, in what makes existence shiver, shake and tremble. Cf. Lysemose, "The (im)proper Community," p. 7; Jean-Luc Nancy and Roberto Esposito, "Dialogue on the Philosophy to Come," *Minnesota Review*, vol. 75, 2010, pp. 82–83.

59 2 Corinthians 3:7.

60 Mt 22:39, James 2:8.

61 *SKS* 5, 461–461 / *TD*, 92.

62 *SKS* 5, 446 / *TD*, 76.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

same comes to a halt—only then can the real, authentic movement of existence begin. Only then—what Kierkegaard does not explicitly write in “At a Graveside” but presupposes—is the believer reborn in Christ.[63]

The question emerges: is Kierkegaard’s argumentation that pivots on the double movement of faith—infinite resignation from earthly attachments and faith in the absurd to receive everything in return (and even to a greater degree)—not an economic one and, in this sense, teleological? Moreover, is not the Pauline conception of death that is in the background of Kierkegaard’s deliberations also a productive and an economic one? Should not the Christian identify herself with the passion of Christ and put to death the sinful nature of the flesh *in order to* be reborn into eternal, ethical life in Christ? Indeed, in Paul’s tortuous reasoning, Christ’s death puts death to death so that we may live eternally.[64] Does not this notion of religious salvation rely on a positive notion of death, one which is to be regarded in terms of a utilitarian logic?

In order to address this difficulty, consider that for Kierkegaard, the love shared by the community is tantamount to the idea of the Holy Communion, the space in which community as a common body, the church, and *Corpus Christi* intertwine.[65] For Kierkegaard, God’s bliss, by virtue of which the individual is called upon, is not a substance that can be fully mastered, appropriated or possessed. The gift of love is not “something,” it is not being *simpliciter* but something more original and primordial by virtue of which the self comes to existence in the first place. On this account, salvation for Kierkegaard does not depend on the works; in dying to sin and being reborn in Christ through love, the person does not receive anything new that she did not have before. Rather, the individ-

63 My reflections on the “eventuality” of earnestness are inspired by Vigilius Haufniensis’ conception of the moment as the fullness of time in *The Concept of Anxiety* (*SKS* 4, 384 – 397 / *CA*, 81 – 92), Constantin Constantius’ notion of *repetition* and the section *Interlude* in Johannes Climacus’ *Philosophical Fragments*. I am also using Dastur’s phenomenological analysis of the event and Caputo’s readings of Kierkegaard and Christianity. See Françoise Dastur, “Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise,” *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2000, pp. 178 – 189; John D. Caputo, “Looking the Impossible in the Eye: Kierkegaard, Derrida, and the Repetition of Religion,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2002, pp. 1 – 25; John D. Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*, Ada, Michigan: Baker Academic Press 2007.
64 Rom 6:5 – 8.
65 Kierkegaard used to regularly attend the *Vor Frue Kirke’s* communion until 1852, when he launched the attack campaign against the Danish established Church. The communion plays also an important role in his later writings. In the opening clause of the preface to *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* Kierkegaard writes that his authorship comes to its decisive moment at the foot of the Communion table (“An authorship that began with *Either/Or* and advanced step by step seeks here its decisive place of rest, at the foot of the altar” (*SKS* 12, 281 / *WA*, 165).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ual is to be born again to what she already shares and, indeed, what she has already been all along.

Kierkegaard's analogy between the person's attitude towards death and the merchant's relation to commodity illustrates earnestness' uneconomic nature.[66] On first sight, it seems that the relationship between the two is similar: just as the value of time increases when life is put under the threat of annihilation, so the price of the goods on the market depends on the circumstances of supply and demand that are external to it. In other words, as much as the trader maximizes profits in times of supply shortfall in the market, the recognition of imminent death makes every day and year infinitely precious. Dealing (with) death appears to follow the capitalist logic of exchange, as Kierkegaard puts it: "Indeed, time [*Tid*] also is a good."[67] However, while the trader maximizes material revenues in relation to market fluctuations, the earnest person is beyond the give-and-take relations of exchange. Instead of dealing (with) time in the sense of seeking to exhaust life's possibilities, the person in earnestness recognizes what goals are at stake at each moment, and is decisive about what is really worth pursuing at the right momentum: "the choosing of work…does not depend on whether one is granted a lifetime to complete it well or only a brief time to have begun it well."[68] Earnestness is not to be considered in utilitarian terms, it does not concern earning time or something material, not even a tiny bit. Rather, earnestness entails changing one's attitude toward actuality. Nothing is materially gained or changed in reality—and yet life as a whole and one's attachments to the world are illuminated in a new, unanticipated, startling significance.

The fundamental difference between the trader and dying person is most manifest in times of insecurity. Kierkegaard gives the example of a merchant's conduct in a state of exception, in times of public unrest. The trader tries with all his might to *keep* his goods safe, lest a thief were to break in and steal everything. The proper attitude toward death, however, works exactly the opposite: the earnest dying person is ready to *let go* of temporal attachments. From an external viewpoint, this seems like an act of madness; the serious person appears to be losing the goods, losing the time allotted to her to spend with those she

66 *SKS* 5, 453–454 / *TD*, 83–84.

67 *SKS* 5, 453 / *TD*, 83.

68 *SKS* 5, 464 / *TD*, 96. See also "the thought of death gives the earnest person the right momentum in life and the right goal toward which he directs his momentum," and it does so in "the present this very day" (*SKS* 5, 453 / *TD*, 83).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

considers precious. In this sense, if death is to be a business, it is certainly a bad one. Death cheats so to speak, it is like a "thief" working at night.[69]

The experience of earnestness (if it can be experienced at all) regarding death's void, as we saw, amounts to a contradiction (while I am, death is not, and vice versa). Logical thinking understands death's contradiction in conformity with the law of the excluded middle (p cannot be ~p at the same time). For logic, death's non-being is precisely this excluded middle: that which cannot be formalized. On this view, nothingness amounts to nonsense, a sheer impossibility that cannot be thought, an empty tautology: *ex nihilo nihil fit* (nothing comes from nothing). Nothingness can be thus only understood as the negative modality of what exists and is possible. By contrast, earnestness' impossibility is more impossible than the impossible in the narrow formal sense. The impossibility of earnestness' contradiction is not merely formal and logical. The event of earnestness is upsetting: impossible-possible, an internal contradiction which happens nevertheless.[70] That is, in spite of everything, earnestness seizes us in both a terrifying and marvelous manner. Earnestness occurs (if it can occur) in a way that is incommensurable with experience's immanent conditions: the contradiction that I am thinking the fate of all humans as my own lot, thereby doing what death is indeed unable to do—namely, that I am and death also is.[71]

Earnestness does not mark a point *in* time or a *final* instant of the void succession of days and nights, minutes and hours. It is not, as in the "arrow of time" metaphor, in which the moment of death's intervention is likened to "the arrow finally hitting the target and stops traveling forward once and for all."[72] It is inconceivable to speak of the coming of death as if it were chronologically lagging or coming too early, as though we were referring to a train arriving earlier than usual or being delayed; death cannot be temporally or habitually localized—it is not another fact like the sequence of all other events. Death is not an event in time, for with death there simply is no time. Thus seriousness neither amount to the completion of selfhood, nor to its mere annihilation; earnestness does

69 *SKS* 5, 454 / *TD*, 84.

70 Compare with Heidegger's 1929 inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg in Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 82–96 ("Was ist Metaphysik?," *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 2013, pp. 103–122). Caputo's reading of Kierkegaard alongside Derrida is also attuned to this line of thought. See Caputo, "Looking the Impossible in the Eye" (especially pp. 6–11).

71 "Earnestness is that you think death, to and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death is indeed unable to do—namely, that you are and death also is" (*SKS* 5, 446 / *TD*, 75).

72 Cf. Guignon, "Heidegger and Kierkegaard on Death," p. 199.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

not occur in the world. Rather, it dislocates time and drastically changes the mode of existence, as if a whole new world opened up through its happening. "Death in earnest gives life force as nothing else does; it makes one alert as nothing else does."[73] Earnestness' responsibility produces, in the literal sense of the word, the difference between past, present and future through its sudden happening. That is, it reveals what Paul calls "the fullness of time,"[74] wherein ordinary time comes to a standstill. Rather than a point *in* time in which existence unfolds according to the earthly law of existence ("like everything that has come from the earth, to earth again"),[75] earnestness' responsibility denotes the movement of coming into existence in the first place, *tilblivelse* in Danish. That is, rather than the formalizable and routinizable time of the same in terms of *kinesis* (in which whatever comes into being perishes), earnestness entails coming into being in the first place (*genesis*), arriving at a dimension of sharing and diffusion that precedes the rule-bound, everyday temporality of sameness. Earnestness constitutes (if it "constitutes" anything) the critical moment of temporality which conditions the continuity of time in the first place: the birth of presence. In this sense we can read Kierkegaard's statement in "At a Graveside" that for the earnest person every day is *both* the first (i.e., laden with possibilities) and the last: "[e]arnestness, therefore, becomes the living of each day as if it were the last and also the first in a long life."[76]

In the fullness of time (*Kairos*) the future is melted into the present, so that each moment is given an infinite worth. Existence is no longer defined by the mere finitude of void succession of sameness, but by its inner freedom which grants infinite significance to each moment. In earnestness, it makes no difference whether I am young or old, poor or rich, distinguished or oppressed—in the earnest moment before death the person has an infinity of time.[77] Seriousness marks the birth of presence: instead of being envious of the dissimilarities of this world, earnestness is indifferent to differences. The earnest person neither strives for, not constrains herself from worldly differences, but is calmly open to whatever comes, in a gesture that reveals nothing of her inner tension. In place of seeking the ruin of the other's wealth, status or achievements, the serious person sees the immeasurable equality of death as a means to wean oneself off from *worldly comparison*. Facing annihilation by death, the person in earnestness sees in the indeterminacy of death a reminder of the equality of all human beings be-

73 *SKS* 5, 452 / *TD*, 83. See also "[n]o comparison has that impelling power" (*SKS* 5, 458 / *TD*, 89).
74 Galatians 4:4.
75 *SKS* 5, 444 / *TD*, 73. Cf. "For dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19).
76 *SKS* 5, 464 / *TD*, 96.
77 *SKS* 5, 464 / *TD*, 96. See also Birkenstock, *Heisst philosophieren sterben lernen?*, p. 47.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

fore God, and is motivated by the humble recognition of the equality of the task set for all as co-dependent on God. Thus the poor is not troubled by the resentment of others' wealth; the oppressed no longer seek the authority of the people in power; neither is the old haunted with regret, nor the young seduced by false hopes.[78]

Conclusion

This article put forth the assertion that mood is an attitude towards death that understands our equality in mortality in material, formal or biological terms—as if our essence were a corporal substance that could be fully posited and possessed. Mortality is thought of from the perspective of death, where physical demise is subjected to the earthly law of necessity: as it is written in Genesis, "for dust you are and to dust you will return."[79] By contrast, earnestness conceives the ambiguous equality of death from the perspective of eternity, or God. The equality of the blessed relies on a share in something spiritual that cannot be fully appropriated or possessed, a share in the gift of divine love.

The eventuality of earnestness is not something that we do or that we see coming, it is not a work—in conformity with the Pauline-Lutheran tradition. As Kierkegaard puts it, "[e]arnestness is the earnestness of the inner being, not of the job,"[80] and "death's decision is like a night, the night that comes when one cannot work (*arbeide*)."[81] Earnestness occurs, it arrives unexpectedly and by surprise and takes possession of us in an unforeseen manner—without warning, justification or explanation. Instead of seizing the love that we all share or straightforwardly deriving a course of action from what earnestness harbors, we need instead, as Caputo neatly puts it (albeit in a different context), "to 'arrive' at an instantiation, a concretization, a way to translate it into existence, all the while letting it happen to us, allowing ourselves to come under its spell and be transformed by the event it harbors."[82] *Earnestness is the name of a certain structure of hope, expectation, or infinite longing for the other, and the other's others. It has the form of a prayer.*[83]

78 Cf. Pattison, "Kierkegaard, Metaphysics, and Love," pp. 188 – 189. The movement described above can be traced to Meister Eckert notion of *self-releasement* (*Gelassenheit*).
79 Genesis 3:19.
80 *SKS* 5, 445 / *TD*, 74.
81 *SKS* 5, 450 / *TD*, 80.
82 Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct?*, p. 57.
83 Ibid., p. 60.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

However, while the (un-)work of death’s earnestness is like the inoperative thief of the night that changes nothing, at the same time it transforms our perspective on our affiliations with the people around us. Death’s in-operation is what reminds the person that although dying is a personal task that is assigned to us as individuals, earnestness awakens—in the name of the Christian longing for eternal bliss and ethical commandments—“the responsibility that always remains”[84]: the person’s responsibility to the neighbor, and neighbor’s neighbors.

Thus, in the final analysis, Kierkegaard’s mediations offer a radical interpretation of being-with-others within the community. While death is stronger than all earthly powers and the dead may be forgotten with the passage of time, there is still a greater power than death itself—the love of God that works through us, in accordance with Paul’s dictum that “love is the fulfillment of the law.”[85] Learning to die is not simply a prompt to mediate one’s own mortality—as George Pattison suggests, it “reveals to me that my own singular mortal identity is from the ground up ‘involved in mankind’ or ‘a part of the main.’”[86] The dead are, so to speak, always proximate and nearby, we are folded together with the dead in a way that we touch each other through love, though we never fully coincide.[87]

84 *SKS* 5, 452 / *TD*, 82.

85 Rom 13:10. Christ’s death in atonement puts an end to human fallenness, sinfulness and mortality that characterizes life under the Mosaic Law, cf. Rom 5:20 – 21.

86 Pattison, “Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Love,” p. 189.

87 The being-with of the community according to Nancy and Esposito is characterized by a touch which implies both proximity and distance. By implication, for Kierkegaard, the neighbor is farthest away from me in the sense of our impossibility to come together in a common being. As we saw in the above, I cannot appropriate the divine love that unites me with the neighbor. At the same time, however, the neighbor is the closest to me, not geographically and spatially, but in the sense that the nearest is everybody to the extent that everybody shares with me the same impossibility to master or posit the shared love of the community. In this sense Kierkegaard argues in *Works of Love* that the neighbor is one’s self-redoubling and, as far as thought is concerned, the neighbor does not need to exist. Ethics is here to be regarded through quasi-ontological thought categories: even if one lives alone on a desert island one is still in an ethical relation of duty to the neighbor, and under the duty to love the (absent) other as much as one’s own self (*SKS* 9, 29 – 30 / *WL*, 21).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Part III: **Challenges To Identity**

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

René Rosfort

10 The Strength of a Fragile Mind

Kierkegaard and Psychiatric Ethics

Kierkegaard's authorship revolves around mental suffering. From the opening pages of *Either/Or* about the incommensurability of—and tension between—the inner and the outer to the late exploration of the reality of suffering in *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard's thought is spurred by and structured around mental suffering. Not only are many of his key concepts such as anxiety, melancholy, and despair connected with mental suffering, his theory of subjectivity, his ethics, and ultimately his understanding of Christianity is related to a fundamental notion of negativity.[1] This notion of negativity is perhaps most visible in Kierkegaard's conception of human existence as the task of becoming oneself. A human being is not merely who she is. In one sense, she is of course who she is, but in another, and more significant sense, she is not herself. That is to say, she is not what she understands or feels herself to be. Our identity, Kierkegaard argues, is constitutively fragile because our sense of self is constantly disturbed by an otherness that is part of who we are. Kierkegaard's characters are constantly struggling with understanding who they are and how they are supposed to live their lives. The tension in human existence between self and otherness, intimacy and alienation, is at the heart of Kierkegaard's work with mental suffering. We cannot escape negativity. Or more precisely, it is our existential task to work through negativity to become who we are in the sense that we both lose (and *should* lose) and find (and *should* find) ourselves through the turmoil of mental suffering. This ethical qualification of mental suffering, that is, that we

1 For careful investigations of the function of negativity in Kierkegaard's work, see Michael Theunissen, "Kierkegaard's Negativistic Method," *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith, New Haven: Yale University Press 1981, pp. 381–423; Michael Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, trans. by Barbara Harshav and Helmut Illbruck (German original: 1993), Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005; Arne Grøn, *Kierkegaard. Subjektivitet og negativitet*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1997; Arne Grøn, *The Concept of Anxiety in Kierkegaard*, trans. by Sinead Ladegaard Knox (Danish Original: 1994), Macon: Mercer University Press 2008. The present article is heavily indebted to the interpretations of Kierkegaard by Theunissen and Grøn. For accounts of my reading and use of these two authors, see René Rosfort, "Kierkegaard's Concept of Psychology: How to Understand It and Why It Still Matters," *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell 2015, pp. 453–457, and René Rosfort, "Kierkegaard and the Problem of Ethics," in *Hermeneutics and Negativism: Existential Ambiguities of Self-Understanding*, ed. by Claudia Welz and René Rosfort, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2018, pp. 33–51.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-011

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

should both lose and find ourselves through suffering, is—as I will argue in the present paper—the most radical aspect of Kierkegaard's work with mental suffering. And it is in this radical claim that we find one of the ways in which Kierkegaard can contribute to contemporary debates in ethics, and in particular psychiatric ethics.

Kierkegaard is no stranger to psychiatry. Karl Jaspers, who apart from being a prominent philosopher of existence was also a psychiatrist, was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard. This influence is significant in the fourth and authoritative edition of his principal psychiatric contribution, the monumental *General Psychopathology*, which shaped twentieth century psychiatry, and continues to influence contemporary psychiatry.[2] Jaspers was not the only psychiatrist that found theoretical perspectives and insights in Kierkegaard's work. Throughout most of the twentieth century, Kierkegaard and Kierkegaardian thought can be found in the works of major psychiatrists and psychologists such as Ludwig Binswanger, Viktor Frankl, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Hubertus Tellenbach, Gion Condrau, and most recently Emma van Deurzen.[3] Kierkegaard's presence waned in the final quarter of the last century, and his influence on contemporary mental health professionals is negligible. There are many reasons for this development, of which the most significant is arguably the rise and now consolidated hegemony of biological psychiatry.

In what follows, I will try to show how our understanding of mental illness in contemporary psychiatry and clinical psychology could benefit from a return to Kierkegaard's work with mental suffering. As we learn from the psychiatric and psychological tradition in the twentieth century, Kierkegaard can contribute to mental health care on various levels. As mentioned above, I will here focus on

---

2 Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, trans. by J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (1st German edition 1913; 4th German edition 1946), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1997. For overviews of Kierkegaard's influence on Jaspers, see Wilhem Anz, "Die Nähe Karl Jaspers' zu Kierkegaard and Nietzsche," *Karl Jaspers: Philosoph, Arzt, Politischer Denker*, ed. by Jeanne Hersch, Jan Milič Lochman and Reiner Wiehl, Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag 1986, pp. 282–290, and István Czakó, "Karl Jaspers: A Great Awakener's Way to Philosophy of Existence," *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2011 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources*, vol. 9), pp. 155–197.

3 For overviews of Kierkegaard's influence on these, and other, psychiatrists and psychologists of the twentieth century, see *Kierkegaard's Influence on the Social Sciences*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2011 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources*, vol. 13); *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2011 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources*, vol. 9); Anders Dræby Sørensen, "Søren Kierkegaards gennemslag i den eksistentielle og humanistiske psykologi, psykoterapi og psykiatri," *Slagmark*, vol. 68, pp. 79–102.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Kierkegaard's ethical qualification of mental suffering, which—to my knowledge at least—has not been explored in a psychiatric context. I will argue that Kierkegaard can help us make sense of and possibly deal with a fundamental and urgent problem in contemporary mental health care. Briefly stated, this problem concerns the fact that we—in the vast majority of cases—investigate and treat mental illness as an anonymous brain disease, and yet in investigating and treating mental illnesses we deal with people who experience their illness as a deeply personal issue, and who expect that their illness be treated accordingly. There is, in other words, a tension—and many would argue a conflict—between the scientific and ethical perspectives on mental illness. My argument is that Kierkegaard's insistence not only on the inescapable existential character of suffering, but also on its ethical necessity, shows us that we cannot separate the scientific and ethical aspects of a mental illness. Ethics is at the heart of mental suffering, and as such it functions as a necessary part of understanding what it means for a person to be mentally ill. On the other hand, we cannot hope to clarify what it means to be mentally ill without a scientific foundation, that is, without taking the impersonal functioning at work in our mental suffering seriously. Contemporary psychiatry is keenly aware of the importance of the scientific aspect of mental illness, and therefore invests most of its resources in scientific investigations of its biological underpinning. Less interest and resources are dedicated to the ethical aspects of mental illness. In fact, rarely do the ethical and normative issues involved in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses feature in the leading psychiatric journals. Ethical questions concerning central psychiatric issues such as suffering, identity, selfhood, dignity and shame are treated only marginally in the leading research debates in psychiatry, and are most commonly dealt with in the context of bioethics or applied philosophical ethics. I will argue that we can use Kierkegaard's work with mental suffering to show that this separation between the scientific and the ethical aspects of mental illness is untenable. Mental illnesses are illnesses of experience, that is, we experience mental suffering in a mental illness, and as such we cannot hope to understand and cure a mental illness without attending to the ethical questions and challenges that a person struggles with during her or his illness.

I will unfold my argument in four steps. First, I will describe what is generally considered to be one of the most urgent challenges in contemporary psychiatry. I will then turn to a conceptual clarification of the relation between psychiatric ethics and the role of ethics in Kierkegaard's authorship. The third step will unfold how ethics is central to Kierkegaard's understanding of human identity. I will conclude with an outline of how I think that Kierkegaard's radical connection of ethics with suffering can contribute to contemporary mental health care.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

10.1 An Epidemic of Mental Illness

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard famously writes:

> [T]here is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbor an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about an unknown something or a something he does not even dare to try to know, an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself, so that, just as a physician speaks of going around with an illness in his body, he walks around with a sickness, carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain.[4]

It may seem a trivial observation that we all despair in one way or another. I will argue that Kierkegaard's observation is anything but trivial, but before unfolding this argument I will first look at another fact that most would agree is not trivial at all, namely that we live in a time where Kierkegaard's existential despair has developed into a medical emergency. Today one fifth to one quarter of the world's population despair to the extent that they are diagnosed with a mental illness.[5] We are struggling with what has been called an epidemic of mental illness that has incalculable social, economic, and personal consequences, and despite impressive scientific advancements in the past decades we seem utterly incapable of solving or even slowing down this epidemic.[6] It is not just—as Kierkegaard writes—the individual who cannot explain the anxiety that permeates her life and disturbs her mental health. It is also the global medical community that struggles with unsatisfactory explanations and problematic treatments of mental illnesses. There are many reasons for this lamentable situation. One of these—perhaps the most fundamental one—is that the medical community cannot come to an agreement about what a mental illness is. Or rather, the conception of what constitutes a mental illness has changed many times and radically

4 *SKS* 11, 138 / *SUD* 22.

5 For data concerning the US, see the reviews and surveys done by the National Institute of Mental Health: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml; concerning Europe, see the data provided by the WHO's regional office for Europe: http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health/data-and-resources.

6 Richard McNally, *What is Mental Illness?*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University 2011, pp. 1–31; Veronica Tucci and Nidal Moukaddam, "We are the hollow men: The worldwide epidemic of mental illness, psychiatric and behavioral emergencies, and its impact on patients and providers," *Journal of Emergencies, Trauma and Shock*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2017, pp. 4–6.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

throughout the past hundred years, and the very definition of a mental illness is still debated intensely in psychiatry and clinical psychology.[7]

For the past forty years, the most debated issue has been whether we should approach and explain mental illnesses primarily through a biological methodology or whether we need to take into account other factors such as social, psychological or phenomenological aspects of our mental suffering. I will not go into this fascinating—and frustrating—debate, but only note that even though biological psychiatry has dominated the field of mental health care over the past decades, and medical treatment is the by far the most widespread treatment, the authoritative global diagnostic manuals such as the DSM[8] and the ICD[9] still refuse to settle for a biological etiology or pathogenesis. These manuals remain a-theoretical. This means that they do not provide us with theories with about what a mental illness is ontologically, how we should investigate mental illnesses epistemologically or therapeutically treat a person who suffers from a mental illness.

This scientific impasse has serious ethical consequences. Seeing that we cannot satisfactorily explain what a mental illness is or even agree upon a methodology to examine it, whether or not a case of mental suffering counts as a mental illness remains an open question. The vast majority of the mental illnesses that are treated in contemporary health care are ambiguous cases. This means that it is close to impossible to unambiguously ascertain whether a person's suffering is a case of a mental illness or if that person is "merely" struggling with an

---

7 For an informative review of and debate on the definition of mental illness, see the February 2016 volume of the leading psychiatric journal: *World Psychiatry*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2016. The following books and Encyclopedia entries also provide in-depth explorations of the history and nature of mental illness: McNally, *What is Mental Illness?*; George Graham, *The Disordered Mind*, London: Routledge 2013; Andrew Scull, *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015; Anne Harrington, *Mind Fixers: Psychiatry's Troubled Search for the Biology of Mental Illness*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2019; Jennifer Radden, "Mental Disorder (Illness)," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/mental-disorder/>.; Dominic Murphy, "Philosophy of Psychiatry," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/psychiatry/>.

8 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. This manual is published by the American Psychiatric Association and is now its 5th edition: https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm.

