# RESPONSIBILIZATION: RETHINKING RESPONSIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY WITH KIERKEGAARD

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*Abstract*: This article discusses how a person becomes responsible and accountable towards other human beings, as member of a community, in relation to God, and as an agent in nature. In Kierkegaard's works, I argue, this process begins with responsivity, with the "single individual" (*den Enkelte*) responding to a text and thus entering into a process of indirect communication with the author, with oneself, and with God as absolute other. The process of responsibilization evolves throughout Kierkegaard's authorship, from *Repetition* and *The Concept of Anxiety* to *Works of Love*. Neighborly love, I suggest, raises the question of sensitivity to the suffering of others and responsivity to their needs. Whereas Kierkegaard sees preferential love as an expression of self-love, the extended *me*, he points to the extended *we* as an expression of universal love. God is thereby emphasized as the *middle term* in all social relations, the radical otherness that makes a community of love possible. Finally, I suggest reconsidering Kierkegaard's understanding of responsibilization as a response to the more-than-human (to God, but also to non-human creatures). This coming community, I argue, to which humans belong, will have to offer an even more *extended* understanding of responsibility, and a new perception of what it means being responsively and responsibly human.

*Keywords*: responsibility, responsivity, love, singularity, community, environmental humanities

## 1. Introduction

The "single individual" (*den Enkelte*) is a key category in Kierkegaard's works, in a certain sense defining his entire philosophy. However, this category has also been the topic of considerable debate and divergent interpretations. Some take it to be a question of Kierkegaard's biography and his unhappy love story with Regine; others see in it "the martyr of inwardness."[1] There are also critics who see the category as

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Singular Individual" in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, trans. Peter Goldberger, ed. Josiah Thompson (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 231. For a more detailed presentation of the debate, cf. Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard's single individual and the point of indirect communication," in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Stephen Galt Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 71–95. See also Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 310–324.

advocating a merely subjective truth, a methodological abstraction, or an approach to philosophy haunted by irrational paradoxes. However, if we follow the development of this notion throughout Kierkegaard's authorship, it is gradually brought out from its biographical origins towards an analytical category at the border between the singular and the social. The Danish philosopher reacts to a subordination and neglect of the single individual in social, religious, and philosophical thought. Does that make him a thinker of individualism? He is clearly concerned with the single individual, but "individualism" in the aesthetic sense of Johannes the Seducer (*Either/Or*) or the young man (*Stages on Life's Way*) becomes an object of ridicule in some of the early works. For Kierkegaard, the category of the single individual rather identifies the *responsive* reader, one who is willing and able to listen and *attend* to the other. The responsive person is addressed and explored through Kierkegaard's strategy of indirect communication (*indirekte Meddelelse*). His dialogical approach is further developed throughout the pseudonymous and autonymous writings towards a process of *responsibilization*. "Responsibilization" here means "addressing the reader in a way that calls for an existential response—to God and to other human beings."[2] The response could be linguistic, existential, or take the form of an action, as is most clearly emphasized in *Works of Love*. Responding to the commandment of loving the other as yourself is a process of *responsibilization* that requires a development of the person as *response-able* in order to become *responsible*. Thus, to avoid misunderstandings like Sartre's mentioned above, I would rather speak of *responsive singularity* as a qualification of the Danish expression "*hin Enkelte*."

By discussing and redefining the conditions for social and ethical relations, Kierkegaard is not only emphasizing and challenging human subjectivity; he is also pointing towards a "We" to which "I" can belong without losing myself or ignoring an infinite responsibility before God. The connection between response, responsivity, and responsibility is the first point of my argument; this decentering of the self from the extended *me* to the extended *we* is the second. My third point is that Kierkegaard's thought on responsibility and the human condition offers valuable resources for rethinking the self in the twenty-first century, when we are facing climate and nature crises and a fracturing of human communities. Kierkegaard advocates responsibilization in a radical sense, not only for the human, but also in the face of the more-than-human. Reconsidering human responsibility and response-ability has once more become a challenge for understanding human existence, and we can draw on Kierkegaard's philosophy in developing this notion of *responsibilization*.

[2] As he pointed out later, looking back on his entire authorship, the single individual ("*hin Enkelte*") was from the outset defined ethically. See SKS 16, 99 / WA, 119.

## 2. Responsive Singularity

Kierkegaard often returns to the category of the single individual, which he claimed would be *his* category: "This category [*den Enkelte*], having used this category, moreover so decisively and personally, determines the outcome ethically. Without this category and without the use of it that has been made, the reduplication of the entire work as an author would be missing."[3] "Reduplication" (*Fordoblelse*) is a key word here: Kierkegaard expects an ethical actualization of what is thought, hence, *understanding* the category means *responding* to it, ethically. He presupposes that the reader is *able* to respond, simply by being human, yet at the same time, he seeks to develop this *response-ability* by "determining the outcome ethically." Identifying this category, and using it decisively and personally, he wants to provoke the reader to think about him- or herself rather than some general "individualism" or (even worse) the individuality of the author. The single individual is addressed by Kierkegaard and challenged to rethink his or her subjectivity in an ethical sense. As discussed by Kierkegaard in 1847 in *Without Authority*, and again in the two notes to *The Point of View* (published posthumously in 1859), the "single individual" is not significant *as such*, in isolation from other categories, but rather as "vivifying stimulus" within an established order. The ethical determination of his thought qualifies singularity *as* social, as *responsive singularity,* embedded in social and ethical responsibilities.

