# International Journal of Kierkegaard Research

# *International Journal of Kierkegaard Research*

Edited by

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**Book Reviews**

# Abbreviations

## Danish Abbreviations

B&A *Breve og Aktstykker vedrørende Søren Kierkegaard*. Edited by Niels Thulstrup. Vols. 1–2. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1953–54.

Pap. *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*. Edited by Peter Andreas Heiberg, Victor Kuhr, and Einer Torsting. Vols. I to XI–3. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag 1909–48; Second, expanded edition, vols. I to XI–3, edited by Niels Thulstrup. Vols. XII to XIII, supplementary volumes, edited by Niels Thulstrup. Vols. XIV to XVI, index by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968–78.

SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*. Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, Alastair McKinnon, and Finn Hauberg Mortensen. Vols. 1–28, K1–K28. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997–2013.

## English Abbreviations

JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Vols. 1–6. Vol. 7, *Index and Composite Collation*, by N. Hong and C. Barker. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–78.

KJN *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*. Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Söderquist. Vols. 1–11. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007–2020.

KW *Kierkegaard's Writings*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Vols. I-XXVI. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978–98.

AN *Armed Neutrality*. In KW XXII.

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|---|---|
| BA | *The Book on Adler*. In KW XXIV. |
| C | *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. In KW XVII. |
| CA | *The Concept of Anxiety*. Translated by Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. In KW VIII. |
| CAH | *The Concept of Anxiety*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. New York: W.W. Norton, 2014. |
| CD | *Christian Discourses*. In KW XVII. |
| CI | *The Concept of Irony*. In KW II. |
| COR | *The Corsair Affair*; *Articles Related to the Writings*. In KW XIII. |
| CUP1 | *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In KW XII, 1. |
| CUP2 | *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In KWXII, 2. |
| CUPH | *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. |
| EO1 | *Either/Or, Part I*. In KW III. |
| EO2 | *Either/Or, Part* II. In KW IV. |
| EOH | *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London and New York: Penguin, 2004. |
| 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*. Translated by Julia Watkin. In KW I. |
| EUD | *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. In KW V. |
| FSE | *For Self-Examination*. In KW XXI. |

| | |
|---|---|
| FT | *Fear and Trembling*. In KW VI. |
| FTH | *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. |
| FTK | *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. New York: Liveright, 2021. |
| JC | *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*. In KW VII. |
| JFY | *Judge for Yourselves*. In KW XXI. |
| LB | *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses*. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. |
| LD | *Letters and Documents*. Translated by Hendrik Rosenmeier. In KW XXV. |
| M | *The Moment and Late Writings*. In KW XXIII. |
| P | *Prefaces / Writing Sampler*. Translated by Todd W. Nichol. In KW IX. |
| PC | *Practice in Christianity*. In KW XX. |
| PF | *Philosophical Fragments*. In KW VII. |
| PCP | *Philosophical Crumbs*. In *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*. Translated by M. G. Piety. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. |
| PV | *The Point of View*, including *On My Work as an Author* and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*. In KW XXII. |
| R | *Repetition*. In KW VI. |
| RP | *Repetition*. In *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*. Translated by M. G. Piety. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. |
| SBL | *Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*. In KW II. |

| | |
|---|---|
| SL | *Stages on Life's Way*. In KW XI. |
| SUD | *The Sickness unto Death*. In KW XIX. |
| SUDH | *The Sickness unto Death*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London and New York: Penguin Books, 2004. |
| SUDK | *The Sickness unto Death*. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. New York: Liveright, 2023. |
| TA | *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, a Literary Review*. In KW XIV. |
| TD | *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. In KW X. |
| UDVS | *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. In 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*. In KW XVIII. |
| WL | *Works of Love*. In KW XVI. |
| WLK | *Works of Love*. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. New York: Liveright, 2025. |

# Editors' Introduction

Dear Readers,

Below you will find the 2025 issue of the *International Journal of Kierkegaard Research* (IJKR), a double-blind, peer-reviewed, open-access journal, founded in 2024. The IJKR is both a continuation and transformation of the Hong Kierkegaard Library's *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter*, which prior to 2023 published articles in Kierkegaard studies for over 40 years. Last year, we brought the publication to a new scholarly platform in order to promote further reach and access through libraries, databases, and virtual portals, and we introduced the valuable process of peer-refereeing. Meanwhile, we recommitted to the original *Newsletter*'s mission of promoting diverse perspectives from a global research community. Importantly, we also forefronted the pedagogical aims of the journal, through both *what* we publish and *how* we engage our authors, potential contributors, and readers.

The IJKR finds its home in the Hong Kierkegaard Library, a Research and Publication Center, which welcomes students and scholars from around the world to access its resources and join a vibrant research community. Each summer, the Kierkegaard Summer Institute at the Kierkegaard Library hosts approximately forty or fifty visitors from about fifteen countries. The mission of the Library and the journal are linked: the IJKR aims to provide a platform for the fruits of this rich research opportunity.

This second issue of the *International Journal of Kierkegaard Research* shows growth, as well as continuity, in relation to our first issue, which landed in December 2024. One year later, our peer-reviewed section has now grown from four to five articles. Each approaches central Kierkegaardian themes and questions from a variety of disciplines and philosophical traditions: the 2025 issue includes work by Alexander Jech, Marius Timmann Mjaaland, James P. Rasmussen, Anthony Rudd, and Michael Steinmetz, and we are happy once again to feature one excellent student article, this year by Joshua Griffiths. In this issue, we also present a special talk delivered by the President of the Søren Kierkegaard Society (SKS), USA, Michael Strawser, at the SKS banquet during the American

Academy of Religion's Annual Meeting in San Diego in November 2024. Our book reviews section has grown from two to four articles, enabling us to bring attention to notable new publications in the field. Please see the "Notes on Contributors" for more information on the contributors to this issue.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank both Manifold and St. Olaf College for hosting our publication. We especially value the open-access format permitted by Manifold's platform and mission. Articles are available to anyone on Manifold's website, where they can also be downloaded—individually, or the issue as a whole—as PDFs.

We would also like to thank our peer reviewers for their meticulous refereeing, for helping to guarantee the quality of our publications, and for promoting our educational and supportive vision. Likewise, we are grateful to the members of our advisory board for promoting and believing in the journal. Special thanks go to our peer-review coordinator and copyeditor, Colleen O'Reilly, for her professionalism, organizational acumen, and insightful approach to our shared work. Finally, we are grateful to you, our readers and contributors, for your scholarship and engagement.

Sincerely,

The Editors
Frances Maughan-Brown, Philosophy Department, College of the Holy Cross
Anna Louise Strelis Söderquist, The Hong Kierkegaard Library, St. Olaf College
Elizabeth Xiao-An Li, Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, University of Copenhagen

# WHAT ABRAHAM INTENDED: A NOTE ON TRANSLATING PROBLEMA I, WITH A VIEW TOWARD THE PARADOX

BY ALEXANDER JECH

*Abstract:* Probably no part of *Fear and Trembling* has received more philosophical attention than Problema I, on the teleological suspension of the ethical. It is a dense, potent, and difficult section of argumentation. Unfortunately, beginning in the first paragraph, English translations have suffered from a peculiar difficulty in providing a clear and precise translation of its definitions and so also of the dialectical impetus of the section. In this article, I review existing translations, show the difficulties they introduce into the argument, and suggest a better way of expressing Problema I in English. In conclusion, I show how getting the translation right draws Kierkegaard into the main philosophical debates about action theory alongside figures like Aristotle and Kant, and clarifies the scope of Silentio's "paradox" as a particular challenge for understanding the practical reasoning of religious believers.[1]

*Keywords:* Action, Anscombe, Aristotle, faith, intention, Kant, practical reason, translation, teleological suspension of the ethical

## 1. Introduction

Probably no part of *Fear and Trembling* has received more philosophical attention than Problema I, on the teleological suspension of the ethical. It is a dense, potent, and difficult section of philosophical argumentation. Unfortunately, beginning in the first paragraph, English translations have suffered from a peculiar difficulty in providing a clear and precise translation of its definitions and so also of the dialectical impetus of the section. This imprecision and vagueness has made it more difficult to understand and discuss his argument than it ought to be, and it is my view that clarifying Problema I adds significant sharpness to secondary debates over this important section. Thus, in this note, I will set

[1] This paper was the labor of a half dozen years, on and off. It was largely a solitary labor but two individuals provided significant encouragement along the way, whom I will thank here: Karl Ameriks and Megan Fritts.

out the main translation alternatives on offer, demonstrate the confusion they cause about the key question of intentionality, and suggest a set of translation options that better capture Kierkegaard's meaning. Notably, such clarity does not at all erase the paradox; rather, a better translation makes the paradox stand out more sharply and starkly. Thus, this analysis will make interpretation of and debates over Problema I more fruitful wherever English is the primary language in which Kierkegaard is read and discussed.

## 2. What Abraham Wanted?

Let us begin with the Hongs. Although they were not the first English translators, their achievement in translating Kierkegaard's writings has made them the default for many, and a natural place to begin. Here is how they translate the beginning of Problema I:

> The 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. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its τέλος but is itself the τέλος for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further. The single individual, sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy, is the individual who has his τέλος in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, 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. Every time the single individual, after having entered the universal, **feels an impulse to assert himself** as the single individual, he is in a spiritual trial, from which he can work himself only by repentantly surrendering as the single individual in the universal.[2]

My focus is on two sentences in which I have applied boldface to the phrase surrounding the main verb. In the Hongs' translation, there is a clear distinction between the two sentences: *sinning* means *asserting* one's individuality in violation of the universal, whereas *temptation* means experiencing a *feeling* that would lead someone to *assert* oneself in such a way.

Three more recent translations, by Alistair Hannay, Sylvia Walsh, and Bruce H. Kirmmse, have each shown dissatisfaction with the Hongs' translation, and render this passage differently.

[2] SKS 4, 148 / FT, 54.

Hannay:

> As soon as the single individual **wants to assert himself** in his particularity, in direct opposition to the universal, he sins . . . Whenever, having entered the universal, the single individual **feels an urge to assert his particularity**, he is in a state of temptation . . .[3]

Walsh:

> As soon as the single individual **wants to assert himself** in his particularity over against the universal, he sins . . . Whenever the single individual **feels an urge to assert himself** as the particular after having entered into the universal, he is in a state of temptation . . .[4]

And Kirmmse:

> Whenever the individual **wants to assert himself** in his particularity vis-à-vis the universal, he sins . . . Whenever the individual, having entered into the universal, **feels an impulse to assert himself** in his particularity, he is in a state of spiritual trial . . .[5]

I have bolded the relevant phrases where these translations differ from the Hongs' translation in each case. Interestingly, despite the differences between these three, all adjusted the translation of these phrases in the same way. Perhaps some readers already see the possible confusion created by their strategy, to which I will return later. For the moment, let us talk about the underlying Danish text to see what the Hongs may have left out that would prompt translators in a new direction. Here it is:

> Saasnart den Enkelte **vil gjøre sig gjeldende** i sin Enkelthed ligeoverfor det Almene, da synder han . . . Hver Gang den Enkelte, efterat have været traadt ind i det Almene, **føler en Tilskyndelse til at gjøre sig gjeldende** som den Enkelte, da er han i Anfægtelse . . .

The phrase *gjøre sig gjeldende* means "to assert oneself," so the Hongs seem to have simply left an entire word out, the short word *vil*. Hannay, Walsh, and Kirmmse add this word back in, translating it as "wants."

Is there something wrong with the Hongs' translation, and does the contemporary emendation of translating *vil* as "wants" correct the error? Let us walk through the condensed passage. Each sentence begins with a condition: "As soon as the individual (*Saasnart den Enkelte*);" "Every time the individual (*Hver Gang den Enkelte*)." The main verb

[3] *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 83.
[4] *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 46.
[5] *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Bruce Kirmmse (New York: Liveright, 2023), p. 148.

of the first sentence's condition is *vil,* infinitive *at ville*. The main verb of the second sentence's condition is *føler*, infinitive *at føle*. The meaning of these words is hinted at by their English cognates: will and feel. *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, the most serious attempt to catalogue the history of the Danish language, gives the following as its first definition of *at ville*: "an expression for . . . intention, decision, wish, [or] inclination," and the eighth definition provided is a "willed intention, demand, [or] wish."[6] It is perhaps more due to the extraordinary range of the English word "want" than to the semantic content of *ville* that the latter is so often translated as the former.[7] Now, what is the cost of translating this phrase as the Hongs did, so that Abraham's "intention, decision, wish, or inclination" is submerged? To begin, it is no longer clear whether Abraham actually *did* assert himself against the universal or feel a strong impulse to do so. First, since he did not *actually* murder Isaac, did he *actually* assert himself in the way that Silentio describes? If he didn't *actually* assert himself, then did he *actually* sin, and if not, why speak of him as a sinner? At the same time, he doesn't seem to have had a strong felt *desire* to kill Isaac. Silentio says that "Cain and Abraham are not identical,"[8] meaning that "only in the moment when his deed is in absolute contradiction with his feeling, only then does he sacrifice Isaac."[9] Further, according to Silentio, the "paradox of faith" includes the idea that the knight of faith has already passed through the ethical and acquired the character of a virtuous individual:

> 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.[10]

For this reason, it is precisely Abraham's faith that makes the deed "difficult for him,"[11] difficult for him because he is repelled by it. If having faith like Abraham's presupposes having ethical character, then it presupposes that one already has rightly formed desires; and someone with this character does not desire, or want, to sin.

[6] "Som udtryk for (især en persons) forsæt, beslutning, ønske, tilbøjelighed . . ."; ". . . en viljebestemt hensigt, et krav, et ønske. . . ." Verner Dahlerup, ed., *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, vol. 26 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1982).
[7] One can see this tendency especially if one examines the Gyldendal *Dansk-Engelsk Ordbog*, which includes a large number of idioms in which it instructs the reader to translate *vil* as "want."
[8] SKS 4, 165 / FT, 74.
[9] SKS 4, 166 / FT, 74.
[10] SKS 4, 149 / FT, 55.
[11] SKS 4, 126 / FT, 30.

So Silentio rules out the idea that Abraham harbors murderous feelings toward Isaac; but since Abraham also doesn't actually kill Isaac, does Abraham actually violate either condition, on the Hongs' rendering of the argument? Letting *vil* slip away produces confusion, and one needs a way to show that Silentio's definition of sin does involve "intention, decision, wish, or inclination."