9 *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*. This manual is published by the WHO and is currently in its 10th edition with an 11th edition in the making: https://icd.who.int/browse10/2016/en

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

existential problem.[10] Only a limited number of cases of mental illness are unambiguous. These are the severe cases where a person normally gets admitted to a hospital or psychiatric center because of, for example, delusions, acute suicidal ideation, rage or paralyzing apathy. This ambiguity has led to the problem known as the dilemma of "met unneed" and "unmet need."[11] This is the problem that people who are not "really" mentally ill use up the limited clinical and therapeutic resources available in our health care systems, thereby making it difficult for "truly" mentally ill people to obtain treatment. In addition to the serious social, political, and normative ethical challenges that this problem elicits there is a deeper ethical aspect to the problem that goes to the heart of psychiatry as a scientific discipline, namely: who has the right to determine whether or not a person's suffering qualifies as a mental illness or not? In want of a satisfying medical explanation of what a mental illness is, this ethical question becomes acute and connects back to the definition of a mental illness. If a person reports that she suffers mentally to the extent that she wants professional help to cope with her suffering, is a psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist allowed to turn her down explaining that she is not mentally ill, but merely struggling with existential problems?

10.2 Psychiatric Ethics and Kierkegaardian Ethics

It is this intimate and yet contentious connection between the science and ethics of psychiatry that I believe Kierkegaard can help us shed some light on. My argument is twofold. One the one hand, I hold that the failure to recognize that ethics is an integral part of the scientific examination of mental illness plays a significant role in the current mental health crisis. On the other hand, I want to show that Kierkegaard's analysis of the fundamentally ethical character of the relation between selfhood and suffering can show us a way to deal with this problem.

10 Jerome Kagan, *Psychology's Ghosts: The Crisis of the Profession and the Way Back*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2012, pp. 133 – 146; Allen Frances, *Saving Normal: An Insider's Revolt Against Out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Normal Life*, New York, William Morrow 2013, pp. 3 – 34; Joel Paris, *Overdiagnosis in Psychiatry: How Modern Psychiatry Lost Its Way While Creating a Diagnosis for Almost All of Life's Misfortunes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, pp. 55 – 65; Hanfried Helmchen, "Fuzzy Boundaries and Tough Decisions in Psychiatry" *Vagueness in Psychiatry*, ed. by Geert Keil, Lara Keuck, and Rico Hauswald, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017, pp. 138 – 155.
11 McNally, *What is Mental Illness?*, p. 2.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

The first aspect of the argument can stand on its own, that is, we do not necessarily need Kierkegaard to argue that ethics is an integral part of the scientific examination of the mental illness. In this paper, I will focus on developing this latter aspect of my argument, although I will briefly touch on the first aspect in the final section.[12] A first step is to clarify how psychiatric ethics differs from medical ethics, and how this difference makes Kierkegaard's work on the connection between ethics, suffering and identity particularly relevant for psychiatric ethics.

Contrary to what is the case with most other scientific and medical practices, ethics cannot be conceived of or dealt with as a so-called "add-on" to the science of psychiatry. Bioethics and general medical ethics are normally concerned with establishing ethical principles for scientific investigations and evaluating the ethical status of scientific practices, and as such come in either before or after the actual scientific practice.[13] Psychiatric ethics is different because it deals with issues that are an indispensable part of the scientific practice of psychiatry. It does this through examinations of the normative issues involved in the experience of mental illness such as autonomy, shame, guilt, anxiety, trust, despair, responsibility, and stigma.[14] Such issues are also pertinent to somatic illnesses, but they are not medically indispensable to their cure. Somatic illnesses rely upon explanations of physiological processes, which render the experience of the illness secondary to the biophysical disease processes responsible for the illness. When a doctor diagnoses and treats a broken arm or a diseased kidney, she will of course rely upon the patient's description of his experience of discomfort or pain to localize and identify the problem. But the patient's experience functions merely as a symptom of an underlying physiological cause of the disease, and once the doctor has discovered this cause, the patient's experience becomes —medically speaking—secondary to the pathophysiological processes. This

12 For an account of the first aspect of the argument, see René Rosfort, "Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychiatric Ethics," *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, ed. by Giovanni Stanghellini, Matthew Broome, Anthony Fernandez, Paolo Fusar-Poli, Andrea Raballo, and René Rosfort, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, pp. 958–972.

13 See, for example, the now classic introduction to bioethics: Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 7th ed. (1st ed. 1979), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013.

14 On the autonomy of psychiatric ethics, see, for example, Sidney Bloch and Stephen A. Green, "An Ethical Framework for Psychiatry," *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 188, 2006, pp. 7–12; Jennifer Radden and John Z. Sadler, *The Virtuous Psychiatrist: Character Ethics in Psychiatric Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009; *The Oxford Handbook of Psychiatric Ethics*, ed. by John Z. Sadler, Kenneth W. M. Fulford, and Werdie van Staden, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

means that the cure of a broken arm or a diseased kidney does not rely primarily upon the patient's experience of the illness. The medical scenario is radically different with mental illnesses. The lack of physiological explanations when it comes to mental illnesses makes their experiential character primary to both the diagnosis and treatment of this class of illnesses. Mental illnesses are illnesses of experience in the sense that a depressed person's experience of sadness or a borderline person's experience of anger are not merely symptoms of discrete underlying diseases. The experience of the illness is an ineradicable part of the illness itself. The mental or experiential character of mental illnesses are that which makes them a specific class of illnesses, and this mental or experiential character makes questions concerning selfhood and identity an integral part of what it is to be mentally ill. This means that questions about how and why a depressed person experiences sadness or a borderline person feels uncontrollable anger are central to our medical understanding of depression and borderline personality disorder. In other words, it is our sense of self that is at stake in a mental illness, and as such we cannot hope to understand what mental illness is without examining the ethical challenges that a person struggles with when she suffers mentally.

In my reading of Kierkegaard, his account of ethics deals exactly with this relation between suffering and selfhood at the heart of human identity. Ethics plays a complex and controversial role in Kierkegaard's authorship. This is in part due to the fact that there are at least two accounts of ethics at work in Kierkegaard's work: a "first ethics" and a "second ethics."[15] The "first ethics" is the one that plays a crucial role in *Either-Or* and *Fear and Trembling*. This is ethics understood as part of the three stages: the aesthetical, the ethical, and the religious. It functions as the normative glue that holds both society and a person's individual life together, that is, the teleological norms and values that secure an ordered society and promote a good life. These are presented by Judge Wilhelm and Johannes de Silentio as civic duties and personal virtues such as, among others, obedience, responsibility, continuity, courage, patience, honesty, and transparency.[16] We learn from Judge Wilhelm's letters to his friend, the Aesthete,

15 Arne Grøn, "Kierkegaards 'zweite' Ethik," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1998, pp. 358–368.
16 For interpretations of Kierkegaard's ethics as a form of virtue ethics, see, for example, Gregory R. Beabout, "The Silent Lilly and Bird as Exemplars of the Virtue of Active Receptivity," *Without Authority*, ed. by Robert C. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 2007 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 18), pp. 127–146; C. Stephen Evans and Robert. C. Roberts, "Ethics," *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippitt and George Pattison, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 211–229; John Lippitt, "Kierkegaard's Virtues? Humility and Gratitude as the Grounds of Contentment, Patience, and Hope in Kierkegaard's Moral Psychology," *Kier-*

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that this kind of ethics is not only important, but necessary for living a human life:

> The mood of a person who lives esthetically is always eccentric, because he has his center in the periphery. The personality has a center in itself, and the person who does not have himself is eccentric. The mood of a person who lives ethically is centralized. He is not in the mood, and he is not mood, but he has mood and has the mood within himself. What he works for is continuity, and this is always the master of mood. His life does not lack mood—indeed, it has a total mood. But this is acquired; it is what would be called *aequale temperamentum* [even disposition]. But this is no esthetic mood, and no person has it by nature or immediately.[17]

Without an ethical framework a person is a victim of fleeting feelings, disturbing passions, and haphazard inclinations, and therefore unable to live a satisfactory life. Ethical norms and values stabilize a person by grounding the individual in the shared social environment of everyday heroes for whom "work is also a calling" and married life "elucidates the universal."[18] Stability, continuity, and order constitute the foundation of this type of ethics. As Johannes de Silentio argues, "[t]he ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times," and it is the ethical task of the single individual "to annul his singularity in order to become the universal. As soon as the single individual asserts himself in his singularity before the universal, he sins, and only by acknowledging this can he be reconciled again with the universal."[19]

---

kegaard's God and the Good Life, ed. by Stephen Minister, J. Aaron Simmons, and Michael Strawser, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2017, pp. 95–113. These interpretations of Kierkegaard's ethics are careful to distinguish their conception of virtue ethics from the contemporary debate in virtue ethics. While the latter focus on solving "theoretical puzzles," the Kierkegaardian interpretations are more aligned with the classical virtue tradition (for example, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine) by aiming "not to solve theoretical problems, but to build up virtue" (Beabout, "The Silent Lilly and Bird," p. 139). Robert C. Roberts chooses the name "virtuism" to characterize this classical tradition to which Kierkegaard belongs according to this approach (Robert C. Roberts, "The Virtue of Hope in Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses," *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. by Robert C. Perkins, Macon: Mercer University Press 2003 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 5), pp. 184–188), and John Lippitt argues that this tradition is not narrowly concerned with ethical virtues, but also with spiritual virtues such as hope and faith. Moreover, Kierkegaard's "virtuism" also differs from the major thinkers in the virtuist tradition such as Plato, Aristotle or Augustine by not being concerned primarily with the perfection of individual virtues, but with building up the whole person (Lippitt, "Kierkegaard's Virtues?," p. 96).

17 *SKS* 3, 220 / *EO2*, 230.

18 *SKS* 3, 288 / *EO2*, 305.

19 *SKS* 4, 148 / *FT*, 54.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

For all of its virtues and pragmatic stability, this kind of ethics nevertheless remains a transitional stage on our way to a religious life. As the radical concluding letter of *Either/Or*, "Ultimatum," argues, the true aim of human striving is not to be ethically just or find the most appropriate way of living one's life. Ethical frameworks are constructed by human beings, and they therefore provide merely finite solutions to human problems. The human being is more than the finite joys and sorrows that make up a virtuous life. A human being is also an infinite creature whose being goes beyond understanding—its own and that of other people. A human being is not rationally transparent, and perhaps more importantly, human actions cannot be fully understood, guided or judged rationally. Humanly devised ethical guidelines and humanly conceived virtues are not able to structure a human life because this life cannot be understood through human ideas of good and evil. In front of God even our purest virtues are always wrong. Or as the pastor from Jutland argues in "Ultimatum": "Therefore, wishing to be in the wrong is an expression of an infinite relationship, and wanting to be in the right, or finding it painful to be in the wrong, is an expression of a finite relationship! Hence it is upbuilding always to be in the wrong—because only the infinite builds up; the finite does not!"[20] The ethical framework of a happy human life that Judge Wilhelm argues for is rooted in and draws its sustenance from a religious foundation that ultimately brings out the limits of this kind of ethics. We need civic duties and personal virtues to live a good life, but this normative framework is problematic because it is impersonal. It does not acknowledge the absolute value of the individual, but subordinates the needs of the individual to the common good. In this way, it does not recognize that the individual human being is a child of God, and as such a being of infinite and absolute value whose life, according to Kierkegaard, cannot be understood, organized or lived according to the finite norms and values of a humanly structured society. This argument is driven home vehemently by Johannes de Silentio:

> Thus in the ethical view of life, it is the task of the single individual to strip himself of the qualification of interiority and to express this in something external. Every time the individual shrinks from it, every time he withholds himself in or slips down again into the qualifications of feeling, mood, etc. that belong to interiority, he trespasses, he is immersed in spiritual trial....The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal....The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute. In this connection, to say that it is a duty to love God means something different from the above, for if this duty is absolute, then the ethical is reduced to the relative. From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated;

20 *SKS* 3, 327 / *EO2*, 348.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty.[21]

The primary problem with the first ethics is that it attempts to understand and structure an individual human life within a framework constituted by universal norms and values. The individuality of the individual is unable to express itself within such a framework, and seeing that we human beings understand and live our lives as individuals, we need another kind of ethics that can construct an ethics upon the fact that human beings are individuals with their own peculiar ideas of how to live a good life. This is why we need to transition from this kind of worldly ethics to what he calls a religious ethics that takes the infinite and absolute value of the individual seriously.

Kierkegaard does not provide a stable terminology for this religious ethics. He sometimes loosely calls it the ethical-religious, but then again he seems to also subordinate this ethics to a more purely religious perspective.[22] In light of *Works of Love* and his complex analysis of the stages in the *Postscript*, we could perhaps simply characterize this ethics as a peculiar Christian ethics that is characterized "by the paradox, by the break with immanence, and by the absurd."[23] Although this Christian ethics is most manifestly present in the authorship after the *Postscript*, the most theoretically stringent account of this peculiar ethical view is found in the conceptually dense introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*. Under the cryptic name "second ethics," Vigilius Haufniensis introduces this Christian ethics as an ethics that is constructed upon the reality of sin. That is to say that contrary to what Haufniensis calls traditional philosophical ethics that "points to ideality as a task and assumes that every human being possesses the requisite conditions"[24] to fulfill this task, a Christian ethics destabilizes this ideality by insisting that the sinful character of human beings makes them incapable of living ethically. The ideal world of the first ethics famously "shipwreck[s]" on the concept of sin.[25] While the first ethics with what Kierkegaard calls "admirable naivety" labors to introduce its norms and values from "above and downward," from an ideal conception of human existence, the new, second ethics wants to construct an ethics "from below and upwards," that is, from the lamentable reality of human sinfulness and ethical fail-

21 *SKS* 4, 161–162 / *FT*, 69–70 (translation slightly modified).
22 *SKS* 7, 472 / *CUP1*, 519.
23 *SKS* 7, 483–483 / *CUP1*, 531–532.
24 *SKS* 4, 324 / *CA*, 16 (translation slightly modified).
25 *SKS* 4, 324 / *CA*, 17.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ure.[26] Being an ethics, Haufniensis argues, this second ethics of course also works with and through ideality. It is an ideality, however, that is constructed upon the reality that human beings constantly fail, and that no human being can live an ethically justified life because of the simple fact that human reality is a sinful and therefore an "unwarranted reality."[27] The explicitly Christian character of this ethics ties it, according to Haufniensis, closely to dogmatics. Here I will not go into the difficult discussion of how this ethics is a Christian ethics and the relationship between ethics and dogmatics. I will only focus on what I consider to be the philosophical implications of this Christian ethics.

10.3 The Ethical Task of Becoming a Self

There are two principal and interconnected aspects to Kierkegaard's second ethics: a negative, deconstructive aspect and a positive, upbuilding aspect. The negative aspect functions as a critique of traditional philosophical ethics understood as a set of normative guidelines for living one's life together with other human beings. It is an ethics that makes evident that ethical norms and values are inherently fragile, and an ethics that shows how and why our attempts to construct ethical guidelines for a human life shipwreck on the inscrutable individuality of human desires, dreams, and hopes. In this sense, it is a modern—or some would argue a postmodern—ethics of autonomy that like Nietzsche's ethics of empowerment aims at liberating the individual from the yoke of the hidebound norms and values of a society that organizes human life around mindless repetition of bourgeois conventions and religious habits.

Secondly, although this deconstruction or destabilization of the norms and values that orient our life brings out the fragile character of human existence, it also functions as a possibility for living an autonomous life. That is to say, it is an upbuilding deconstruction. We experience this existential fragility in and through an anxiety that we cannot explain, as we saw above in the quote from *The Sickness unto Death*. But this anxiety—Kierkegaard insists—is not a bad thing in itself. On the contrary, it is the possibility of freedom, and the nothingness that we feel but cannot explain is the openness of our existence.[28] We discover our autonomy through an unsettling anxiety that destabilizes the norms and values that structure and orient our life. This anxiety lets us know

26 *SKS* 4, 328 / *CA*, 20.
27 *SKS* 4, 416 / *CA*, 113.
28 *SKS* 4, 416 / *CA*, 113

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that we cannot—and should not—live our life by merely following the ready-made norms and values of the society or interpersonal context in which we are situated. This is not to say that we should not live according to the norms and values of our society. As De Silentio argues in the quote above, the first, worldly ethics is not invalidated by the religious perspective. We probably should follow some, if not most, of these norms and values, since a life in constant opposition to the society in which we live is exhausting and probably not a viable existential option. Kierkegaard's point is that we cannot mindlessly follow the normative guidelines that structure our life. The fragility of our existence means that we constantly relate ourselves to the norms and values that we live with. In fact, our autonomy becomes visible in this fragile existential relation to the normative structures of our life.

This existential fragility is experienced as "a psychological ambiguity."[29] This ambiguity basically means that we do not have a simple relation to the norms and values that structure and orient our life. Even if we reflectively understand the importance of a certain virtue, say patience, and try to incorporate this virtue in our existence, this incorporation is still accompanied by an ambiguity that results in "*a sympathetic antipathy* and *an antipathetic sympathy*."[30] Patience is indeed a good thing—to a certain extent, though, and in some circumstances it is just annoying. The human being is not a simple thing or a simple idea. Rather as Climacus argues, it is an "intermediary being" that exists between being and thinking.[31] This means that the ideality of our norms and values cannot be directly infused into our lives as if an actual human life could be lived according to the ideas about how a human life should be lived: "[T]o be an individual human being is not a pure idea-existence."[32] And yet, a human life is not a rose or a potato for that matter, and although human existence is bound to the biophysical reality of earthly life just as a rose or a potato, it is still an existence "that has an idea within itself."[33] This means that contrary to other types of being such as potatoes or roses, human beings do not merely live the life that they are given. They create their own existence to the extent that one human being's life is not comparable to another human being's life. To exist is—literally—to stand out from life, and from other people, to create a life of one's own. This is why Climacus can argue that: "The individual's own ethical reality is the only

29 *SKS* 4, 348 / *CA*, 42.
30 *SKS* 4, 348 / *CA*, 42.
31 *SKS* 7, 301 / *CUP1*, 330.
32 *SKS* 7, 301 / *CUP1*, 330.
33 *SKS* 7, 302 / *CUP1*, 331.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

reality."[34] To be a human being is to be a self, and to be a self is the ethical task of becoming a self in and through the existential difference of one's individuality.

This individual's ethical reality is, however, not simply a constructed reality, as if the individual self could choose the reality in which she lives. She is not in control of her own ethical reality. Her ethical reality is her own, but it is not her own production. As Anti-Climacus famously argues in the opening of *The Sickness unto Death*, the self is not an autonomous self. The self is a derived self that is produced by another, and *should* be grounded transparently in that power that has produced it.[35] And yet, as Anti-Climacus argues some pages ahead in the same book, the self is "a relation that, even though it is derived, relates itself to itself, which is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical aspect of possibility and necessity."[36] In other words, the ethical reality of the self is a dialectical production of possibility and necessity. Human freedom is always a conditioned freedom. A person has to become who she is through the aspects of her identity that she has not chosen and cannot control. She is a self who is a rational, social, situated, and embodied being. This means that she becomes herself by relating herself to herself as a rational being subjected to rational norms that she has not chosen, but which still structure her thought and behavior. Moreover, she has to relate to the fact that her life is inextricably interwoven with the lives of other individuals and that she belongs to a specific society with particular sociocultural norms and customs. And finally, she has to live her life by constantly accepting that she has a body, which while being her intimate lived body is also a biophysical organism subjected to the impersonal and often inhuman processes of nature.

The fragility of human identity stems from this dialectic: to be human is to be free, and human freedom is possibility in and through necessity. Freedom is not an option. To be a self is, as we have seen, to be free. We cannot escape freedom, just as we cannot escape the necessities that form, and sometimes destroy, our lives. We are not just what we are. We constantly have to become who we are through our choices. The identity of a human being is fragile because it is a fact that is also an ethical task. That is to say, we are who we are and yet we have to become who we are through a constant struggle with an otherness that disturbs our sense of selfhood. When Climacus argues that our own ethical reality is the only reality, he is pointing to the fact that we have to live with the reality of the

34 *SKS* 7, 298 / *CUP1*, 327.
35 *SKS* 11, 129–130 / *SUD*, 13–14.
36 *SKS* 11, 145 / *SUD*, 29.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

self that we are. As Kierkegaard argues in a famous journal entry from the year he published the *Postscript:* "In relation to their systems most systematizers are like a man who has built a vast palace while he himself lives next door in a barn: They themselves do not live in the vast systematic edifice. But in matter of the spirit this is and remains a decisive objection. Spiritually, a man's thoughts must be the building in which he lives—otherwise it is wrong."[37]

10.4 The Necessity of Suffering

It is this existential fragility, namely, that our thoughts are the building in which we must live, that is neglected in contemporary mental health care. Psychiatry—and most clinical psychology—operates with a sharp distinction between science and ethics, between facts and norms, which is simply not tenable when it comes to "an intermediary creature" like the human being. The idea that you are either healthy or ill, sane or insane, normal or abnormal produces a simple understanding of suffering as the opposite of an equally simple idea of happiness that both shipwreck on the existential complexity involved in the humdrum of everyday life. For Kierkegaard, to exist is to suffer because we have to lose ourselves to become ourselves. My argument is that Kierkegaard's primary contribution to contemporary mental health is to be found precisely in this insistence on this ethical character of suffering. And yet, Kierkegaard's account of the normative complexity of suffering is also the most difficult obstacle to overcome if one wants to reintroduce Kierkegaard into the scientific fields of psychology and psychiatry. The reason for this is that Kierkegaard connects suffering with the Christian notion of sin, and it is obvious that contemporary scientific disciplines cannot—and should not—return to specific religious qualifications of suffering. We therefore need a secular, philosophical interpretation of Kierkegaard's notion of sin if we want to use his thoughts in a contemporary scientific context. Fortunately, this is not an impossible task, since Kierkegaard himself spent much time and energy on transforming the traditional Christian notions of sin into existential categories. Here I will not go into the complex role that sin and sinfulness play in Kierkegaard's thought,[38] but only use his basic definition of sin as self-

---

37 *SKS* 18, 303, JJ:490 / *KJN* 2, 279.

38 For in-depth treatments of the philosophical and psychological importance of the role of sin in Kierkegaard's thought, see Kresten Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1972, pp. 110 – 124, pp. 165 – 178, pp. 200 – 239; Arne Grøn, *Subjektivitet og negativitet: Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1997, pp. 278 – 285, pp. 320 – 334; Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff Ernst bei Søren Kierkegaard*, Frei-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ishness to show how an ethical perspective is a necessary part of the scientific explanation of mental suffering. It is in *The Concept of Anxiety* that we find the most sustained treatment of sin as selfishness, and Kierkegaard argues that although selfishness is a common definition of sin:

> [I]t is incomprehensible that it has not been recognized that precisely here lies the difficulty of finding a place for its explanation in any science. For selfishness is precisely the particular, and what this signifies only the single individual knows as the single individual, because when it is viewed under universal categories it may signify everything in such a way that it signifies nothing. The definition of selfishness may therefore be quite correct, especially when at the same time it is held that scientifically it is so empty of content that it signifies nothing at all.[39]

There are three interconnected aspects of Kierkegaard's definition of sin as selfishness that are important in this context. The first is that we cannot provide a scientific or universal explanation of selfishness. We can only deal with selfishness as a concrete personal problem. That is to say, there is no paradigm of selfishness, just as there is no paradigm of what constitutes a good life. Every person is selfish in his or her own way, and we can only hope to make sense of a person's selfishness—that of another person or our own—by engaging with that particular person's feelings, actions, and ideas about life. In other words, understanding selfishness requires a concrete existential interpretation. The second aspect is that for Kierkegaard—and for most of the Christian tradition—sin is a complex concept that discloses the fundamental ambiguity of human freedom. Sin is hereditary, and as such we are not responsible for the fact that we are selfish. Kierkegaard argues that sin is often wrongly understood as a primarily pneumatic or reflective problem, that is, as an ethical problem that we can solve conceptually. We need to take into consideration that selfishness also manifests itself sensuously or bodily, which means that often we do not entirely understand or control our selfishness.[40] Now, the ambiguity consists in the fact that we are, nevertheless, responsible for how we deal or cope with the various manifestations of selfishness. This ambiguity is connected with the third and final aspect of sin as selfishness, namely that selfishness is a sin, and as such selfishness is an ethical problem that every person needs to work with. The human being is a self, and this means that human beings are naturally inclined to selfishness, that

---

burg: Verlag Karl Alber 1958, pp. 171–185; Giuseppe Modica and Marco Ravera, "Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855)," *Il peccato originale nel pensiero moderno*, ed. by Giuseppe Riconda *et al.*, Brescia: Morcelliana 2009, pp. 649–662.

39 *SKS* 4, 380–381 / *CA*, 77–78.

40 *SKS* 4, 380 / *CA*, 77.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

is, towards understanding their identity in terms of the self that they want to be or the self that they do not want to be. As we have seen in the previous section it is in this sense that we should lose our self in order to find our self. We can only become who we are through the otherness that makes up our identity. This is not a task that we can ever fulfill, but an ethical task with which we are constantly struggling.

Contemporary mental health care does not sufficiently recognize that our identity is an ethical task. The main reason for this is, as mentioned, the problematic conception of psychiatry as a science on a par with other biomedical sciences. Psychiatry cannot escape ethical considerations in its assessment, examination or treatment of mental illness, because a mental illness is an existential illness that makes, as Karl Jaspers argues with reference to Kierkegaard, the patient's relation to her illness central to the illness itself.[41] As I noted in the beginning, it was in fact Jaspers who was the first to appreciate the psychological and psychiatric importance of Kierkegaard's existential account of the self, and it is from Kierkegaard's argument for the individual character of mental suffering that Jaspers developed his mature understanding of mental illness.[42] This insistence on the individuality of mental suffering is connected with Kierkegaard's basic conviction that a human being remains free even in the most paralyzing suffering. This is not an original stance in itself. That the patient is always an agent, that is, that the person always does something with her or his suffering, was one of the leading ideas in the creation of psychiatry as an autonomous discipline during the Enlightenment, and especially for the humanistic reforms of our conception of mental illness pioneered by the two great physicians Philippe Pinel and Vicenzo Chiarugi.[43] Kierkegaard's contribution to this development lies in his radical argument that we are to understand our mental fragility as an existential strength and not as personal or medical weakness. It is in our fragility that we discover our freedom as being responsible for suffering in the sense that we have to respond to our suffering in order to find a way to live with suffering.