Singularity can indeed be analyzed as a formal category, even when Kierkegaard emphasizes its existential significance. Thus, he argues in the second note to *The Point of View*: "But this doubleness is precisely the dialectic of the single individual. The single individual can mean the most unique of all, and the single individual can mean everyone. Now if one desires to stimulate attention dialectically, one will always use the category the single individual in a double stroke."[4] Every person is thus a single individual, one in a finite number of members of a group, a party, a society. This is the category taken in its ordinary sense. In Kierkegaard's analysis, however, singularity also represents infinitude, that is, the potential of *becoming* singular.[5] This ambiguity of *den Ene* (the One) and *den Enkelte* (the single One) is basic for Kierkegaard's understanding of existence: If the infinite—or eternal—quality of a person is neglected, then he sees their *humanity* as being undermined. According to Kierkegaard,

[3] SKS 16, 99 / WA, 119.
[4] SKS 20, 95 / PV, 115.
[5] As infinite, the number One is also different from any other number, a point that is central to Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy and central to the mathematical philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa. The One as non-other represents the infinite or the eternal. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De li non aliud*, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: A.J. Bannings Press, 1983).

this happens in politics (when humans are subsumed by the crowd), in technological progress (when persons become functions), and in the philosophical and "world-historical" system of Hegelian dialectics.[6] In the latter case, Hegel's Idealist system, the single individual is sublated (*ophævet*) into the "universal" or—in a more precise translation of the term—the "general" (*det Almene*).[7] Hence, the infinite and qualitative aspect of singularity gets lost. Thereby, as Kierkegaard argues in *Fear and Trembling*, even *faith* gets lost.[8] In subsequent writings, he demonstrates how other existential categories such as sin, redemption, original sin, the moment, and neighborly love lose their meaning when the category of the single individual is overlooked, downplayed, or sublated. In Kierkegaard's Denmark there is, of course, a Christian society, a Christian ethics, a Christian dogmatics, and so on, but he contends that the specific *quality* of Christian categories such as faith, sin, love, grace, responsibility, and reconciliation are bound to the infinite aspects of singularity.[9] With such a formal analysis, Kierkegaard can argue that key categories in both philosophy and theology are undermined and hollowed out unless responsive singularity (*den Enkelte*) is taken into account. He applies various literary strategies to interrupt and bring awareness to the problem: irony, indirect communication, paradox. Singularity in the infinite sense can only be uncovered, or triggered, when someone *discovers* their infinite potential. Kierkegaard sees his writings as an invitation to such a disturbing discovery. Hence, he addresses "*den Enkelte*," whom he joyfully calls *his* reader.[10]

Kierkegaard's path to becoming an author sets out from this problem. The broken engagement with Regine sets him *apart* from society, from the ethical, from the general, from the universal: he comes to consider himself as the "exception." This is a shattering existential experience, excluding him from immediate social communication, from the sphere of the general. His identification with the biblical figure of Abraham, or even Job, may seem somewhat exaggerated, but these figures—and the narratives and thoughts they represent—become occasions for reflecting more

[6] See SKS 20, 83–104 / PV, 103–124, where such examples are mentioned successively. However, they are also found scattered throughout the pseudonymous and the autonymous works.
[7] Kierkegaard refers to *det Almene*—sometimes translated as "the universal," other times as "the general." In Danish, it means both, but ethically it reflects the Hegelian term *das Allgemeine*. Anglophone readers should here try to adapt to the Danish and German language rather than the other way around. Similar difficulties of translation concern the term *den Enkelte*—where the phrase "the single individual" has caused numerous misunderstandings in the direction of individuality and individualism.
[8] "Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal—yet, please note, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that after having been in the universal he as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal" (SKS 4, 149 / FT, 55).
[9] Cf. SKS 20, 101 / PV, 121.
[10] See the preface to *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843), to which he often returns: SKS 5, 13 / EUD, 5.

fundamentally on the problem of the singular versus the universal (or the general).[11] Hence, as Kierkegaard elaborates in the name of a certain Constantin Constantius (the pseudonymous author of *Repetition*), "the exception" is a *justified* dialectical category *within* the universal.[12]

### 3. Thinking Through the Exception

The two texts that were published in October 1843, *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, are both concerned with the exception. For Kierkegaard, citing Hegel, the ethical is the general (*det Almene*). Abraham represents the absolute exception to the ethical as the general since he cannot defend his intention to kill Isaac based on general reasons. Still, he puts the wood on his son's shoulders and walks up Mount Moriah to make the sacrifice. His undertaking cannot be explained nor defended. It would be an intended murder. Yet still, this possibility of acknowledging the singular *above* the ethical signifies the continued possibility of true responsibility, of the paradoxical faith, of an infinite double movement of resignation and faith, relating *absolutely* to the Absolute.[13] Abraham is the exception: the singular *as* the exception.