Thus, we come to the more recent translators, who have brought *vil* back in, as "wants." *Prima facie*, this may seem appealing, but it presents problems when we look more closely. It may even leave us in an even worse position than before. Silentio's definition of temptation describes the situation in which someone "feels an urge" or "feels an impulse" to perform the wrong action, described as a "spiritual trial" in the Hongs and Kirmmse or a "temptation" in Hannay and Walsh.[12] It presupposes that the individual has not yet chosen whether to act upon the impulse or to deny it. The danger of translating *vil* as "wants" is that it makes it unclear to the reader whether the two sentences describe the same condition in two different ways or two different conditions. One of the main meanings of this word in English is precisely to experience an inclination or strong feeling directed at having or doing something. This annihilates the distinction between sin and temptation, as now each seems to mean experiencing a feeling aimed at asserting one's individuality against the universal. Equally bad, Silentio's Abraham doesn't have a felt desire to kill Isaac (as we just saw), and we *still* have the Hongs' problem that Abraham is perhaps exempt from violating either condition. Readers could be forgiven for thinking that Kierkegaard himself is a rather vague, impressionistic author.[13]

### 3. What Abraham Wished?

A few readers may be tempted to call out, "Wait! Is not 'wish' available as an alternative here?" And a particularly skeptical, or merely stubborn, reader might even add, "And isn't

[12] *Anfægtelse* has given translators so much trouble that the first translators of Kierkegaard just used the German cognate *Anfechtung*. Following the Hongs, most translators have opted now for "spiritual trial," but I prefer the translation "spiritual agon," since it best captures both the etymology of the term (a kind of trial by combat) and what Johannes Climacus describes as the special meaning of this term in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (SKS 7, 416ff / CUP1, 457ff), as well as the implication that whereas one ought to take care to avoid temptations when possible, and that it is often best to flee rather than fight them, one must fight through an *Anfægtelse* instead. Yet it is admittedly rather awkward and not very idiomatic.

[13] If one will forgive me for the expressing the matter thus, one could say it leaves the reader wanting a new definition for "want," to avoid this impasse, but the semantic domain of "wants" wants any obvious recourse; a different word is wanted.

the semantic range of 'want' actually 'desire or wish,'" meaning, of course, that even if "want" created the potential for confusion, it was serviceable enough, if only we keep the second disjunct in mind.

Perhaps no such stubborn readers exist; but still, what about "wish"? Would "as soon as the single individual *wishes* to assert himself in his particularity" be preferable? Certainly, this at least distinguishes sin from temptation. And those familiar with action theory, or with Aristotle's ethics, will also remember that Aristotle too distinguished wish (βούλησις) from both appetite (ἐπιθυμία) and spirit or anger (θυμός),[14] and assigned to wishing a distinct role in his action theory: it was wish, rather than desire, that was "for the [person's] end"[15] or for things constituting or seeming to supply that end, or what a person takes to constitute that end, whether these things are possible or impossible, whether up to us or outside our power, so that Aristotle includes wishing for health, to be immortal, or that an actor or athlete would win a particular award or prize all as valid expressions of "wish" as opposed to desire or anger.[16] So, someone might be tempted to adapt this distinction here and say that temptation involves desire or anger, but sin involves wrong wishing.

Yet the reader who knows enough Aristotle to suggest this may already sense a problem—or, rather, several problems. If Abraham is presupposed to be virtuous, then Aristotle will want to say that his wish must be directed at the genuine good, and so he won't wish to do what is wrong, let alone what he knows to be wrong.[17] Besides, the concept Aristotle would wish to deploy here would not be "wish" but "deliberate choice" (προαίρεσις); and this is really to the point, since Silentio has already given "wish" (*Ønske*) a definite and distinct meaning in the text, a meaning that largely corresponds to Aristotle's, and is concerned in some way with a person's end. Kierkegaard and Silentio are particularly interested not in particular wishes, but in those wishes in which a person envisions their temporal happiness, later stating that "the wish" is essentially related to "a happier temporality" (whereas faith and hope are "the relation to the eternal").[18] Here we see that Abraham "was still young enough to wish to be a father" and "faith had

[14] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014), 1111b2 and following.
[15] Ibid., 1113a15.
[16] Ibid., 1111b21-24.
[17] Ibid., 1113b24-29.
[18] SKS 8, 203 / UDVS, 99.

preserved" this wish.[19] Knights of both faith and resignation are partially defined by their possession of "one single wish" in which they have concentrated their "whole life's content and the meaning of actuality."[20] The significance of Abraham's wish is that it is contrary to his deed. On the other hand, for the tragic hero, "wish and duty [are] opposite each other," so that he "gives up his wish in order to fulfill his duty," for Abraham, the knight of faith, "wish and duty are identical" and "what is required is that he give up both parts."[21] Silentio defines Abraham's wish in terms of Isaac, of having offspring through Isaac, of living with Isaac in the land. *Isaac* is Abraham's wish, his "happier temporality," what he wishes for *in time*. He describes the pain of resignation in terms of the pain of giving up the wish in obedience to the divine command and the superior greatness of faith in terms of holding fast to the wish one has given up.[22] If we use "wish" here, to translate sin as "wishing" to assert oneself in one's individuality against the universal, then we will again lose Abraham, and make him exempt from the whole dialectic, since by Silentio's definition he does not *wish* to do what he does any more than he *desires* to do it. Instead of losing the distinction between sin and temptation, we will lose the ability to describe resignation, and be relegated to speaking nonsense, to saying *Abraham wished to give up his wish*. That is, we will have to say that Abraham was double-minded, which is not the situation Silentio wishes to examine; and, even if such mental infirmity constitutes a "paradox," it is not one worth so much fanfare.

### 4. What Abraham Was Willing to Do?

Consider another usage of *ville* in *Fear and Trembling*, this time, in its past tense as *vilde*:

> Det ethiske Udtryk for hvad Abraham gjorde er, at **han vilde myrde Isaak**, det religieuse er, at **han vilde offre Isaak** . . .[23]

Here, especially, we see the problems with translating *ville* either as *want* or as *wish*. For this passage would make no sense if we rendered this as:

[19] SKS 4, 115 / FT, 18.
[20] SKS 4, 137 / FT, 43.
[21] SKS 4, 170 / FT, 78.
[22] SKS 4, 114–115 / FT, 18.
[23] SKS 4, 165 / FT, 30.

> The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that **he wanted to murder Isaac**, the religious is that **he wanted to sacrifice Isaac**.

Neither could we render it as:

> The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that **he wished to murder Isaac**, the religious is that **he wished to sacrifice Isaac**.

The four modern translators translate this in three different ways:

> he meant to murder . . . he meant to sacrifice (Hongs, 30)

> he was willing to murder . . . he was willing to sacrifice (Hannay, 58; Kirmmse, 36)

> he intended to murder . . . he intended to sacrifice (Walsh, 24)

None of the more recent translators are willing to translate *vilde* in a manner parallel to their translation of *vil* above, as *wanted*. The oldest English translation, by Walter Lowrie, on the other hand, translates each the same way:[24]

> he **would** murder . . . he **would** sacrifice (Lowrie, 66)

> As soon as the individual **would** assert himself in his particularity he sins (Lowrie, 107)

This rendering now seems rather old-fashioned, but before commenting on it, let us examine the option adopted by both Hannay and Kirmmse: "was willing to."

This may seem promising. "Being willing to" involves a state of voluntariness that is distinct from both performing an action *and* from a felt desire to perform it. Thus, it could be the third thing that would draw Abraham into the dialectic of Problema I, as intended. But there are at least two significant problems with using this translation here or back at the beginning of Problema I. First, if we translate *vilde myrde* as "was willing to murder," then we are saying that the situation of Abraham is like that of someone who "was willing to go for coffee." Being willing to go for coffee does not entail that the person did go for coffee; instead, it seems to describe a kind of disposition or condition in which the person *would* agree to go for coffee *if* asked to do so, or *if* they became aware that their friends wanted them to, or *if* something similar. Yet this person might not even be thinking of going for coffee or making plans to do so, and this does not describe Abraham going to

[24] *Fear and Trembling; and, The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

Mount Moriah. Being willing to murder another person is a bad or wicked state, but it is compatible with the would-be murderer living on the other side of the world from the would-be victim and not even sparing a thought for the would-be victim. It means only that, under some possible circumstances, the would-be murderer would, or maybe merely could, choose to do it. This is not a particularly apt or precise way of describing what Abraham did when he went to Mount Moriah; we mean not that there are conditions in which he would kill Isaac; we mean that the condition was *activated*.

So "being willing to murder" would say too little. But it might also say too much. The standard definitions of this term in English place it firmly in the camp of what Aristotle described as a condition of voluntariness in *Ethics* III.1, as what someone would do either with enthusiasm or under duress. But "enthusiasm" seems to once again ask us to imagine Abraham either wanting or wishing to commit the deed—which he doesn't—or being in the situation of someone who is threatened by "a tyrant with control over your parents or children"[25] and is ordered to commit a shameful act. The first, we have ruled out; the second might mitigate the blame placed on Abraham, except no parent or child is threatened, unless we count Isaac, and it is Abraham who threatens him.

Abraham has slipped away again. The associated connotations of this phrase make it confusing to use, and regardless, it is unsuitable for the precise meaning needed by the definition.

### 5. Would, Meant to, Willed to, Intended to Murder Isaac?

"Would murder," the translation chosen by Lowrie for his much older translation, has a different problem. He uses it both in the second passage and the first, in the definition of sin: "As soon as the individual would assert himself in his particularity, he sins." Thus, he faithfully preserves the consistency of Kierkegaard's own prose, and he does it by using the English cognate for *vil/vilde*, which, other things equal, seems desirable; and, "would" can be used to express a mere intention to do something, which the other options surveyed cannot do—therefore, it might seem worthwhile to just return to this older translation of *Fear and Trembling*. I agree it is worth honoring Lowrie's translation more than we are accustomed to, but time has made this usage of "would" less common and less intuitive to contemporary readers. It has become much invested with the conditional mood and has so become inapt for expressing the indicative statement that someone *is*

[25] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1110a3-4.

doing something; instead, it is likely to be read as implying, more strongly than "was willing to," that there are circumstances which, if given, would entail that the individual murdered the victim; or perhaps that there are circumstances in which he would be happy to do this, or merely accept the necessity of doing so, given some other intention or other of his which he will not give up; but it does not, under this construal, imply that the individual *did* do anything in relation to the would-be victim, or even that the individual was thinking of doing anything. The phrase, used today, would be not much better than "was willing to" for the purposes of understanding Problema I.

This leads us to translating these passages around the main verbs "means to" / "meant to" or "intends to" / "intended to," respectively. One could also add the very literal—and sometimes the most literal one-for-one translation can be clarifying—translation of "wills to" / "willed to" as an option.[26] The very literal option would seem to finally fulfill what Hannay recommends to translators: avoiding both the temptation "to ease the passage of a translated author's text into the new language by amending the original in ways that make it more immediately intelligible" while also avoiding the temptation "to provide renderings that conform with—and may then be taken to confirm—a preferred reading."[27] But the very literal translation also comes across as very technical, while the original Danish does not. The other renderings—using "means" or "intends"—are less ambiguous than the Danish, but come across as natural English, and they avoid the whole host of problems listed above. These renderings assert that the individual had a purpose in

[26] In some languages, this is a more natural phrasing, and one can find it in German and Italian translations from the very beginning. For example, Emanuel Hirsch's German translation has "Sobald der Einzelne dem Allgemeinen gegenüber sich in seiner Einzelnheit geltend machen **will** . . ." *Furcht und Zittern*, second revised edition (Düsseldorf: E. Diederichs, 1950), p. 57, and Cornelio Fabro's Italian translation has "Appena il Singolo **vuol** farsi valere nella sua singolarità di fronte all'universale . . ." *Timore e Tremore; Aut-Aut (Diapsalmata)* (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1972), p. 79. The German translations in general follow this pattern. However, the French translation of Paul-Henri Tisseau errs in the way that the Hongs do ("Dès que l'Individu **revendique** son individualité vis-à-vis du général, il pèche," or "as soon as the individual asserts [perhaps "lays claim to"] his individuality against the universal, he sins." *Crainte et Tremblement* (Paris: Fernand Aubier, 1935), p. 82. The Catalan translation of Begonya Sáez Tajafuerce takes a similar approach, rendering the passage as "Tan bon punt l'individu singular **pretén tenir vigència** en la seva singularitat per sobre del general," or "as soon as the individual claims to have validity in his singularity over against the universal." *Temor i Tremolor* (Barcelona: Marbot, 2012), p. 69. Thus my remarks in this paper may also aid those translating *Fear and Trembling* into French, Catalan, and other languages that cannot imitate the structure of the Danish as closely as the German and Italian translations do.

[27] Alastair Hannay, "Translating Kierkegaard," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013, rev. 2014), pp. 393–394.

mind and directed themselves toward this purpose without implying that the individual felt anything in particular about this action—whether attraction or aversion, whether he did it wholeheartedly or begrudgingly, without implying that he viewed it as an end or as constituting part of his end. "Means," "intends," and "wills" clear the room, in other words, of precisely those elements that Silentio means to exclude from Abraham's psychology, and allow us to focus—as perhaps Silentio intended us to—on precisely one thing, the idea that Abraham, regardless of his wishes or feelings, was engaged in an intentional action when he went to Mount Moriah.

Between "means," "wills," and "intends," I find "intends" to be the clearest and sharpest word available. I will therefore follow Walsh's instinct here, but now apply the result to the beginning of Problema I:

> As soon as the individual **intends to assert himself** in his particularity over and against the universal, he sins . . .

This allows us to establish the dialectic of Problema I in the following way: The ethical is defined as the universal, i.e., it applies to every individual and at every moment. Sin is defined as an individual's intention (whether outwardly achieved or not) to perform an action that would leave the universal and assert their particularity or, perhaps, singularity. Temptation is defined as a feeling (whether that takes the form of desire, fear, anger, etc.) that urges someone to commit such an act. Such felt urges are a consequence of our "immediacy" being as it is: our given desires, aversions, and other feelings do not, of themselves, necessarily cohere with the ethical; the individual must consciously intend the ethical in such a way as to transform these feelings so that they conform with the universal, whereas the sinner accepts them and intends what the felt desire suggests in contradiction to what the universal demands.