---

41 Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, trans. by John Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1997 [translation of the seventh German edition from 1959. The book has remained unaltered since the publication of the fourth edition in 1946], pp. 414 – 427.

42 Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin: Julius Springer 1919, pp. 370 – 381.

43 Philippe Pinel, *Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale ou La manie*, Paris: Richard, Caille et Ravier 1801 [An IX]; Vicenzo Chiarughi, *Della pazzia in genere, e in specie. Trattato medico-analitico con una centuria di osservazioni*, *Tomo I-III*, Firenze: Luigi Carlieri 1794. For an informative overview of this formative period in the history of psychiatry, see Andrew Scull, *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine*, London: Thames & Hudson 2015, pp. 188 – 223.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

It is in our mental fragility, and in our ensuing capacity for mental suffering, that we become aware of our freedom. We are free creatures, and with this freedom comes an existential fragility that we experience first and foremost in and through anxiety. Our anxious fragility is not the cost of freedom, but its very possibility. With his insistence on the necessity of suffering, and on our responsibility to use this suffering to become ourselves, Kierkegaard encourages us to reverse our common, and now medicalized perspective, on suffering as something we have to get rid of and that we would be better off without. The commonness of existential despair stems from our inability to understand suffering as the possibility of freedom. Kierkegaard makes this eloquently evident on the opening page of the concluding chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*. He here puts forward the radical argument that we must all learn to be anxious, and perhaps more importantly, we have to see our anxiety not as a medical problem, but as an existential "adventure."[44] It is an adventure because it is in and through anxiety that we come to learn the possibilities and limits of our freedom, and Kierkegaard can therefore conclude that the one "who has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate."[45]

It is important to note that Kierkegaard's argument for the strength of fragility does not entail a rejection of the medical reality of mental illness. Although the patient always does something with his suffering, some mental illnesses, as I mentioned in the beginning, are unambiguous illnesses in the sense that the patient's freedom is so radically diminished that she cannot be held responsible for her actions (this is most evident in psychotic episodes). Most mental illnesses, however, are ambiguous in the sense that it is not clear to what extent the person can be held responsible for his or her actions—or more radically, to what extent we can actually talk about an illness at all. It is this ambiguity that requires an ethical perspective such as the one that Kierkegaard develops. In 1844, Kierkegaard notes in a laconic journal entry: "It is [and] remains the most difficult mental struggle [*den tungeste Anfægtelse*] when a human being doesn't know whether the reason for his suffering [*Lidelses Grund*] is weakness of the mind [*Sindssvaghed*] or sin. Here freedom, otherwise used as the means with which to struggle, [has] become dialectical in its most terrible contrast."[46] The experience that we cannot determine the extent to which we are responsible for our suffering is at the core of most mental illnesses. In fact, as Kierkegaard argues, this dialectic of freedom and "its most terrible contrast," unfreedom, is

44 *SKS* 4, 454 / *CA*, 155.
45 *SKS* 4, 454 / *CA*, 155.
46 *SKS* 18, 218, JJ:242 / *KJN* 2, 200 (translation modified).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

the most difficult aspect of mental suffering. The experience of freedom in suffering is both the possibility of working oneself out of that suffering and one of plunging into an even deeper despair. Karl Jaspers draws a similar conclusion from this particular journal entry:

> The crude categories, with which we classify and comprehend psychopathologically, do not penetrate into the core of a human being. Therein is a source by means of which he seems to be able to detach himself from everything, from what occurs, from what happens to him, and from what he is not in so far as he distances himself…For the psychopathologist there always remain the limits of knowledge [*Grenzwissen*].[47]

Recognizing the strength of our fragile mind involves a change of our perspective on the limits of our medical knowledge. We should not merely see such limits as scientific problems to solve or medical conditions to overcome, but also as possibilities for a freedom that it is the task of ethics to protect and promote.

47 Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, pp. 426 – 427 (translation modified).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Mélissa Fox-Muraton

11 Existential Ethics and Liberal Eugenics

Kierkegaard and Habermas

In *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur* (*The Future of Human Nature*), Jürgen Habermas evokes the problems that modern developments in genetic engineering and the move toward a liberal eugenics pose for understandings of human nature and responsibility, and more importantly for moral understandings of human shared existence.[1] In a world in which man can intervene on the organic make-up of other individuals, so that the biological foundations upon which individuality and subjectivity are later to be constructed and de-constructed depend no longer on contingency, but rather on an intentional project determined by someone other than the subject himself, will we still be able to understand ourselves as "normative beings; even more, as beings who expect responsibility and solidarity from each other, as well as equal respect?" Habermas asks.[2] "If one person makes for another an irreversible decision...then the symmetry of responsibility that exists in principle between free and equal persons is necessarily limited."[3] Will we in such cases still be able to conceive of ourselves as responsible for our own biographies, able to determine for ourselves who we are against the limitations of biological circumstances defined externally? And will an "ethics of the ability-to-be-ourselves (*Ethik des Selbstseinkönnens*)" still make sense?[4]

What is striking in these seemingly un-Kierkegaardian reflections is that Habermas' primary interlocutor in the opening chapter of *Zukunft* is none other than Søren Kierkegaard, whom Habermas cites as the first thinker to shift the focus of ethics away from normative concerns to the existential question of measuring an achieved or failed life through the post-metaphysical concept of "ability-to-be-oneself," and thus as that philosopher who may be able to offer the strongest arguments against the right to artificially modify the biological nature of other human beings.[5] Despite this privilege awarded to Kierkegaard, how-

1 This chapter is a slightly revised version of a previously published article: Mélissa Fox-Muraton, "Habermas and Kierkegaard on Existential Ethics and Liberal Eugenics," *Estudios kierkegaardianos. Revista de Filosofía*, no. 2, 2016, pp. 219 – 241.
2 Habermas, Jürgen, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur: Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002 (2005), p. 32. (Our translations from the German for all references to Habermas.)
3 Ibid., pp. 31 – 32.
4 Ibid., p. 32.
5 Ibid., p. 17.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-012

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ever, Habermas' appeal unfortunately has little resonance, and it is unclear whether he sees Kierkegaard's philosophy as one which can resolve the situation, or rather as the very root of the problem. More importantly, however, Habermas' dialogue with Kierkegaard remains superficial, as Karin Christiansen points out, qualifying Habermas' appropriation of Kierkegaard as a "(no doubt unintentional) silencing" of the latter, and arguing that not only does Habermas fail to give an adequate account of the existential impact of eugenics on the genetically modified individual, but also that Habermas' perspective occults Kierkegaard's own positions.[6]

In appealing to Kierkegaard in the opening chapter of *Zukunft*, Habermas marks a radical departure from his traditional accounts of socially constructed normative ethics. And indeed the turn seems justified, to the extent that the specific question posed by the practice of liberal eugenics may well render ineffectual any linguistically or socially derived normative account of responsibility toward others. If we presuppose that genetic intervention on human beings could transform these beings into something other than human beings, could modify the biological nature of the individual to an extent that one may no longer be recognized as part of a human community, we would in fact be confronted with a situation to which linguistic constructivist accounts of normative ethics can offer no response, an unprecedented situation for which there exist no norms to which we may appeal. Habermas' appeal to Kierkegaard functions thus as an implicit appeal to a non-normative ethico-existential requirement. At the same time, Habermas is quick to abandon the existential stance, and to return to a normative constructivist approach in his discussion of the problem of eugenics.

Though existential philosophy has traditionally been plagued with the problem of articulating an understanding of ethics as being-with or being-together in a shared moral sphere, we will argue that a reconsideration of Kierkegaard's existential approach to ethics could offer more solid grounding for the constitution of an existential ethics than that we can find in Sartrean or Heideggerian-inspired existential approaches. As we have argued elsewhere, a Kierkegaardian existential ethics is not solely an ethics of self-accomplishment, but is rather an ethics founded upon kinship, concern for others, and accountability.[7] Kierkegaard's humanistic or existential perspective requires that we recognize the individual's ability to maintain a sense of self, but also that we have duties toward

6 Karen Christiansen, "The Silencing of Kierkegaard in Habermas' Critique of Genetic Enhancement," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2009, p. 155.
7 Mélissa Fox-Muraton, "Existence Philosophy as a Humanism," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2018, pp. 345–73.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

them as selves. These considerations will allow us to demonstrate that there is a fundamental confusion in Habermas' articulation of the relationship between the existential appropriation of one's own life and the possibility to construct normative principles, which not only weakens his argument against eugenics, but also falsifies his dialogue with Kierkegaard. Finally, we will examine how Kierkegaard's existential philosophy could better serve Habermas' arguments.

11.1 The Problem of Existential Ethics: Ontological solitude and moral requirement

Existential philosophy has traditionally been plagued with the incapacity of articulating an account of shared existence and responsibility toward others. If we seek to abandon an intellectualist or essentialist position, and take concrete human existence as the starting-point of philosophy, it would seem that we necessarily fall into the trap of some form of relativism or solipsism. This is particularly apparent in Jean-Paul Sartre's account of the existence of other subjects "for me"; while Sartre strives to claim that "existentialism is a humanism," he fails to give an adequate account as to how the move toward a *being-with* could be made. As Sartre writes, "the man who reaches himself directly through the *cogito* also discovers all other [human beings], and discovers them as the condition of his existence. He realizes that he can be nothing (in the sense that one says that one is spiritual, or that one is mean, or that one is jealous) if others do not recognize him as such."[8] Sartre's analysis evokes a major difficulty for thinking the ethical from an existential perspective, for if recognition is certainly an important element of life in the shared social sphere, such recognition, *as determination* (one *is* what one is because others *see* one as such), not only excludes true thinking of intersubjectivity, but also undermines the reality both of ethical judgment and of individual personality. If there is no reality to the individual's ethical character independent of the judgments and evaluations imposed upon one by others, it would seem that this attempt to reintroduce the ethical sphere into his existential thinking of the individual undermines Sartre's own project—for if one is determined by how one is perceived, then it is questionable whether it is possible at all to construct one's identity—i. e., to maintain the idea that the individual constructs himself through the choices that he makes

8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris: Gallimard 1946 (1996), pp. 58–59 (our translation).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

—and to maintain the affirmation that "existence precedes essence."[9] As Rachel Bespaloff wrote in an early critique of Sartre's perspective, the Sartrean account of existential ethics leads down not only to a "hollow subjectivity," but also reveals itself to be incapable of establishing a "veritable communion between beings," and as such, "existentialism can only succeed in establishing an *aggressive solidarity* in a hostile or tamed world."[10]

The problem Sartre encounters in attempting to offer "a positive theory of the existence of the other [that] should be able at once to avoid solipsism and to get by without recourse to God,"[11] is not specific to Sartre's philosophy, but rather illustrative of a difficulty inherent within the project of establishing an existential approach to ethics. Sartre recognizes this failure, admitting that "[w]e are never *we* except in the eyes of others...the effort to salvage human totality cannot occur without positing the existence of a third party, distinct in principle from humanity."[12] And if the we-object is pure external construct, the we-subject is likewise, for Sartre, pure internal construct: "the experience of a we-subject is a pure psychological and subjective event in a singular consciousness."[13] The problem for any existential ethics is, it would seem, none other than that of the ontological solitude of the existing subject. And as Sartre clearly points out, there appears to be no solution for establishing an ethical grounding for moral responsibility, or for the ethical requirement, without recourse to a third party, to some form of transcendence, be it through God, through the community, through discourse practices or the "logos of language"[14] as Habermas suggests, or any other principle distinct from human existence itself. Kierkegaard/Climacus already formulated this difficulty in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, noting that "ethically (*ethisk*) there is no direct relation between subject and subject."[15] Yet the problem resides precisely here for the existential account, since if we appeal to something beyond the individual existing subject, then we can no longer, it would seem, take existence as our starting point. If indeed we are what we are, at least partially, because of an Other, we can no longer admit the radical subjectivity Sartre sought to establish, and the radical notion of responsibility that this entailed.

9 Ibid., p. 26.
10 Rachel Bespaloff, "Lettres à Boris de Schlœzer (I)," ed. by Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, *Conférence*, no. 16, 2003, p. 450 (our translation).
11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, Paris: Gallimard 1943 (1998), p. 271 (our translation).
12 Ibid., p. 463.
13 Ibid., p. 466.
14 Habermas, *Die Zukunft*, p. 26.
15 *SKS* 7, 293 / *CUP1*, 321.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Of course, we may not wish to maintain Sartre's radicalized account of subjectivity. Yet, this illustration is more generally indicative of a problem with secular existential ethics as such. For an existential approach to ethics always presupposes some notion as to what an existing human being *is* as subject, and this ontological presupposition is not indifferent with regard to the origins of the moral requirement. If we do adopt a Sartrean-type approach, and assume that the coming into existence of the individual is contingent, arbitrary *thrownness* into the world, it makes sense to situate the origin of the moral requirement within the individual, as Sartre does: beginning with ourselves, we come to recognize other human beings. Within this context, it makes sense to speak of the primary moral requirement as ability to be ourselves, authorship of our lives, self-legislation. If the ethical requirement is immanent in this sense, however, it is difficult to see how we could ever come to a satisfactory account of our moral responsibility toward others, or of how others come to count for us. If, however, we wish to appeal to some third-party principle in order to explain the ethical requirement, then we are implicitly admitting a very non-Sartrean ontology: that the coming into existence of an individual depends upon some *givenness*, that our existence is not purely contingent, that it is rather dependent upon some external Other (be it society, parents, language, God…). And if our existence is given, the ethical requirement must to some extent be given as well, external or transcendent to us as individuals. Yet if that is the case, we can no longer maintain that the fundamental ethical requirement is the ability to be *ourselves*. In other words, any existential account of ethics leaves us with an alternative hinged upon our ontological view of human nature. Either we admit that human existence is contingent, arbitrary, in which case we can conceive of a free and autonomous self-construction on the part of the individual, but not of how our responsibility toward others could be established. Or we must assume that our existence is not entirely contingent, that life is in some way "given" or "granted" to us (whether in a theological or secular framework), in which case the notion of ethical demand and responsibility are also already *outside* of ourselves, and the fundamental ethical question cannot thereby be one of the ability to be *oneself*, of complete moral *autonomy*.

The flaw in Habermas' analysis of the problem of liberal eugenics is that it unwittingly subsumes this either/or. When appealing to Kierkegaard, Habermas evokes the fact that the ability of the individual to construct himself within the social sphere is only possible *because* each individual's existence is contingent and independent of any intentional project on the part of a third party. Third-party intervention on the biological constitution of a human being could render access to the ethical impossible, according to Habermas. In making this claim, Habermas is much closer to a Sartrean conception of the *thrownness* of individ-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ual existence than to a Kierkegaardian understanding of human nature, despite his citing of Kierkegaard. At the same time, Habermas seeks to maintain that the ethical requirement, or moral existence, comes from *outside* the individual, from his dependency upon social contexts and interactions. Though he admits to holding a much weaker position than that held by Kierkegaard or other religious thinkers, for whom the appeal to a transcendent power is necessary, he nevertheless sees the social structuring power of language as that through which a "'proper' ethical self-understanding" is "given" (*gegeben*).[16] This power of language functions as a secularized version of the transcendent principle in the Habermasian context, since language is always outside of the individual, is not the property of any particular person, and is thereby that which is always already present, the context within which particular individuals define themselves within and against the structures of preexisting norms.[17] Habermas recognizes that this is a "deflationist" understanding of the absolute Other,[18] but suggests that this "weak proceduralist reading of 'Otherness'" preserves the criteria for absoluteness (*Unbedingtheit*) by transposing it to the sphere of the inter-subjective or the trans-subjective.[19]

While this solution does seem to resolve the dilemma inherent in existential accounts of ethics, Habermas' argument in *Zukunft* is unconvincing precisely because he is unable to demonstrate how the existential requirement of self-appropriation relates to the normative requirement of responsibility toward others. This is apparent in *Zukunft*, and illustrated by Habermas' quite ambiguous treatment of Kierkegaard in the text, making Kierkegaard into a privileged yet absent interlocutor, and inciting us to wonder whether Habermas is not artificially drawing Kierkegaard into dialogue. References to Kierkegaard can only be found in the introductory chapter of the work, while Kierkegaard is strangely absent in the following discussions about moral status and eugenics. And Habermas' appeal to Kierkegaard situates the latter within a post-metaphysical context where "philosophy no longer has the presumption of furnishing responses having a character of obligation to questions about modes of personal and collective life."[20] As Karin Christiansen has pointed out: "Because he does not succeed in explaining the relationship between the existential analysis and the mainly empirical, sociological and psychological observations he makes, [Habermas] renders himself vulnerable to critique from researchers within a number of dif-

16 Habermas, *Die Zukunkft*, p. 26.
17 Ibid., pp. 25–26.
18 Ibid., p. 25.
19 Ibid., p. 26.
20 Ibid., p. 11.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ferent disciplines."[21] On purely philosophical grounds, Habermas' argument is particularly weak insofar as it relies on an extremely fragile notion of what constitutes a human existence. As such, Habermas' understanding of human life renders the appeal to an existential ethics ineffectual, and suggests that, at best, Kierkegaard's existential ethics can offer us an understanding of what constitutes "a life which is not a failure" (*eines nicht verfehlten Lebens*).[22] As Vilhjálmur Árnason has pointed out, a full existential analysis of the issue cannot focus merely on notions of individuality and freedom, but must also offer an "analysis of the basic conditions for freedom, speech and action in the linguistic structures of the lifeworld."[23] Unfortunately, Habermas stops short of such an analysis in limiting the sphere of existential ethics to the questions of individual freedom and possibilities for self-determination.

11.2 A Confusion of the Categories: The Ontological Flaw in Habermas' Account of Human Nature and the Appeal to an Existential Ethics

For Habermas, it is the individual's capacity to assume himself within a social context, against the varying forms of dependency that his biological structure and shared, collective existence force him to engage in, that shape the ethical as the very possibility for assumed life stances and responsibility. Selfhood is an act of rational self-appropriation, and ethics, or more precisely "the moral attitude," is thus seen by Habermas as "a constructive response to the different forms of dependency which stem from the fact that the organic apparatus is unachieved or incomplete, or that corporeal existence is in a state of sustained weakness."[24] According to this account, our dependency upon others stems from the fact that we cannot exist outside of our relationships to others, through which, however, we must partly give ourselves up, and thus our moral state is one of perpetual vulnerability. Habermas thus construes the moral sphere as a

21 Christiansen, "The Silencing of Kierkegaard," p. 154.
22 Habermas, *Die Zukunft*, p. 27.
23 Vilhjálmur Árnason, "The Danger of Losing Oneself: Habermas's Species Ethics in Light of Kierkegaard's Existential Analysis," *Kierkegaard's Existential Approach*, ed. by Arne Grøn, René Rosfort, K. Brian Söderquist, Berlin: De Gruyter 2017 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 35), p. 237.
24 Habermas, *Die Zukunft*, pp. 62–63.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

palliative to that vulnerability, the only way in which we might regain the responsibility for our lives and the human dignity whereby we can be individuals. It is through moral community that we are able to set aside the weaknesses inherent in our nature, through the constitution of rules and norms which we set up mutually and reciprocally, and which must apply equally to all members of the community. According to Habermas, therefore:

> Autonomy is…a precarious achievement of finite existences, which can only acquire something merely resembling "strengths" on the condition that they be well aware of their physical frailty and their social dependence. If this is the "grounds" of morals, its "limits" can also be explained therefrom. It is the universe of possible interpersonal relations and interactions which is, at once, demanding and capable of moral regulations. It is only in this network of relations of recognition, legitimately regulated, that men can develop and preserve—simultaneously along with their physical integrity—a personal identity.[25]

The problem that the development of modern scientific techniques, and more specifically eugenics, poses for such an understanding of ethics and of personal identity, is according to Habermas inherently linked to the fact that such techniques and practices necessarily undermine the presupposition of equality upon which normative regulations can be constructed. For, as Habermas underscores, the ability to modify one's own biological constitution, and even more so that of other beings, depends on preferences and choices which irrevocably disrupt the fundamental understanding of all moral beings as free and equal individuals, leading to the "instrumentalization of…human life."[26] More than simply a problem specific to certain individuals, Habermas asks whether "the technicization of human nature" will lead to a state where "we will no longer be able to understand ourselves as ethically free and morally equal beings orienting ourselves through norms and reasons," and as such, where our lives will be devoid of meaning and no longer worth living.[27]

We would argue that Habermas' understanding of the relationship between human nature as biological condition and moral nature as socially constructed is fundamentally confused. In attempting to explain *both the grounds and limits* of morality as stemming from the biological vulnerability of human beings as finite, dependent organic structures, Habermas is really making two very different claims about the nature of the moral requirement. On the one hand, he suggests that it is our biological frailty as finite beings incapable of existing without the

25 Ibid., pp. 63–64.
26 Ibid., p. 58.
27 Ibid., p. 74.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

aid of others that establishes the moral demand. This essentially comes down to the idea that moral responsibility is immanent within human nature itself, responsibility toward others is inherently nothing more than the condition for the subsistence of the individual and the species. On the other hand, Habermas portrays the moral sphere as that through which the individual becomes more than just a member of the species, the context through which the biological being becomes a person, capable of autonomy and personal identity. According to this view, the moral requirement is no longer immanent within human nature, but rather transcendent or distinct from the existence of any determinate human being as such.

These two claims may not be incompatible. Yet, since Habermas does not articulate the means by which they may coexist, he fails to give a convincing account as to why the appeal to an existential ethics might be necessary with regard to the questions that the development of modern scientific practices, and more specifically eugenics, pose for understandings of human nature and ethics. Is moral requirement inherent in human nature itself, so that a modification of human nature might eliminate this requirement? Or is the moral requirement transcendent to human nature, and if this is the case, why should a modification of human nature have an impact on the ways in which individuals relate to themselves through the moral sphere? One of the problems in Habermas' argument is that he fails to distinguish between the notion of the human being, as a biological physical reality, and that of the self, in its subjective and psychological dimensions. Or, in other words, between the notion of human being as a static reality or fact, and the notion of *self* as a dynamic relationship. This is where an appeal to Kierkegaard would have been extremely useful for Habermas; indeed, Kierkegaard clearly distinguishes between the notions of "self" (*Selv*) and "human being" (*Menneske*), writing that "a human being is still not a self."[28] Being a self, for Kierkegaard, requires more than merely existing as a human being. Selfhood is defined by Kierkegaard essentially as relational: "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation."[29] Or, as Patrick Stokes notes in his recent book, *The Naked Self*, Kierkegaard locates selfhood "in a relational dynamic whereby a mass of psychological facts and dispositions relates to itself and its environment in an irreducibly first-personal way. It is in the specific *way* in which this psychology relates to itself that a human being comes to constitute a self."[30] According-

28 *SKS* 11, 129 / *SUD*, 13.
29 Ibid.
30 Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, p. 13.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ing to this perspective, the locus of selfhood can be seen as relating both inwardly and outwardly, both to one's own organic and psychological nature and to the environment. In this sense, the double structure proposed by Habermas—man as finite, vulnerable biological being, and man as immersed within an environment or context (the moral sphere) through which he becomes capable of freedom—makes sense. Human selfhood, according to a Kierkegaardian view, depends on the individual's ability to relate both to the facticity of his own being and to the external environment in which he evolves and interacts in a dynamic and first-personal mode. Yet Kierkegaard takes this analysis a step further, noting that there are two ways of understanding this relation: either it "must have established itself or have been established by another."[31]

Here, we return to the abovementioned problem of the understanding of existence as either contingent or as given/granted. If we understand the self as capable of establishing itself by itself, then we have to admit that the self is undetermined by any transcendent principle. A *fully* autonomous self is only ontologically conceivable insofar as we understand its existence as depending upon no act through which some form of determination is given or granted. As soon, however, as we render the existence of the self dependent upon some form of givenness, this conception no longer makes sense. A self established by an Other cannot be seen as isolated existence, fully capable of autonomous self-determination, and as the origin of moral requirement. Kierkegaard's own response to this either/or is clear: the self is established by an Other, and can only be construed as full selfhood when seen as being before that Other (God). Whether we accept this position or not, however, Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood, and the dichotomy he confronts us with, clearly demonstrate that Habermas' double-positioning of the moral requirement is ontologically flawed. If we assume the self establishes itself, then we have to understand every individual being as a separate, isolated existence whose freedom to determine himself is absolute, yet in this case, we have no grounds for establishing moral requirement. If on the other hand we understand the self as established through an Other, we necessarily limit the individual's autonomy, but we gain the possibility of establishing moral requirement through the same *givenness* through which self is granted. Though Sartrean or Heideggerian models of existential ethics portray the individual self as self-granting and self-legislating, Kierkegaard notes that any understanding of the individual as isolated, separated being can only lead down to the impossibility of founding universal moral requirement, or anything resembling a moral goal or moral criteria: "If the individual

31 Ibid.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

is isolated [*Er Individet isoleret*], then either he is absolutely the creator of his own fate, and then there is nothing tragic anymore, but only evil…; or the individuals are merely modifications of the eternal substance of life."[32] And Kierkegaard understands the origin or moral requirement as something which cannot and "did not arise in any human being's heart,"[33] and thereby must be transcendent or given.