Although the challenge Abraham faces is exceptional, the three problems discussed by Johannes de silentio apply to every single individual. As long as the ethical is defined as the general (i.e., Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, *das Allgemeine*), there is no absolute responsibility, no absolute relationship to God, and no *suspension* of the ethical.[14] According to Johannes de silentio, however, each person is addressed as a singular person, and a *general* response will not suffice. Hence, *every* single person represents an exception, although only Abraham was called to sacrifice his son. Undergoing the existential double movement of resignation and faith thus means *singularizing* each individual insofar as s/he responds absolutely to the absolute. This *singularization* is at the same time a *responsibilization*, since the single individual withdraws from general criteria and takes the responsibility not only for the action but also for the ethical

[11] See fn. 7 above.
[12] "Above all, it is asking too much of an ordinary reviewer to be interested in the dialectical battle in which the exception arises in the midst of the universal, the protracted and very complicated procedure in which the exception battles his way through and affirms himself as justified, for the unjustified exception is recognized precisely by his wanting to bypass the universal" (SKS 4, 92 / R, 226).
[13] "Thus, either there is a paradox, that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is lost" (SKS 4, 207 / FT, 120).
[14] If we follow Derrida's analysis in *The Gift of Death*, relating to the other as wholly other (*tout autre*) is an ethical requirement that raises responsibility as a problem in every ethical situation. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), ch. 3.

criteria involved. She cannot point to some general opinion but responds to the calling of the other, as absolutely other.

Abraham is presented as an example who remains incommensurable to "common" sense. However, every single person is facing a similar problem: by responding radically to God's commandment, or some other non-negotiable ethical imperative, thus breaking with the social and ethical order, they will discover the incommensurability between the singular and the social. Hence, proclaims Johannes de silentio, there is a need for Abraham to remain silent: "The distress and anxiety in the paradox were due in particular to the silence: Abraham cannot speak."[15]

The exception is also a remarkable category in *Repetition,* the other pseudonymous book that was published on the same day as *Fear and Trembling*. Since the books are written at the same time, it stands to reason that the definition of "the exception" here provides a more general understanding of how Kierkegaard, alias Constantin Constantius, uses the term. Discussing how the singular relates to the general, he differentiates between a justified and an unjustified exception. The latter *avoids* the general, whereas the former relates to it dialectically. These dialectics are described as a "struggle" and a "refraction" (*Brydning*) where the exception *belongs* to the universal and yet stands in opposition to it, withdraws, and posits itself *outside* of the universal.[16] It is hardly a Hegelian dialectic Constantius aims at, a dialectic where the singular is *sublated* by the universal. On the contrary, in contemporary terminology, these dialectics would qualify as indicating a *disruption* and a *caesura* between the singular and the universal.

The struggle of the exception in its relation to the universal becomes an occasion to reflect upon sociality from outside, or rather, reduplicated as being *both outside and inside* the general or common society.[17] As I read the Danish concept *det Almene*, it simply refers to sociality here, or *the social community*, to which the single individual belongs, and from which s/he is excluded as the exception. The reduplication of the single individual as excluded and yet included in the social community is conspicuous.

The described ambiguity between the social and the singular characterizes Kierkegaard's analyses of ethical responsibility in the years to come. Thus, both singularity

[15] SKS 4, 205 / FT, 118.

[16] Cf. SKS 4, 92 / R, 226f.

[17] "On the one side stands the exception, on the other the general, and the struggle itself is a strange conflict between the rage and impatience of the general over the disturbance the exception causes and its infatuated partiality for the exception . . . . On the other side battles the insubordination and defiance of the exception, his weakness and infirmity. The whole thing is a wrestling match in which the general breaks with the exception, wrestles with him in conflict, and strengthens him through this wrestling" (SKS 4, 92 / R, 226f; trans. mod.).

and sociality are put on the agenda. With his emphasis on the exception and the single individual, he reacts to the subsumption of existential notions such as faith, responsibility, and reconciliation under collective terms such as the crowd, the state, and the general. In *Repetition*, the analysis of the exception is expressed formally as follows:

> The exception also thinks the general in that it thinks itself through; it works for the general in that it works itself through; it explains the general in that it explains itself. Consequently, the exception explains the general and itself, and if one really wants to study the general, one only needs to look around for a legitimate exception; it discloses everything far more clearly than the general itself.[18]

The exception is thus established as a category at the limit between the singular and the social. It identifies a position: from this *topos*, the general (and the general conditions for a community) can be understood, he argues, exactly because it is withdrawn from the social, and yet belongs to it. The ambiguity of belonging and not belonging makes explanations possible, not in order to regulate or govern society but to analyze the complex interdependence of responsive singularity and the social.

### 4. Anxiety and the Rift of Generational Sin

In *The Concept of Anxiety,* published under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis, Kierkegaard identifies a traditional theological notion that affects the single individual but also the generation: original or hereditary sin (*Arvesynd*). When Vigilius first analyzes the narrative of Adam and Eve from Exodus 2-3, he emphasizes "Generations-Forholdet," that is, the generational and procreative issue.[19] In his analysis, it turns out to be problematic and ambivalent. No single person can be understood independently from the generation to which they belong, he contends. Still, the notion of "sin" and responsibility cannot be understood adequately as merely a *generational* issue. When he reconsiders the notions of sin, the fall, and hereditary sin, he does so therefore as limit categories, rendering both the individual and the generation problematic—and thus also the "general" as an expression of belonging to a "generation."