## 6. Kierkegaard as Ethicist and Action Theorist: Comparisons with Aristotle and Kant

The universal, as Silentio construes it, attaches specific tasks and duties to specific roles. What the ethical says to fathers is: the father shall love the son. The duty of the father is to love the son more than himself. This duty imposes both the task of forming loving character and the duty of acting in certain ways toward the son. Because Abraham does not live within a larger ethical community of some kind—he has no *polis*, is subject to no

king, does not belong to any modern state—Silentio concludes "there is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than this, that the father shall love the son."[28]

The question, given all this, is how Abraham could have gone to Mount Moriah. If we define his character and intentional states as Silentio does, then it seems he has no comprehensible motive: he doesn't want to, he doesn't wish to, he doesn't regard it as good, he has no ethical duty to do it—that is, unless there is some form of intentionality distinct from those normally provided by philosophers. In Aristotelian terms, he obtains no pleasure and avoids no pain by performing the act; he does not fulfill any wish he has or achieve any aspect of his end—quite the contrary! What could lead him to act? In Kantian terms, he can have no inclination to perform the act, but the ethical, which acts by causing the will to shudder in respect at the moral law, will surely not press him forward to violating it. The statement that "the father shall love the son" genuinely summarizes the whole situation: Abraham *does* love his son more than himself and he *ought* to love his son more than himself. Nonetheless, Abraham, feeling no desire to do so, aware of the contradiction between what he intends and his own happiness and blessedness, between the ethical requirements of a father and his intended deed, still went to Moriah—and he raised the knife.

The consequence of making the translation of Problema I clear in this way is that it shows us that the paradox is not, as it is all too easy to assume, merely a statement that Abraham, a culturally admired figure, violated an important ethical norm, or came in between two conflicting norms. Translating the dialectic precisely and correctly makes it possible to see that Kierkegaard, like the other major figures in ethics, had a depth and clarity to his understanding of action theory on a par with his grasp of the ethical dimension of life, and capable of structuring and underwriting it. Hence, the "new category"[29] Silentio says that faith requires involves reconceptualizing how we think about practical reason, from the religious perspective, as much as it involves rethinking ethics.

The kind of practical reasoning Silentio assigns to Abraham has much in common with a famous example from the next century, Anscombe's unintelligible agent in search of a camera:

[28] SKS 4, 153 / FT, 59.
[29] SKS 4, 153 / FT, 60.

> . . . [The] future state of affairs [of an intention] . . . must be such that we can understand the agent's thinking it will or may be brought about by the action about which he is being questioned. Consider the question "Why are you going upstairs?" answered by "To get my camera." . . . [If] someone says "But your camera is in the cellar," and I say "I know, but I am still going upstairs to get it" my saying so becomes mysterious; at least, there is a gap to fill up. . . . But if I say: "No, I quite agree, there is no way for a person at the top of the house to get the camera; but still I am going upstairs to get it" I begin to be unintelligible.[30]

If one transposes the conversation and inserts Abraham into this exchange, and we ask him, "Why are you sacrificing Isaac?" then the answer he makes will be: "To live with Isaac in the land where he will have descendants as numerous as the stars." It is constantly tempting to think that Abraham, in raising the knife, believes he is going to kill Isaac. However, the situation is, as Anscombe's example shows, not so easy to understand or describe. What *does* Abraham believe?

What Silentio says is that "Abraham believed precisely for this life that he should grow old in the land, honored among the people, blessed by posterity, remembered forever in Isaac"[31] and that Abraham "believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he was, however, willing to sacrifice him when it was required."[32] Silentio's paradox therefore seems to include the absurdity of intending to do something one does not believe will occur. Even if we nibble around the edges by distinguishing different senses of "believed" (*troede*), since *troede* can mean "trust" (in someone or something) or "believe" (that something is true), we could try to pry these into two different kinds of claims: perhaps Abraham *trusts* that God will fulfill his promise, yet he either believes a proposition akin to "I am going to kill Isaac" *or* does not mentally assent to any particular proposition at all (perhaps he thinks "I have no idea how this will turn out, I do not know what I believe; but I do trust the Lord!"). It does not seem correct to me to translate Silentio's "*Abraham troede . . . at han skulde . . .*" as "Abraham *trusted* that he would. . ." rather than as "Abraham *believed* that he would," but even if we do interpret the text this way, the fact that Abraham trusts that his intended action—which is wholly within his own power to bring off, just as it is within the power of Anscombe's example to go upstairs—will not come to pass, while intending it nonetheless (he is not intending to *try*

[30] G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 35–36.
[31] SKS 4, 116 / FT, 20. The SKS has: Men Abraham troede netop for dette Liv, at han skulde blive gammel i Landet, hædret i Folket, velsignet i Slægten, uforglemmelig i Isaak . . .
[32] SKS 4, 131 / FT, 36. The SKS has: I al den Tid troede han; han troede, at Gud ikke vilde fordre Isaak af ham, medens han dog var villig til at offre ham, naar det forlangtes.

to do it) is, and remains, paradoxical and difficult to comprehend. This is why it is no wonder that Silentio concludes that attempting to understand Abraham's intentional state leaves thought "paralyzed."[33] It is infinitely easier to conclude that Abraham is either mad or actually does intend to kill Isaac.

What is at issue in this point is the fact that, as described by Silentio, Problema I grabs hold of a feature common to all theories of action since Aristotle: the axiom or assumption that it is essential to practical reason that it concerns identifying what is "up to us and achievable by action."[34] If Aristotle were to analyze Silentio's problem, he would have to conclude that the knight of faith was a type of person who was confused about the relationship between luck and action, and who proceeded as if one can incorporate luck into practical reasoning, like planning one's retirement upon the basis of winning the lottery or finding some sort of treasure, an unlucky marriage of reason and fantasy that cannot be consummated.[35] What else could Aristotle say when Abraham seems to have abandoned the requirement that action involves what is "up to us and achievable by action" to pursue things that "could never come about through ourselves"?[36]

The situation remains intractable for practical reason even if we shift forward to a modern giant like Kant, whose conception of practical reasoning includes an explicit discussion of miracles. It is well known that in his *Religion*, Kant stated, without naming Abraham, that a father should not obey a voice that tells him to kill his innocent son:

> Among miracles, however, the demonic are the ones most irreconcilable with the employment of our reason. For, as regards the theistic miracles, reason can at least have a negative criterion at its disposal, namely, if something is represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one (e.g. if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent) . . .[37]

[33] SKS 4, 128 / FT, 33.
[34] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1111b23.
[35] In view of this, perhaps Brand Blanshard had *some* excuse for his explosive response to *Fear and Trembling*, insofar as it centers on the idea that Abraham's reasoning is depicted as "non-teleological" and thus (automatically, for Blanshard) as "irrational" ("Kierkegaard on Faith," *The Personalist* 49 (1968): pp. 5–23).
[36] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1111b23; 1112a29–35.
[37] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 124 (6:87). Later, in a different context—discussing the right of authorities to execute someone due to a divine revelation—Kant mentions Abraham explicitly as having been commanded "to slaughter his own son like a sheep," and Kant reaches a similar conclusion, that it is "unconscientious to act upon [such a command]," p. 203 (6:187).

What Kant had said about miracles is the following:

> Regarding theistic miracles, we can of course form a concept of the laws governing the actions of their cause (as an omnipotent etc. and hence moral being), but only a general concept, so far as we can think of him as the creator and ruler of the world, according to the order of nature as well as the moral order, for we can obtain immediate and independent cognition of the laws of these orders, and reason can then employ them for its own use.[38]

Kant says that we can analyze a miracle as an event caused by the action of an omnipotent and moral being using its unlimited power to effect some good end. However, this "general concept" does not help us when we reason about the future or about action; the idea of God as "the creator and ruler of the world" is linked to "the order of nature as well as the moral order," and we can learn and cognize the laws of these orders—but while the miracle would be in keeping with the idea of the moral order, it would not follow the laws we use to cognize the natural order, which laws we use in framing our understanding of nature, an understanding we presuppose and utilize in our practical reasoning. Thus, Kant infers:

> Should we, however, accept that from time to time, and in special cases, God allows nature to deviate from such laws, then we do not have the least conception, nor can we ever hope to attain one, of the law according to which God promotes any such occurrence (apart from the general moral law that whatever God does will all be good, in virtue of which, however, nothing precise is established with respect to the particular event).[39]

Kant reasons that while we can know that whatever God does will be good, we do not know, cannot know, the law according to which he deviates from the general laws he has established for the order of nature.[40]

[38] Ibid., p. 124 (6:86). Kant delivers a much more explicit condemnation of Abraham in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 115: "For if God should really speak to man, man could still never *know* that it was God speaking," making the same proviso as before regarding when we "must consider it an illusion," and then adding, in a note, "Abraham should have replied . . . 'That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.'"

[39] Kant, *Religion*, p. 124 (6:86).

[40] Leibniz had begun to conceptualize the miraculous along these lines in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*; see Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), pp. 40, 48–49.

> Here reason is as paralyzed, for it is held back in its affairs according to recognized laws while not being instructed in a new one; and neither can it ever hope to be thus instructed in the world.[41]

Because reason cognizes according to laws, it loses its grasp when the miraculous appears, for this event *ex hypothesi* lies outside the scope of such laws, save the rule that God only performs good acts, a rule too vague for us to give it concrete application. Reason cannot apply the ordinary law and cannot obtain a new law; it therefore halts, unable to find a rule, unable to apply one, to the event in question. It is in this context that Kant makes his remark about Abraham. For, Kant reasons, while we cannot predict when God will perform a miracle, we can rule out a miracle that appears to sanction a violation of morality. Since the miraculously appearing voice—which speaks to Abraham in a way that cannot be explained by the laws governing the natural order—commands him to violate the moral order, we must conclude, says Kant, that the voice is demonic instead.

This leads Kant to say that in "practical affairs, therefore, we cannot possibly count on miracles, or in any way take them into consideration in the employment of our reason."[42] Kant adds a footnote in which he explains that this "is the same thing as saying: He does not incorporate faith in miracles in his maxims (either of theoretical or practical reason), without however contesting their possibility or actuality."[43] Kant defines a maxim as "the subjective principle of volition"[44] or "the subjective principle for action."[45] This principle "contains the practical rule that reason determines according to the conditions of the subject"[46]—that is, it is the principle under which an agent does, in fact, act. Following Henry Allison's commentary in *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, such maxims dictate "the pursuit of a specific end in a determinate manner and under certain conditions,"[47] and can be represented in a schema as follows:

[41] Kant, *Religion*, p. 124 (6:87).
[42] Ibid., p. 125 (6:88).
[43] Ibid.
[44] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of The Metaphysic of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 56 (4:402).
[45] Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 73 (4:422).
[46] Ibid.
[47] Henry Allison, *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 95–106. I quote here from p. 97.

When in S-type situations, perform A-type actions in order to attain end E.[48]

Silentio's argument is therefore easily expressed in Kant's terms; he can be interpreted to say that fathers should adopt the following maxim:

With regard to my son, perform those actions that conform with loving him more than myself.

"Loving the son more than himself" could then be taken to entail (at least) placing higher priority upon the son's welfare and well-being than upon his own. Maxims are themselves tied together by an agent's overall character or orientation of the will, their *Denkungsart*; this general orientation of the will can stipulate the relationships among different maxims.[49] So this maxim might also involve the possibility of the father acting in a manner that either ignores the son's well-being or even harms the son when demanded by other ethical principles, for example, if the son committed treason and endangered a newborn republic, as Brutus' sons did. So some (but not all) of Silentio's tragic heroes would or could be justified in Kantian terms. But what Silentio always maintains is that in Abraham's situation, there is nothing that could ground such a "higher" maxim—the relationship between father and son represented the highest ethical claim upon Abraham.

Then what does Kant's claim that a rational being should not or cannot incorporate faith in the miraculous into his maxims amount to? Suppose we attempt to frame such a maxim. It would need to have the following form, where "M" is a situation defined by expectation of a miracle:

In situation M, do A for the sake of E.

However, the schema requires a discernible link between the three terms; for example, if Kant were asked to describe the maxim utilized by Silentio's "thralls of misery," he would need to describe it as something like, "When marrying, marry for the sake of the social and material advantages obtained thereby," and it is rational to expect that marrying the rich brewer's widow would provide such benefits. If asked why one should do this, perhaps the person would have no answer, but likely anyone giving this advice thinks that a person's earthly happiness consists in possessing such advantages—and as for heavenly blessedness, well, that's a matter for the minister.

[48] Allison, *Kant's Groundwork*, p. 97
[49] Ibid., p. 98.

On the other hand, imagine that someone said, "Why don't you marry the poor girl from Jutland? I believe then you will become wealthy indeed!" One of the "thralls" might ask, "How do you mean? Is she expecting an inheritance?" And if the answer were, "No, she has mean expectations indeed," but then went on to say, "I believe God will miraculously provide whomever she marries with great wealth," and could provide no general explanatory principle to support this, one would not know how to frame the maxim. For there is no basis for asserting "marrying a poor girl from Jutland will make one wealthy," which is what one would need to support the maxim

> When marrying, marry a poor girl from Jutland to obtain great wealth.

If someone, perhaps the speaker himself, added, "But for God all things are possible," that is, that it is *possible* for a good, omnipotent being to bestow wealth upon the person who marries this particular girl—it *is* possible, but it cannot be made into a rational law, and so a rational being cannot incorporate it into its set of maxims. It is possible that when throwing oneself from a tower God will intervene to miraculously save one, but testing this possibility by throwing oneself from the tower is what is called "tempting God," assuming that God will act on one's behalf, or trying to force him to do so. Hence, Kant's conclusion that without knowledge of some kind of law governing when God will perform a miracle, maxims cannot be based on the assumption that God will do anything out of the ordinary, and this is knowledge we do not possess.

Kant's view is that it is not enough to identify a good end to know that God will intervene. Otherwise, every maxim could take the following form:

> When in any situation, do anything, and, by virtue of the fact that for God—who is both all-powerful and perfectly good—all things are possible, some good end will result.

Reason is "paralyzed" in such situations because it has no resources to draw upon for eventualities that, by their very nature, do not have a law-like character or display any kind of predictable relationship to actions or events that the agent might perform or bring about.