In claiming that the contingency upon which an individual's coming into the world is a necessary factor for that individual's being able to freely choose himself within the social sphere, Habermas makes an important category mistake. He assimilates the necessity, or facticity, of individual *being* (a human being) with the ethical possibility of *becoming* (a self), and thus ultimately holds an ontologically untenable position which posits life (and moral requirement) as simultaneously given and contingent. This confusion further incites Habermas to confuse what are really *two distinct types of meta-ethical questions present in Kierkegaard's writings:* those pertaining to the *objective groundings* of moral principles, and those pertaining to *subjective appropriation* of those principles as engagement and responsibility. Indeed, in his treatment of Kierkegaard, Habermas focuses uniquely on the existential question of the individual's ability to be himself, which is really a question of subjective appropriation, and not one of the groundings of moral requirement. According to Habermas, as far as the grounds for universal normative ethics are concerned, Kierkegaard has little to say. To the contrary: "All of his attention is in fact pointed to the structure of the 'ability-to-be-oneself', that is, to the form of an ethical auto-reflection and the choice for oneself, which is determined by an infinite interest in the success of [the individual's] life project."[34] Habermas suggests that for Kierkegaard, all that matters is the individual's ability to appropriate his own life-biography for himself, to become the author of his own life history. It is only insofar as the individual is free to completely assume all of his present, past and future positions and choices, all of his actions, that a person can be considered to be free and, as such, a truly non-interchangeable singular subject. Of course, Habermas recognizes that within Kierkegaard's theological perspective, such authorship of oneself only takes on meaning in relationship to God, and that the objectivity of any ethical stance depends on a higher power, the only means by which the demands of ethics can be reconciled with what Habermas portrays to be an infinite self-interest. Nevertheless, Habermas portrays Kierkegaard's ethics as one which

32 *SKS* 2, 158 – 159 / *EO1*, 160.
33 *SKS* 9, 32 / *WL*, 25.
34 Habermas, *Die Zukunft*, p. 19.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

associates *autonomy* with *authorship*, and suggests that from a Kierkegaardian perspective, a life deprived of such possibilities of authorship—which may result from human intervention on the biological constitution of other humans—would be a life without meaning.

It is however important to note that the notion of freedom that Kierkegaard develops with regard to the ethical stage (in *Either/Or*[35]) is quite different from the position Habermas seeks to ascribe to him, suggesting that the ability-to-be-oneself entails *complete control* over one's actions and decisions. For Kierkegaard, to the contrary, absolute freedom does not, of course, mean absolute liberty of action, or the idea that we can always choose otherwise. It may not even mean that we can choose *any* of our acts at all. What it is that our freedom enables us to choose is not our acts, but our *selves*; or, as Kierkegaard affirms, "greatness is not to be this or that but to be oneself, and every human being can be this if he so wills it."[36] None of our past choices, none of our present circumstances or social roles, no institution or higher being can ever replace the absolutely individuating and radically isolating act whereby we must take full responsibility for our own freedom. But this "radical subjectivity,"[37] as Kelly Oliver terms it, is in no way a form of subjectivism in Kierkegaard's thought. For Kierkegaard, the responsibility for our freedom does not entail that the ethical requirement is the individual's own construction. As Kelly Oliver has pointed out, the main problem with arguments on liberal eugenics is that they all "begin with some version of a liberal sovereign individual who has freedom of choice that must be protected."[38] Yet as she notes, this is clearly not Kierkegaard's view.[39] While she does not develop the question with regard to Kierkegaard, we would add that the problem in Habermas' reading is precisely that it fails to distinguish between the ontological question of human being and the ethical question of moral requirement. For Habermas, understanding the individual human being as undetermined, a product of mere contingency, is the only way in which to conceive of human responsibility.

35 Habermas refers mainly to the conception of the ethical developed in this text, and generally neglects the other dimensions of Kierkegaard's ethics.
36 *SKS* 3, 173 / *EO2*, 177.
37 Kelly Oliver, "Genetic Engineering: Deconstructing *Grown* versus *Made*," in *Technologies of Life and Death: From Cloning to Capital Punishment*, New York: Fordham University Press 2013, p. 37.
38 Ibid., p. 26.
39 Ibid., p. 37.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

11.3 Kierkegaardian Existential Ethics and Liberal Eugenics

Seen in this light, however, it is unclear why Habermas insists on the fact that the intervention of others' choices, their *actions* which affect our biological constitution, should have any impact at all on the freedom to choose our *selves*. Certainly, such actions may affect the biological conditions upon which we come into the world—our genetic makeup, the facticity which regulates certain historico-social facts of our determination. But if the choice of our *selves* is indeed absolute, there is no reason *a priori* why such decisions should have any more impact than, say, the natural processes of selection inherent in procreation or the basic biological determinism inherent in every human being's existence. In light of these reflections, it appears clear that Habermas' dialogue with Kierkegaard remains artificial because, in his desire to secularize the moral problems which eugenics poses for us, he nevertheless unavowedly retains an inherently religious view of human nature as sacred, while simultaneously attempting to argue that the reasons why eugenics should be regarded with caution are of a moral and legal nature. Yet these arguments are incompatible. *Either* we must assume, as Kierkegaard does, that human nature is itself the foundation upon which each individual becomes what he becomes, independent of external social factors and circumstances in which he later learns to navigate, in which case there is no reason *a priori* that the modification of man's biological constitution should influence possibilities of self-appropriation *unless* such modifications make human beings into something other than human beings (the creation of a new species, for example). *Or* we can assume that the entire foundation of human selfhood is based on social, legal, linguistic, and political contexts in which the individual is inherently inscribed and against which he identifies himself, as Habermas does, in which case the generalization of eugenics and the modification of human biological constitution should not greatly modify the relations of recognition which presently exist in our rather inegalitarian societies.

It should be noted, however, that in the latter analysis, the emphasis should be placed on the notion of *generalization*. For the real philosophical problem inherent in the question is one that Habermas evokes but fails to develop in *Zukunft:* that of the *liberalization* of eugenic practices within a capitalized economy. Only one brief mention of this problem can be found in the text: "In liberal societies, it's the market, determined by the search for profit and the preferences linked to demand that will leave decisions…up to the individual choices of pa-

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

rents, and in general, to the anarchic desires of its users and clients."[40] We would argue that this is the real issue for concern,[41] which Habermas unfortunately fails to develop in *Zukunft*. For there is no strong argument enabling us to affirm that the choice of parents to have recourse to eugenics will strongly alter the existing political and social contexts through which our identities are constructed. Habermas insists on the idea that such practices might implement a fundamental inequality, since the programmed child will not be able to switch places with his programmer, not be able to re-appropriate himself and set himself upon equal footing. Yet this argument fails to recognize that in *natural* social conditions, *this is already the case*.[42] The natural son cannot change places with his father any more than a biologically altered son could. This is precisely the argument that Peter Sloterdijk presents in *Regeln für den Menschenpark*, where he suggests that the contemporary questions posed by bioengineering and prenatal selection as technical possibilities are really no more than an extension of the processes of selection, breeding and determination inherent within civilization itself.[43] With regard to Habermas' arguments, then, the problem of eugenics is not one of choice, but rather of the *absence of choice*. Eugenics poses a problem precisely because it is not preference which determines the individual, *but rather the system which determines preferences*, price and offer ultimately leading to a predetermined selection of traits and characteristics which will determine not only individual genetic makeup, but also social classes and structures.

With regard to this debate, would a Kierkegaardian approach to existential ethics have anything to say? Habermas is quick to dismiss Kierkegaard, suggesting that an existential ethics can provide no grounding for the constitution of normative moral requirements or principles. Yet it is not clear that this is indeed the case. Where modern (twentieth-century) accounts of existential ethics fail to demonstrate how an understanding of moral requirement could be anything

40 Habermas, *Die Zukunft*, p. 86.

41 Despite the fact that some thinkers associate this claim with a sort of "science fiction"; see for example David Gurnham, "Bioethics As Science Fiction: Making Sense of Habermas's *The Future of Human Nature*," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, vol. 21, 2012, pp. 235–46.

42 Kelly Oliver insists on the importance of political and social preferences, which are generally overlooked in speculative debates on the topic, noting that while of course there is no way of saying that it is morally preferable for an individual to have, say, a certain color of hair or skin, these traits may represent a distinct advantage or disadvantage within socio-political contexts, and thus can have a major impact on the individual's ability to exist within society (Oliver, "Genetic Engineering," pp. 28–29).

43 Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1999.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

other than subjective, since they are founded on the presupposition of the *ontological* solitude of the human being as isolated subjectivity and derive therefrom a conception of *moral* solitude, this second movement is not necessary. It is true that, in many respects, Kierkegaard does seem to defend the position that ethical existence is always that of a subject incapable of relating directly to another subject. In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard/Climacus remarks that: "existing ethically (*ethisk*)...the individual human being stands alone."[44] Separation does seem to be an existential condition, in Kierkegaard's view: not only is the subject separated from other subjects, but also from the different dimensions of himself. However, "standing alone" does not imply, for Kierkegaard, that man is self-legislating, the author of his own fate, and the creator of moral norms, principles, or requirement. Rather, if in ethical existence, the individual human being stands alone, this only refers to the fact that each individual is himself responsible *for himself*, that no one can be judged in his stead. He is responsible for what he is, even when he cannot choose; as such, Kierkegaard/Judge Wilhelm writes that "even the lowliest of individuals has a double existence. He, too, has a history, and this is not simply a product of his own free acts. The interior deed, on the other hand, belongs to him and will belong to him forever; history or world history cannot take it from him."[45] Standing alone, or ontological solitude as we have termed it, simply refers to the individual "interior deed," and not to the origins of moral requirement. In other words, the individual stands alone insofar as it is his task, and his alone, to subjectively appropriate for himself his own freedom and assume the responsibility that this entails.

However, if the ethical can been understood as an individual task, it is precisely because the ethical is not for Kierkegaard something posited within the individual—to the contrary, the ethical is the domain of the universal, and only as such can the moral requirement be anything other than arbitrary construct. As such, ethics can only be understood as a science based on *universal* postulates, the first of which is that: "Ethics (*Ethiken*) focuses upon the individual, and ethically understood it is every individual's task to become a whole human being, just as it is the presupposition of ethics that everyone is born in the state of being able to become that."[46] The moral requirement thus stems, for Kierkegaard, not from existence or human nature itself, but from our ability to understand our existence from a universal point of view. Thus, the ethical choice is not one of relative norms or values, "this or that," but rather the choice of "the ab-

44 *SKS* 7, 295 / *CUP1*, 323.
45 *SKS* 3, 171 / *EO2*, 175.
46 *SKS* 7, 316–17 / *CUP1*, 346.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

solute" and of "eternal validity."[47] For every individual, this is a task which he must accomplish alone, but which is only possible because he is precisely not alone in the world.

Does this entail that an existential ethics supposes that there are no universal norms to which we can appeal, as Habermas suggests? While Kierkegaard is highly critical of the variability of socially constructed moral norms, which are obviously contingent and relative from one society to the next, his works do point to some universal principles, and insist on the fact that existential choice "is not lawless; neither does it itself establish the law."[48] Rather, there are some universal principles that Kierkegaard articulates in his works, the two most fundamental being (1) the duty to love one's neighbor as oneself, which is "essentially to will to exist equally for unconditionally every human being" rejecting all consideration of contingent, socially or physically rooted disparities between individuals,[49] and (2) the duty to judge oneself more severely than one judges others, or perhaps more radically the obligation to make "everyone judge only himself."[50]

Are these principles sufficient to respond to the complex questions that modern technologies raise about the future of human nature and morality? Habermas is perhaps right to suggest that in the face of these developments, only a return to an existential ethics can offer a solution. However, in his appeals to Kierkegaard, Habermas places the criterion of living a meaningful life on the wrong side of the debate. A Kierkegaardian existential ethics, which insists on *our duties* to ourselves and others, our judgments of ourselves, would ask the question in a very different manner: what does it say about *me*, that *I* believe that I could only love my child if he had a particular hair or skin color, particular intellectual or physical capacities? What does it say about *me*, that *I* grant more importance to the accidental attributes of my future child than to the "eternal validity" of his self? What does it say about my own life, that I think that it would be more meaningful if future generations had certain capacities, traits, and dispositions?

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard suggests that the only way in which a person's ability to love is fully made manifest is through his relations to those who are not living: "if you want to ascertain what love there is in you or in another person, then pay attention to how he relates to the dead."[51] It is only through the rela-

47 *SKS* 3, 205 / *EO2*, 214.
48 *SKS* 3, 251 / *EO2*, 264.
49 *SKS* 9, 89 / *WL*, 84.
50 *SKS* 5, 333 / *EUD*, 345.
51 *SKS* 9, 341 / *WL*, 347.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

tionship to the dead that the living are “disclosed”[52] in all their fullness, only in relationship to the absent that they may become fully present. In all worldly interactions, we see ourselves and others through our *relationships to* others, we understand ourselves subjectively by objectifying others. Yet “[o]ne who is dead is no actual object; he is only the occasion that continually discloses what resides in the one living who relates himself to him or that helps to make manifest the nature of the one living who does not relate himself to him.”[53] This argument could also be made for the not-yet living, the yet-unborn children of future generations. Their absence is an appeal to our own self-examination, to our judgment of ourselves and the principles upon which we ourselves act and deploy our freedom.

Kierkegaard certainly never envisaged the possibilities that modern science, genetic engineering, cloning and other technological developments have opened up for humanity. Yet his works do offer a path for thinking through these questions. As such, Habermas is right to suggest that a return to existential ethics may be the only solution faced with a situation in which no norms or precedents can determine what is right or good. However, he is mistaken in situating the existential question within the possibilities of future generations. There is no strong argument to say that genetically modified individuals would be less able to “be themselves” simply because of genetic alteration. The real questions that we ought to ask—from the perspective of an existential ethics—are not about our ability to be ourselves, but rather about how we demonstrate our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to others through our practices. How can we be sure that the choices we are making are really our own, and not dictated by the social and political contexts in which we find ourselves? How can we be sure that we are choosing *absolutely*, in a world where “we are everywhere lavishly regaled with pragmatic rules, a calculus of considerations” that point us in the direction of “habitual and excessive relativity”?[54] How can we understand *our own* lives as meaningful, if we place the value of the life of another in non-essential attributes such as physical characteristics or capacities?

Kierkegaard’s existential ethics invites us to understand that every individual, as a self, has infinite eternal value, and that ethics is precisely the recognition of this infinite eternal value. While Kierkegaard certainly understands this from a religious perspective, there is no need to appeal to a form of divine transcen-

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 *SKS* 8, 67–68 / *TA*, 70.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

dence or creation to maintain this presupposition. From a secular perspective, we can just as well understand ourselves as *selves* as beings of infinite eternal value—indeed, this may well be the criterion upon which we can understand ourselves as selves at all. This is not an appeal to an ideal of the individual as sovereign and self-legislating, but merely a fact of human experience: if our lives have meaning for us at all, it is because we are passionately engaged in them. We cannot understand ourselves as beings of only finite value without falling into despair. Whether this corresponds to any actual fact about reality is not the question—it is what we are as selves, and not as mere biological beings, that opens up the dimensions of the ethical. Yet it is clear as well that it is impossible to attribute such absolute value to the notion of selfhood without also recognizing ourselves as duty-bound toward others with whom we share kinship. As such, an existential ethics cannot focus solely on self-realization, but depends on our ability to relate to others in the right type of way.

To the question of liberal eugenics, Kierkegaard could thus offer the following (secular) response: in choosing to engage in such practices, what is at stake is not the freedom of future human beings, but rather our own freedom. Our ability to understand ourselves as selves requires that we attribute some absolute, eternal (yet non-substantial) value to the notion of selfhood. Yet this is only possible if we understand our lives as more than mere finite existences—be they biological or social. And it requires an appeal to the universal dimensions of the ethical, to the infinite relationships in which we engage with others. Yet as Kierkegaard/a "pastor from Jylland" remarks, the only way by which we can engage with others infinitely is by first understanding that with regard to others, "we are always in the wrong."[55] "Therefore, wishing to be in the wrong is an expression of an infinite relationship, and wanting to be in the right, or finding it painful to be in the wrong, is an expression of a finite relationship."[56] Making irreversible choices for other individuals will not in itself deprive them of the possibility to be themselves and to lead a meaningful life—although this certainly might have an impact on the social and political existence of these individuals. But it would deprive us, *those who choose*, of our own freedom and meaningfulness: it would condemn us to engaging with others only through finite relationships, and to seeing our own lives as mere finite, meaningless existences.

55 *SKS* 3, 326 / *EO2*, 346.
56 *SKS* 3, 327 / *EO2*, 348.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Conclusion

As progress in biotechnologies continues to shape and reshape our view of nature, the focus of many debates has surreptitiously shifted. When Dolly was cloned in 1996, the major debate was whether cloning (and especially human cloning) was an acceptable practice at all; a quarter of a century later, the major question is now whether to limit cloning to purely therapeutic practices, or extend it to reproductive cloning. Decried after the Second World War, eugenics is now once again on the verge of becoming a socially accepted practice, at least as far as the early detection and prevention of serious and potentially handicapping illnesses is concerned, and many are the proponents of "designer babies." Almost without our being aware of the shift, the question has become one of the *limits* we impose upon our technological prowess, and no longer one of *whether* these technologies should be used at all. In light of these debates, normative ethics indeed has little to offer, as Habermas points out, aside from the Precautionary Principle. Yet however necessary this principle may be, it is clear that it can hold off neither the development of new biotechnologies, nor the evolution in mentalities and social norms that these entail. However careful we may be in attempting to foresee the potential social, political, and biological effects of new technologies, we simply have no scientific grounding upon which to draw our conclusions—and we will have no such grounding until these effects have already become the norm.

Despite the inconsistencies inherent in Habermas' *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*, this text has one great merit: Habermas recognizes here that a strictly normative approach to ethics cannot offer a response to many of the questions that scientific developments are bringing up with regard to the future of human nature, and argues for a revival of existential ethics. Contrary to Habermas' argument, however, existential ethics is not a "post-metaphysical" approach to the Good, but rather an inherently metaphysical questioning of existence. What is human reality? What is the individual human being, what is the nature of individual experience? What *value* and *meaning* does existence have? These are questions to which we cannot offer a normative, societal response.

While existential ethics and normative principles are not mutually exclusive, existential ethics places the emphasis on the criteria for meaningful selfhood, rather than on the principles that guide our actions. In order to make choices, to act in ways which can be construed as meaningful, we first have to understand ourselves as beings whose lives have meaning for us. While Sartre and Heidegger's radicalized understanding of human subjectivity seems to leave no room

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

for ethical concern for others, existential ethics does not necessarily have to lead down to solipsism. Kierkegaard's notion of the self as relating to itself *through another* offers a path to understanding that the meaningfulness of our existence is dependent upon the ways in which we engage with others. With regard to contemporary debates, this approach is all the more necessary, since it invites us to see the future human beings these decisions will impact not as mere objects of theoretical reasoning, but as real, individual human beings whose selfhood is at stake: individuals who share kinship with us and to whom we owe responsibility.

Existential ethics cannot, and ought not, replace normative debates about the role and effects of biotechnologies in our societies. However, it invites us to return to the fundamental questions that these debates often occult, and to examine the beliefs and suppositions that underlie many of our positions. For example, many proponents of the application of eugenic practices for therapeutic purposes claim that these practices will enable us to eliminate illnesses leading to severe handicaps. We often forget, however, that this desire for progress already contains a normative value judgment: that the life of a handicapped person is somehow less good, less worth living, than the life of a non-handicapped person, and that the handicapped person would have led a "better" life had he not suffered from this handicap. Are we justified in making such claims? Do we indeed have the authority to decide what constitutes for another a "good" or "better" life? To answer such a question, we would have to presuppose that we have access to some outside, universal perspective. Existential ethics encourages us to rethink our positions and normative values, and to understand that such normative judgments are not *legitimate* considerations, that we do not have the knowledge or capacity to decide on questions such as these. Habermas is certainly right to suggest that what is important in existential ethics is the possibility of constructing oneself *as self*, however, he fails to see that the problem inherent in normative debates is not one about the possibilities of future individuals, but rather one of the ways in which norms are *already constructed* in our present societies. And though existential ethics may not be able to respond to all questions, it nevertheless leads to the construction of some normative principles. Most importantly, it suggests that since no individual has the experience of another's life, *no one has the right* to decide for another whether his life is meaningful, whether his life is worth living. And therefore, it is never legitimate to act in such a way that we surreptitiously make that decision in his stead.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Jakub Marek

12 Creatures of Habit

On Second Nature, Habitual Behavior, and Ethical Life in Kierkegaard

Introduction

This paper proposes a somewhat radical reading of Søren Kierkegaard, a reading emphasizing a less investigated aspect of ethical life.[1] The analyzed phenomena belong to the ethical "souterrain," or the ground floor of everyday institutions. Instead of focusing on ethics as involving a conscious deliberative agency, I wish to tackle the question of the role of *habit* in Kierkegaard.[2] My first problem thus will be the notion of habit, habituality, or even *Sittlichkeit* in the Hegelian sense.[3] My focus here lies with the idea that habitual behavior ought not be discarded as "inferior" compared to the higher faculties of ethical deliberation. On the contrary, I wish to place Kierkegaard's anthropology in the context of 19th century debate on the role of habits (and, specifically: second nature) in the formation of ethical life. For Hegel, habituality constitutes a necessary foundation for higher ethical agencies, for Darwin habituality directly contributes to the emergence of specifically human morality, and Nietzsche reverses the view of higher and lower ethical determinations, arguing that we incorporate habituality to the point that it reshapes our corporality. In the case of Kierkegaard, I wish to present a reading of habituality in contrast to the idea of free agency and Christianity. In habits (through second nature) man succumbs to a life of illusionary security and becomes incapable of moral action. Put differently, my interpretation revolves around the notion of "second nature," which in the tradition of European philosophy equates to habitualized behavior as opposed to purely instinctive (natural) behavior. As we will see, this notion of second nature

1 This publication was supported by The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports—Institutional Support for Long-term Development of Research Organizations—Charles University, Prague, Faculty of Humanities (2019).

2 The role of habit in Kierkegaard's philosophy has already been investigated by Clare Carlisle. My contribution is informed by her research and takes a different approach, stressing the idea of "second nature" and corporality. Both play only a very limited role in Carlisle's book. See Clare Carlisle, *On Habit*, London: Routledge 2014.

3 Usually translated into English as "ethical life."

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-013

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

comes with a twist on the part of "nature," when habituality becomes so natural that it brings about the possibility of having an effect on the corporality of the moral agent.

My second point of contention involves the problem of "moral instincts." Here I am very briefly following up on discussions about the developmental theory of such instincts in recent literature.[4] What interests us here is the idea that morality, ethical agency, etc. have an evolutionary background. Simply put, this evolutionary theory argues not only that we share the origin of our moral faculties with our close relatives on the tree of life, but also—and this is the important part—that these can evolve, change, and become rearticulated. Without this evolution, there would be no higher ethical life. I will shortly refer to Darwin, who unambiguously connected the two, evolution and the higher faculties of man. "The feeling of religious devotion is a highly complex one, consisting of love, complete submission to an exalted and mysterious superior, a strong sense of dependence, fear, reverence, gratitude, hope for the future, and perhaps other elements. No being could experience so complex an emotion until advanced in his intellectual and moral faculties to at least a moderately high level."[5] For Darwin, this advancement transcends the ontogenetic development of the individual and involves the animal relatives of mankind.

My primary concern lies with Kierkegaard. How are we to make sense of such arguments in relation to Kierkegaard's work? I will focus on the role of habit and argue that Kierkegaard explicitly discusses the problem of habitual behavior changing—as he would say—the human race. Changing how? In two principal respects. Firstly, the change is cultural, involving the gradual process of leveling. More interestingly, the change can also affect humanity as a race. Kierkegaard's radical analysis of the contemporary age culminates in late journal entries, where Kierkegaard employs the idea of "degeneration" to express his lasting concern for the ongoing historical-societal change. I will present an interpretation of the progress of habituality, where such moral instincts and moral faculties degenerate. The progress of culture, the progress of generations leads, according to this reading of Kierkegaard, to a gradual loss of the ability to be or become a Christian. In short, I am trying to argue that Kierkegaard stands on the brink of declaring the human race to be irreversibly degenerate, incapable of (moral) agency in the highest sense—of Christianity.

---

4 See Darcia Narvaez, *Embodied Morality: Protectionism, Engagement and Imagination*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, p. 12.

5 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and the Selection in Relation to Sex*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1981, p. 68.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

12.1 Moral Agency and Habitual Behavior

Let me phrase out my principal considerations in more detail. The analysis presented here is based on the following specific questions: 1) What are the conditions of moral agency? Re-translated into the problem developed by Vigilius Haufnienis, the author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, the first question reads: what are the psychological conditions of ethical capacities? What faculties inherent in human nature make explicit ethical standpoints possible?[6] 2) What are the *inherited* conditions of moral agency? Here the emphasis is being placed on the idea of heredity rather than substantiality. Is there any real relevance of such views in Kierkegaard? Does not such a proposition contradict the Christian anthropology of "Imago Dei," of the immutable nature of man created in God's image? In Kierkegaard's philosophy (and theology) we encounter a very specific concoction of traditional dogmatic views and very progressive voluntarist ideas. The cornerstone of his anthropology and of the problem of heredity that we need to investigate is the notion of "hereditary sin" [*Arvesynd*]. 3) Are "moral faculties" immutable? In evolutionary theory, "inherited" does not necessarily equate to "immutable," but rather the opposite. In the framework of Kierkegaard's philosophy, such reasoning is much more problematic. The question stands: Is it possible for inborn moral capacities to change over time? To change from one generation to another? 4) What is the relation between moral agency and habitual behavior? In other words, are the two mutually exclusive? Is it the case that only moral agency is constitutive of morally valid actions, while habitual behavior remains morally defective or neutral at best? Is habituality to be avoided, overcome, or suppressed? Or, rather, should we give more credit to the ethical life of habituality? In this case study a different view of ethical deliberation, a bottom-up rather than top-down view of ethics will be developed.