[18] "Undtagelsen tænker tillige det Almene, idet den gjennemtænker sig selv, den virker for det Almene, idet den gjennemvirker sig selv, den forklarer det Almene, idet den forklarer sig selv. Undtagelsen forklarer altsaa det Almene og sig selv, og naar man ret vil studere det Almene, behøver man blot at see sig om en berettiget Undtagelse; den udviser Alt langt tydeligere end det Almene selv" (SKS 4, 93 / R, 227; trans. mod. from "himself" to "itself," since Kierkegaard refers to "Undtagelsen" as "den," and from "universal" to "general," since, as I argue above, the latter comes closer to the Danish term "det Almene." Moreover, I read "Undtagelsen" as a position *from which* to rethink and explain both the general and the singular in their mutual distinction and interdependence.

[19] See SKS 4, 367–377 / CA, 62–73.

Original sin is triggering anxiety, "a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy."[20] A rift is thus revealed between the person as individual and as member of the social bond uniting humanity. A similar rift, indeed, a deep chasm, is identified between the individual and God.

In the book, Kierkegaard scrutinizes the ambivalent relationship between man and woman, between generations, and between humans and the rest of creation as symptomatic for modern human beings and their loss of a deeper understanding of their dependency on the divine. After a careful analysis of negativities—anxiety, guilt, the demonic, and self-conceits—he concludes that the very possibility (and illusion) of *choosing oneself* as this concrete single person in its historical situatedness provokes anxiety. At the same time, anxiety represents the possibility of freedom, not the freedom of choice (*liberum arbitrium*) but the freedom of becoming oneself in the *infinite* sense:

> Anxiety is freedom's possibility, and only such anxiety is through faith absolutely educative, because it consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness. . . . Whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude.[21]

Hence, in the final analysis, anxiety is perceived as possibility and thus a sign of freedom. As experienced by the single individual, however, the main forms of anxiety point towards freedom's negativity. Vigilius Haufniensis observes a dizziness in the relationship to oneself, to the generations and to God—yet also towards other creatures. The harm done to others is heaping up through the generations, he argues, influencing our habits and infecting our relations to them, from the *other* sex to the *other* generations to *other people* in society at large. It also pertains to the *others* in creation, that is, the alterity perceived in nature. Vigilius discusses the latter under the subheading "objective anxiety":

> By coming into the world, sin acquired significance for the whole creation. This effect of sin in nonhuman existence [*den ikke-menneskelige Tilværelse*] I have called objective anxiety. The meaning of this I can indicate by calling attention to the Scriptural expression *apokapadokia tes ktiseos* [the eager longing of creation] (Rom 8, 19). Inasmuch as one can speak of an

[20] "When we consider the dialectical determinations of anxiety, it appears that exactly these have psychological ambiguity. Anxiety is *a sympathetic antipathy* and *an antipathetic sympathy*" (SKS 4, 348 / CA, 42).

[21] SKS 4, 454f. / CA, 155f.

> eager longing, it follows as a matter of course that the creation is in a state of imperfection. . . . This anxiety in creation may rightly be called objective anxiety.[22]

Although Friedrich Schelling is the philosopher who identified such anxiety in nature, Vigilius criticizes Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, where the origin of anxiety is located in "lifeless Nature." For Vigilius, and thus Kierkegaard, nature is alive and responsive; hence the *alteration* of nature also renders the agent responsible, thus triggering guilt and anxiety. He acknowledges that Schelling's term "alteration" describes human interventions in creation, but Kierkegaard moves beyond Schelling by presupposing a mutual relationship between humans and more-than-human nature, to borrow an expression from David Abram.[23] Hence, anxiety can make the human *aware* of her responsibility towards agents in nature, again an indication of how anxiety is vital for human *sensitivity* on the one hand, and responsibilization on the other.

If we apply these analyses to the current age, the Anthropocene, the text acquires another dimension, still unconceivable for people living in the nineteenth century.[24] The emerging planetary crisis, in a significant sense triggered by human activity, is the result of such *interventions* and *alterations* in the ecosystems. Quantitative sin, heaping up in the maximation of profit and extraction of natural resources, has caused irreparable damage to organic as well as non-organic forms of nature. It should not be of any surprise if this generational and creational issue in turn triggers anxiety and fear.[25] As Vigilius points out, humans are members of creation, yet they have felt superior to it, acting as sovereigns rather than servants. Original sin would thus be an appropriate name for the rift *within* human nature, so to speak: a destruction of nature that is also self-destruction.

[22] SKS 4, 361f. / CA, 57f.

[23] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

[24] For an explanation of the term "Anthropocene," see Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415 (2002): p. 23, https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a. For the relation between "Anthropocene" and "Noosphere," see Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin: Essai de vie intérieure*. *Œuvres*, vol. 4 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957). Due to stratigraphic methodological concerns, geologists have now rejected the definition of a new epoch, but some geologists have suggested understanding Anthropocene as a geological *event*. See Alexandra Witze, "Geologists Reject the Anthropocene as Earth's New Epoch—after 15 Years of Debate," *Nature Magazine*, March 6, 2024, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00675-8.