Let us return to Abraham. When he hears the voice commanding him to go to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, he cannot find any maxim that reason would endorse that would support him obeying. For, on the one hand, killing Isaac would violate his duty as a father; and on the other hand, reason cannot endorse any general principle saying that God will

intervene to stop him, since God's goodness and omnipotence support only the possibility, not the necessity or probability, of that. Probabilistic reasoning supports the opposite conclusion, that God usually does *not* stop agents from committing evil. If Abraham nonetheless acts, it cannot be because of a rationally endorsed maxim. How can one escape the conclusion that Abraham must have been tempted by some inclination, a temptation he has sinfully converted into a maxim of action; and if this is impossible, because Silentio's presuppositions rule this out, then it is hard to know what to say except that perhaps Abraham is mad, or lying.

## 7. Conclusion

It may seem that making a slight change in how we translate Problema I should not have significant implications for how we understand *Fear and Trembling* and Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole. However, the matter of practical reason is so thoroughly interwoven into how Kierkegaard understands the paradoxical relationship between the ethical and the religious that greater clarity on the paradox can affect many different topics.

First, it means we cannot solve the paradox merely at the ethical level, in terms of "pagan" or "Greek" and "Christian" ethics. While it may well be true to say that for Kierkegaard, "Judeo-Christian ethics is not suspended; only pagan ('first') ethics or some variant of it is suspended,"[50] as Fremstedal argues, or to say that the knight of faith "relativizes" the norms belonging to social morality in favor of an "absolute relation to the absolute,"[51] as Westphal argues, we must *also* be clear that the "dialectic" that applies to Abraham involves him acting under the condition of having lost ordinary means-end rationality with respect to his most important goals and obligations; the knight of faith's actions and expected outcomes do not align according to human possibility. Silentio's paradox does involve ethics, but the breakdown of ordinary practical reasoning is essential to how "first" ethics is suspended and relativized. The paradox leaves us with the task of reconfiguring intentionality and practical reason so that Abraham's response to the Anscombian question is no longer nonsensical. If we cannot do this, then it would be better to accept what Kierkegaard said in his journal: "Let us rather say it openly, along

[50] Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion: Purity or Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 112.
[51] Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's, 2014), p. 94.

with honest Kant, who declared the relation to God to be a sort of madness, a hallucination."[52]

Similarly, we can recognize that this breakdown of ordinary practical reason is rarely mentioned in accounts commentators give of Problema I, yet is often deeply implicated in what they describe. For example, Mooney may be right that Kierkegaard means to show us that someone entering the Religious sphere, or making significant progress within that sphere, will experience a deeply disturbing "crisis" or "transition" achieving "a more complex ethicoreligious orientation" and "perspective."[53] But if the argument of this paper is correct, then it is mistaken to ascribe this crisis to a "*terrible deadlock* where inescapable requirements clash," in which the real problem is "a commonplace morality that absolutizes the claims of community, communication, and reason."[54] The "deadlock" is due less to a conflict of requirements than to the prior failure of practical reason to find a humanly possible path of reconciliation.

To shed light on this question, one can compare the example constructed by Elizabeth M. in *The Hurricane Notebook: Three Dialogues on the Human Condition*, near the end of the first dialogue. Elizabeth M. distinguishes Abraham's situation from that of a doctor who, to perform a medical procedure that will save a child's life, must first induce clinical death, causing the cessation of blood circulation and breathing, before reviving him. No matter how risky the situation is, she argues that the doctor is not an analogue for Abraham, because the links in the practical reasoning are based on scientific knowledge and the probabilities that a given course of action will produce a given outcome. The doctor does not find a way to break a deadlock between two requirements ("Do no harm"/"Save the child") but rather, through medically informed practical reasoning, he or she identifies a way whereby what would ordinarily be regarded as harm is now one of the means in a causal chain that leads to saving the child.[55] Abraham had no such scientific or probabilistic knowledge by which he could create a rational link between sacrificing Isaac and numbering his descendants through him; but Abraham believed. Hence, the paradox of practical reason is more fundamental than the deadlock, which is merely an outcome of

[52] SKS 20, 229; NB2:235 / KJN 4, 229.
[53] Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 80.
[54] Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, p. 80.
[55] See Elizabeth M., *The Hurricane Notebook: Three Dialogues on the Human Condition*, ed. Alexander Jech (Wilmington, NC: Wisdom/Works, 2019), p. 53.

practical reason's becoming "paralyzed," due to its presupposition that action must involve "what is up to us" and the terror of leaving the outcome up to God.[56]

What I mean can be brought to light by going back to Westphal: he is completely right to insist on the centrality of divine commands and promises to faith, and it is these that underlie both Abraham's situation and ours, as potential forgiven sinners and knights of faith in our own right. A person who lives and acts in such a way as to expect God to fulfill his promises always looks like Abraham and Mary, not only in receiving rewards and sufferings that their actions do not seem to merit, but in how the practical reasoning of the believer proceeds. This "believing" mode of practical reasoning—or rather, something approaching it—does seems to be what Kierkegaard recommends in discourses written under his own name, such as "What We Learn from the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air" in *Upbuilding Spirits in Various Spirits*, when he says,

> But if the heavenly Father feeds him, then he, of course, is free from worry about making a living . . . This means: to be contented with being a human being, with being the humble one, the created being who can no more support himself than create himself. But if a human being wants to forget God and support himself, then we have worry about making a living.[57]

Normally when we hear someone speak this way, we think it is only a pious nicety. We of course "know" that we have to worry about making a living; the command isn't meant "literally," by which we seem to mean, it is not meant *seriously*. When we do see someone take it seriously, like the abolitionist minister John Ames in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, we find it unsettling. When Ames was a young man in Maine in the 1830s, he had vision in which the Lord appeared to him in chains, which prompted him to devote himself to the cause of abolition.[58] This is comfortable to us, since here the vision leads someone to pursue an ethical end. Thus far, he is no Abraham. But his ready obedience to that vision was reflected in other ways that those around him found difficult and unsettling. His grandson (the protagonist of the novel, also a minister, and also named John Ames), recollects:

[56] Similarly, I think that the knight of faith's loss of ordinary practical reason is the common factor not mentioned in Lippitt's summary of four aspects of the teleological suspension of the ethical (see John Lippitt, *Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* [New York: Routledge, 2003], p. 106), but I regrettably lack the space to spell this out in the present paper.

[57] SKS 8, 276 / UD, 177.

[58] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), p. 49.

> My grandfather never kept anything that was worth giving away, or let us keep it, either, so my mother said. He would take laundry right off the line. She said he was worse than any thief, worse than a house fire. . . . He really would give anything away. My father would go looking for a saw or a box of nails and it would be gone. . . . Times were hard . . . and he would actually give away the blankets off his bed. [59]

The grandson concludes,

> I believe he was a saint of some kind. . . . But he did make things difficult. It was an innocence in him. He lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments.[60]

It is unsettling to see someone live in strict obedience to divine commands and in strict dependence upon the mercy of Providence in this way, but I think that Silentio would say that this is what it looks like to live not only with "Christian ethics" (that is, obedience to divine commands, principally loving one's neighbor as oneself) but also "Christian practical reasoning"—living as if every need will be supplied by Providence and therefore living free from material worry. If we are unsettled, then it is because the practical reasoning of John Ames is closer to that of Abraham and Mary than to our own.

The foregoing reasoning, if correct, also has an effect on how we should view what some call "the figural interpretation" of *Fear and Trembling* associated with Louis Mackey, Ronald Green, and Stephen Mulhall.[61] Clare Carlisle at times also approaches this view.[62] This reading is based on the traditional medieval hermeneutics in which commentators identified both a "literal" and a "spiritual" sense of scripture, further dividing the "spiritual" senses into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings of a given text.[63] In the story of Abraham and Isaac, there is a literal level of meaning conveyed by the story, and the other meanings are built from it. Mackey, Green, and Mulhall do not agree on all

[59] Robinson, *Gilead*, pp. 31–32.
[60] Ibid., p. 31.
[61] See Louis Mackey, "The View from Pisgah: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1972): pp. 394–428, Ronald M. Green, "Enough is enough! *Fear and Trembling* is *not* about ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993): pp. 191–209; Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 354–388.
[62] See Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010); for the most part, Carlisle dwells closely upon the text, but the analysis provided on pp. 111–118 adopts an interpretive strategy similar to that of the others.
[63] Mackey, "The View from Pisgah," p. 422.

specifics, but all agree that in some sense we are meant to view the Abrahamic story as a figure pointing to a Christian understanding of sin, faith, and forgiveness. Mackey's conclusion is that "whatever Johannes says about Abraham is to be understood obliquely of the Christian believer."[64] Surely this view is basically on to something true—Johannes does say, "If there is any question of an analogy, it must be the paradox of sin"[65]—but there is a danger inherent in this interpretation, a danger which I hope that my treatment of the paradox will ward against: the danger that in transposing Abraham's situation into the sinners, we forget the knife raised over the beloved, that is, we lose the fear and trembling. The Merman-seducer of Problema III, should he repent, will be burdened not only with the guilty conscience but with the fear that despite seeking forgiveness he will not after all change, that he will tire of Agnes and return to his old ways. Humanly speaking, it is easier to understand the remorseful Merman who disappears into the monastery, because he lacks the capacity for ethical married life, for which he depends on divine grace.[66]

To conclude, then, when we translate Problema I carefully, we see that in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard is no less involved in thinking through the questions of practical reason and action than he is in thinking through questions of ethics. As in Aristotle or Kant, practical reason and ethical thinking intertwine in countless ways and cannot always be easily separated or distinguished. Especially since so much of the debate in contemporary action theory has taken place in English, part of what we have lost is an awareness of Kierkegaard's connections with these debates and his possible role in influencing them.[67] His thinking in this area is precise and more clear than supposed, and connects

[64] Ibid., p. 421.
[65] SKS 4, 200 / FT, 112.
[66] Jeffrey Hanson provides an account that partially overlaps with and complements what I have argued above. He emphasizes how "the teleological suspension of the ethical dispenses with the intelligible correlation between what has been done and how the deed is to be rewarded" and places welcome focus on the "hard sayings" of Jesus and the suffering Mary experiences as a knight of faith. Whereas I have focused on how the knight of faith can't depend upon the type of causal links that practical reason normally depends upon to connect means with ends, Hanson emphasizes the breakdown that occurs on the ethical level, so that practical reason cannot depend upon evaluating an action according to ordinary ethical criteria, either. See Jeffrey Hanson, *Kierkegaard and the Life of Faith : the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious in Fear and trembling* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017).
[67] It is possible that he *did* influence Anscombe, which may make her example of the unintelligible camera-fetcher intriguing for the reader of Kierkegaard. Not only did her mentor Ludwig Wittgenstein and younger friend and contemporary Iris Murdoch admire Kierkegaard, but (according to hearsay) she herself read and appreciated him, although she did not know how to teach him without "ruining" him. She also mentioned

in subtle but straightforward ways with the thinking of predecessors like Aristotle and Kant who discussed practical reason, and even with that of philosophers of action like Anscombe who wrote much later; she too defined practical reasoning in terms of "future matters which our action can affect"[68] and described someone engaged in it as "trying . . . to find a truth condition which he can effect [or] make true"[69] to achieve some end. But not only must Abraham not expect his act to make it true that Isaac flourishes in the land and has many descendants—rather, his act must be expected to make that end false. Perhaps Abraham as described by Silentio must conflict with *any* "sensible" theory of action.

It is natural to draw a distinction between the perspectives developed within the *Discourses* on the one hand and *Fear and Trembling* on the other, but reading the text this way demonstrates their continuities as well. The difference is that knights of faith like Abraham and Mary present the same form of reasoning, but, as Problema II highlights, they follow a particular, not general, divine command. Even the practical reasoning of the *Discourses*, as evidenced by "What We Learn from the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air," however, displays what the kind of person whom Kierkegaard terms the "sagacious" individual must regard as a troubling insouciance toward the relationship between actions and outcomes. We see this elsewhere in examples like the imagined objection in "Patience in Expectancy," the objection that "the person who prays and fasts accomplishes nothing, since prayer is idle talk on earth, even though it 'works in heaven,' and fasting consumes earthly energy and gives no strength to endure in expectancy."[70] Thus, to restate my conclusion, although the difference between the one who follows the road to Mount Moriah and the one who contemplates the lilies and the birds is noteworthy, what they have in common—the believing mode of practical reasoning—contrasts in interesting and significant ways with the practical reasoning of Aristotle, Kant, and the main tradition of action theory in Western philosophy. Translating Problema I more accurately allows Kierkegaard to enter these debates as an important contributor to how

him obliquely in her debate with R. M. Hare and others over the honorary degree awarded to Truman by Oxford University. Anscombe quoted, without explicit attribution, a statement from his journals, stating that "the 'law' administered to oneself by oneself is much like Sancho Panza's whacks on his own bottom." See her letter to the editor, *The Listener,* April 4, 1957, p. 564; cf. SKS 23, 45; NB15:66 / KJN 7, 42.

[68] G. E. M. Anscombe, "Practical Inference," in *Human Life, Action, and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2005), p. 131.

[69] Anscombe, "Practical Inference," p. 124.

[70] SKS 5, 222 / EUD, 223.

we think about the forms of action typical of religious believers and the believing mode of practical reason.

# RESPONSIBILIZATION: RETHINKING RESPONSIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY WITH KIERKEGAARD

BY MARIUS TIMMANN MJAALAND

*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).

# KIERKEGAARD, SPIRIT, AND THE DEFINITION OF THE HUMAN IN THE LILY-BIRD DISCOURSES

BY JAMES P. RASMUSSEN

*Abstract*: Through a focus on Kierkegaard's four sets of upbuilding discourses on the lily and the bird of Matthew 6, written between 1846 and 1851/1852, this article elucidates changes in the meaning of "spirit" and in the definitions of the human vis-à-vis the animal from the earliest lily-bird discourses to the latest. Kierkegaard gradually moves away from "spirit" in the sense of higher-order mental activities of self-relating and reflective understanding as what defines the human, and toward "spirit" as a pre-reflective awareness of and orientation toward the unconditional. This conception can serve as a Kierkegaardian amendment to the famous definition of the human at the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*.