European philosophy has traditionally understood the human capacity of moral behavior to be directly linked to the highest and most ideal qualities of the human condition: to freedom, responsibility, spontaneity, independence, autonomy, but also to the religious aspects of *charitas*, love for one's neighbor, and other moral capacities in general resulting from man's creation in God's image. Moral capacities are conceived from the viewpoint of eternity—as substantially not changing. That being said, I am hoping to draw the reader's attention to a different understanding of ethical life formulated over the course of the 19th century. My very brief and rudimentary discussion of this competing take on ethical life will start with Hegel. I will follow his developmental perspective as it be-

6 See *SKS* 4, 326–329 / *CA*, 19–21.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

comes absorbed and rearticulated by Darwin's evolutionary theory and, in a specific reading, finally reflected in Nietzsche's work. My hope here is to sketch out a contextual background fit to support my reading of Kierkegaard.

12.2 Habit and Second Nature: Cicero, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Darwin

This study approaches the problem of habituality and second nature using a truly improbable source: Kierkegaard, especially his *The Concept of Anxiety*. When Haufniensis declares that "[a]nxiety in a later individual is more reflective as a consequence of his participation in the history of the race—something that can be compared with habit, which is something of a second nature,"[7] he is implicitly pinpointing two further problems. Firstly, the process of anxiety equates to the process—or rather progress—of hereditary sin. But hereditary sin here ought not to be understood as sin passed on to the offspring by their parents, i.e. genetically.[8] Hereditary sin seems to be present as it were in the form of anxiety. At the same time, it does not qualitatively differ from the original sin (that of Adam). The difference lies in what Haufniensis calls a "more" of anxiety. "[W]e inherit only the anxiety-ridden propensity to sin; the actual act of sinning happens only through the single individual's decision and act."[9] The second point I need to make regards the notion of "second nature." By second nature Kierkegaard does not understand a simple rhetorical figure of speech, but rather refers to a vast tradition of distinguishing between the first (inborn) and second (cultural) natures of humanity. In order to understand the importance of the notion of second nature in *The Concept of Anxiety* (and Kierkegaard's work *in toto*), I will turn now to a more detailed discussion of the idea.

A) The classical formulation of the idea of second nature goes back to Cicero, firstly to his *De Natura Deorum:* "We enjoy the fruits of the plains and of the mountains, the rivers and the lakes are ours, we sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilize the soil by irrigation, we confine the rivers and straighten or divert

7 *SKS* 4, 358 / *CA*, 53.

8 See Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, "The Interpretation of Hereditary Sin in *The Concept of Anxiety* by Kierkegaard's Pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis," *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2010, pp. 131–146. For further discussion of the problem see Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, p. 41.

9 Leo Stan, "Sin," *Kierkegaard's Concepts, Tome VI: Salvation to Writing*, ed. by Steven M. Emmanuel and Jon Stewart, Farnham: Ashgate 2016 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15), p. 47.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

their courses. In fine, by means of our hands we essay to create as it was a second world within the world of nature."[10] Next, in the treatise on the ends of goods and evils (*De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*), Cicero famously asserts that "habit is like second nature."[11] The canonical formulation linking habit with second nature was adopted by other authors of late antiquity such as Augustine, Plutarch, and Rufus, to name a few. The shared view of second nature is such that it equates human institutions and habits—to the artificial world of spirit, culture, and civilization. Furthermore, we can follow Italo Testa's distinction between the "subjective" and "objective" aspects of second nature, the subjective ones being habits, ethical customs, virtues, abilities, faculties and characteristics of the individual. Objective second nature comprises social forms and relationships, as well as institutions (education, technology, culture, laws, statehood).[12]

Second nature is similar to the first nature in providing a substitute for drives, instincts and immediate reactions. Our second nature operates, similarly to the first nature, by enclosing us within a network of habitualized (instinctive in the case of the first nature) behavioral responses to stimuli. Yet we acquire these responsive patterns by enculturation, through upbringing, tradition, or schools: we appropriate the second nature by learning, by repetition and imitation. The function of second nature is to create an environment suitable for human life, to provide at the most basic level the necessary means of survival, albeit in a cultural more than a natural sense; second nature becomes in this way the infrastructure of our everyday activity. Below the surface level of conscious activity remains the level of automatic, unwitting behavior. We do not get to choose our second nature; it is imposed on us and we are introduced into it at birth. Second nature provides us with reactions and habits, patterns of behavior which bypass decision and intentionality. On the one hand, it reduces the load of investing conscious attention into the minute details of our lives, on the other hand, it diminishes the share of voluntary participation in ev-

10 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1933 (*Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 268), p. 271. "*Terrenorum item commodorum omnis est in homine dominatus : nos campis nos montibus fruimur, nostri sunt amnes nostri lacus, nos fruges serimus nos arbores, nos aquarum inductionibus terris fecunditatem damus, nos flumina arcemus derigimus avertimus, nostris denique manibus in rerum natura quasi* alteram naturam *efficere conamur*" (Ibid., p. 270, my emphasis).

11 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, Portsmouth: William Heinemann 1914 (*Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 40), pp. 466 f.

12 Italo Testa, "Selbstbewußtsein und zweite Natur," *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes—Ein kooperativer Kommentar zu einem Schlüsselwerk der Moderne*, ed. by Klaus Vieweg and Wolfgang Welsh, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2008, p. 287.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

eryday life. And yet as we will see, habitual behavior has far-reaching consequences for human life.

B) The rudimentary idea of second nature has survived in its canonical form throughout the Middle Ages and early modernity, periodically surfacing in various authors' works.[13] In the German-speaking world, the idea of a second nature has become widespread since early Enlightenment and is evidenced in the writings of Lichtenberg or Herder.[14] Our specific interest, however, lies with G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel does not provide a sustained and comprehensive discussion of the problem of second nature. He does, however, refer to the notion in one of the most crucial passages of his last major published work. In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues: "The basis [*Boden*] of right is the realm of spirit in general and its precise location and point of departure is the will; the will is free, so that freedom constitutes its substance and destiny [*Bestimmung*] and the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom, the world of spirit produced from within itself as a *second nature*."[15]

For Hegel, spirit is, in very simple terms, "rationalized intersubjectivity," or rather it is the actuality of rational society, its realization. Such society is based on right and is made possible by free will. Free will is not to be understood as arbitrariness [*Willkür*], the faculty of choosing between arbitrary alternatives (choosing A over B), but rather as the actualization of freedom in the sense of mutual recognition within a society. To be free is dependent upon the institutions making my (individual) freedom possible. It is in this sense that the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom. Freedom has to do with institutions, with sediments of reason perfected in history. The world of spirit is the second human nature, rational intersubjectivity becomes our world and we navigate this world "naturally": "It does not occur to someone who walks the streets in safety at night that this might be otherwise, for this habit of [living in] safety has become second nature, and we scarcely stop to think that it is solely the ef-

13 Just one example in Pascal's *Pensées:* "*Les pères craignent que l'amour naturel des enfants ne s'efface. Quelle est donc cette nature sujette à être effacée? La coutume est une seconde nature, qui détruit la première. Mais qu'est-ce que nature? Pourquoi la coutume n'est-elle pas naturelle? J'ai grand peur que cette nature ne soit elle-même qu'une première coutume, comme la coutume est une seconde nature.*" Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Paris: Gallimard 1936, p. 74. I want to thank Oliver Norman for bringing this to my attention.

14 See "Natur," *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, vol. 13, Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1854–1961, p. 440.

15 G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen W. Wood, trans. by H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 35. G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, vol. 7 of *Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer und Karl Markus Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1986, p. 46 (my emphasis).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

fect of particular institutions."[16] The naturalness of such second nature so far involves an almost somnambular quality of how one navigates the world, how naturally one embraces the world of institutions and "ready-made" solutions to everyday problems.

Yet Hegel's view of second nature reaches further and deeper. Second nature not only becomes adopted and acquired; it becomes outright embodied, naturalized, and incorporated: Hegel makes the suggestion that by perpetuating ethical (*sittliche*) habits, one naturalizes them, so that, eventually, they become one's second nature.[17] In the *Encyclopaedia's* (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*) discussion of habit, Hegel links it directly to the above-mentioned aspects:

> Habit, like memory, is a hard point in the organization of the mind; habit is the mechanism of self-feeling, as memory is the mechanism of intelligence. The *natural* qualities and alterations of age, of sleeping and waking, are immediately natural; habit is the determinacy of feeling...made into something that is natural, mechanical. Habit has rightly been called a second nature: *nature*, because it is an immediate being of the soul, a *second* nature, because it is an immediacy *posited* by the soul, incorporating and moulding the bodiliness [*Ein- und Durchbildung der Leiblichkeit*] that pertains to the determinations of feeling as such and to the determinacies of representation and of the will in so far as they are embodied.[18]

What is Hegel suggesting? Firstly: habit is an instinct-like mechanism, it allows for automated behavior. But at the same time the habitual patterns arose from intentional human actions, they were "posited by the soul." Thirdly, and this is a truly puzzling comment: second nature is naturalized in the sense of "incorporating and moulding the bodiliness" of individuals. Without much to lean on

---

16 Hegel, *Elements of Philosophy of Right*, p. 289 / *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, p. 414.
17 Hegel, *Elements of Philosophy of Right*, p. 35, p. 195 / *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, p. 46, p. 301.
18 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2007, p. 131 / G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften,* vol 10 of *Werke in 20 Bänden*, p. 184: "*Die Gewohnheit ist wie das Gedächtnis ein schwerer Punkt in der Organisation des Geistes; die Gewohnheit ist der Mechanismus des Selbstgefühls wie das Gedächtnis der Mechanismus der Intelligenz. Die* natürlichen *Qualitäten und Veränderungen des Alters, des Schlafens und Wachens sind unmittelbar natürlich; die Gewohnheit ist die zu einem Natürlichseienden, Mechanischen gemachte Bestimmtheit des Gefühls, auch der Intelligenz, des Willens usf., insofern sie zum Selbstgefühl gehören. Die Gewohnheit ist mit Recht eine zweite Natur genannt worden,—*Natur*, denn sie ist ein unmittelbares Sein der Seele,—eine* zweite, *denn sie ist eine von der Seele* gesetzte *unmittelbarkeit, eine Ein- und Durchbildung der Leiblichkeit, die den Gefühlsbestimmungen als solchen und den Vorstellungs- [und] Willensbestimmtheiten als verleiblichten (§ 401) zukommt.*"

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

in interpreting this cryptic formulation,[19] I would suggest that Hegel understands habitual behavior as having a direct "physiological" effect by appropriating sensory organs and sensory neural pathways[20] differently than in the situation of a "first nature." What is speech physiologically other than using vocal cords in an "unnatural" way? "Natural" use of vocal cords—screams, growls, grunts, etc.—sometimes sounds to us, in its "naturalness," exactly like something brutish and wild. We have appropriated our bodiliness and reshaped it to fit the cultural needs of our second nature. In this sense we acquire a second nature not only by bypassing our instinctiveness (Hegel would argue that we need to "purify" our instincts or impulses), but rather by cultivating our bodiliness.

The argumentation presented so far has already drawn a first full circle: Habit is a condition, a prerequisite of moral faculties, but at the same time it also somehow molds the bodiliness of a moral agent. Our ability to see the world, to interact in our cultural world, is physiologically dependent on our habitualized behavior, on being "enculturated." I would also like to stress that in Hegel's account we do not inherit second nature genetically, but culturally. Our second nature is the spiritual environment of cultural institutions, the rationality embedded in our intersubjective relationships.

C) Before we finally turn to Kierkegaard, I need to discuss the same problem in the works of two other authors, the first of them being Friedrich Nietzsche.[21] For the sake of my argument Nietzsche serves the role of an extreme position, Hegel being the other extreme and Kierkegaard oscillating somewhere between the two. Nietzsche's first encounter with the problem of habit comes up in his discussions of the role of culture in the life of a nation and individuals. From this point of view, habits facilitate and solidify culture and, subsequently, through habits those individuals who belong to such culture, those cultured in it, become themselves "solidified." This is a strong motif investigated by Nietzsche in the early stage of his philosophical career, especially in the *Untimely Meditations* (*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*). However, the notion is a double-edged

19 Novakovic, in her otherwise excellent monograph (*Hegel on Second Nature in Ethical Life*) quotes the same passage, albeit without offering an interpretation of the "moulding" of bodiliness. See Andreja Novakovic, *Hegel on Second Nature in Ethical Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, p. 36.

20 Physiology of sensory perception is here used as an example rather than as an exhaustive description.

21 In this section I am partially adapting some of the material used in my study of the problem of degeneration in Nietzsche's philosophy: Jakub Marek, "O pokroku, degeneraci a Nietzscheově ctnosti, jež obdarovává," *Nietzsche o ctnosti*, ed. by Ondřej Sikora, Jakub Chavalka, Prague: Filosofia 2018, pp. 16–35.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

sword; one acquires a solid ground in culture, a "protective and veiling cloud,"[22] but, on the other hand, one could easily become dissolved in such habitualized culture, lose one's individuality and creative potential. "Since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and error."[23] Similarly to Hegel's view, Nietzsche emphasizes the historical role of second nature: in history, behavioral patterns have become solidified, creating the foundation for cultural interaction. Nietzsche perceives the value of habitualized culture very critically and, unlike Hegel, rejects the idea of progressive rationality in history. Nietzsche also challenges the duality of naturalness (first nature) and arbitrariness (second nature). Should we try to rid ourselves of habits, become "natural," we achieve at best that we "implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature."[24] It is constitutive of the process of naturalizing habitual behavior that any difference between first and second nature becomes dubious: "[T]his first nature was once a second nature and…every victorious second nature will become a first."[25]

In Nietzsche's account, man is not a tabula rasa, but rather a palimpsest, a sheet of parchment covered in script that has been repeatedly written over and scratched out, making any distinction between the first and second nature obsolete. There is no indisputable "nature" underneath, only a series of "re-naturalizations." In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche briefly comments on the relationship between drives and moral judgments: "In itself it has [humility], *like every drive* [Trieb], neither this moral character nor any moral character at all, nor even a definite attendant sensation of pleasure or displeasure: it acquires all this, as its second nature, only when it enters into relations with drives already baptized good or evil or is noted as a quality of beings the people has already evaluated and determined in a moral sense."[26]

---

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 97 / Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin: de Gruyter, München: dtv 1980 (*Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1), p. 298.

23 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 76 / *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, p. 270.

24 Ibid.

25 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 77 / *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, p. 270.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 26 / Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin: de Gruyter, München: dtv 1980 (*Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3), p. 46: "*An sich hat er,* wie jeder Trieb, *weder diess noch überhaupt einen moralischen Charakter und Namen, noch selbst eine bestimmte begleitende Empfindung der Lust oder Unlust: er erwirbt diess Alles erst, als seine zweite Natur, wenn er in Relation zu schon auf gut und böse ge-*

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

From the very early unfinished fragment "on truth and lies in non-moral sense" onward,[27] Nietzsche associates metaphors with virtues, social behavior, morality, habit, and finally with bodiliness too. *Cum grano salis*, one might argue that Nietzsche's mature philosophy takes the form of a continuous investigation into the process of how moral values become *incorporated*.[28] These values are for the most part nihilistic, thus turning the process of incorporating them into a process of decadence. Nietzsche's philosophy might then be revealed to be a therapeutic and diagnostic endeavor, where the author probes into the nature of decadence and at the same time struggles to halt its progress.

My exposition of Nietzsche's notion of second nature needs to turn to the centerpiece of his authorship in *Zarathustra*. The term second nature does not come up in the book, but the notion as such certainly does: "Upward flies our sense; thus it is a parable of our body, a parable of elevation. Such elevation parables are the names of the virtues."[29] In Nietzsche's understanding, moral values originated in metaphorical projections of what had previously been expressed by bodily dimensions: upright stance, power, etc. Nietzsche's perception of the relationship between corporality and values results in a truly remarkable view of historicity. It is this metaphorical or metaphorized body that is the subject of history, the body that becomes changed and developed by values originating in itself. However, the process works the other way around too. The body is changed by incorporating values. Very much like *bodily* uprightness gave origin to the values of *moral* uprightness, the body starts to crouch down as the result of incorporating the values of submission and self-denial. In history it is not the spirit that evolves, but the body. "Thus the body goes through history, becoming and fighting. And the spirit—what is it to the body? The herald of its fights and victories, companion and echo."[30] Or elsewhere: "But the awakened, the know-

---

tauften Trieben tritt, oder als Eigenschaft von Wesen bemerkt wird, welche vom Volke schon moralisch festgestellt und abgeschätzt sind."

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne," ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin: de Gruyter, Munich: dtv 1980 (*Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1), pp. 873–890.

28 I am drawing on the excellent research by my colleague Jakub Chavalka, who has focused on the interplay between morality and incorporation. See Jakub Chavalka, *Přivtělení a morálka*, Prague: Togga 2014.

29 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 57 (On the Bestowing Virtue I) / Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin: de Gruyter, Munich: dtv 1980 (*Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 4), p. 98.

30 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 57 (On the Bestowing Virtue I) / *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 98.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ing one says: body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is just a word for something on the body."[31] The body becomes, as it were, the somatic memory of previous metaphorical expressions. A history of incorporation: "Indeed, human beings were an experiment. Alas, much ignorance and error have become embodied in us! Not only the reason of millennia—their madness too breaks out in us. It is dangerous to be an heir."[32] In my reading, Nietzsche presents the most interesting theory of "second nature," a theory of psychosomatic interdependency, according to which culture is the expression of the body, a translation of the bodily dimensions and experience into a foreign medium, the medium of language. These expressions and metaphors acquire independent existence, become values in their own right, alienate themselves from their origin, become decadent only to finally be re-acquired, re-appropriated and re-incorporated, thus changing the corporality itself.

D) Nietzsche's position is already informed by his—albeit problematic and selective—reading of Darwin. Moreover, Charles Darwin authored a novel view of moral capacities. Ever since its beginnings in the *Origin of Species* (1859) and the *Descent of Man* (1871), evolutionary science, and evolutionary psychology in particular, has been discussing the hereditary aspects of, in Darwin's words, "moral faculties." As Darcia Narvaez points out: "Darwin argued that humanity inherited the characteristics of a moral sense and that morality was embedded in human nature, not in spite of it." In other words: "biology is foundational for sociomoral behaviour."[33]

For Charles Darwin, "moral sense" resulted from a series of supporting and gradually developing instincts or practices. Among these he counted "sympathy" or "conscience," which we share with other species. The four-stage structure underlying moral sense concludes with "habit" or practice. It is through this activity that culture or behavioral inventions can be passed on and preserved.[34] Darwin connects some of the highest human qualities (such as empathy) to the animal realm, thus challenging the idea of man's elevated position above the sphere of the bestial, of the merely animal. He understands habits as a medium or element of transmission of cultural institutions, moral values, and also behavioral patterns.

---

31 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 23 (On the Despisers of the Body) / *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 39.

32 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 58 (On the Bestowing Virtue II) / *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 100.

33 Narvaez, *Embodied Morality*, p. 12.

34 See Narvaez, *Embodied Morality*, and Darwin, *Descent of Man*.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

To conclude this section, several points should be highlighted: we have followed the idea of second nature and habitual behavior in the sense of a conduit of tradition, which creates the *memetic* field of human life,[35] the field of institutions, culture, and the nurture side of the infamous—and largely outdated—nature/nurture dilemma. Secondly, in this brief and very limited account, we have analyzed how in the works of several 19th century thinkers the idea of habitual behavior became linked to the possibility of historical change. Second nature evolves. In Hegel, the change and development correspond to the sphere of spirit, that is, culture and civilization. In Darwin, evolution in the animal realm made the emergence of moral faculties possible. Finally, in Nietzsche, the boundary between the spheres of the natural and the cultural completely dissolves, culture changing our corporality and our corporality manifesting itself in moral sentiments.[36]

12.3 Second Nature, Habit, Hereditary Sin, and Kierkegaard

I wish to discuss the same constellation of habit, ethical life, corporality/bodiliness, second nature, as well as moral faculties, in the case of Kierkegaard. We have already seen the connection made by Vigilius Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety*, but the notion of second nature runs much deeper in Kierkegaard's philosophical work. Kierkegaard makes use of the classical formulation of habit being man's second nature already in his first published work, *Either/Or.*[37] Here Wilhelm discusses the notion of the romantic superiority of nature as compared to the monotonous repetition of "second nature," and tries to defend the constancy of marital life. Kierkegaard will later return to this dialectic

35 Memetic as well as mimetic. Dawkins understands humans to be "built as gene-machines and cultured as meme-machines," mirroring the present problem of first/second nature. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, p. 201.

36 As a side note, I need to clarify that the idea of behavioral changes influencing inherited traits is, from today's evolutionary standpoint, still controversial, violating the "Weismann barrier." According to this theory we cannot pass on to our offspring any traits acquired in life. Or, in other words, such view would resemble that of Lamarckism. The historical notion of the "Weismann barrier" has, however, become challenged not only by research into epigenetic factors of ontogenetic development, but also by disputing the principle "that hereditary information moves only from germline to body cells and never in reverse." M. Azim Surani, "Breaking the Germ line–soma Barrier," *Nature Reviews Molecular Cell Biology*, vol. 17, p. 136, 2016.

37 See *SKS*, 125 / *EO2*, 128.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

in *Works of Love* condemning the effect of custom/habit [*Vane*] on love and proposing his view of love as the unconditional imperative of the "you shall" [*du skal*].[38] Wilhelm's view of habit/second nature barely skims the surface of the problem; second nature here equates to mechanical repetition. It is up to other pseudonyms to venture further into the discussion of what role second nature plays in the building-up of man's ethical life.

In the *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus discusses second nature in connection with faith: "The advantage of the consequences seems to be that that fact is supposed to have been naturalized little by little."[39] He argues that the historical process does not warrant a "naturalization" of faith. "Now faith certainly may become a person's *second nature*, but a person for whom it becomes second nature must certainly have had a *first* nature, inasmuch as faith became the second. If that fact is to be *naturalized*, then with respect to the individual it may be said that the individual is born with faith—that is, with his second nature."[40]

Climacus clearly defends the individual act of freedom involved in faith. The naturalization of faith would result in faith becoming something *inborn* and thus rid faith of the individual's struggle, empty it of qualifications such as offence or consciousness of sin. Faith would become a first rather than a second immediacy.[41] For Climacus, habit or habituality signals the loss of freedom and originality. Man's second nature is that of culture—and culture covers up one's original disposition to individuality, one's primitive originality.[42]

Climacus' argument closely follows the logic of *The Concept of Anxiety*, where hereditary sin makes it more complicated for individuals to become Christians. Most importantly, later generations (Adam and Eve being the first generation) are more cultured, more complicated, more distracted in the world, more anxious, dizzier and more drawn away from the actual task of mankind.[43] The effect of culture is exactly that it leads one away from simple-mindedness, it complicates matters. In the concluding chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Hauf-

38 See *SKS* 9, 43–46 / *WL*, 36–38
39 *SKS* 4, 292 / *PF*, 95.
40 *SKS* 4, 293 / *PF*, 96.
41 Kierkegaard aims his critique of the naturalization of Christianity directly at Martensen. See *SKS* 18, 205, Journal JJ:339 / *JP* 1, 452. Also cf. *SKS* 7, 334 / *CUP1*, 367.
42 "Primitive Oprindelighed." *SKS* 4, 367 / *CA*, 62.
43 This is the principal argument of the final chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*. Haufniensis proposes a treatment for this diagnosis: to let oneself be educated by anxiety. *SKS* 4, 454–462 / *CA*, 155–162.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

niensis promotes the idea of being educated by anxiety, which is the same as undergoing the process of simplification, getting back to the basics, to originality.

The effect of habit or of culture, the "more" of anxiety, still appears to be acquired (as opposed to inherited or inborn) in essence. As we have seen, for Climacus the literal "naturalization" of Christianity remains out of the question, unless this is understood ironically as the historical process of the triumphant church described by Anti-Climacus.[44] It is my suggestion that in Kierkegaard's thought in general, second nature is at work primarily in leveling, in habitualized religiousness, in spiritlessness. Kierkegaard's critique of the contemporary age seems to be a critique of the triumphant "second nature" in man. In the *Sickness unto Death* Anti-Climacus refers to this progress directly as to sinfulness: "Sin has become so natural to him [the sinner], or sin has become so much his second nature, that he finds the daily everyday [*det Daglige*][45] to be entirely in order."[46] The process of naturalization brings about a downward tendency, a falling away from the spiritual and Christian determinations of existence. Whereas Christianity (and subjectivity) demands individual moral agency, second nature corresponds to the process of leveling [*Nivellering*], where the individuals dissolve into abstraction and anonymity.