[25] I have written about the question of climate anxiety as related to Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety in: Marius Timmann Mjaaland, "Angst i antropocen," in *Antropocen: menneskets tidsalder*, ed. Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, and Dag O. Hessen (Oslo: Res Publica, 2024), pp. 117–132.

## 5. With Others

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard explores the intersubjective consequences of being a single individual among others, despite the "rift" introduced by anxiety, egocentricity, and original sin. His starting point is love, the eternal bond connecting all creatures:

> Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person's love originate even more deeply in God's love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake nor a human being's love.[26]

Kierkegaard does not give logical reasons for this grounding of human love in the divine source, he simply claims pragmatically that the fruits, i.e., the *works* of love, will show whether love is *there* or not. As I read Kierkegaard, this overflowing love, originating in God's love, emerges as the decisive and yet hidden presupposition for community, for a sociality of mutual care and responsibility.[27]

Despite his emphasis on social and ethical relations in this book, Kierkegaard once more addresses the category of the single individual. The inherent conflict in every human heart, he argues, is the conflict between self-love and love of others. Yet self-love seems to be everywhere, pervading human existence on a personal as well as a social level.[28] Could we then possibly overcome self-love in loving others? This is a tricky dilemma since Kierkegaard (in opposition to Hegel) sees self-love as inevitable.[29] The commandment to love others as yourself becomes the prism for his analysis: you ought to love your neighbor *as yourself*, neither more nor less, he claims, but it is the *selfless love* of others that will teach you how to love yourself non-preferentially.[30]

[26] SKS 9, 18 / WL, 9f.

[27] Thus, Jamie Ferreira comments on love's hiddenness: "What is at stake for Kierkegaard in arming love's hiddenness? First, he wants to remind us that love is unfathomable (without why) because its origin is God's love. Ultimately, the source or power of the act is hidden (cannot be infallibly known). Second, he wants to ensure that we do not assume that love is equal to its fruits, that it is exhausted by an enumeration of its fruits. But it is important to remember that the emphasis on hiddenness is balanced by an emphasis on knowability. In an important sense the fruits of love cannot be hidden; they must be recognizable, and they must allow grounds for determining, though not infallibly, whether love is our motivation" (M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], p. 24).

[28] John Lippitt discusses the problem of self-love at length in his 2013 monograph. On this problem, see in particular the introduction and chapter 3: John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 4–7, 44–62.

[29] SKS 9, 25–28 / WL, 17–20.

[30] "When the Law's *as yourself* has wrested from you the self-love that Christianity sadly enough must presuppose to be in every human being, then you have actually learned to love yourself. The Law is

John Lippitt argues that Kierkegaard's many negative examples make it difficult to identify a *positive* sense of loving oneself. Whereas Harry Frankfurt has argued that self-love in a certain way is "the purest of all modes of love,"[31] since it does not need justification nor external reasons, Lippitt replies that self-love includes all kinds of motives, good and bad; moreover, it implies "uncertainties, hesitations and self-doubts" and thus, it is anything but pure.[32] The same applies to parental love and the love of friends. Lippitt is also critical of Sylvia Walsh's emphasis on self-denial, claiming that Christianity "seeks to transform every love relation into sacrificial love."[33] The emphasis on sacrifice, Lippitt argues, tends towards self-annihilation rather than self-esteem and reconciliation with the self that has been *given* to me. Although self-denial is often emphasized in *Works of Love*, Lippitt explicitly warns against the dangers of self-destruction, shame, and despair. I may add that pride and selfishness are thriving as soon as self-denial becomes an *ideal* for social community, or even for the love of others. Self-denial and even sacrifice may occasionally be necessary for the sake of the other, thus expressing wholeheartedness without reservation, but even then, it requires self-love to avoid the pitfalls of excessive moralization.

There is no clear-cut way to draw a conceptual or moral distinction between self-love and the love of others. Hence, Jamie Ferreira is right in pointing out the tension in *Works of Love* between the abstract ideal and the concrete task of loving your neighbor.[34] The ideal love presented in Jesus' parable of the good or merciful Samaritan is the figure who *becomes a neighbor* to the needy. Learning to love the other thus implies a turn of perspectives: You may learn to perceive yourself as the other and thus to love *yourself* as *another*. Consequently, Kierkegaard argues:

> The one to whom I have a duty is my neighbor, and when I fulfill my duty I show that I am a neighbor. Christ does not speak about knowing the neighbor but about becoming a neighbor oneself, about showing oneself to be a neighbor just as the Samaritan showed it by his

therefore: You shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbor when you love him as yourself" (SKS 9, 30 / WL, 22 f.).

[31] Lippitt, *Kierkegaard,* p. 99; quoting Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 79.

[32] Lippitt, *Kierkegaard*, p. 109.

[33] Ibid., p. 120; quoting Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005), p. 99.

[34] Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 113.