*Keywords*: spirit, the human, upbuilding discourses, the unconditional, nature

This article explores conceptual space for a Kierkegaardian definition of the human that places the emphasis quite differently than his best-known definition of a human being, in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The famous passage there reads as follows:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself . . . If . . . the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.[1]

The emphasis in this definition, as frequently noted in the secondary literature, is on spirit as an activity of self-relating.[2] The human being is a synthetic relation of two elements—"the infinite and the finite," "the temporal and the eternal," "freedom and necessity"[3]—and then also the self-conscious activity of relating to that synthesis. As spirit, I am not only constituted a certain way but am consciously aware of myself, and affirm

[1] SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.
[2] Cf. Marcia Morgan's entry on "Spirit" in *Kierkegaard's Concepts, Tome VI: Salvation to Writing*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), pp. 75–82.
[3] SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

 

myself, as being so. As C. Stephen Evans formulates it: "A spirit is a being that (at least partially) defines itself or helps to create its own identity."[4]

Self-consciousness can appear in varying degrees and modes; Merold Westphal notes that even when the self is unaware of having or being a self, this is not a complete absence of self-awareness since one can also be "self-conscious only in 'sensate' categories rather than those of spirit."[5] One can be aware, for instance, that one is hungry. Animals are self-aware in that sense too, without it becoming a matter of actively self-relating. But the pseudonymous Anti-Climacus' emphasis in *Sickness* is specifically on self-consciousness in categories of spirit. Thus he declares, "to be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is" and "not to be conscious of oneself as spirit—is despair, which is spiritlessness."[6] Only the human is capable of despair: "The possibility of [despair] is man's superiority over the animal, and this superiority distinguishes him in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit."[7] What is at issue for Anti-Climacus, as a matter of defining the human, is the capacity to relate to oneself in particular ways that involve higher-order mental activity.

But as several recent scholars have suggested, Kierkegaard's definition of the human in *Sickness* has some limitations. These can become apparent when one considers various forms of mental disability, for instance. Christopher Craig Brittain asserts that "Kierkegaard's emphasis on inwardness and subjective awareness is not immediately translatable to the conditions of mental disability."[8] Joshua Cockayne puts the point more strongly, asserting that "a straightforward reading of *Sickness* suggests that Kierkegaard would think of those with cognitive disabilities as similar to non-human animals."[9] Cockayne affirms the need for what he calls a "constructive amendment" to Kierkegaard's

[4] C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), p. 15.
[5] Merold Westphal, "Divine Givenness and Self-Givenness in Kierkegaard" in Jeffrey Hanson, ed., *Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist: An Experiment* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 46.
[6] SKS 11, 141 / SUD, 25. SKS 11, 159–160 / SUD, 44–45.
[7] SKS 11, 131 / SUD, 15.
[8] Christopher Craig Brittain, "Between Necessity and Possibility: Kierkegaard and the Abilities and Disabilities of Subjectivity" in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), p. 298.
[9] Joshua Cockayne, "Disability, Anthropology, and Flourishing with God: A Kierkegaardian Account" in *Religions* 11 (2020): p. 189, https://doi:10.3390/rel11040189.

anthropology as articulated in *Sickness*. In offering such an amendment, Cockayne has recourse to *Works of Love* and to the category of the neighbor.[10]

My focus in this article will not be on mental disability (though I hope to consider such issues in subsequent work). But while I am very sympathetic to Cockayne's goals, my sense is that his turn to *Works of Love* shifts the textual grounds of the argument away from the question of defining the human being. Kierkegaard deliberately avoids that question in *Works of Love*, where it appears in the form of the question of who our neighbor may be. Just as Christ did not answer this question, neither does Kierkegaard: the focus is not on identifying or knowing the neighbor but on becoming a neighbor oneself.[11] Kierkegaard does provide some initial thoughts, to be sure: "The word is obviously derived from 'nearest'; thus the neighbor is the person who is nearer to you than anyone else, yet not in the sense of preferential love . . . the concept 'neighbor' is actually the redoubling of your own self."[12] But Kierkegaard avoids analyzing further either neighbor or self, and instead refers to Christ's refusal to define the neighbor. Cockayne's analysis of inferences that we can draw on the basis of Kierkegaard's various examples of neighbors is cogent and well argued, but it occurs at the cost of distorting Kierkegaard's explicit focus on an ethical rather than an anthropological-definitional issue.

I propose that we are on firmer textual ground when we turn to Kierkegaardian texts that take up, rather than reject, the question of an anthropological definition, and that can therefore provide a more direct amendment to the argument of *Sickness*. The texts I propose to consider are Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses on the lily and the bird from Matthew 6, in which the issue of defining the human vis-à-vis the animal (and plant) is an explicit focus. I follow Frances Maughan-Brown in identifying four sets of such discourses. I also follow both Maughan-Brown and David Kangas in asserting the philosophical significance of the upbuilding discourses even as they are written in such a way that tools and techniques of literary analysis are essential to draw out that significance.[13] When Brittain asserted that there is some difficulty in making sense of mental disability with Kierkegaardian conceptions, he also added that Kierkegaard's treatment of "the grace and beauty of the 'birds of the air'" does offer directions that could be pursued

[10] Ibid.
[11] SKS 9, 29–30 / WL, 22.
[12] SKS 9, 28–29 / WL, 21.
[13] David Kangas, *Errant Affirmations: On the Philosophical Meanings of Kierkegaard's Religious Discourses* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Frances Maughan-Brown, *The Lily's Tongue: Figure and Authority in Kierkegaard's Lily Discourses* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

further.[14] He does not elaborate. But in my view, it is not the birds' grace and beauty that are most helpful, but rather Kierkegaard's wrestling with the definition of "spirit" and with the definition of the human being as he follows, repeatedly, the gospel injunction to consider the lilies and the birds.

The first set of lily-bird discourses is comprised of three discourses in "What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air" in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, written in the fall of 1846 (published March 13, 1847). The second set involves seven discourses in "The Cares of the Pagans" in *Christian Discourses*, written near the end of 1847 (published April 26, 1848). The third set is found in *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air,* written during the second half of 1848 (published May 14, 1849), and the final discourse is "Christ as Prototype, or No One Can Serve Two Masters" in *Judge for Yourself!*, written in 1851–1852. Notably, the first two sets of lily-bird discourses were composed before the writing of *Sickness* (which took place in the spring of 1848), and the third and fourth sets were composed afterwards.

Taken as a whole, Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses reveal a development of thought that can be charted as a movement away from a definition of the human as spirit in the sense of higher-order mental capacity, and toward a definition of the human as spirit in the sense of having been given life in particular modalities that shape a pre-reflective form of intelligent awareness. In the earliest lily-bird discourses, spirit is a qualification of the human and is absent in nature; by the time of the latest lily-bird discourse, Kierkegaard asserts baldly that "surely there is spirit in nature" too. This is one textual marker of the conceptual distance Kierkegaard traverses in these discourses. A second is to be found in his very different invocations of the Socratic discussion of the human being's erect walk and upright head as markers of the human. In the 1846/47 discourses, Kierkegaard invokes that discussion only to discount it and emphasize that it is spirit that truly distinguishes us from the animals. But in the discourse of 1851/52, Kierkegaard affirms aspects of that discussion even as he gives it his own interpretation: the shape of our head and neck *is* the start of what makes us human, because it allows us to look up to the sky and to acquire a pre-conscious awareness of a dimension of absolute height and thus of the unconditional. This awareness is what he now calls "spirit." In this way, Kierkegaard's developing thought begins to anticipate aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of bodily intentionality, in which my presence in the world already has an

[14] Brittain, "Between Necessity and Possibility," p. 298.

intelligent orientation prior to conscious thought.[15] Our task to become a human being, for Kierkegaard in the later lily-bird discourses, requires that we move beyond the higher-order capacities of self-aware thought that have a tendency to obscure this pre-reflective awareness of the unconditional. Higher-order mental capacities are no longer foundational for what it means to be human.

A word on method. There are many ways to read Kierkegaard, but for purposes of this article my method is to treat Kierkegaard as "a kind of poet"[16] whose figures of speech and (sometimes unelaborated) word choices are just as important as his explicit argumentative claims in performing conceptual work. I contend that these texts reward an engagement that involves the close reading of literary analysis as well as philosophical analysis, both with respect to what the texts say and do and also with respect to how they open on to additional philosophical questions. Aside from taking *Sickness* as a familiar reference point, I am unconcerned to articulate where and how the conceptions in Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses align with or depart from others of Kierkegaard's texts; that would be a separate and subsequent project.

## 1. "What We Learn From the Lilies in the Field and From the Birds of the Air"

In these earliest lily-bird discourses, Kierkegaard's definition of the human being is closely aligned with what will become the definition in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard addresses the question in the second of these three discourses, and much of the focus centers on how the human differs from the animal. The first assertion is that the human being has been isolated in a way that animals have not: "God isolated the human being, made every human being this separate and distinct individual . . . The individual animal is not isolated, is no unconditionally separate entity; the individual animal is a number and belongs under what that most famous pagan thinker has called the animal category: the crowd."[17] The category of isolation here anticipates Kierkegaard's discussion of spirit a few pages later. But first, Kierkegaard invokes Socrates' (Plato's) account of the glory of the human body in its distinguishing features. Socrates, Kierkegaard asserts, saw "the upright walk" as "the distinguishing mark of being human," and also marveled

[15] Cf. Ronald L Hall's argument that spirit for Kierkegaard emerges in or from nature dynamically. "The Origin of Alienation: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12.2 (1981): pp. 111–122, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00135377.
[16] Cf. Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).
[17] SKS 8, 287 / UD, 190.

at "the ingeniousness of the human eye and even more over expression in the eyes, because the animal has eyes but only the human being has expression in the eyes."[18] Thus in Greek, Kierkegaard says, the human being is called "the upright" with a double meaning: "First, that the human frame is erect and upright like the straight tree trunk and, next, that the erect and upright being directs his vision upward."[19] The consequence of this upward vision is that man can see higher than the mountains and therefore is "commanding," which is also suggested by the fact that the human being has hands, "for the ruler, after all, stretches out his hand when he commands."[20]

This description of the glory of the human body proceeds from the Socratic claim that the soul weaves the body as its clothing.[21] But Kierkegaard insists that this claim shows that Socratic discourse is not adequately aware of God.[22] Invoking the scriptural declaration that God created the human being in his image, Kierkegaard insists that we resemble God not in our visible features, but in our qualification as spirit. "God is spirit, is invisible, and the image of invisibility, of course, is invisibility . . . the image of God is explicitly the invisible glory . . . To be spirit, that is the human being's invisible glory."[23] The pagan Greek sought likeness to the gods in ruling, but our true resemblance with God is to be understood inversely: what makes the human being resemble God is not ruling as he rules but rather worshipping him as the sole ruler. "Only when God has infinitely become the eternal and omnipresent object of worship and the human being always a worshiper, only then do they resemble each other."[24] To seek to resemble God by ruling is to seek to *replace* God. But worshipping and praising the Creator, which is "something nature cannot do,"[25] is an invisible glory that makes manifest our resemblance to God.

The capacities of invisible spirit also include an ability to consider the future. Here the earlier idea of the human being's isolation returns: to be spirit or consciousness is also to be isolated and individuated in a way that animals cannot be. Though we are "earthbound,"[26] the human being as consciousness is also "the place where the eternal and the

[18] SKS 8, 288 / UD, 190–191.
[19] Ibid.
[20] SKS 8, 288 / UD, 191.
[21] SKS 8, 288 / UD, 190.
[22] SKS 8, 289 / UD, 191.
[23] SKS 8, 289–290 / UD, 192–193.
[24] SKS 8, 290 / UD, 193.
[25] Ibid.
[26] SKS 8, 269 / UD, 170.

temporal continually touch each other, where the eternal is refracted in the temporal."[27] Having the eternal in our consciousness, we can be weighed down by time in a way that animals cannot, and we can also become worried and anxious about the future. It is a human perfection to be able to have such a worry, but the task is to follow Jesus, the divine prototype, in having the consciousness of being without a nest and "in that situation to be free from care."[28] Similarly, it is a human perfection above the animal to be able to work as God's co-worker.[29]

Thus, whereas Socrates' distinguishing markers for the human being are the upright walk, the expressive eye that can look above the mountains, and the hand of the ruler, for Kierkegaard the distinguishing mark is spirit as an individuating consciousness that is the site of a self-relating intersection between the eternal and the temporal. Spirit is set over against nature and the resulting isolation of the individual is set over against number, the category of the animal. Of course, it is possible to fall into worries and into comparisons with others, and in so doing we fail to live up to the glory of the human being. But the possible glory is there.

Such conceptions of the human are quite similar to those in *The Sickness Unto Death*. I must be fully conscious of "being without a nest" and then must consciously choose to worry or not to worry in the sense here described; otherwise I am not isolated in the way Kierkegaard celebrates here and may not fit into the definition of the human. But after this initial position, Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses begin to pursue a different direction.

## 2. "The Cares of the Pagans" in *Christian Discourses*

The operative distinction is now a tripartite one. Rather than the binary opposition of human versus nature, what matters now are differences between the pagan, the Christian, and the realm of nature. The lily and the bird make clear what paganism is and what its cares are but without being pagans themselves, since they do not have those cares even as they have comparable necessities. They also make clear what a Christian is without themselves being Christian: "If you live as the lily and bird live, then you are a Christian—which the lily and the bird neither are nor can become."[30] The distinction here is due, as

[27] SKS 8, 292 / UD, 195.
[28] SKS 8, 293 / UD, 197.
[29] SKS 8, 295 / UD, 198–199.
[30] SKS 10, 21 / CD, 9.

before, to the higher-order capacities of self-relating and of understanding that make us human, and also now to human language that is a marker of those capacities. But now the word "spirit" no longer refers to those capacities as such, but rather to the right use of them. Thus it is not the realm of nature that is "spiritless," but rather paganism, and the right use of such capacities is now, in part, to refuse to employ them.