One might find it particularly interesting that on three separate occasions, Kierkegaard makes the connection between progress and second nature. Firstly, he includes a commentary on second nature in "The Latest Generation" chapter of the *Fragments*. In this chapter Climacus sketches out the *consequences* brought about by the "fact" of the paradox; second nature relates to the established order, the orderly process of bourgeois society. Secondly, Haufniensis discusses second nature in the "Anxiety as Explaining Hereditary Sin Progressively" chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*, focusing on the progress of sin, its "history" and continuation. Finally, the same constellation comes up in the Anti-Climacus' *The Sickness unto Death*, in the chapter "The Continuance of Sin." In all three cases, Kierkegaard's pseudonyms link the idea of a deepening and progressive continuation of sin with second nature and, by the same token, with habits. One might argue that for Kierkegaard the true peril of habit lies in the fact that it seems to provide a kind of "constancy" which lulls us into an illusion of security.[47] In habituality, one appropriates one's second nature, becomes embedded in the society and culture. In the logic of Kierkegaard's exposition of the

44 In the sense outlined in the *Practice in Christianity* III/5 (*SKS* 12, 198–226 / *PC*, 201–232).
45 "Det Daglige" is rendered here as "daily everyday" in the sense of the everyday life.
46 *SKS* 11, 217 / *SUD*, 105.
47 See Carlisle, *On Habit*, p. 12.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

contemporary age, second nature as a consequence leads the individual away from the originality of sin-consciousness, suppressing and repressing the consciousness of one's sinfulness.[48]

Our exposition of Kierkegaard's view of second nature concludes in 1854. In the penultimate year of his life, the author employs a new term: degeneration [*Degeneration*]. On a first reading, the idea seems to be out of place in Kierkegaard's *Skrifter*. Out of a longer journal entry, I will only quote the first decisive section. The very explicit discussion of "moral faculties" by Kierkegaard is of particular interest:

> Here we are faced by what I mean by the degeneration of the race. Everything Christian presupposes a dialectic or is so constituted [*lagt an*] that the individual must be able to undergo a redoubling [*Fordoblelse*] within himself. To be able to see sharply and clearly that Christianity involves the thrust of offense, to be able to see that Christianity makes one, humanly speaking, unhappy, and then despite all this to enter into Christianity—I doubt that men so structured will appear any more.[49]

Although this may come as a surprise, Kierkegaard indeed uses the word degeneration in the *biological* sense: degeneration distances one from the species, alienates one from the *genus* (de-generare; ud-arten; Ent-artung). In a journal entry similar to the one just quoted,[50] Kierkegaard again laments the degeneration of the race, but also equates the situation of the later generations to that of *animals*. He talks about the creeping inflation of the numerical, about the gradual growth of significance of the extensive, so that the category of the individual, which should be higher than the race, becomes subordinated to the category of race. This, according to Kierkegaard, is only the case in animal species.[51]

Therefore, what Kierkegaard has in mind when he talks of degeneration is becoming more and more *animal in nature*, degrading to the level of the animal, losing individuality and the unconditional. What has been lost is the originality, the primitive state. To put it differently, humanity becomes degenerated by losing

48 *SKS* 4, 411 / *CA*, 109.

49 *SKS* 26, 426–27, NB36:28 / *JP* 2, 305.

50 *SKS* 26, 379–381, NB35:17 / *JP* 4, 527–529.

51 *SKS* 26, 379, NB35:17 / *JP* 4, 527: "This is the situation. In the course of generations, the race has degenerated more and more, has become less and less significant and more and more finds consolation in extensity and numbers to make up for what has been lost of the intensive. In a certain sense this also holds true for animals. In animal species, since there are no individuals [*Individer*] but only specimens [*Exemplarer*] the extensive has significance and in a sense an animal species becomes more significant in proportion to numerical extension. But since the whole point about the human race is precisely that the individual is higher than the race, the despair underlying forfeiture of the intensive for the extensive becomes apparent."

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

its true defining trait, individuality. Degeneration thus involves a loss of originality, individuality, and freedom to the point that the individuals of the current generation are born *incapable* of becoming Christian. What else could be the driving force of this degeneration? In the context of Kierkegaard's thought, it is cultural progress. Seen from the vantage point of the idea of a second nature presented and exemplified throughout this paper, one might argue that Kierkegaard subscribes to the same view of the power of habit: habits, habituality, our *second nature imprints itself so deeply that it reshapes or molds our corporality.*

What is second nature in the context of Kierkegaard's anthropology? It is a habitualized escape from anxiety. In originality, in individuality, one is confronted with anxiety as a force disruptive to worldly harmony and repose. Anxiety is the root and precondition of higher moral faculties. Yet it is this same anxiety that gives birth to the second nature of man. Culture and institutions create a protective and veiling cloud of forgetfulness, an illusion of stability. For Hegel, second nature constitutes the foundation of higher ethical phenomena. For Nietzsche, the difference between first and second nature dissolves in the process of value formation, habituality and moral judgment. Finally, in the case of Kierkegaard, we see that second nature in the form of cultural progress overlays the primitiveness or originality of the individual human existence. The superficiality of second nature makes existence shallow.

Conclusion: Quantitative or Qualitative Degeneration?

It is my suggestion that Kierkegaard presents *a theory of moral development*, where his notion of *hereditary sin equals* that of *second nature* in the sense of habit or habitualized behavior. The ontogenesis of morality is embedded in the element of everyday-life habitual actions and institutions. In the second section of this paper, I have asked about the psychological conditions of ethical capacities. The one discussed here is anxiety. Anxiety, as presented in *The Concept of Anxiety*, has both a mutable and an immutable aspect; every individual should have the same capacity of anxiety. Anxiety is inherited as principally the same faculty of relating to oneself, of relating to oneself as spirit. Anxiety's mutable aspect results from cultural progress and is not passed on hereditarily. Are moral faculties immutable? It would seem so, at least according to the discussion presented in *The Concept of Anxiety.*

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

What is the notion of hereditary sin in Kierkegaard's work? The standard view presented above identifies hereditary sin with a gradation of anxiety. In light of Kierkegaard's discussion of the process of degeneration, the notion seems to involve qualitative changes to the *inborn* moral faculties. Is the degeneration Kierkegaard talks about in his late journal entries a quantitative or qualitative one? Does habitualized behavior, our second nature, affect our corporality? The idea seems to be far-fetched and incompatible with Kierkegaard's view of the human condition. In order to assess the plausibility of such reading, I have tried to contextualize his notion of degeneration.

In the framework of 19th century philosophy, second nature and incorporation seem to go hand in hand. Appropriating habits results in corporeal changes. Kierkegaard maintains that some individuals are born degenerate to the point of not being capable of becoming Christians. Such degeneration would be a qualitative one and in that case, Kierkegaard would be subscribing to a view of corporality and second nature championed and pursued together with other thinkers of the 19th century.

European philosophy has, for the most of its modern history, taken its point of departure in a dualistic view of man. With the autonomous subject as its prized centerpiece, such philosophical conceptions of the human condition tended to disregard the relevance of the somatic experience, of the body as such. In many ways the tradition of the dualistic view persists until today despite efforts made—in philosophy—especially by French post-structuralist thinkers and phenomenologists.[52] This paper has focused on the role of habituality in constituting the so-called second nature of man. The notion of second nature itself seemingly includes a contradiction: it is a fabricated, unnatural nature. By the same token the notion of second nature presents an opportunity and conceptual staging grounds for approaching the problem of mind-body dualism and, effectively, breaching the divide. The study of habituality and its effect on moral sentiments, self-esteem, and self-understanding could prove instrumental in the framework of psychosomatic, holistic or integral medicine.[53]

The study of habituality and its incorporation provides a further context for examining phenomena relating to body-mind identity, specifically conditions such as body dysmorphic disorders or transgender identity. What we have at-

---

52 See Michael A. Schwartz and Osborne P. Wiggins, "Psychosomatic Medicine and the Philosophy of Life," *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2010, pp. 1–5.
53 For example in 19th and early 20th century Germany, philosophical background has traditionally accompanied attempts at formulating an integral understanding of man in medicine. See Hans-Christian Deter et al., "History, Aims and Present Structure of Psychosomatic Medicine in Germany," *BioPsychoSocial Medicine*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2 January 2018.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

tempted to define as second nature can provide a conceptual framework for further investigation of the commonly understood principle that the change of our basic rituals and habits leads to a changed quality of life. One pertinent example is Oliver Norman's compelling study of transgender identity (see chapter 13 of this volume). Norman pinpoints the condition of suffering experienced by a large majority of transgender individuals and proposes the Kierkegaardian concept of selfhood as a category capable of sustaining a more robust and transgender-inclusive identity. In section two of the study, Norman, following Judith Butler's analyses presented in her seminal work *Bodies That Matter*, discusses the "rituals" and social instruments whereby gender is being imposed on individuals, namely that it is the repeated and ritualized character of performative statements that lead to reification. "Habits do not make the monk," as the author remarks, and it is undoubtedly true that personal and gender identity transcends habitual behavior. At the same time, the discussion of sex-gender relationship reintroduces the duality of nature-nurture split, rather than attempting a unified interpretation of the role that ritualized behavior plays in the phenomena of naturalization and incorporation. Butler favors the interpretation of such phenomena as performative acts, as social constructs. It is the intention of the present study to offer the notion of second nature as overcoming the one-sidedness of social (respectively biological) determinations. The biological and social sides are not isolated, but rather constantly fused in habitualized naturalizations, incorporative acts, and appropriations. The recent phenomenon of the so-called snapchat or selfie dysmorphia illustrates this point: using filters to enhance selfies that individuals post on social media leads to such degree of habitualization/naturalization and identification with the mediatized image of the self that such individuals might seek plastic surgery to IRL (in-real-life) live up to such image of themselves.[54] It is a cycle and a mutual inter-dependency of the bodily (biological) and mental (social) aspects of our identities. Rather than splitting it into the nature-nurture sides, I propose the notion of second nature as the middle synthetic term.

54 I want to thank Valérie Roberge bringing this troubling phenomenon to my attention.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Oliver Norman

13 Despair and Gender Identity

Reading Kierkegaard in a Queer Light

Amongst Kierkegaard scholars the notions of gender and of selfhood have both been tackled as important topics in the canon. The latter is at the heart of much research on Kierkegaard; the concept appears in almost every thorough study of the philosopher as one of the central elements of his thought. And rightly so, the Self is an important Kierkegaardian concept properly thematized, especially in the opening pages of the *The Sickness unto Death*. The former was given much attention in the collective work *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* published in 1997 and in many articles by one of the editors, Sylvia Walsh. Whilst this publication and Sylvia Walsh's work are both great steps towards properly acknowledging the problem of gender in Kierkegaard's authorship, it seems that they take gender in a very specific meaning which is not the one I wish to take in this paper. However, Sylvia Walsh does highlight one very important aspect that we must always bear in mind when using Kierkegaard to think problems like gender: "All the problems that plague the interpretation of Kierkegaard are heightened and intensified when his writings are scrutinized on the topics of women and gender, for on no other topic does the reader encounter more ambiguity and ambivalence, more agreement and disagreement, consistency and contradiction in the authorship."[1]

Walsh's analysis of gender is that of the study of what Kierkegaard means by the feminine and by womanhood. She defines her own research in the article as touching upon:

> [F]irst of all, the fundamental feminist issue of whether social environment (nurture) or some given essence of woman (nature), defined in terms of the feminine gender, is seen as being determinative in shaping the life, meaning and character of women in Kierkegaard's writings; and second, two gender characteristics that are particularly associated with woman in the texts: devotedness and a lack of reflection.[2]

1 Sylvia Walsh, "Issues that Divide: Interpreting Kierkegaard on Woman and Gender," *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings from the Conference "Kierkegaard and the Meaning of Meaning It,"* ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Jon Stewart, Berlin: De Gruyter 1997 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 1), p. 192.
2 Ibid., p. 193.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-014

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

This is of paramount importance, seeing the ambiguity of Kierkegaard's work in this respect, whose pseudonyms seem to shun women in *In Vino Veritas* and embrace them as a paragon in the discourse on the woman who was a sinner. And without taking away from the brilliance of Sylvia Walsh's work, it seems to me that if we are to ask the question of gender today, a "new" context arises that hasn't been studied within the Kierkegaardian authorship: the problem of gender identity.

This approach fuses together an interest in selfhood and an interest in gender. Because it is to ask *quid* of the self-identification in gender and the struggles of those whose self-identification does not match their "biological," *given* corporeity. The main points of Sylvia Walsh's analysis can be found once again: the fundamental distinction between nature and nurture is at play. But whilst the feminist interpretations of Kierkegaard revolve around what Kierkegaard tells us of women or the selfhood of women, the queer reading that I propose revolves around what Kierkegaard can tell us or help us to understand about the transgender individual.

It seems that the queer approach to Kierkegaard is not an oft-travelled path. While the relative non-existence of queer readings of Kierkegaard may seem normal for many, it appears odd when we consider, for example, that one of the major forces behind LGBT+ studies, Judith Butler, was inspired by Kierkegaard in her youth, as Gerhard Thonhauser explains in his article "Judith Butler: Kierkegaard as Her Early Teacher in Rhetoric and Parody."[3] Kierkegaard is at the foundation of Butler's thought, not as a constant reference like Althusser and his concept of interpellation, but as the master who, in the shadows, gave life to his student's own thought process.

This relative non-existence could have many reasons: either we think that transidentity is a purely contemporary problem that Kierkegaard's text cannot give any insight into, or we think that there is not enough to go on to forge a theory of transidentity from Kierkegaard, or simply the fact that nobody has written about it yet. This paper will attempt to fill at least this final gap. The first statement, that Kierkegaard could not have known about transgender people is factually incorrect, as the works of historians of sexuality such as Whittington or Feinberg have shown that whilst the term "transgender" is modern, the reality

3 Gerhard Thonhauser, "Judith Butler: Kierkegaard as Her Early Teacher in Rhetoric and Parody," *Kierkegaard's Influence on Social-Political Thought*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2011 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 14), pp. 53–72.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

is not, and can be traced back at least to the Middle Ages in Europe.[4] It is possible that Kierkegaard did not encounter such individuals or did not know of them as transgender, but to dismiss the arguments from a historical perspective would be fallacious as he *could have* encountered these individuals. However, what is certainly true is that Kierkegaard never explicitly or implicitly refers to them.

I cannot pretend to forge a Kierkegaardian theory of transidentity—to base a Kierkegaardian theory on the possibility that he knew about transgender individuals seems an exaggeration. My aim is rather to confront Kierkegaard's analysis of selfhood with the problem of transidentity, to see if it can yield any enlightenment, or if it falls at the hurdle of a contemporary political and ethical question.

I believe that Kierkegaard does offer us some insight into the suffering the transgender individual can experience. His conception of despair—quite rightly in his eyes—universalizes this suffering and therefore takes us down a double path: on the one hand the transgender individual is recognized as a self and a suffering one, just like most other selves (we here have an analysis that can vouch for the transgender individual as a person *just like any other*); but, this universality also takes us into a problematic realm where the transgender individual is *just like* any other and therefore asks the question of how to fight for the rights of a minority if that minority is actually part of the immense majority of despairing people. In order to set along this path, we first have to define the notions of *transgender/transidentity*. I will then proceed to an analysis of the concept of Selfhood in relation to that of transidentity by taking two main focal points of Kierkegaard's authorship: *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death*.

13.1 Introductory Remarks: Transgender, cross-dresser, drag queen

What does it mean to be a transgender self? What is transidentity and how can we distinguish it from representations that accompany it in mainstream media but also in the collective consciousness? First of all, I must posit that being transgender and being a cross-dresser are not one and the same. This is not a self-evident distinction *per se*; the social image of transgender individuals is that they

4 Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1997; Karl Whittington, "Medieval," *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 125–129.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

remain men or women and are merely portraying another gender than their own. What seems to take the forefront is the consideration that a transgender individual may appear one way, but *be* another.

Although a transgender individual can also be a cross-dresser and vice versa, it is not a general truth we could establish on the nature of transidentity. For someone like Virginia Prince, transgender activist, publisher of *Transvestia* magazine and founder of Tri-Ess (Society for the Second Self)—a social, educational and support group for heterosexual cross-dressers—transidentity and cross-dressing seem to be closely linked. Virginia was a crossdresser when she was young, before coming out as a transgender woman. But we cannot take this one exemplary case as a general rule. Cross-dressing and transidentity are not one and the same: "Cross-dressing covers a huge range and can go from donning one or two items of women's clothing, usually undergarments, for the purposes of arousal and masturbation, to spending days or weeks living and performing as a woman."[5]

Whereas cross-dressing can be seen as akin to putting on a persona or can even be the taking of sexual pleasure from wearing clothes designed for the other gender, it would be wrong to state that being transgender is anything of the sort. The proper of the cross-dresser is that this person is a "dresser," it is through the way s/he dresses that s/he feels gratification, be it moral or sexual. In the case of the transgender individual, however, what is at issue is not putting on clothes that are designed for the other gender, but rather of a lived experience that extends beyond the boundaries of sexuality and touches the very heart of what it means to be a self. A transgendered individual is not someone who wakes up one day thinking: I am going to put on a dress and pretend to be a woman, and the next day does not. In this regard, it is important to see how it can be misleading to argue, as for example Pepper LaBeija does in Jennie Livingston's seminal documentary *Paris is Burning*,[6] that the difficulty is that a person who decides to get an operation might change his/her mind later in life and regret this irrevocable decision. Whilst LaBeija may be commenting from personal experience with the gay and Afro-American ball communities of the 1980s (where, as they put it: gay people think they will have a better life as women but don't understand just how hard it is for women in the world and especially for women of color), it is erroneous to extend these considerations to transidentity as a whole, reducing it to something like a choice.

5 Miqqi A. Gilbert, "Cross dresser," *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2014, p. 65.
6 Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, Documentary, USA, 1991.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Both the cross-dresser and, furthermore, the drag-queen choose to dress up for their own reasons. The drag-queen, according to Butler, in order to play with dominant heterosexual norms and thereby *either* expose their socially constituted nature *or* in some cases reinforce their power;[7] the cross-dresser mostly for pleasure. If a trans person chooses to dress as a man or as a woman, it is not that which makes them trans. The truism "habit does not make the monk" applies here as well. People choose to wear many different things for many different reasons: personal taste, economic reasons, social standing, and sometimes as a critique of the gender structure of society (androgynous clothes lines try to do this for example). Being trans is not a question of what you wear, of who you love or of who you take pleasure with in the bedroom, it is a question of who you are as a self. This is why it is distinguished from such acts as cross-dressing or drag-queening. However, the two are not mutually exclusive, as the example of Virginia Prince shows. When studying transidentity it is important to always remember that it is a question of identity or self-identification, and not reduce it to sexual preference or sartorial choices.

13.2 *The Concept of Anxiety*, the Physico-Psychical Relation and Gender Dysphoria

So where does Kierkegaard come into all of this? He certainly never talks explicitly of transgender individuals anywhere in the authorship, and the term "transvestite" does not appear in any of the published or unpublished works. So, it would be a rather disingenuous stretch to say that Kierkegaard thought about the transgendered self. However, his main descriptions of the self seem to tell us a lot about what being transgender can mean. In other words, my aim is not to find within Kierkegaard a theory of transidentity, but rather to see if Kierkegaard's works can teach us anything applicable to the case of transidentity today.

First of all, we must bear in mind that transgender means that the assigned sex at birth differs from gender identity. Namely, there is a misrelation between the assigned "biological" sex given at birth and inscribed upon official docu-

---

7 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, New York: Routledge 1993, p. 125. Butler does not think that drag is in itself a subversive force, but rather that it *can be* subversive just as it can re-idealize heterosexual gender norms: it can be both a parody and a pastiche.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ments such as birth certificates, and the gender with which the given person identifies. Being transgender is therefore a problem of self-identification: you identify as a self that is different from the one assigned to you at birth and that is constantly repeated to you throughout your life. Butler's analysis of the performative nature of gender shows that there is an intrinsic difference between gender identity and given social gender. The interpellation that emanates from society ("it's a girl," for example, when a baby is born) correlates sex and gender in such a way that we cannot escape thinking of gender as a natural phenomenon linked to genitalia. What Butler shows is that this reification comes from the ritualized and repeated nature of performative statements about gender: it is the State or someone authorized by the State that pronounces "it is a girl," that inscribes upon the birth certificate the sex of the baby. The child is then brought up surrounded by "girly" or "manly" things and colors—this is at the heart of some recent polemics about children's toys for example. At every step of their lives, children and adults alike are reminded of their sex and are ascribed a place in society accordingly. The given social gender that is a political construct assigns certain roles to women on the simple basis of an apparent natural phenomenon. The assigned "biological" identity of individuals appears to be a natural law, a normality not to be questioned once we are in a system of ritualized performative actions: it is through repetition that the world of nature takes over. As Butler puts it: "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized."[8] If something is "naturalized" then it cannot have been natural but rather enters into a process whereby it *appears* natural. This *appearance* of naturality is—to use categories of German phenomenology—not only an *Erscheinung* (appearance) but also, for Butler at least, a *Schein* (illusion). Butler's vocabulary is important here: masculinity and femininity are not only "naturalized" and therefore not natural, but are also explicitly said to be "produced." The gender binary at work in society is not a natural relation but rather a by-product of society itself. In other words, masculine and feminine, male and female, are not found in the world, but are constructed through a nexus of rituals that are incessantly repeated.[9] The equation between sex and gender is not a biological fact, if biological facts exist, but rather a ritualized norm dictated by society that has been accepted as "natural."[10] This form of naturalization, of production of gender within a societal framework, can be referred to as a form of alienation—gender becomes other than the way it *should be* perceived, rather

8 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge 1999, p. 43.

9 This is why Butler calls gender "performative," hereby conforming to J.-L. Austin's definition of performativity in *How To Do Things With Words*.

10 This is why I maintain quotation marks around the word "biological."

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

than societal it *appears* natural, we tend to forget its societal origin because of the incessant repetition of rituals within society.[11] Transidentity is, at its very grounds, a response to the alienation of the self from the self. The trans individual rises up against a form of self that is imposed upon her by society and says "no, this is not who I am." She is a transgressive individual insofar as she refuses the *diktat* of a society that reifies gender identity into sex, that naturalizes the purely social.

Kierkegaard did not put forward the social construction of gender as Butler does. But he did see the problem of the relation between the physical and the mental or the psychical. In *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis says: "Man is a synthesis of the psychical and the physical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit."[12] It is within this very definition that I believe we can find the possibility of a first reading of Kierkegaard as enlightening for the transgender individual. For if the spirit is a synthesis of physical and psychical, does this not also mean that the relation between the physical and the psychical is at the heart of what it means to be oneself? Haufniensis does not yet distinguish like Anti-Climacus will between Self and Spirit.

The transgender individual is precisely that individual whose physicality (assigned sex) and psychicality (gender identity) do not correspond. But can there be a synthesis of two elements that do not correspond to each other? Could a third be founded upon such an opposition? I see no reason why not, as Haufniensis does not posit that the psychical must be a mirror-image of the physical. And in the history of philosophy there is one thinker who comes to mind when talking about the synthesis of opposites, Hegel—even though he does not use the terms synthesis and opposition, preferring those of *Aufhebung* and negation. The synthesis of the two poles signifies that humans are made up of a body and a soul. There is no question of whether this soul is composed of the idea of the body, as there is in Spinoza for example,[13] or if this body is the expression of the soul. But as the Spirit is the synthesis between body and psyche, the two

---

11 In this regard Butler's analysis is comparable to Marx's description of the fetishism of commodity, or Feuerbach's conception of alienation.

12 *SKS* 4, 349 / *CA*, 43.

13 However, Spinoza prefers to talk of the mind rather than the soul. For an example of the soul as idea of body see Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 2, Note. On the discussion of the identity between mind and body in Spinoza see among others: Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu*, Paris: Aubier 1968; Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1969 and *Behind the Geometrical Method*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988; Leon Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1981.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

are intimately linked. It seems that within this synthesis we can already grasp an idea of what it means to be a self—in at least a loose sense—and what it means to be a transgendered self.

Although for some of us the idea of body that is contained within our soul corresponds to the "biological" or assigned reality of that body, at least as far as sex is concerned, for some however this is not the case. The transgender individual could be said here to suffer from gender dysphoria as defined by the American Psychiatric Association.[14] Gender dysphoria is a suffering linked to this synthesis of the body and the soul, of the physical and the psychical. This does not mean that being transgender is an illness, but rather that it is a suffering.[15] The transgender individual is that particular Spirit in whom body and soul not only exist as separate entities synthesized in a third, but in whom body and soul—or at least body and psychical idea of body—are at odds one with the other.

But is this small glimpse adequate to think the transgender condition? Is it enough to say that humans are syntheses of physical and psychical elements? Do we not have to go further than this in order to apply Kierkegaard correctly to the problems of transgender individuals? Indeed, if we were to stay here, we could just about say the same, in varying degrees, for people suffering from body dysmorphia. In this condition the body you have, and your idea of that body, are tinted by a "false mood"[16] as Kierkegaard would put it. The person suffering from dysmorphia finds herself unattractive, undesirable or even repulsive. This is another form of misrelation between body and soul. The difference between it and transidentity would be merely one of degree and not of nature. However, transidentity is not just the feeling that you were "born in the wrong body." The

14 The APA gives five criteria of gender dysphoria: A strong desire to be of a gender other than one's assigned gender, a strong desire to be treated as a gender other than one's assigned gender, a significant incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's sexual characteristics, a strong desire for the sexual characteristics of a gender other than one's assigned gender, a strong desire to be rid of one's sexual characteristics due to incongruence with one's experienced or expressed gender, and a strong conviction that one has the typical reactions and feelings of a gender other than one's assigned gender. See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM 5), Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing 2013, pp. 451–460.
15 We must always be wary with such sources that seem to equate mental disorder and illness. We cannot for example say that a transgender person is ill, as if their transindentity were the illness. Rather, the transgender individual suffers from the misrelation between his/her assigned sex and gender identity.
16 *SKS* 4, 322 / *CA*, 14: "The concept is altered, and thereby the mood that properly corresponds to the correct concept is also disturbed, and instead of the endurance of the true mood there is the fleeting phantom of false moods."