> mercy. By this he did not show that the assaulted man was his neighbor but that he was a neighbor of the one assaulted.[35]

As soon as he reaches this turning point, Kierkegaard follows up with the duty to love the people you see and encounter in life, not the abstract others of your fancy. Moreover, he argues, with reference to Paul, that it is a duty to remain in the *debt* of loving each other.[36]

At this point, I see a *deepening* of the dynamic described earlier, of the gap separating me from the others, and yet, including me in the community of all the others. The debt awaiting your response is demanding and yet simple. It is concrete. It takes the form of a call-and-response to the *face* of the other.[37] Responding to the call and the need of the other thus develops into a process of *responsibilization*. As the single individual, the reader is called to become the *exception*, following the example of Christ even when others dismiss the calling as unachievable and exaggerated.[38] This radical calling formulated by the command to love others is not exclusively Christian, though. It unavoidably *transcends* the limit of a Christian society, a Christian community. The love commandment is categorically directed towards every member of humanity—and the silent and concrete calling lights up in the face of *every* other, as other: to love your neighbor as yourself.

## 6. From the Extended Me to the Extended We

Kierkegaard nevertheless becomes polemical when addressing common perceptions of love: erotic love and the love of friendship. The lover or the friend are not *others* in the qualified sense, he argues:

> The love commandment can say to him: Love your neighbor as you love the beloved. But does he not love the beloved as himself, as the commandment that speaks of the neighbor commands? Certainly he does, but the beloved he loves as himself is not the neighbor; the beloved is the other I. Whether we speak of the first I or of the other I, we do not come a step closer to "the neighbor," because the neighbor is the first "you." The one whom self-

[35] SKS 9, 30 / WL, 22. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). The title, as well as key points in Ricœur's narrative ethics, echo a central insight in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*.

[36] SKS 9, 175ff. / WL, 175ff.

[37] The face of the other is an expression developed by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), see pp. 76–78.

[38] Cf. Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, pp. 234–235.

> love, in the strictest sense, loves, is basically the other I, because the other I is he himself. Yet this certainly is still self-love.[39]

In Kierkegaard's eyes, preferential love is merely an extension of the I: extended self-love, or *the extended me*. This attitude is preferential, and thus completely different from neighborly love, he contends.

As a number of commentators, including Lippitt and Ferreira, have pointed out, Kierkegaard introduces a criterion for neighborly love: *God as the intermediary*, the middle term (*Mellembestemmelsen*).[40] This is the decisive, and the *infinite*, extension of your relation to the other: "In erotic love and friendship, preferential love is the middle term; in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term. Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being."[41]

As the middle term, the reference to God is both an *interruption* of self-love and represents an infinite *alteration* of my love of others.[42] This love grounding in God opens up *the extended we*, the love pertaining to every human being. At the same time, Kierkegaard insists that my neighbor is the middle term between myself and God. That is the decisive extension of my self-relation: the other as intermediary between me and God. Hence, Kierkegaard seeks to avoid or warn against a fantastic or speculative interiority replacing the concrete, and therefore external, works of love. Implicitly, we can here see a sharp critique of the speculative religiosity expressed in Hegel's notion of Spirit and in Feuerbach's Idea of God as speculative projection of my inner self. Such ideas are misleading and distracting, Kierkegaard argues, as soon as you focus on the neighbor outside your door, on the street, or lying in the ditch. The call reaches you from outside, it represents the unexpected *intervention* and *interruption* of your relation to yourself (and even to "your" God); hence, it represents the exact opposite of speculative projections and fantastic interiority. An adequate response will draw you *out* of your self-concerned interiority.

This is what I call responsibilization: in Kierkegaard's case, it begins with a sensitivity and thus responsivity to the other—indeed, every other, not only your friend or your beloved. The many examples throughout the second part of *Works of Love* indicate

[39] SKS 9, 64 / WL, 57; quotation marks added from the original, since they are lacking in the translation.

[40] See Ferreira's discussion of God as "middle term" in *Love's Grateful Striving*, pp. 71-73 and Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*, pp. 56-61.

[41] SKS 9, 64 / WL, 57 f.

[42] Emphasizing the interruption (or the rift, the rupture) in your relation to the other represents a more radical interpretation of "the middle term" than we find in both Ferreira and Lippitt and runs counter to Løgstrup's critique of Kierkegaard's ethics. Cf. K.E. Løgstrup, *Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968).

that it is the suffering of the other that appeals to your compassion. Only by responding to this call, you may become response-able, thus developing your response- and account-ability.[43] The proof of this responsibility is not theoretical but rather practical, in the concrete response to a specific neighbor. Within this process of responsibilization, Kierkegaard sees a trace of God who comes to mind, interrupts thought, and comes to *deed*, to works, as love. "God" is thereby a name for the One who breaks the self open to itself, in the name of the Other.

Without suggesting a sublime schizophrenia, this decentered understanding of the self means loving oneself as another, a stranger: an exception and yet the most ordinary person in the world. As the single individual (and thus the exception), you are separated from the beloved, separated from your friend and the group or party to which you belong: "The other human being, this is the neighbor who is the other human being in the sense that the other human being is every other human being."[44] In this sense, the "extended we" is infinitely extended—open to the world, open to God—and yet, ethically and socially, it remains concrete.