The Christian lives on "the daily bread" and in that resembles the bird, yet unlike the bird, the Christian also prays for bread and gives thanks for it. Praying and giving thanks "is human language in the most profound sense,"[31] and through it the Christian enters into a relationship with God. Thus when the bread comes, it is known to come from God. The Christian is consciously aware of her distinction from the birds: "He believes that a human being is not differentiated from the bird by his inability to live on just as little but by his inability to live 'on bread alone'"[32]—a reference to the scriptural passage declaring that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). The satisfaction of her need comes, as she knows, by blessing from God, and what the Christian truly seeks is not the satisfaction but the blessing, while the bird merely seeks to be satisfied.[33] The Christian is thus more "alive" than any bird, in the sense that she not only lives but also understands the conditions of her life and enters into a relation with her creator.[34] The bird is like an infant not yet separated from its mother and is an example of light-mindedness in comparison to the Christian, serving a master whom it does not know.[35] The bird is simply what it is, but the Christian *becomes* a Christian.[36] Aware of God as prototype and of her own continual need for God, the Christian is able to work for her daily bread as God's co-worker, while the bird does not work and the pagan "slaves" rather than works.[37]

The Christian is thus "wide awake, awake to God," while the bird is "innocently ignorant" and the pagan is "spiritlessly ignorant."[38] Kierkegaard emphasizes several times this distinction in types of ignorance.[39] The bird is perfectly obedient to God's will but is

[31] SKS 10, 33–34 / CD, 22.
[32] SKS 10, 27 / CD, 15.
[33] Ibid.
[34] SKS 10, 28 / CD, 16.
[35] SKS 10, 46 / CD, 35. SKS 10, 71 / CD, 62.
[36] SKS 10, 52 / CD, 41.
[37] SKS 10, / CD, 21.
[38] SKS 10, 73 / CD, 64.
[39] SKS 10, 70 / CD, 61. Cf. SKS 10, 75 / CD, 66–67.

incapable of knowing him; it is therefore innocent but not spiritless. The pagan is capable of knowing God but does not in fact know him and is not perfectly obedient. To be "spiritlessly" ignorant is to misuse and thus to lose spirit: Kierkegaard also characterizes it as a matter of "desouling" oneself and as a matter of the "light of the spirit" having gone out.[40] One is then "enslaved to the earth" rather than a traveler as both the bird and the Christian are.[41]

The central form of enslavement at issue for Kierkegaard occurs when we try, as the pagan may do, to live "the next day" today.[42] The bird has no next day in this sense, while we have the task of getting rid of it.[43] Of course it is a human perfection to be capable of contemplating the future (as it was also in the earlier discourses). But with the distinction between the pagan and the Christian, both of whom are capable of this but one of whom is "spiritless," Kierkegaard introduces the idea that we are summoned to become *post-capable* and implicitly aligns this with the Christian opposite of spiritlessness. He employs here an image of disability: the God-fearing person "limps after having wrestled with God" (a reference to Jacob's limp in Genesis 32:22–32).[44] This limp is a figure for our work (including our prayer and thanksgiving) in view of the awareness that we need God, and it is at the same time also a figure for our getting rid of the next day. Kierkegaard aligns Jacob's limp with an actor blinded by lighting and with a rower sitting with his back to his goal. In each case, one foregoes capacities that might seem to provide an advantage in order to become "properly positioned":

> To be properly positioned, to take the correct position, is important for everything in life . . . It is well known that the actor, blinded as he is by the effect of the lighting, faces the deepest darkness, the blackest night. Now, one would think that this must disturb him, make him uneasy. But no, ask him, and you will hear; he himself admits that precisely this supports him, calms him . . . So also with the next day. At times we lament and find it sad that the future lies so dark before us. Ah, the misfortune is precisely when it is not dark enough, when fear and presentiment and expectancy and earthly impatience catch a glimpse of the next day!
>
> The one who rows a boat turns his back to the goal toward which he is working. So it is with the next day. When, with the help of the eternal, a person lives absorbed in today, he turns his back to the next day. The more he is eternally absorbed in today, the more decisively he turns

[40] SKS 10, 56, 87 / CD, 47, 78–79. SKS 10, 97 / CD, 90.
[41] SKS 10, 45 / CD, 34.
[42] SKS 10, 86–87 / CD, 78–79.
[43] SKS 10, 80 / CD, 71.
[44] SKS 10, 76 / CD, 67.

> his back to the next day; then he does not see it at all. When he turns around, the eternal becomes confused before his eyes and becomes the next day. But when, in order to work toward the goal (eternity) properly, he turns his back, he does not see the next day at all, whereas with the help of the eternal he sees today and its tasks with perfect clarity. But if the work today is to be done properly, a person must be turned in this way.[45]

Jacob's limp, the actor's inability to see, and the back-turned rower are all self-inflicted limitations from a pagan or "spiritlessly ignorant" perspective. But they are actually markers of properly positioning ourselves. Earlier, it was assumed that we can and should employ our full human capacities of consciousness in being aware of the future in order then to choose to remain without care. Now, the summons is to move beyond our conscious mental capacities and even turn our back to them, because they can confuse us. Moving beyond them can look very similar to not having them at all: the bird can look a lot like the Christian, both of whom, as noted above, are characterized equally as "travelers" on the earth. But of course the distinction remains firm because the Christian becomes that way by positioning herself properly in conscious awareness of God, while the bird simply is so without knowing God in the way the Christian can.

### 3. "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air"

The discourses discussed so far were all written prior to the composition of *The Sickness Unto Death*, which occurred in the spring of 1848. This third set, however, was composed afterwards and involves a major innovation of thought. These discourses continue to assume that we have a capacity for self-aware, conscious reflection that the bird does not, while still pursuing the idea of becoming "post-capable" by also insisting that we must silence the activities of that understanding. But whereas the earlier discourses emphasized that the lily and bird were obedient to the master without knowing him, now they "know" and "understand" a great deal, including God. This language now anticipates Connor Cunningham's argument, in his study of Darwin's idea of evolution, that something analogous to intelligence has to be assumed in the way even plant life adapts to its environment.[46] Kierkegaard's thought is reaching for an articulation of the lily's and the bird's knowledge as a pre-conscious intelligent orientation toward the world and one's

[45] SKS 10, 82 / CD, 73.

[46] Connor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), pp. 163ff.

tasks in it. "However simple the lily and the bird are," he writes, "they are not thoughtless," and there are "thought-categories" expressed in their actions.[47]

In the previous set of lily-bird discourses, Kierkegaard had claimed that praying and giving thanks were the highest forms of language, and such language use was appropriate and fitting as part of our becoming God's co-workers. But here, Kierkegaard disparages even "the verbosity [*Ordrigdom*] of thanksgiving"[48] and insists that what we must do is not speak but be silent:

> Surely it is speech that distinguishes humanity above the animal and then, if you like, far above the lily. But because the ability to speak is an advantage, it does not follow that the ability to be silent would not be an art or would be an inferior art. . . . Speech is the human being's advantage over the animal—yes, quite true, if he is able *to be silent*.[49]

Earlier, humans were said to resemble God in that we are spirit like him, and language was a marker of our special kinship. But here, speaking is not treated as a resemblance with God, and Kierkegaard speaks only ironically of the advantage of language. Our speaking, which is intimately associated with our conscious thought, is now a marker of our *distance* from God: "God is infinite wisdom; what the human knows is idle chatter; therefore they can hardly converse. God is love and the human being, as we say to a child, is a little ninny even in regard to his own welfare, and therefore they can hardly converse. Only in much fear and trembling is a human being able to speak with God."[50]

Nothing of the earlier emphasis on our kinship with God is retained. In the earliest lily-bird discourses, the bird is from the start more distant from God than we are, while in *Christian Discourses* we are capable of being either nearer to God than the bird (as Christians) or else further away (as pagans). But now, the lily and the bird are emphatically closer to God than we: humans chatter, but God is "out there with the lily and the bird, where there is silence and also something divine in this silence."[51] The earlier distinction between human awareness and the bird's ignorance is eradicated as the bird now "knows" and "understands" many things, especially the all-important moment for action in perfect obedience:

[47] SKS 11, 42 / WA, 38.
[48] SKS 11, 17 / WA, 11.
[49] SKS 11, 16 & 18 / WA, 10 & 12.
[50] SKS 11, 17 / WA, 11.
[51] SKS 11, 18 / WA, 13.

> The bird is *silent and waits*. It knows, or rather it fully and firmly believes, that everything takes place in its time; therefore the bird waits. But it knows that it is not entitled to know the time or day; therefore it is silent . . . When the moment comes, the silent bird understands that this is the moment; it uses it and is never disappointed.[52]

The same is true for the lily, who does not impatiently ask when spring will come but "knows that spring will come in due season . . . then comes the moment, and when the moment comes, the silent lily understands that now is the moment, and it makes use of it."[53]

These descriptions of the lily and the bird as knowing, understanding, and making use of the moment would have been impossible in the conceptual structure of the earlier lily-bird discourses. Kierkegaard is now finding in the lily and the bird a mode of living that is explicitly a possibility for the human being as well. The fact that we have to *become* silent, whereas the lily and the bird simply *are* so, continues to highlight a difference between the human and the animal, but the difference is now framed not as a matter of higher human capabilities that we might misuse, but rather as a matter of intrinsically damaging capabilities that keep us distant from God unless we can learn to silence them. The higher-order understanding that had been associated with spirit is here simply a matter of chattering. This is why Kierkegaard emphasizes that worldly human life demonstrates only "in a sad way" that speech distinguishes us from the animals.[54] We must learn to silence not only our tongue but our sagacity and human reasoning, which is itself merely a form of witty but empty chatter:

> Therefore you are not to say, "The lily and the bird, it is easy for them to be obedient; after all, they cannot do anything else . . . ." You are not to speak this way; you are to say nothing at all, you are to be silent and obey, so that, if it really is true that the lily and the bird make a virtue of necessity, you also might succeed in making a virtue of necessity. You, too, are indeed subject to necessity.
>
> "But," you say, "the lily and the bird, they have it easy." Answer: Do not come with any "but"—but learn from the lily and the bird to become completely present to yourself in being today; then you, too, are joy. But as stated, no "but"; because this is earnestness, you *shall* learn joy from the lily and the bird. Even less may you become self-important, so that you, because the lily and the bird are simple, perhaps in order to feel that you are a human being, become witty

[52] SKS 11, 19 / WA, 13.
[53] SKS 11, 19–20 / WA, 14.
[54] SKS 11, 18 & 15 / WA, 12 & 9.

> and, speaking of a particular tomorrow, say: The lily and the bird, they have it easy, they who do not even have tomorrow to be plagued by.[55]

Noting that the lily and the bird do not have a tomorrow, while we do, was not idle chatter in the earlier discourses. It was a key point of difference, though of course we also had the task of getting rid of the next day. But now, any reasoning that seeks to identify how the human differs from nature by focusing on higher-order mental activity is decried as an attempt to evade the gospel injunction to learn from the lily and the bird. What was "spirit" in the earliest lily-bird discourses is now empty chatter and idle witticism.

Thus Kierkegaard systematically removes his own earlier emphasis on distinguishing between a humanity that can know God and a nature that cannot. Before, the lily and the bird were incapable of worship because they could not know God; now they are explicitly described as worshippers who seek God's kingdom first.[56] Earlier, the bird was incapable of working, but now "it knows that this is God's will" and "only has to do its work."[57] Earlier, the lily was incapable of care, but now in contrast it is "unconditionally free of care" because it is able to find the unconditioned.[58]

Kierkegaard does still keep in reserve a form of human perfection above the lily and the bird, adding at one point in parentheses that "if you have learned [what you are supposed to learn] thoroughly, you have become the more perfect one, so that the lily and the bird change from being the teacher to being the metaphor [*Billedet*]."[59] He does not explain the nature of our greater perfection, though it presumably has something to do with the two action verbs given, our abilities to learn and to become. He also does not explain the posited temporality of our changing relation to the lily and the bird, who are first teachers and then only later metaphors.

My elaboration of Kierkegaard's distinction, accepting for now the Hongs' translation of *Billedet* as "the metaphor," runs as follows. A metaphor always involves some form of carrying over, a transferal of attributes proper to one entity onto another, enabled by an identified point or area of similarity embedded in a more general recognition of the gap or the difference that the transfer is traversing. The potency and effectiveness of a metaphor depend in part on that gap always remaining a gap: we come to see an illuminating

[55] SKS 11, 34, 43 / WA, 29–30, 39. Cf. also SKS 11, 22 / WA, 17.
[56] SKS 11, 22 & 24 / WA, 16 & 19.
[57] SKS 11, 32 & 33 / WA, 28 & 29.
[58] SKS 11, 32 / WA, 27.
[59] SKS 11, 36 / WA, 32.

commonality only against the backdrop of a basic and enduring difference. In contrast, while there is also a transfer or carrying-over of a kind in the relation between a master and a learner or apprentice, this transfer is of a very different sort: it is a matter of imitation intended to *reduce* or *eliminate* the gap between master and apprentice. What the teacher-model does, the pupil-apprentice should do, and often in precisely the same way. The apprentice's task, certainly in the context of these Kierkegaardian discourses, is to find her way to taking the master's way of doing things as her own starting point. That is what must come first in our relation to the lily and the bird: we must not begin with the assumption that we have a different starting point (say, spirit), but we must arrive at a recognition that we have, or need to (re-)gain, the *same* starting point, which in this case is the pre-reflective but intelligent knowledge and orientation Kierkegaard now identifies in the lily and the bird. As we do so, arriving at the same starting point and thus learning thoroughly what we need to learn from them, we also discover, but subsequently, that there are some differences between us after all, not unlike an apprentice who becomes a master in her own right and discovers her own way of acting as such. At that point, the bird's way of life becomes a mere poetic figure or metaphor for us—a carrying-over across a gap of difference—instead of a model. The point is that the bird becomes a metaphor only *after* we have made the bird's way of being our own starting point.

What is that starting point exactly? What the lily and bird model and teach is unconditional submission to "the place assigned."[60] This submission is not at all a matter of despairing resignation, but is rather a matter of doing one's work without any regard to how conducive or unconducive to that work the place assigned may be. Kierkegaard writes:

> If the place assigned to the lily is as unfortunate as possible, so that it is easy to foresee that it will be utterly superfluous all its life and not be noticed by a single one who could find joy in it, if the place and the surroundings are so "desperately" . . . unfortunate that it is not only unsought but is avoided—the obedient lily obediently submits to its conditions and blossoms in all its beauty.[61]

Kierkegaard writes of the bird's migratory flight in the same vein, as an unconditional submission to the unconditional that he now calls the moment:

[60] SKS 11, 31 / WA, 27.
[61] Ibid.

> If, when the moment comes to fly away, the bird is ever so certain that its present situation is good just as it is, so that by flying away it will let go of the certain in order to grasp the uncertain—yet the obedient bird immediately starts out on its journey. Simply, with the help of unconditional obedience, it understands only one thing but understands it unconditionally—that now is the unconditional moment.[62]

The bird and the lily both see their assigned place and are aware of their task at each moment: to wait, to bloom, to make a nest, to fly, and in doing so to worship God and be his co-worker.