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

heart of the transgender struggle is not solely the body and the relation to an idea of the body, rather it is in a willing to be the self that you identify as, which passes through a relation to the body but is first and foremost a reflexive relation to one's own personal psychical identity. This is where we must leave Haufniensis and seek out the help of Anti-Climacus.

13.3 *The Sickness unto Death*, Beyond the Relation, the Will to be Oneself: Despair in Relation to Transidentity

The question of transidentity cannot be completely understood as a mere misrelation between body and mind or body and soul. If this were the case it would be merely a state of distress, a state or a quality of certain beings. Rather, being transgender is always an act of will. It is the willing to see an end be put to the distress suffered in the misrelation between body and mind. This does not mean that as soon as a sex-change operation is undertaken everything is fine. The will extends beyond this and becomes the will to not be the assigned self the person is. Are these not precisely the Kierkegaardian categories at the heart of *The Sickness unto Death?*

But what form of despair would the transgender individual be in? From a purely superficial reading we may say every form: the transgender individual wills to be herself while also willing not to be the assigned self that society dictates she is. As Anti-Climacus puts it, the very first and ludicrous vision of despair is as follows:

> Imagine a self (and next to God there is nothing as eternal as a self), and then imagine that it suddenly occurs to a self that it might become someone other—than itself. And yet one in despair this way, whose sole desire is this most lunatic of lunatic metamorphoses, is infatuated with the illusion that this change can be accomplished as easily as one changes clothes. The man of immediacy does not know himself, he quite literally identifies himself only by the clothes he wears, he identifies having a self by externalities (here again the infinitely comical).[17]

Here Anti-Climacus proposes the absurd story of a person wishing to change her self just as she would change her clothes. This is the despair of the immediate person, a despair that appears through an external blow. If the transgender

17 *SKS* 11, 168–169 / *SUD*, 53.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

person were to think that s/he could become someone else merely by undergoing an operation, then Anti-Climacus would more than likely apply this first vision of despair to such an individual. However, is this really the case? Does the transgender individual really wish to become *someone else?* I would argue that this is not the case: the transgender individual wishes to become someone else if and only if we posit that their socially presented and assigned self is who s/he is. In other words, we would have to give some form of legitimacy to this social self that has been forced upon the transgender individual. It is not true that in despair the transgender individual wishes to become someone else; rather she wishes to become herself. While this first form of despair does not correspond to the reality of the transgender individual, it does, however, correspond to a vision we have of transgender and more widely LGBT+ individuals when we say that they are gay, bi, trans, etc. "by choice." If it were a choice, which it is not, then we would be these ludicrous individuals believing we could change selves in an instant. What we do see here, though, is that the change occurs in despair; if such a change exists, is not something easy. Rather, it is a struggle.

If the transgender individual does not correspond to this first case of despair, does she perhaps correspond to Anti-Climacus' second vision of the will to not be oneself? The second form of despair arises when reflection appears in the self:

> The advance over pure immediacy manifests itself at once in the fact that despair is not always occasioned by a blow, by something happening, but can be brought on by one's capacity for reflection, so that despair, when it is present, is not merely a suffering, a succumbing to the external circumstance, but is to a certain degree self-activity, an act…So he despairs, and his despair is: not to will to be himself. But he certainly does not entertain the ludicrous notion of wanting to be someone else; he keeps up the relation to his self—reflection has attached him to the self to that extent.[18]

This form of despair is not occasioned by an external force, as the self distances itself from externality, draws at least partially into interiority. This self does not entertain the idea of becoming someone else. This form of despair attaches the self to itself rather than making it imagine that the self can be given up. The self that despairs in this way realizes that it is inevitably a self and that this cannot be given up. But at the same time, this self wills not to be herself. It is the paradoxical situation of being attached to oneself as a self and willing not to be oneself. Despair, understood in such terms, is not just suffering; applied to our prob-

18 *SKS* 11, 169–170 / *SUD*, 54.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

lem this takes us away from the consideration that transgender individuals are ill, for example.

The final form of willing not to be oneself is the despair over oneself. In the two previous examples Anti-Climacus tells us that this is despair of the earthly. Here the despair becomes that of the eternal and, first and foremost, the despair over oneself: "If a person is to despair over himself, he must be aware of having a self; and yet it is over this that he despairs, not over the earthly or something earthly, but over himself."[19] For Anti-Climacus, the end result of this type of despair is either faith or the intensification of despair. The person "hurls [herself] into life," "becomes a restless spirit,"[20] or seeks oblivion in sensuality. The danger here is that the will for oblivion may become too powerful, and that the self may commit suicide. This could confirm statistics that have shown time and time again that transgender individuals, especially teens, are more at risk of committing suicide then cisgender individuals: according to a 2018 survey, 50.8% of female to male teens attempted suicide and 29.9% of male to female teens.[21]

If the first category of despair (the will not to be oneself), or at least the second and third forms of it seem to correspond to the transgender condition, can we say the same about the second Kierkegaardian category of despair, that is the despair to will to be oneself? A superficial reading would provide an easy affirmative response here, because it seems like the transgender individual wishes to become the self that s/he identifies as rather than the self that society assigns to him or her. In this regard we could say that s/he wills to be her/himself. Anti-Climacus however, says that this form of despair is "thoroughfare to faith,"[22] as it comes through the aid of the eternal: does that mean that faith is required to despair to will to be oneself? Not exactly, as we find:

> This infinite self, however, is really only the most abstract form, the most abstract possibility of the self. And this is the self that a person in despair wills to be, severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it, or severing it from the idea that there is such a power. With the help of this infinite form, the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self.[23]

19 *SKS* 11, 176 / *SUD*, 62.
20 *SKS* 11, 180 / *SUD*, 65.
21 Russell B. Toomey, Amy K. Syvertsen and Maura Shramko, "Transgender Adolescent Suicide Behaviour," *Pediatrics*, vol. 142, no. 4, 2018, https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/142/4/e20174218.full.pdf.
22 *SKS* 11, 181 / *SUD*, 67.
23 *SKS* 11, 182 / *SUD*, 68.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

This self does not rely upon the Third mentioned in the opening pages of *The Sickness unto Death*. It is a self that relates to itself as posited by itself and not by a Divine Third. As Anti-Climacus quite rightly puts it, this self is one that creates what it wants to be. Is it not the case that the transgender individual acts upon her own self in order to create the self that she wills to be? We might think that transidentity is something given alongside a body which does not "match," however if we follow this Kierkegaardian reading, transidentity is not a given essence, but rather an act of self-constitution. This does not entail that transidentity is a choice. Rather, it means that identity does not eschew to us as something purely given, it is always acted upon. If identity were purely given, then the strength of the social identity pushed upon the transgender individual would take over any form of selfhood. But the transgender individual does not receive her inner self from the outside, but only her social or assigned self. The self-constitution in question here is the *acting upon oneself* in order to make the self that one identifies as and the self one expresses coincide, overwriting the socially assigned self.

It seems to me that Anti-Climacus' discussion of despair is the apex of Kierkegaard's possible insights into the transgendered self. But we must bear in mind that these figures of despair that seem to apply to the transgender individual are not exclusive to the transgender individual. Rather, Kierkegaard's diagnosis is universal: "In any case, no human being ever lived and no one lives outside of Christendom who has not despaired, and no one in Christendom if he is not a true Christian, and insofar as he is not wholly that, he still is to some extent in despair."[24] If despair is universal, if it touches everyone, be it consciously or not, does this not make transgender individuals *just like everyone else?* This could be seen as an encouraging parallel, since the discrimination transgender individuals suffer in society often comes down to the conception that they are somehow different from the "norm." Transgender individuals are seen as abnormal or as deviants. In light of the universality of despair, transgender individuals become like everyone else and therefore can be recognized as human beings capable of despair just like everyone else. The axiology gives way because everyone is in the same case: we are all in despair so there is no abnormality, no minority, just the universality of despair. In other words, all differences are superseded by a common denominator: despair. Whether it be the heterosexual cisgender baker, the homosexual cisgender candlestick maker or the transgender individual, all share something in common. This common denominator may not erase the particular-

24 *SKS* 11, 138 / *SUD*, 22.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ities that distinguish one individual from another. However it allows us to see the other not as purely different, but sharing with us a kinship in despair.

Yet this reading is problematic. To assert that all share in despair may wipe away the minor but distinctive features of individuals in order to envelop them in a wider community. The universality of despair could blind us to the injustices committed in the social world if we were to hypostatize this universality and conceive of it as more than a common denominator, or a fundamental kinship. In other words, if we consider the universality of despair as universality in every aspect of existence, then we blind ourselves to the possible suffering grounded in the differences between individuals and especially in the different social attitudes towards groups of individuals. Transgender individuals are not only individuals who suffer within themselves from a misrelation in the synthesis at the heart of the Self, they are not merely "beings-in-despair." They are all of this, but also and more importantly: they are unjustly treated in society. The examples Anti-Climacus gives in *The Sickness unto Death* of beings-in-despair are not individuals who struggle within the social environment. This is an important limit to the consideration of despair if we espouse Anti-Climacus' vision *verbatim*.

This apparent universality of despair could take us along a dangerous path, if it does not signify equality but rather pure identity. Universality simply indicates that despair is the common lot of humanity, it does not follow that all who despair are the same: this is categorial equality not a factual identity. Equality of rights, for example, does not resorb the differences between individuals, but it constitutes a legal framework wherein no party has—or should have—more rights than another. Equal rights do not exist without the recognition of the greater struggle of some parts of society: poor and rich are equal before a court but are not equal *de facto* in the world.

The universality of despair means that all individuals share in despair, however this does not indicate they are all the same: despair is not always at the same level for example, there is conscious despair and unconscious despair. The universality of despair must not appear as a solution in itself: if we take its universality as a natural identity then we lose ourselves in absurdity. We are not all naturally identical, but we are equal in rights, this much is confirmed by Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." However, equality of rights does not signify identity: the legal system, as Hegel quite rightly saw, is the world of the empty and abstract person that can apply to anyone but is no one in particular.[25]

25 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. by Hugh B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, pp. 68–69, §§ 35–36.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

The judicial must do away with particularity, the world does not. Faced with transidentity we are not in the case of an abstract category but rather of a lived experience of suffering that distinguishes one individual from another. The question of transidentity is also the question of *transgender particularity:* how the relation to oneself as a transgender individual differs from that of a cisgender individual for example.

13.4 Is the Transgender Self Strictly Speaking a Self?

Although it may seem that the transgender individual corresponds to a certain vision of despair, this understanding leads us to substantial problems. For Kierkegaard the question is not so much that of *being* a self as that of *becoming* a self. His meditation on despair may seem to correspond to the suffering of the transgender individual but this is not entirely accurate. The transgender problem involves willing to be the psychical self one identifies as and not being the physical self one does not. For Kierkegaard, however, the difficulty with selfhood is that of becoming transparent to oneself. The relational entity known as spirit is not posited by itself but by God for Kierkegaard, if this were not the case we could not account for the different forms of despair. It is only before God in humility that the self truly becomes a self. It is in the encounter with the grounds upon which one is built, that is to say God, that one becomes more than a simple relation between two, because the Third is always there. It is through the encounter with the Third of God that guarantees the relation, that the self can come to itself and recognize itself as a self. God is the condition of selfhood and is not strictly speaking a being that the self can encounter as a self but on the way to becoming a self. When God appears in the experience of the individual, this marks the qualitative leap between despair and true selfhood.

But in this encounter with the absolute alterity of the Divine Third that constitutes myself as a Self, do not the categories of the world fade away? The categories of the relation are subsumed in the new reality of selfhood. Of course, if we take this term in its strict Hegelian meaning then what is *aufgehoben* is also conserved. But in our consideration, the categories in question are not metaphysical ones such as finitude and infinity, temporality and eternity but worldly ones such as body and mind, gender and sex. In the encounter with God do these even have a meaning anymore? The Single Individual before God is a sinner

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and the greatest of all sinners.[26] In the God-sinner relationship there is only the Divine and the Single Individual, nothing more, nothing less. Worldly categories fade away, for the worldly is, to use Max Picard's expression, "the flight from God."[27] The worldly takes us away from the encounter with God and into a world of Pascalian *divertissement*.[28] The categories of the world establish relations beyond myself and God, link us to others.

In the God-relationship, gender roles disappear, nobody is a father, a mother, a son or a daughter. These are forms of relative alterity that take away from the unilaterality of the God-sinner relationship, they are relations which would hold outside of that with God. We could even say that the social gender binary no longer holds when the Individual is alone before the Divine and therefore does not relate to the social sphere in that precise moment. In that moment of encounter, that instant where God appears to the sinner in quietude, one is alone before the Divine. The rich man cannot, if he truly wants a relationship with God, hide behind his philanthropy or avarice, he cannot regain his boardroom and sycophants. He is alone. Of course, the Individual must come down from the mountain just like Abraham and Moses did, she has to regain the social world. But in that brief encounter the Individual is transfigured.

In this singular, unilateral God-sinner relationship then, transgender selfhood seems to be a fallacy. We could even go so far as to say that the transgender self could appear to be an inauthentic one as long as it does not come before God. The transgender self is a misrelation between two poles of spirit but is not as such yet a self. The transgender condition is a synthesis of two conflicting poles but is not, as a synthesis, a self until it encounters the Third that posited it. The transgender individual is conscious of a will to be herself but thinks that being herself is to conform to her self-identification. In this regard we could attempt to establish a distinction between a *self* and an identity: if the attempt to conform to one's own self-identification does not make one a self, it must mean that selfhood and simple identity are not one and the same. The transgender individual is not necessarily conscious of the will to be a *self* because selfhood is taken as a generic term for a relation to one's own person. Our contemporary view of selfhood on these questions is not exactly Kierkegaard's, and yet it seems that in the despair to will to be oneself there is something inherently true about the transgender condition. It is just that our modern and postmodern

26 *SKS* 5, 409 / *TD*, 30.
27 Max Picard, *The Flight from God*, ed. by Matthew Del Nevo and Brendan Sweetman, Southbend: St. Augustine's Press 2015.
28 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. by Honor Levi, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, p. 48.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

self, as Simon Podmore puts it, is the self of the death of God[29]; the self that has lost God as a grounding power, a self that, in Schelling's and Henri Maldiney's terms,[30] has lost its *Grund* (ground or foundation) and falls into an *Abgrund* (abyss).

Podmore asks the question: "But how does the relation relate to itself and not merely to its doubleness?"[31] He replies that Kierkegaard's answer is simple "A self 'must either have established itself or have been established by another' (SUD, 13). The first option might read as a cartography of the modern self striving to authenticate itself in the space of its self-reflection."[32] This modern self is open only to itself and not to the Divine Third that, for Kierkegaard, posited it. If God is dead, then the openness of the self-relation contracts into a dyadic and not a triadic relation. The self struggles against and with itself in order to authenticate itself, to become an authentic self. Kierkegaard would argue that this is not possible when God is dead because there is nothing that can stand over-and-above the doubleness of the self to ground it as a self anymore.

Even though this may be true for the world of the death of God, I would argue that the death of God does not entail the death of God-like realities that could give us a Ground. Nietzsche's aphorism on the death of God is nuanced in *The Gay Science* where he says: "After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. And we, we still have to vanquish his shadow, too."[33]

The modern and post-modern self is not necessarily lacking any and all ground, but this ground is self-made or socially posited. It remains however that the modern Self is not posited by a transcendent divine Third, rather it attempts to posit itself individually and/or socially. Kierkegaard's idea is that without God the triadic relation needed in order to become a self dissipates and gives way only to the dual relating of polar opposites—we could not even call this a

---

29 Simon Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2011, pp. 20 – 28.

30 Henri Maldiney and Roland Kuhn, *Rencontre-Bewegnung: Au peril d'exister, Briefwechsel / Correspondance 1953 – 2004*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2017, Letter of 24 February 1984. Maldiney here uses Schelling's concept of *Grund* from the *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*.

31 Simon Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2011, p. 21.

32 Ibid.

33 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books 1974, p. 167, § 108.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

synthesis seeing as the synthesis, as Haufniensis puts it, "is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third."[34] Whether the socially or individually posited ground can suffice in order to make a self remains doubtful for Kierkegaard. This is why, if we follow Kierkegaard's thought we can tend to think that the transgender problem is a false problem. Anti-Climacus' vision of the self seems to lead us to an aptly anticlimactic solution to the problem. If the self is incapable of being grounded upon anything other than God, then the transgender individual must seek God and turn away from her modern and postmodern condition in order to truly become a self. Whether the possibility of grounding can exist without God is at the heart of the contemporary problem of using Kierkegaard in a world where the transcendence of the divine seems to be lacking.

While the transgendered self does not correspond precisely to Kierkegaard's definition of the self, it may offer us a glimpse of the way to become that self. If becoming a self means becoming transparent before God, for Kierkegaard, is it not impossible to do so without first and foremost becoming transparent to oneself? If this is true of sinners who must realize they are sinners in order to enter into the God-relationship, is it not also eminently true of the transgender individual whose struggle is the very consciousness of the non-concordance between identity and biological assignation? That is to say that whereas a despairing individual can wallow in an unconscious form of despair, the transgender individual is always conscious of herself as transgender and therefore transparent to herself or at least more transparent than a simple despairing individual. In order to proclaim that she is transgender the individual must already be conscious of the misrelation at work within her and therefore will to be the self she is and not the one she appears to be: being, willing, and consciousness are one and the same here. But, can gender identity not be refused, pushed back into an unconscious recess of the mind in order to conform to certain social, familial or personal expectations? In order to push back the consciousness of her gender identity, this has to have been attained in the first place: it thus becomes the will not to be oneself of self-denial or conscious repression.

We should also ask whether the religious solution of becoming a single individual before God is an adequate response to the suffering of transgender individuals in society today. To enter into the God relationship is to encounter the Third that posits my own self, and this may allow us to come before God as authentic beings, justified in our being. But on the other hand, the God relationship is beyond the political and ethical worlds, at least in the very instant of the en-

34 *SKS* 4, 349 / *CA*, 43.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

counter. It may be that after this initial encounter, the whole of the social world can be modified accordingly, as Kierkegaard seems to suggest in *Works of Love*. It may be that after this encounter we can base a society upon love of the neighbor rather than preferential love. This could lead us to re-establishing the political world upon a bedrock of acceptance. But this does not necessarily respond to the issues for transgender individuals. The problem faced by transgender individuals is one of receiving a recognition of their existence not as a disorder, a deviance, or a sin, but as who they are.

Before God I am a sinner and am forgiven as such, that is, I become a *singular* individual, isolated in the God-sinner relationship. This is both a solution and a problem when considering the question of transidentity. In a certain regard then I am justified in my existence because before God I am justified as the individual I am. Being recognized as a singular individual before God means that my identity is not fully constituted by my social surroundings: I am not only what society makes me. I am myself and my *self* in its pure singularity before God. The distinction between selfhood and identity becomes absolute. But just as the universality of despair, if hypostatized, could lead us to an abstract equality, conversely my singularity in the God-sinner relationship could lead to an individualism incompatible with the problem of transgender rights. In the encounter with God my *self* manifests itself as not fundamentally posited by society. The illusion of binary gender could be dissipated. But at the same time, transgender rights need to *recognize the social struggles* that transgender individuals in particular face in the world: if the world is no longer available, then how do we take into account those very struggles? One way to think of it would be to see them not as the struggles of a particular group but as the struggles of an individual. Here we find another problem: if the individual is our criterion, then the transgender individual differs only superficially. Once again this can be both a solution and a problem. On the one hand the transgender individual is recognized as an individual just like all others—as an individual who differs from every other, who arrives before God with her own individual history. This is a secondary recognition of kinship, secondary because needing to deviate from the standpoint of the existing individual and proceeding, by means of a judgment, to the idea that every single individual is of an equal kinship. Whereas the universality of despair goes from the universal to the particular, here we would have to make a logical leap from the individual to the general asserting thereby that every individual before God is likewise an individual.[35] But on the

35 This does not once again negate the specific differences between individuals. However, before God there is not comparison, there is no other person from whom I could differ. It is only in

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

other hand, is the proper ground of transidentity and transgender rights not particularity instead of singularity? In other words, is it not upon the social and political terrain of particularity and generality that transgender questions must be asked, rather than the religious grounds of the *Enkelte* before God?

Transgender individuals need and long for the *political and social recognition* of their existence as legitimate, rather than an individual relationship with God which would legitimize their individual existence. I would argue that Kierkegaard's solution to despair in faith does not help to accept oneself as transgender, nor does it change society's view as a whole of such problems. I will not go so far as to say that the religious coming before God as a single individual cannot help, but it seems like a meagre consolation if, when we descend from the mountain of faith, we enter back into a society that does not recognize us as justified, and especially a society where the Church often does not recognize us as justified. Of course, the organized religion of the Church and the reality of faith are two completely different things for Kierkegaard. But how can you be compelled to seek out a God-relationship if religion itself conflicts with your own identity? When the immanent social and political categories break down, I can come into contact with God through faith, and indeed it is only in such situations that true faith appears, when we are confronted with the absurdity of a world that immanent categories cannot explain (Job's suffering is a prime example). But it would be too naïve to think that the rejection of transgender individuals by organized religion does not alienate them from the prospect of faith in God. When the world of organized religion states that I am not worthy of God's love, why would I open myself up to the possibility of being justified before God through faith?

This is where the modern self can take over from the Kierkegaardian perspective. In a world where God has become more or less absent and the self posits itself, the transgendered self does not need to search for justification in a transcendent divine presence. This does not make the task easier; the political world is still reluctant and must be changed by force. But it takes away one obstacle. If authentic selfhood requires God, then the political world will not change for the transgendered individual because s/he will come upon the knowledge that s/he is in despair like everyone else and that s/he is a single individual before God, cut off at least initially from the world. While Kierkegaard saw Christian love as a solution for creating human equality, the main focus of transidentity politics is not merely equality: it is rather a very modern idea of paradoxically maintaining both equality and particularity. Affirming the universality of despair could be

the social world that I can "compare the incomparable" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1991, p. 16).

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

used as a tool to reduce the specific suffering of the transgender individual and also be used to affirm the equality of transgender individuals and cisgender individuals insofar as they both participate (albeit differently) in this universality.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard gives us something to think about. He does not fall at the hurdle of transidentity, but it could trip him up, nonetheless. He gives us the categories to think the modern self, in all its forms. His psychological insights are extremely modern and can account for the suffering of the transgender individual. But it is the religious path he sees as essential to authentic selfhood that becomes problematic with regard to the specific demands for recognition of the transgender community. The religious standpoint seems to drown out the problems inherent in minority and especially sexual and gender minorities: if the transgender individual is in despair *just like anyone else* and can, *just like anyone else*, become a single individual before God, then we have taken one step forward but there is an abyss which opens itself before us. We have taken the major step of recognizing transgender rights as human rights, transgender people as people. The transgender individual is a person like any other and is therefore entitled to neighbor love, to the same recognition as any other. But this is insufficient when we aim to defend the rights of minorities, which implies recognizing that the minority is at least *relatively different* from ourselves—a set of *Alter* egos—which we cannot do under a superficial reading of the universal recognition of despair, a reading that would affirm the identity of all the despairing subjects. Transgender rights are human rights, but the suffering of the transgender individual is not the same as the suffering of every other despairing individual. If we understand transidentity as a misrelation between psychical and physical and not merely constrained within the psychical we can start to see the distinguishing feature between the universality of despair and the suffering of transgender individuals. The will to be oneself is not only the will to be a *self*, it is the will to be a self that manages to resolve, or at least desires to resolve, the misrelation between two of its constitutive poles: the physical and the psychical.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Abbreviatons

Danish Abbreviations

Pap. *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, vols. I to XI–3, ed. by Peter Andreas Heiberg, Victor Kuhr and Einer Torsting, Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag 1909–48; second, expanded ed., vols. I to XI–3, by Niels Thulstrup, vols. XII to XIII supplementary volumes, ed. by Niels Thulstrup, vols. XIV to XVI index by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1968–78.

SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vols. 1–28, K1-K28, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, Alastair McKinnon and Finn Hauberg Mortensen, Copenhagen: Gads Forlag 1997–2013.

English Abbreviations

JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk, vol. 1–6, vol. 7 Index and Composite Collation, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1967–78.

JSK *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. by Alexander Dru, New York and London: Oxford University Press 1938.

KJN *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vols. 1–11, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Söderquist, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2007 ff.

KW *Kierkegaard's Writings*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vols. I-XXVI, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978–98.

PJ *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. with introductions and notes by Alastair Hannay, London and New York: Penguin Books 1996.

AN *Armed Neutrality, KW* XXII.

AR *On Authority and Revelation, The Book on Adler*, trans. by Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1955.

BA *The Book on Adler, KW* XXIV.

C *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress, KW* XVII.

CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. by Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson, *KW* VIII.

CD *Christian Discourses, KW* XVII.

CI *The Concept of Irony, KW* II.

COR *The Corsair Affair; Articles Related to the Writings, KW* XIII.

CUP1 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, KW* XII,1.

CUP2 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, KW* XII,2.

CUPH *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. by Alastair Hannay, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009.