Since Kierkegaard presupposes that the source of love remains hidden, love would only be recognizable in the *works* of love, and the noun "love" is ambiguous here: if you follow the example of the good Samaritan or the poor widow who gives away her last coins, you perform *works* of love. However, in a more profound sense, they also represent the works of Love, with a capital L. Love would then be the true agent and driving force of the work. In theological discourse, this double agency is often discussed under the heading of "co-operation" with God. Here, however, such "co-operation" becomes another step in Kierkegaard's strategy of *decentering* subjectivity: every person depends on the love of others, and ultimately on divine love. Such love is pervasive and remains a gift both to the giver and the receiver, to the Samaritan and the poor man in the ditch. It is an active love that is ultimately grounded in passivity. Kierkegaard's appeal to the source in the opening passage quoted above makes it clear that self-love and love of others in this qualified sense both are *derived*, or *dependent*, forms of love.

The commandment, however, insists on some sort of action, possibly even a *volitional* act, as emphasized by Harry Frankfurt.[45] Hence, Kierkegaard's detailed

[43] Ferreira refers to similar examples when she argues for *responsiveness* as constitutive of neighborly love in Kierkegaard: "We find, then, throughout *Works of Love* recommendations of compassionate responses to what the neighbor needs and is—not one-sided initiatives that ignore the concrete situation or response of the other" (Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, p. 222).

[44] SKS 9, 64 / WL, 58.

[45] See Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 129.

interpretation of the commandment affirms the *duty* to love: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*.[46] The question is whether there is an inner contradiction here, between active and passive, between loving and being loved. Sharon Krishek suggests that there is a hierarchy of different expressions of love, running from God as the source of love via the power of love in us, to works of love, and finally, to the "fruits" of love.[47] She may be right, but I think she overlooks the difference *in kind* between the levels and forms of love. Love is indeed a work, and it implies volitions, but volitions and works are futile unless they are driven by love, as Paul emphasizes in 1 Cor 13. Lippitt acknowledges this point and suggests that "God is the 'filter' through which all proper love, including self-love, must pass."[48] As good as the intention of the metaphor of a "filter" may be, I am afraid that both Lippitt and Krishek get the question wrong, as is also the case with Sylvia Walsh. They take "self-love" to be a problem that we ought to "solve" by the help of self-denial, abstinence, or selflessness. In contrast to these scholars, I think the problem is irresolvable, and I read Kierkegaard along similar lines.

Divine love as the source of true love is key to understanding the transformation of self-love, but not because it is a "filter" of purification. On the contrary, this love approaches us from a different source, overwhelming and transformative. It is by *losing* ourselves, in the process of abandoning, even forgetting, our selfishness, that we are able to *perceive* and *receive* such love. Such receptivity is grounded in the deeper love, by accepting Love as the agent within my agency, thus decentering the "self" of self-love to other-love. This is the liberating force of passively grounded, overwhelming love: it qualifies the self as receptive, and thus responsive to the needs and the love of others.

Paradoxically, this is the path indicated by Kierkegaard in the first three chapters of the second part of *Works of Love*: a love that is quite different from a "filter," since it is involved in "building up," in trusting, in hoping, and is thereby never disappointed. The way to avoid disappointment and resentment is to proceed otherwise, that is, through the passivity and receptivity that is involved in every "act" of loving, trusting, and hoping. This passivity is the key to understanding the transformation of the self from a self-concerned self to a loving, decentered self, concerned with others (including the *alter ego*, oneself as another).

The process of responsibilization thus transforms the *aut-aut* of (either) self-love or neighborly love into alternatives that are not mutually exclusive. This is where I think

[46] See the sustained meditation on this commandment in *Works of Love*: SKS 9, 51–67 / WL, 44–60.
[47] Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 111.
[48] Lippitt, *Kierkegaard*, p. 61.

some of the commentators run into a blind alley when insisting on selflessness as a moral requirement. The second alternative described here includes and presupposes self-love, but it also transforms this self-concerned self into a responsive, and thus responsible self, being aware of the other and acting (in the sense of *responding*) as far as time and resources permit. In my reading, this transformation is not the result of a "supernatural" intervention or a volitional act of self-denial. It is the bodily and spiritual *response* to a spiritual and bodily reality, namely, the acceptance of ultimate dependence on others and on the alterity which remains the ultimate and *other* source of love. Moreover, it represents a *response* in the form of abandoning oneself in trust and hope of the other.

## 7. Rethinking Responsibility with the Lily and the Bird

The question of responsibility is again confronting us today, yet from a different angle. The human race is accused of exceptionalism, of suppressing and exploiting the planet and other species for its own sake. This is an expression of human self-love on another scale, at the cost of vulnerable ecosystems, at the cost of biodiversity and the web of life. An increasing number of scholars advocating various forms of posthumanism are asking what this exceptionalism means, and whether it is ethically defendable.[49] These efforts are a reaction to a prevailing understanding of the human being as an exception, a creature called to dominate creation and exploit it.[50] Alleged consequences of such exceptionalism are global warming, climate gas emissions, a sixth mass extinction, and destruction of nature. These are characteristics of the Anthropocene, the "Age of the Humans." In this diagnosis of the *Zeitgeist*, it is first of all an age of human exceptionalism.