This unconditional submission to the place assigned and to the moment is an expansion and further development of Kierkegaard's earlier emphasis on being "earthbound."[63] It is merely the idle wish of a poet, Kierkegaard writes, to wish to be like the bird so one is free to fly away instead of "being bound and fettered and nailed to the spot."[64] For we *are* assigned to our spot and to our moment—the bird is too, though the poet does not recognize this—and it does no good to wish it were otherwise. The charge is to submit unconditionally to this and thus to find the moment in which to pursue the task that is ours, unconcerned with wishing our circumstances were otherwise. The bird does no differently. Yet our assigned places and moments do differ from it, which is why the bird eventually becomes a mere metaphor. They differ in that we, unlike the bird, are capable of ambivalence about doing God's will and have to make choices. Kierkegaard writes:

> There are two powers: God and the world, good and evil; and the reason a human being can serve only one master is undoubtedly that these two powers, even though the one power is infinitely stronger, are in mortal combat with each other. This enormous danger, in which a person is by being human—which the lily and the bird in their unconditional obedience, which is happy innocence, escape, since neither God and the world nor good and evil are fighting over them—this enormous danger, that a *human being* is placed between these two enormous powers and the choice is left up to him, this enormous danger is what entails that one must either love or hate, that not to love is to hate.[65]

That we must make choices is *not* fundamentally an issue of self-relating and higher-order mental activity. Our need to make choices is presented emphatically here as a matter of how we are placed. Kierkegaard then suggests further that our conscious understanding

[62] SKS 11, 33 / WA, 29.
[63] SKS 8, 269 / UD, 170.
[64] SKS 11, 13 / WA, 7.
[65] SKS 11, 37–38 / WA, 34.

of how and where we are placed comes only after we start making choices. We do not first understand our position and then choose deliberatively and reflectively; rather, we are first in the position of needing to choose, and must submit unconditionally to that position and make a choice. Only later can we come reflectively to understand our placement or position. Indeed, it is only a particular choice—for the good in obedience to God—that enables us to arrive later at a true understanding: "The Gospel knows very well that the way things go is not that a person first understands that what it says is so and then decides to obey unconditionally, but the reverse, that by unconditionally obeying he first comes to understand that it is as the Gospel says."[66] Kierkegaard is beginning to suggest here not only that we have to make choices regarding "God and the world, good and evil" before our higher-order mental capacities are capable of providing us with a reflective understanding of reality, but also that our pre-reflective choices affect the very operation of those mental abilities, for better or for worse.

The lily and bird obey unconditionally on the basis of a pre-conscious awareness of God and of their task that is expressed in how they act. There is no "light-mindedness" in the lily or the bird, Kierkegaard now writes,[67] in direct contrast to his earlier claim in *Christian Discourses* that the bird is a model precisely of light-mindedness.[68] Similarly, our pre-reflective choices are also not a matter of light-mindedness. It is the empty chatter and wit of self-conscious reflection that is light-minded. Our higher-order understanding is always only playing catch up and is easily misled if we have made the wrong choices. The more fundamental difference between the human and the bird is not reflective consciousness but our placement in a position of danger in which we must make a (pre-reflective) choice.

### 4. "Christ as Prototype, or No One Can Serve Two Masters" in *Judge for Yourself!*

In this final lily-bird discourse, written 1851–1852, what it means to be positioned as a human being is given further elaboration, and the word "spirit" is once again prominently invoked. But its meaning has changed considerably.

Kierkegaard writes that Christ used "the powers of omnipotence to ensure his continually being nothing" in what seems to have been an attempt "to force the human race to

[66] SKS 11, 38 / WA, 34–35.
[67] SKS 11, 42 / WA, 38.
[68] SKS 10, 33 / CD, 22.

take leave of its senses."[69] What Christ wanted was "to thrust upon [the human race], or to force into it, the qualification of being 'spirit,' something the human race has always considered a superfluity and, if this attempt is taken too far, has considered it necessary to defend itself for dear life against this lunatic, obsessed exaggeration that must come from someone who 'has a demon.'"[70] Spirit, in this understanding, is a dimension of existence beyond the customs and prudential rules of social life. When it is thrust upon us, it fundamentally changes in potentially painful ways "what it means to be a human being."[71] Christ, for Kierkegaard here, shows us what "spirit" is when he draws attention to himself as the extraordinary and then insists on refusing every high worldly position, declaring instead that his kingdom is not of this world. Christ embodied, as our prototype for living a life of spirit, what it means that "no one can serve two masters."[72] Our socialized mode of thought and experience expresses a belief that we *can* serve two or even more masters. But spirit is an awareness of the unconditional in distinction to the conditionalities of our worldly relations and thus in distinction to the human wisdom of moderation and prudence.

Part of Christ's effort to make us spirit involves directing our attention to the lilies and the birds. Here Kierkegaard finds "spirit" again, now in nature: "Pay attention to the lily and the bird! Surely there is spirit [*Aand*] in nature—especially when the Gospel inspirits [*beaander*] it, because then nature is pure symbol [*Sindbillede*] and pure instruction for man; it, too, is inspired [*indblæst*] by God and is 'profitable for instruction, for reproof, for correction.'"[73] The claim that there is spirit in nature is directly opposed to his assertions in the first set of lily-bird discourses, where spirit was what distinguished the human being from nature. In part, Kierkegaard is making a somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference to the recently-published work *The Spirit in Nature* by the physicist Hans Christian Ørsted,[74] and he immediately then invokes Paul's words about scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17) to serve as a kind of corrective: spirit is in nature, yes, but not in quite the physical-materialist way Ørsted may think. Rather, it is "blown in" or "inspirited" by God. This inspiriting of nature is comparable to Christ's thrusting of spirit upon the human race, though human beings, unlike nature, put up resistance to it. Yet the claim that the

[69] SKS 16, 223 / FSE, 175.
[70] Ibid.
[71] SKS 16, 225 / FSE, 177.
[72] Matthew 6:24, often quoted in this discourse. Cf. SKS 16, 227 / FSE, 179.
[73] SKS 16, 230 / FSE, 182.
[74] Hans Christian Ørsted, *Aanden i Naturen* (Copenhagen: Andr. Fred. Høft, 1850).

inspiriting of nature makes it become "pure symbol and pure instruction" for the human being can appear to suggest that nature itself may not gain an awareness of the unconditional, and that Kierkegaard is returning to his early emphasis on a reflective higher-order consciousness enabling human beings to know God while nature cannot. Yet I argue that Kierkegaard is not in fact making such a return, for two reasons.

First, this discourse is clearly intent elsewhere on maintaining an emphasis on nature itself having an awareness of the unconditional. Kierkegaard's implicit reference to Ørsted's title is not merely meant tongue-in-cheek. Ørsted's claim that there is spirit in nature is highly amenable to Kierkegaard's own concerns already articulated in the previous set of lily-bird discourses: there, the lily and the bird "knew" and "understood" things; here, similarly, the bird "speaks" to sorrow and is able to be happy and clever, while the lily is "pensive" but also happy, having its own jests with sorrow.[75] In part this is personification—sorrow, too, is represented as speaking—but such language is not, for Kierkegaard, solely an instance of an anthropomorphizing metaphor that may paste human characteristics onto the lily and bird without much attention to their own way of being. The lily's and the bird's ways of being show that they know and understand things, and this can now, for Kierkegaard borrowing from Ørsted, be called "spirit." As already mentioned, Kierkegaard's later lily-bird discourses anticipate aspects of Cunningham's argument that something akin to intelligence must be assumed in the way animal and even plant life adapts to its environment. But what Cunningham calls adaption, following Darwin, is for Kierkegaard not a matter of the species but of the action of each lily or bird. This adaption to the environment is characterized in Kierkegaard's vocabulary as a matter of unconditional obedience to the unconditional; the perception and relation to local environmental factors (the place assigned) are thoroughly saturated by an orientation toward the unconditional as the over-arching "environment" or context in which the lily and bird are always acting and to which they are always responding. That is how they exhibit what Kierkegaard earlier called "finding the moment" and now calls "mastery in living," and it is how they teach "the peace that is rest or resting in God."[76]

In the previous set of lily-bird discourses, the lily and the bird were first teachers and then subsequently mere metaphors [*Billeder*], and their status as metaphor was a marker of our greater human perfection after we learn from them what we need to learn. Here, however, once the lily and bird have become inspirited by God, they are at once both pure

[75] SKS 16, 229–230 / FSE, 181.
[76] SKS 16, 230, 229 / FSE, 182, 181.

symbol [*Sindbillede*] and pure instruction [*Lærdom*] for us, and they remain so. The movement from a role of teaching to that of merely illustrating is eliminated: the lily and bird now teach and illustrate continuously and simultaneously, though they are not *Billeder* here but *Sindbilleder*. In the companion discourse "Becoming Sober," Kierkegaard uses these two terms in a close juxtaposition that can clarify a distinction between them. He provides two figurative illustrations of what he means by becoming completely sober: one is a horse who becomes unconditionally still at the command of the royal coachman, and the other is the unconditional stillness of the weather just before a thunderstorm.[77] Kierkegaard introduces the image of the weather as *et andet Billede*, another illustration, suggesting that both horse and weather are *Billeder*.[78] Yet immediately upon acknowledging that the scriptural passage on which he is focusing (1 Peter 4:7) associates being sober with being vigilant, he leaves behind the image of the weather and returns to the horse, declaring that it is like a *Sindbillede* of how we are to be.[79] He elaborates briefly: the horse is not only unconditionally still but is unconditionally attentive to the royal coachman and ready to be obedient to his every command. The horse, in other words, is not only a figure that we can take as an illustration of being sober and vigilant, but *is itself* also sober and vigilant. In contrast, the still weather before a thunderstorm can illustrate such a way of being but cannot be said to be that way itself except as a matter of mere metaphor. In Kierkegaard's usage here, then, a *Sindbillede* is a particular type of *Billede* and is distinguished from the broader generic category by its being an actual instantiation of that which it is taken to illustrate. The horse is still only "somewhat a symbol" [*ligesom et Sindbillede*],[80] presumably because it is vigilant only in relation to the royal coachman and only so long as he is present, while we are to be so in relation to God and at all times. Kierkegaard provides no qualifying *ligesom* in "Christ as Prototype" when he calls the story of the boy Jesus going missing and then being found teaching in the temple a symbolic [*sindbilledligt*] description. That occurrence illustrates and at the same time instantiates Jesus' task of serving only one master.[81] Nor is there a qualifying *ligesom* with respect to

[77] SKS 16, 163–165 / FSE, 107–109.
[78] SKS 16, 164 / FSE, 108.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] SKS 16, 213 / FSE, 164. It is quite a different matter for Kierkegaard's story in "Becoming Sober" of a Bachelor of Theology who seeks above all a job and who then upon finally getting one delivers a sermon on seeking the kingdom of God first. This story is characterized as a *Billede*, an illustration that, as an invented

the lily and the bird, who are instead *sheer* or *complete* symbol, *idel Sindbillede*, at the same time that they are pure instruction too.[82]

The lily and bird became *Billeder* in the earlier lily-bird discourses after we learned from them unconditional submission to the place assigned. This is presumably because they subsequently no longer instantiate what they (still) illustrate once we complete our apprenticeship and discover that our assigned place is a different one. But now, in the context of the new idea that there is spirit in nature too, the lily and the bird are instruction and *Sindbillede* at the same time. They actually do what they are taken to illustrate: they act in unconditional awareness of and obedience to the unconditioned. Kierkegaard no longer finds any value in differentiating what they do from what we are to do; he has now completely rooted out the last vestiges of the earlier idea that one of the things to be learned from considering the lily and the bird is our greater human perfection (differences still remain, as discussed below, but they are no longer framed as a matter of greater or lesser perfection). Kierkegaard does insist that the lily and the bird "really do not express anything" uniquely their own, since only Christ "is the truth of what the lily and the bird symbolize [*sindbilledligt betegne*, describe or designate in the manner of a *Sindbillede*]."[83] Christ, of course, as Kierkegaard emphasizes repeatedly, is the prototype [*Forbilledet*]. This is yet another type of *Billede* or illustration, differing from other types in that it must always be in the singular[84] and it comes *before* (in multiple senses) what it illustrates. All that comes after it, both subsequent illustrations and our experienced realities themselves, merely follows its "footprints."[85] Thus, in comparison to the divine prototype, the lily and the bird are "only" symbolic [*kun sindbilledligt*] and are teachers without authority.[86] Nevertheless, to claim that the lily and bird do not express anything of their own is not to say that they have no awareness or understanding of the unconditional. Rather, it is another way to say that the spirit in them is from God ("blown in," *indblæst*). That they do have an awareness of the unconditional is precisely what enables them to be *Sindbilleder* rather than *Billeder* alone.

fable, may bring an idea vividly to life for us but does not itself instantiate what it is illustrating (SKS 16, 166 / FSE, 110).

[82] SKS 16, 230 / FSE, 182.

[83] SKS 16, 227 / FSE, 179.

[84] It is a mistake, Kierkegaard says, to try to take the lily and the bird as prototypes (in the plural, *Forbilleder*). SKS 16, 234 / FSE, 187.

[85] SKS 16, 199 / FSE, 147.

[86] SKS 16, 234 / FSE, 187.

The second reason I argue that Kierkegaard is not returning to his earlier emphasis on higher-order consciousness as that which differentiates the human from the animal has already been mentioned: that earlier emphasis had used the word "spirit" to describe such a consciousness, but now the word "spirit" is used in quite a different way. Jesus wants to thrust spirit upon a human race that already has spirit in the earlier sense; in addition, spirit is now blown into a nature that does not and cannot have spirit in that earlier sense. Spirit as awareness of the unconditional, as treated here, is of a different order than self-conscious awareness, with the consequence that higher-order mental activity is no longer crucial to the definition of the human. To articulate what replaces it, Kierkegaard returns to Socrates' definition of the human, which he had already mentioned in his first lily-bird discourses. He now engages with it quite differently, however.