EO1 *Either/Or,* Part I, *KW* III.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-015

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EO2 *Either/Or,* Part II, *KW* IV.
EOP *Either/Or*, trans. by Alastair Hannay, London and New York: Penguin Books 1992.
EPW *Early Polemical Writings: From the Papers of One Still Living; Articles from Student Days; The Battle Between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars,* trans. by Julia Watkin, *KW* I.
EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses, KW* V.
FSE *For Self-Examination, KW* XXI.
FT *Fear and Trembling, KW* VI.
FTP *Fear and Trembling*, trans. with an introduction by Alastair Hannay, London and New York: Penguin Books 1985.
JC *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est, KW* VII.
JFY *Judge for Yourselves*, *KW* XXI.
KAC *Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom," 1854–1855*, trans. by Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1944.
LD *Letters and Documents,* trans. by Henrik Rosenmeier, *KW* XXV.
M *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998. *KW* XXIII.
P *Prefaces / Writing Sampler,* trans. by Todd W. Nichol, *KW* IX.
PC *Practice in Christianity*, *KW* XX.
PF *Philosophical Fragments*, *KW* VII.
PLR *Prefaces: Light Reading for Certain Classes as the Occasion May Require*, trans. by William McDonald, Tallahassee: Florida State University Press 1989.
PLS *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1941.
PV *The Point of View* including *On My Work as an Author* and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author, KW* XXII.
PVW *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* including *On My Work as an Author*, trans. by Walter Lowrie, New York and London: Oxford University Press 1939.
R *Repetition, KW* VI.
RPC *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. by Marilyn G. Piety, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009.
SBL *Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, *KW* II.
SDP *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Alastair Hannay, London and New York: Penguin Books 1989.
SL *Stages on Life's Way, KW* XI.
SUD *The Sickness unto Death, KW* XIX.
TA *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review, KW* XIV.
TD *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions, KW* X.
UD *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits, KW* XV.
WA *Without Authority* including *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air, Two Ethical-Religious Essays, Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays, An Upbuilding Discourse, Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays, KW* XVIII.
WL *Works of Love, KW* XVI.

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Index

Abraham 17 – 22, 26 – 28, 62 – 66, 267
Absolute 21, 24 – 28, 34, 49, 59, 62, 83, 98 – 103, 111, 147, 153 – 157, 164, 167, 172, 175, 177, 184, 204 – 205, 220, 224 – 227, 231 – 232, 266, 270
Abstraction 5, 60, 128, 132, 139, 145, 152, 248
Absurd 36, 64, 83, 141, 186, 205, 261
Aesthetic sphere 21, 59, 141
Aesthetic subject 149, 151, 160, 165 – 166.
Agreement 34, 70, 81, 85, 92, 164, 198, 253
Algorithms 9 – 10, 107 – 110, 115 – 117, 119 – 122
Ambiguity 113, 172, 182, 200, 207, 210, 212, 253 – 254
Anonymity 10, 107, 126, 130, 135 – 137, 248
Antisemitism 66
Anxiety 13, 18 – 19, 147, 172, 195, 198, 201, 206, 212, 238, 247 – 248, 250 – 251, 257
Appropriation 5, 33, 74, 78, 82, 117, 165, 179, 216 – 217, 220 – 221, 225, 227
Authenticity 4 – 5, 10, 12, 112
– Authentic 4, 9 – 10, 17, 24, 78 – 80, 82, 110, 113, 115, 117, 122 – 123, 125, 142, 171, 186, 268 – 269, 271 – 272
– Authentic choice 9 – 10, 107 – 108, 111 – 112, 115 – 116, 119 – 120, 122 – 123
Authority 28, 71 – 72, 74, 77-–78, 85, 102, 136, 139, 156, 190, 234
Autonomy 4, 12, 90, 103, 201, 206 – 207, 219, 222 – 224, 226, 237
– Autonomous 90, 206, 208, 211, 219, 224, 251

Belief 6 – 10, 22, 24, 33, 60, 63, 69 – 71, 74, 79 – 80, 82, 86, 120, 170, 234
Biology 199, 245 – 246
– Biological 11, 13, 28, 170 – 171, 181 – 182, 190, 196 – 197, 199, 215 – 216, 219, 221 – 224, 226 – 227, 232 – 233, 249, 252, 254, 257 – 258, 260, 269
Body 13, 70, 142, 180, 186, 198, 208, 244 – 246, 251, 259 – 261, 264, 266
– Broadcast 10, 111, 127 – 128, 132 – 133, 139
Butler, Judith 252, 254, 257 – 259

Cavell, Stanley 46, 82
Character 11, 32 – 33, 37 – 38, 43 – 44, 48, 50, 57, 99, 103, 114, 119, 152, 195, 197, 200 – 202, 205 – 206, 209, 211, 217, 220, 243, 252 – 253
Choice 2 – 3, 10, 25, 28, 33, 57, 59, 70, 100 – 102, 107 – 108, 110 – 113, 117, 119 – 123, 149 – 151, 153, 208, 217, 222, 225 – 233, 256 – 257, 262, 264
– Choose 3, 10, 28 – 29, 59, 101 – 102, 107 – 108, 111, 116, 119, 123, 128, 150 – 152, 157, 175, 203, 208, 225 – 227, 229, 232, 239, 257
– Choosing 10, 59, 107, 117, 150, 174, 176, 187, 231 – 232, 240
Christendom 34, 62, 72, 84, 119, 121, 264
Christianity 6, 8, 31, 33 – 35, 40, 44 – 47, 49, 52, 54 – 55, 57, 60 – 63, 65, 67, 70, 72 – 76, 79 – 85, 116, 121, 128, 186, 195, 235 – 236, 247 – 249
Cicero 238 – 239
Circumstances 6 – 7, 36 – 37, 39, 47, 68, 91 – 92, 94 – 95, 103, 151, 157, 174 – 176, 181, 187, 207, 215, 226 – 227
Claims 31, 53, 67, 70 – 85, 121, 125, 162 – 164, 222 – 223, 234
Clemency 9, 87, 90 – 95, 103 – 104
Communication 2, 10, 97, 125 – 127, 130, 134, 136 – 140, 142, 144 – 145
Communion 179 – 180, 186, 218
Community 7, 9 – 11, 25, 48 – 49, 51, 131, 143, 152 – 153, 156 – 161, 163 – 167, 169 – 168, 178 – 186, 191, 198, 216, 218, 222, 265, 272
– Inoperative community 169, 179 – 181
Concept 87 – 91
Contemporaneity 131, 140, 144

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Corporality 235–236, 244–246, 250–251.
Corsair 66, 128–130, 141, 273
Cultural 12, 24, 81, 84, 112, 151, 157, 159–161, 163, 165, 236, 238–239, 242–243, 245–246, 250
Culture 24, 116, 123, 141, 157, 236, 239, 242–243, 245–248, 250

Darwin, Charles 12, 235–236, 238, 245–246
Dataveillance 109–110, 122
Death 5, 11, 18, 23, 37, 62, 74, 113, 135, 140, 154, 169–191, 268
Decision 10, 12, 18, 25, 67, 113, 118, 143, 150, 176, 190, 200, 226–227, 234, 238–239, 256
Deleuze, Gilles 89–90
Derrida, Jacques 11, 18, 87–88, 104, 169, 175, 177, 184, 186, 188
Despair 13, 23, 52, 54, 65, 129, 171–172, 176, 182, 198, 201, 212–213, 232, 249, 253, 255, 261–267, 269–272
Dialogue 2, 7, 9, 21, 26, 75, 77, 86, 216–217, 220, 227
Disagreement 70, 80, 85–86, 100, 156, 253
Dissimilarities 45–47, 175–176, 178, 189
Distinctiveness 5–6, 8
Divine 6, 71–72, 74, 77–78, 85, 104, 134, 157, 159–162, 183–184, 190–191, 231, 264, 266–269, 271
Doctrinal 70, 81–83
Doctrine 34, 69–70, 80–81
Dreyfus, Hubert 54–55, 107, 125, 131, 133, 135, 140, 142–144
Duty 8, 11, 26, 40–41, 45, 47–48, 88, 157, 161, 163, 165–166, 185, 191, 204–205, 230, 232

Earnest 4, 9, 99, 169–170, 173, 176, 182–184, 187, 189
Earnestness 10–11, 76, 137, 144, 169–172, 176, 178, 181–182, 185–191
Echo-Chamber 9, 107–108, 120, 122–123
Equality 6, 9, 11, 21, 27, 44–47, 131, 152, 158, 166–167, 169, 171, 175–178, 181–183, 189–190, 222, 265, 270–272
– Equality before God 46, 176
– Social Equality 46, 169, 174, 178
Ethical sphere 20–21, 25, 28, 52–53, 63, 90, 217
Ethical Subjectivity 107–108, 110–111, 115, 118, 121–123, 154
– Ethical Subject 10, 108, 116, 121–122, 148–154, 156–159, 161–163, 165–167
Ethics 1–2, 4–5, 7–8, 10–12, 17–19, 20–21, 23–29, 31, 35–36, 50, 53–54, 56, 59–60, 62, 64, 66–69, 87, 94–97, 99, 104, 107, 111, 119, 123, 148–153, 155–157, 159, 162, 164, 167, 175, 184–185, 191, 195–197, 200–207, 209, 213, 215–235, 237, 251, 259
– First Ethics 95, 97, 162, 202, 205
– Second Ethics 9, 94–97, 162, 202, 205–206
Eugenics 12, 215–217, 219–220, 222–221, 226–228, 232–233
Existence 1–2, 4, 10, 13, 17–18, 20–26, 28–29, 32, 35, 46, 51–53, 55–56, 66, 79, 83, 86, 95–96, 98, 101, 103, 113, 118–119, 121, 123, 125, 136, 141–142, 147, 149–155, 159–160, 165, 171, 173–175, 177, 179, 184–186, 189–190, 195–196, 198, 205–207, 215–224, 227, 229, 232–234, 245, 248, 250, 254, 265, 270–271

Faith 7–8, 17–26, 28, 33, 44, 53, 63–66, 69, 71–72, 74–75, 77–79, 82, 97, 99, 175, 182, 186, 203–204, 247, 263, 271
Faithlessness 97
Finitization 116–117
Forgetting 3, 91–92, 118
Forgiveness 9, 48, 87–94, 104, 155
Fragility 12, 24, 206–209, 211–212.
Freedom 1, 3, 12, 27, 57, 59, 76, 93, 112, 114, 116–118, 123, 149–151, 153, 189, 206, 208, 210–213, 221, 224, 226–227, 229, 231–232, 237, 240, 247, 250, 268

Gender 2, 13, 17, 181, 252–254, 256–260, 266–267, 269–268, 272
Generation 19, 23, 230–231, 236–237, 243, 247–250
Genetically modified 216, 231

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Genetic engineering 1, 215, 226, 228, 231
Gift 90, 92, 134, 177, 183–184, 186, 190
Givenness 88, 219, 224
God 11, 18–21, 26–29, 31–34, 37, 43–44, 46, 49, 52–56, 60, 63–65, 67, 69, 78–79, 82–83, 86, 88, 102, 138, 147, 150, 153–157, 159–165, 171, 176–178, 183–186, 190–191, 203–205, 218, 224–225, 237, 261, 266–272
Good 1, 8, 10–11, 20, 24, 31, 35–38, 41–44, 46–48, 52, 54, 60, 67, 71, 74, 102, 147, 149–153, 156–159, 163–167, 175, 179–180, 187, 202–205, 207, 210, 231, 233–234, 243
Graveside 169–172, 174, 178, 186, 189
Ground 268–269, 271

Habermas, Jürgen 1, 5, 12, 215–228, 230–231, 233–234
Habit 10–12, 109–110, 137, 206, 235–236, 238–248, 250–252, 257
Habituality 12, 235–238, 247–248, 250–251
Habitualized behavior 235, 242, 250–251
Harm 92, 142, 144, 157, 163
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 12, 26, 62–63, 75, 94, 98, 235, 237–243, 246, 250, 259, 265
Heidegger, Martin 171–172, 174, 178–179, 183, 188, 228, 233
Hereditary sin 237–238, 246–248, 250–251
Humanity 12, 21, 25–26, 29, 46–47, 115, 156, 158, 165, 167, 177, 183, 218, 231, 236, 238, 245, 249, 265
Human nature 12–13, 22, 164, 215, 219–223, 227–230, 233, 237, 240, 245

Identity 2–3, 7, 10–11, 13, 111, 113, 121–122, 135, 138, 144, 153, 157–159, 178–183, 191, 195, 197, 201–202, 208, 211, 217, 222–233, 251–254, 257–261, 264–265, 267, 269–272
Immanence 10, 89, 153, 157, 159–160, 165–167, 180, 185, 205
Immanent 11, 147–148, 151–154, 156, 158–165, 167, 176, 179–180, 182, 188, 219, 223, 271
Impartiality problem 44
Individual 2–3, 5–9, 11–13, 18, 20–21, 25–27, 32, 39, 42, 46–49, 52, 55–57, 61–62, 71–72, 74, 76, 83, 90, 94–95, 97–104, 109–110, 112–113, 115, 117–123, 125, 128, 130–134, 138–139, 141–144, 147–154, 156–165, 170, 175–176, 178, 180, 183–187, 191, 198, 202–208, 210–211, 215–234, 236, 238–242, 247–252, 254–267, 269–272
Individuality 21, 28, 100, 107, 114, 139, 151, 205–206, 208, 211, 215, 221, 243, 247, 249–250
Injury 93
Institution 2, 9, 12, 46, 57, 60, 100, 226, 235, 239–242, 245–246, 250
Internalism 32–33
– Internalist 8, 31
Internet 9–10, 107, 125–127, 130–135, 138, 140–145
Interpersonal 9, 90, 131, 140, 145, 163, 207, 222
Interreligious dialogue 7, 9, 75
Interreligious understanding 69, 85–86
Introspection 4
Irony 35, 59, 71, 76–78, 80, 86–87, 95, 97–99, 103, 172, 178, 273
Irrational 18, 23–25, 28, 33, 53

Jankélévitch, Vladimir 9, 87–95, 103–104
Jaspers, Karl 196, 211, 213
Judaism 27, 65–66, 70
Judgment 34–38, 41, 50, 103, 113, 137, 217, 230–231, 234, 243, 250, 270
Just war theory 7, 51, 68

Kant, Immanuel 20, 25–26, 28, 35–36, 40, 78, 94, 153, 238
Kinship 171, 216, 232, 234, 265, 270
Knight of faith 20, 65–66, 205

Law 20, 28, 38–40, 65, 67–68, 77, 119, 152, 156, 162, 164, 184–185, 188–191, 230, 239, 258

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Levinas, Emmanuel 8, 21, 25, 66, 87, 104, 174, 177, 184, 271
Life-view 10, 54, 60, 111, 114–115, 120, 136
Løgstrup, Knud Ejler 8, 43
Love 6, 8, 10–11, 20, 25, 31–32, 35, 37–49, 59–60, 64, 100–101, 127, 147–148, 155–157, 160–164, 171, 174–175, 178–181, 183–186, 190–191, 204–205, 230, 236–237, 247, 257, 270–271, 274
– Natural love 41–45
– Neighbor love 8, 10–11, 32, 40–45, 48, 272

Meaning 2–4, 6, 20, 22–23, 55, 59, 81, 85, 89, 91, 97–99, 114, 119, 121, 147, 153, 156, 167, 172–174, 176–178, 180, 182, 222, 225–226, 232–233, 253, 266
Meaningful 17, 22, 26, 81, 99, 102, 162, 185, 230–234
Media 7, 9–10, 107–110, 113, 126–128, 130–134, 136, 138–140, 142–143, 255
Mental Illness 11, 196–202, 211–212
Misrelation 13, 257, 260–261, 265, 267, 269, 272
Monism 52–54, 60, 63, 65, 67
Mood 60, 169–174, 176–177, 181–182, 184, 190, 203–204, 260
Moral agency 12, 236–237, 248
Moral agent 90, 104, 236, 242
Moral demand 6, 223
Moral development 12, 38, 104, 250
Moral faculties 236–237, 242, 245–246, 249–251
Moral instincts 236
Moral luck 8, 36
Moral requirement 217, 219, 222–226, 228–229
Mortality 11, 169–170, 174–176, 178, 182–183, 190–191
– Mortal 36, 177, 181–183, 191
Murdoch, Iris 38–41

Nancy, Jean-Luc 11, 169, 178–181, 184–185, 191
Neighbor 5, 7–8, 10–11, 20, 25, 31–32, 39–45, 47–49, 64, 87, 138, 147–148, 155–156, 160–164, 166, 170–171, 185, 191, 205, 230, 237, 270
Newspaper 46, 107, 127–129, 133
Nietzsche, Friedrich 12, 23–24, 58, 196, 206, 235, 238, 242–246, 250, 268
Normative 1, 11, 95, 127, 138, 143–144, 151–152, 181, 197, 200–202, 204, 206–207, 209, 215–217, 220, 222, 225, 228, 233–234
Normativity 2, 104
Norms 6, 10, 12, 24, 95–96, 103–104, 147, 151–153, 174, 202–209, 216, 220, 222, 229–231, 233–234, 257

Offense 9, 71–75, 78, 80, 85, 90, 93, 159, 249
Online 10, 107–111, 116–117, 119–123, 125–126, 131, 134–135, 137, 140, 142–145
Online life 9–10, 107, 111, 122, 126
Opinion 17, 38, 40, 114, 121, 128–133
Other 3–13, 17, 21, 25–27, 32, 37–49, 55, 60, 69–72, 74, 76–77, 79, 85–86, 93–94, 103–104, 119, 125, 130–131, 133, 143–145, 151–152, 155, 158–161, 163–166, 169, 171, 173–176, 180, 183–185, 189–191, 204, 206–208, 210–211, 215–224, 226–227, 229–232, 234, 255–256, 258, 261–262, 265, 267, 269–270, 272

Paradox 3, 17, 21, 26, 33, 44, 51–52, 55, 63–65, 83, 85, 180, 204–205, 248
Partiality 42, 44
Paul 170–171, 185–186, 189, 190–191
Pelagianism 65
Personal 3, 8, 28, 32, 38, 64, 99, 137, 142, 144, 159, 170, 172, 183, 191, 197–198, 202, 204, 210–211, 220, 222–224, 252, 256–257, 261, 269
Plato 20, 26, 28, 203
Pluralism 52–54, 57, 60, 66–67.
Political revolution 170
Politics 49, 127, 149, 180, 271
– Political 2, 11, 17, 23, 64, 67, 71, 88, 111, 121, 145, 148, 157, 169–170, 178, 200,

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

227–228, 231–233, 254–255, 258, 269–271
Proportionality 126, 130
Proposition 80–83, 237
Propositional 81–84
Pseudonymous Authorial Method 112
Psychiatric Ethics 195–197, 200–201.
Psychiatry 11, 196–197, 199–201, 209, 211
Public 3, 9–10, 46, 120–121, 126, 130–135, 138–139, 141–143, 152, 174, 180, 184, 187

Quantize 119

Rational/Rationality 18, 20–25, 28, 60, 72, 97, 177, 185, 204, 208, 221, 240, 242–243
Reason 7, 17, 20–24, 26, 28, 65, 67, 96, 162, 173, 227, 240
Recognition 3, 13, 24, 113, 122, 157, 183, 187, 190, 217, 222, 227, 240, 265, 270–272
Refugee 6, 9–11, 147–148, 157–162, 164–166
Relation 6, 13, 17, 25–26, 28, 31–32, 34, 37, 44, 53–55, 62–63, 90, 93, 114, 117–119, 121–123, 130–131, 136, 143, 147–152, 154–155, 158–167, 170–172, 181, 183, 185, 187, 191, 197, 200, 202, 207–209, 211, 218, 222–224, 227, 230, 236–237, 243, 255, 257–259, 261–263, 266–268
Relationship 2, 7, 21, 32, 37, 41–44, 48, 57, 76, 119, 122, 125, 127, 130–133, 135, 137, 142, 144, 153–154, 158–159, 169, 177, 184–185, 187, 204, 206, 217, 220–223, 225, 231–232, 239, 242–244, 252, 267, 269–271
Religion 7, 17–18, 21–22, 24, 26–29, 55–56, 60, 62–65, 69–72, 76, 79–86, 97, 159, 179, 186, 271
Religiousness 52–53, 55, 62–64, 74, 78, 83–85, 134, 147, 153, 159–160, 248
Religious pluralism 9, 69, 80
Religious sphere 54, 76
Religious subject 148, 155–157, 159–161
Responsibility 11, 45–46, 90, 116, 126, 130–131, 134–135, 170–171, 181, 185, 189, 191, 201–202, 212, 215–223, 225–226, 229, 234, 237
Revelation 17, 46, 52, 67, 71–74, 77–78, 80–83, 85, 129, 147, 273
Rights 24, 163, 255, 265, 270–272

Sartre, Jean-Paul 22, 171, 217–219, 233
Science 7, 12–13, 24, 95–97, 99, 147, 196, 200–201, 209–211, 228–229, 231, 245, 268
Scientific 11–12, 197–201, 209–210, 213, 222–223, 233
Second nature 11–12, 235, 238–252
Self 2–4, 10–13, 21–22, 39, 41–43, 54–55, 59–62, 66, 71, 75–76, 79, 82, 93, 101, 103, 107–108, 112–113, 115–122, 125, 129–130, 141–144, 149–151, 153, 157, 159, 162, 171–172, 174–178, 180–182, 184, 186, 190–191, 195, 202, 206, 208–211, 216, 219–221, 223–225, 227, 230–232, 234, 241, 244, 251–253, 255–272
Self-deception 22–23
Selfhood 1, 3–4, 9–12, 55, 90, 107, 116, 118, 130, 172, 183, 188, 197, 200, 202, 208, 221, 223–224, 227, 232–234, 252–255, 264, 266–267, 270–272
Self-identification 254, 257–258, 267
Selfishness 39–40, 44, 210
Self-legislating 224, 229, 232
Separation 17, 197, 229
Seriousness 61–62, 76–77, 79, 137, 172, 188–189
Sex 127, 236, 252, 257–261, 266
– Sexual 256–257, 260, 272
– Sexuality 254, 256
Sin 20, 53, 58, 65, 67, 92, 96–97, 154, 170–172, 182, 186, 203, 205, 209–210, 212, 238, 247–249, 270
Sober 34–35
Social change 8, 13, 31, 45
Social media 1, 9–10, 70, 107–110, 115, 117, 119–120, 122, 126, 128, 132–138, 140–142, 144–145, 252
Social Networking Services 125

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Society 3–5, 13, 32, 42, 45–49, 57, 66, 76, 104, 107, 112, 116, 118, 121, 127, 130–131, 134, 140, 142, 145, 148, 175, 179–181, 202, 204, 206–208, 219, 228, 230, 240, 248, 256–259, 261, 263–265, 269–271
Socrates 20, 26, 28, 75–77, 102, 115, 151
Solitude 51, 121, 181, 217–218, 229
Soul 23, 32, 62, 241, 245, 259–261
Spinoza, Baruch 23–24, 26, 28–29, 259
Struggle 53, 79, 97, 115, 197–198, 202, 208, 212, 244, 247, 254, 261–262, 265, 268–270
Subject 25, 39–40, 71–72, 82, 110, 118, 122, 133, 137, 149–157, 159–160, 162–165, 167, 174, 178–180, 183–185, 215, 217–219, 225, 229, 244, 251, 272
Subjectivity 2, 5, 33, 74, 79, 118, 154, 178–179, 184, 195, 215, 218–219, 226, 229, 233, 248
Suffering 11–13, 20, 37, 47, 72, 79, 134, 147, 195–197, 199–202, 209–213, 252, 255, 260, 262, 265–266, 269, 271–272
– Suffer 13, 45, 48, 79, 86, 199–200, 202, 209, 260, 264–265
Suicide 180, 263
Supreme emergency 9, 51, 67–68
Suspension of the ethical 17, 20, 26, 65
Synthesis 54, 133, 259–260, 265, 267, 269

Technology 10, 107, 110, 122, 127, 239
– Technological 125–126, 144, 231, 233
Telegraph 126–127
Tolerance 9, 24, 71, 75–76, 86
Transcendence 104, 154, 159–160, 162, 164, 167, 185, 218, 232, 269
Transcendent 11, 26, 147–148, 153–156, 159–163, 167, 178, 219–220, 223–225, 268, 271
Transformation 154, 162, 165–166, 181
Transformative 78, 90–92, 94, 127
Transgender 13, 251–252, 254–267, 269–272
Transidentity 11, 13, 254–257, 259–261, 264, 266, 270–272
– Trans 257, 259, 262
Trolling 135
Truth 4, 17, 21, 33–34, 48–47, 64–65, 74–76, 79, 81, 83, 97, 107, 118, 131, 140, 147, 149–150, 152, 154, 158–161, 163–167, 177, 195, 244, 256

Unconditioned 34
Universal 11, 13, 20–21, 24–29, 43, 95–96, 103–104, 147, 151–155, 157–158, 163, 167, 184, 203, 205, 210, 224–225, 229–230, 232, 234, 264–265, 270, 272
Untruth 17, 21, 74, 154, 165

Value 4, 10, 24–25, 29, 34, 40, 42, 44, 46, 48–49, 51–54, 56, 67, 69, 76, 80, 91, 134–135, 137, 150–152, 154, 156–164, 177, 179, 181, 187, 202–207, 229, 231–234, 243–245, 250
Verstrynge, Karl 107, 117, 122, 125, 142
Vulnerability 37–38, 140, 144, 221–222

Will 35–36, 40, 52, 116–117, 121–122, 164, 240–241, 261–263, 267, 269, 272

EBSCOhost - printed on 2/12/2023 4:23 PM via . All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use