If we try to rethink human responsibility with Kierkegaard, would it then be possible to think through the human condition as *exception*, without simply effacing the "human" as in posthumanism? Would it be possible, by thinking through the "exception," to understand the general—in this case, creation in a wider sense—and the human self? I think it is worth an effort, and I think we should continue by proceeding to another text by Kierkegaard, *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849). Here,

[49] See two notable examples of posthumanism: Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Co-Existence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); and Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

[50] See the influential criticism of Christianity and the historical roots of our ecological crisis in Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): pp. 1203–1207: "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (p. 1205).

the author discusses what it means to be human by reflecting on the more-than-human, represented by the bird, the lily, and the divine. In a rather detailed analysis of this text published elsewhere, I have suggested that Kierkegaard develops a certain philosophy of nature in the discourse, running through the aesthetics, ontology, and epistemology of the simplicity of nature:

> There are three steps on Kierkegaard's path towards simplicity: First, becoming silent, second, waiting, and third, suffering. . . . As opposed to the speculative character of Hegel's phenomenology, Kierkegaard elaborates an epistemology of nature emphasising its factuality and simplicity. It corresponds to the passivity of perception when nature is "out there": Nature as given in the exterior precedes my effort at understanding. Hence, it also resists my effort at conceiving it meaningfully—and incidentally, the same applies to God.[51]

I will not discuss the argument in detail, but I will point out that the bird and the lily have a double function in Kierkegaard's discourse: on the one hand, they represent an interruption of the social community, but on the other hand, a corrective to the self-love of the isolated and/or Romantic self. Apparently, the lily and the bird are outside of the social community, and yet they are perceived by Kierkegaard as the first members of this community. The bird is an exception, but also an example of responsive *singularity*. The same applies to the lily in the field. Their silence, waiting, and suffering are emphasized as paths towards healing of the original rupture between the social and the singular, the *rift* of original sin.[52] In times of climate change and mass extinctions, this represents a reconsideration of responsivity, with the lily and the bird, pointing towards a *responsibilization* of the human being in the age of ecological crisis.

## 8. Posthuman Postscript: Towards the Coming Community

In the present age, I see this as an example of what Bruno Latour has labeled the "new" exteriority.[53] He aims at modifying our understanding of nature as "external," thus proceeding from the collective (a commodification of capital) to the social, and thereby allowing nature to *interrupt* our community. *Mutatis mutandis*, the lily and the bird would thus become members of the Republic, or of the "extended we," as I prefer

[51] Marius Timmann Mjaaland, "Ecophilosophy and the Ambivalence of Nature: Kierkegaard and Knausgård on Lilies, Birds and Being," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), p. 337.
[52] SKS 11, 43 / WA, 39.
[53] See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, trans Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 121–127.

to call it; the lily and the bird are naturalized in the sense of being socialized and thus becoming members of the "expanding collective."[54]

I perceive this shift towards the extended we as a result of thinking through "the exception" once more, as a repetition in (and interruption of) the "Age of the Humans." This would not only imply an *expansion* but also an *interruption* of common understandings of the social and the political in our times. Nature in the form of a bird or a lily, a bee or a river, interrupts our understanding of the world as dominated by social definitions, definitions mostly referring to *the extended me* of humankind. These "more-than-human" agents become correctives to a self-centered understanding of community and point towards *an extended we*, where humans reconsider their dependence rather than their superiority, their guilt and original sin as ruptures in their (delusions of) freedom.[55] Between me and the more-than-human there is an infinite intermediary (*Mellembestemmelse*): God. Conversely, between me and God there are also numerous concrete and precarious members of the extended we, such as, in Kierkegaard's discourse, the lily and the bird:

> Before God you are not to become more important to yourself than a lily or a bird—yet when it becomes earnestness and truth that you are before God, this latter will be a consequence of the first. Even if what you want in the world would be the most astounding feat, you are to acknowledge the lily and the bird as your teachers and before God you are not to become more important to yourself than the lily and the bird. And even if the whole world were not large enough to hold your plans when you unfold them, you are to learn from the lily and the bird as teachers to be able before God simply to fold up all your plans into less space than a period and with less noise than the most negligible trifle—in silence.[56]

The interruption thus described by Kierkegaard is the interruption of silence, where the bird and the lily become our teachers. In the contemporary context, these agents throw light on the community to which we belong, they represent the *new* exteriority and thus a silent protest to the modern neglection and denial of the created and natural world.[57] As members of the extended we, they represent a continuous challenge to the established order, and thus, paradoxically, they call for the singular individual, in the infinite sense. This call is a silent rebellion against the present order, against the numerical, the parties, etc. Such an interruption of business-as-usual represents a rupture at the limit between the singular and the social but also at the limit between

[54] Latour, *Politics of Nature*, p. 127.
[55] On the discussion of freedom and its blind spots, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Four Theses," in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), pp. 23–48.
[56] SKS 11, 23 / WA, 17.
[57] For a philosophical analysis of the modern denial of nature and its causes, see Arne Johan Vetlesen, *The Denial of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2015).

the social and the natural, between creature and Creator, and between the living and the dead. In this sense, the extended we belongs to the future, a *coming* community.[58] And the future belongs to the extended we.

[58] Cf. the *eschatological* vision of community in Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993).