What distinguishes human beings from the animals for Socrates involves the upright walk and the ability to gaze upward above the mountains. When he treated these ideas in 1846, Kierkegaard followed Socrates in claiming that these physical characteristics were understood as a manifestation of man's superiority and mastery. But then that entire train of thought became merely a foil for Kierkegaard to insist that really it is spirit, in the sense of higher-order mental capacities, that truly distinguishes us from the animal. Now, however, Socrates' description of uniquely human bodily features is not invoked merely as a foil but is affirmed, even as Kierkegaard gives his own meaning to it. The answer to the question of what it means to be human does indeed start with our body, but the key characteristics emphasized by Socrates are now framed without any relation to mastery. Instead, the point is that we are uniquely able to look up to the heavens, and so we can raise our head and eyes and be led to recognize that there is a dimension of height much greater than our own, indeed an absolute or unconditional height.[87] We can look higher than the mountains, but we cannot look higher than the sky. What we gain from looking up is now not an orientation of mastery over the earth but an orientation organized by our own placement below the heavens. This upward gaze is peculiar to the positioning or the emplacement we have been given as humans: the flower blooms, the bird takes flight, the human lifts the head and looks up.[88] We do not necessarily need to see anything when we do so; the very shape of our body and the movement of the head upward affords us an awareness of the greatest height or of the unconditional and our relation to it that is of a different order than our relative

[87] SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 183.
[88] SKS 16, 233 / FSE, 186.

positioning on the earth vis-à-vis other earthbound beings. Along with this awareness comes an orientation toward that greatest height, a (pre-reflective) understanding that our actions are and should be shaped in some way by our awareness of the unconditional. Thus Socrates' claims become in Kierkegaard's hands material for an anticipation of something like Merleau-Ponty's conception of bodily intentionality. This pre-reflective orientation also includes an awareness of the divine somewhat comparable to aspects of Heidegger's treatment of heaven and earth in his elucidations of poems by Hölderlin, though there is no space here to articulate all the connections and differences between them.[89] In any case, what we are to learn from the lily and the bird is how to arrive at or return to a pre-reflective but intelligent orientation to the world that includes an awareness of the unconditional and that arises in the first instance from our bodily shape.

By way of contrast, let us briefly consider one of Nietzsche's aphorisms in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche insists that the noble soul has no desire or need to look up:

> It may be a sublime art to let oneself be provisioned with gifts from above [*Geschenke von oben*] and to drink them up thirstily like drops of water, but for this art and gesture the noble soul has no aptitude. Its egoism provides a hindrance: it dislikes looking "up" at all—but either *in front* of itself, horizontally and slowly, or *down—it knows itself to be sky-high* [*sie weiß sich in der Höhe*].[90]

Nietzsche's noble soul already knows itself to be in the highest position and therefore dislikes looking up, which is presented here as a figurative action or gesture made in awareness of an "above" from which gifts may come (the figure for such gifts is rain). But for Kierkegaard, this is a ridiculous misunderstanding of the self: we are *not* in the sky and the very shape of our body enables (pre-reflective) awareness of the sky as the unconditionally highest and of our position below it. Nietzsche could be said to be invoking the orientation of mastery over the earth that Kierkegaard addressed in his discourses of 1846: the Nietzschean noble soul, looking only ahead or down, rules over all

[89] Cf. Heidegger's claim that "the earth is earth only as the earth of heaven; the heaven is heaven only insofar as it acts downward upon the earth" in "Hölderlin's Earth and Heaven," *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 186. One can compare and contrast this claim with Kierkegaard's insistence here that "God can no more be said to be the one who presses down than the arching sky can be said to press. No, the pressing down comes from the earth or from what in you is of the earth, but just as the arching sky lifts up, so God is the one who wants to lift up," SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 184.

[90] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* §265 in *Werke in drei Bänden* II, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1955), my translation. Cf. also *Morgenröte* §74 "Ein Vorschlag."

it sees. But this misses, for Kierkegaard now in 1851–1852, the effects on our pre-reflective orientation that come about when we look up *at the sky* instead of merely looking *above the mountain*. The difference is subtle but significant. To look above the mountain is to keep one's view within the confines of the conditions and relativities of one's earth-bound life and thus to become or remain enslaved to the earth even as we may think we are masters of it. To look at the sky is for Kierkegaard to become aware of the unconditionally highest and to incorporate—again, already pre-reflectively—an awareness of the unconditional into one's orientation toward life.

Kierkegaard does also register, like Nietzsche, that we may not like to look up so high. Christ's efforts to thrust spirit upon the human race is an effort, in these terms, to get us to look up, while our resistance to his efforts can stem from a (Nietzschean) preference for looking down or straight ahead. Yet it remains the case that our bodily constitution enables us to look up and that it is a movement or position already afforded us naturally if we make the choice to enact it, though we can obscure or override any impulse toward doing so through our self-conscious reasoning and language that all too often become idle, self-important chatter. Nietzsche's noble soul "knowing" itself to be sky-high can perhaps serve as an example of such idle talk. The previous discourses' descriptions of our needing to properly position ourselves, of our human situation of danger, and of our need to make choices even before the conscious understanding catches up, are figured here as a matter of whether we choose to look up at the sky: a simple act but not a thoughtless one, even before any conscious thinking.

Christ thrusting spirit upon us, then, is not the imposition of something alien to our nature but is an effort to help us overcome the obscuring and distorting effects both of our conscious self-awareness and of our social conditions. The lily and bird need no further lessons, but the gospel injunction to learn from them makes this a conscious lesson for us, because it is reflective consciousness that has obscured it from our view. Thus we are to "learn from the bird to lose [our] senses [*at gaae fra Forstanden*] in order to become a human being."[91] We cling to the wrong spirit (that of the earlier understanding of the term) and need to learn to let go of it and receive the right spirit that is to be found in nature as well. Yet we do not learn from the bird how to become a bird. The bird can fly, but we can lift our head and eyes to the heavens; our bodily constitution makes us differently (though equally) aware, pre-reflectively, of absolute heights. Because looking up

[91] SKS 16, 232 / FSE, 184.

suddenly from earth to heaven can seem "too vigorous a movement…too abrupt a transition,"[92] Kierkegaard suggests that we can begin by following the bird with our eyes as it launches itself upward off the ground. The bird's flight leads us to lift our head and our eyes are brought to the sky, at which point, Kierkegaard tells us, "you are in the proper position."[93] What matters, again, is the positioning and the pre-reflective orientation it provides, not seeing anything in particular. Now we are able to "lose our senses"—our abilities of language and of reflective understanding employed as our primary source of orientation—in order to find orientation through a pre-reflective awareness of absolute height and of our peculiarly human relation to it that is shaped by our bodily constitution.

## 5. Conclusion

Kierkegaard does not draw out all of the implications of the conceptualizations of "spirit" and of the human at which his lily-bird discourses arrive. But it is abundantly clear that they open conceptual space to articulate an amendment or even a corrective of sorts to the definition of the human in *The Sickness Unto Death*. If Joshua Cockayne turned to *Works of Love* to suggest such an amendment, I think we can also do so here, and I believe with stronger textual support insofar as the definition of the human is one of Kierkegaard's explicit interests in the lily-bird discourses. Kierkegaard's start with the shape of the head and neck, and then the pre-reflective awareness of the sky and orientation toward the highest, does not at all exclude from the realm of the human those who may be incapable of higher-order mental activity. Such higher-order activities are indeed precisely what get in the way and make necessary the further instruction that is found, for Kierkegaard, in the gospel injunction to consider the lilies and the birds and that is also found in Kierkegaard's own discourses.

One of the consequences of this conceptualization is that we can be or become less isolated from one another. In the first set of lily-bird discourses, Kierkegaard had championed precisely the "isolation" of human individuation. But in the final lily-bird discourse, the effect of spirit is no longer to make us isolated, but rather to help us discover the unconditioned along with what is assumed as our already well-developed awareness of the relative world of human conditional interaction. That relative world is a shared world, of course, and so too is the world of spirit in this later sense. It is the world we

[92] SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 183.
[93] SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 184.

share with the bird, the lily, and every other being under the heavens, even if not all are aware of it. Here, Kierkegaard begins to suggest, is where the truly human, in company with nature and with other human beings rather than in isolation from them, is to be found. The very constitution of our body can already open us to this shared world, and while our self-reflective consciousness may isolate us from it, it can be regained and then integrated with our social human world in such a way that it reorients our interactions there. This was the goal of Jesus' thrusting spirit upon us.

Considered strictly as conceptual ideas, these claims may have benefited from further elaboration. But I contend that part of their interest arises already from the way in which Kierkegaard arrived at them: through repeated returns to the lily and the bird. Kierkegaard, we can say, is trying, repeatedly, to look at the lilies and the birds in obedience to the gospel injunction and to let himself be oriented by them, allowing the injunction and what he sees to shape his reflections rather than the other way around. Only by unconditionally obeying, he writes in the third set of lily-bird discourses, can we "come to understand" rightly. Or in this case, only by also *repeatedly* obeying, though there is much of value in every one of the lily-bird discourses. My effort in this article to chart some of the modulations of Kierkegaard's thought lays bare his process of coming to understand the lily and the bird through repeated returns to them. One cannot remove that sense of "coming to understand," or abstract from the textual context of Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses the final conceptualizations at which he arrived, without potentially losing much of their meaning and value.

# KIERKEGAARD, SKEPTICISM, AND (EPISTEMIC) FAITH

BY ANTHONY RUDD

*Abstract*: Kierkegaard—in signed writings as well as the Climacus works—seems to advocate a voluntarist response to skepticism: the skeptic is right that all contingent knowledge-claims are uncertain, but we can choose to believe, despite that uncertainty. This seems problematic in various ways. I argue that we can see the epistemic "belief" that Climacus opposes to skepticism as (partly) analogous to faith in *Fear and Trembling*. It too is a "second immediacy," a "getting back" of our connection to the world that had been called in question by skepticism; and is based, not on sheer willpower, but on an attitude of trust in what is beyond our control, and thus on a willingness to accept vulnerability. I discuss Alexander Quanbeck's recent argument that Kierkegaard does endorse a sophisticated form of Direct Doxastic Voluntarism, and I argue for the ultimately ethical nature of Kierkegaard's response to skepticism.

*Keywords*: Kierkegaard, Skepticism, Doxastic Voluntarism, Quanbeck

Johannes Climacus claims in the *Postscript* that ancient Greek Skepticism provides us with a salutary reminder of the uncertainty of all our knowledge-claims about contingent matters.[1] This does not mean that he is recommending skepticism; in the *Philosophical Fragments* he argues that the uncertainty that the Skeptics rightly note leaves open the question of whether we should believe what is uncertain or suspend belief in it. Skepticism is primarily a *will* to doubt and its opposite, "belief" (*Tro*), is also "an act of freedom, an expression of will."[2] This seems to suggest that reason can only set out the options and must then leave it to the will to decide whether or not to believe something. And this is not just Climacus' view—it is asserted by Kierkegaard in signed works and in the *Papirer*.[3]

[1] SKS 7, 44 / CUP 1, 38.
[2] SKS 4, 282 / PF, 83.
[3] See e.g. SKS 9, 229–236 / WL 227–235. I can see no reason to doubt that Climacus speaks for Kierkegaard on strictly epistemological matters. On this see Marilyn Gaye Piety, *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralistic Epistemology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), pp. 17–19 and *passim*; also Anthony Rudd, "Believing All Things: Kierkegaard on Knowledge, Doubt and Love" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary Vol 16: "Works of Love,"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999). So, though I will refer

It seems problematic in various ways, however. It would seem to make those willed decisions arbitrary (why should I decide one way or the other if reason can't tell me?); and it would also seem to make it impossible to say that someone has unreasonable beliefs. (So long as someone isn't deluded about the nature of the options, it seems that reason leaves them all open and has nothing more to say.) And can I, in any case, just *decide* to believe something? Can beliefs be directly willed, or can I, at best, only use certain psychological strategies to nudge myself towards belief? Most Kierkegaard scholars, I think, now incline (and think Kierkegaard inclined) to the latter view, but the issue has recently been reopened in a very interesting way in a series of papers by Z Quanbeck.[4] In this paper I will suggest a way to understand Kierkegaard's epistemology, its insights and its problems, that is inspired by some of what Johannes de Silentio says about faith (also *Tro*) in *Fear and Trembling*. I shall not be engaging in any detailed exegesis of *Fear and Trembling;* all I need for current purposes is a brief reminder of the basic structure of Johannes de Silentio's account of faith there.

Faith in *Fear and Trembling* is presented as, most fundamentally, a matter of trust. Abraham obeys God's command because—despite the appalling nature of that command—he trusts God to ensure that, in the end, all will be well.[5] But this faith is not a merely blithe or naïve confidence. As Johannes de Silentio says, "Faith is not the first immediacy but a later immediacy. The first immediacy is the aesthetic. . . . But faith is not the aesthetic."[6] One's initial aesthetic confidence in life is easily shattered, whether by rational criticism or personal misfortune. Moving beyond the specific case of Abraham, we can say that faith is what enables us to come back to ourselves once this first immediacy has been lost. But this faith is not a desperate leap in the dark, but a renewed and deepened trust:

to "Climacus" as the author of the works ascribed to him, this does not mean that I think there is any significant distinction to be made between Kierkegaard and Climacus with respect to these issues.

[4] See Z Quanbeck, "Kierkegaard on Belief and Credence," *European Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 2, (2024): pp. 394–412, https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12891; "Resolving to Believe: Kierkegaard's Direct Doxastic Voluntarism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 109, no. 2 (2024): pp. 548–574, https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.13055; and "Doubt, Despair, and Doxastic Agency: Kierkegaard on Responsibility for Belief" in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, forthcoming.

[5] John Davenport has argued very convincingly for this reading of *Fear and Trembling*; see in particular, his "Faith and Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*" in *Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 196–233 and "Eschatological Faith and Repetition: Kierkegaard's Abraham and Job" in *Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling": a Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 79–105.

[6] SKS 4, 172 / FT, 82. See also SKS 4, 188 / FT, 98, which describes sin as likewise a "second immediacy" and SKS 4, 161 / FT 69, which talks about a first and a later "interiority."

one that enables us to "get the world back," to live joyfully and confidently in the world, in full knowledge of the vulnerability and insecurity of human life.[7] I will argue that Kierkegaard's epistemology traces a similar "double-movement"; or, indeed, that it is in part, concerned to map the same process, but from a specifically epistemic angle. Our initial naïve trust in our beliefs gives way under critical scrutiny to a realization of the fragility of our epistemic relation to the world, the vulnerability of our beliefs to skeptical questioning. What enables us, nonetheless, to continue to live our epistemic lives, is not a theoretical refutation of skepticism, but it is also not an arbitrary act of sheer willpower. Rather, it is a renewed and now conscious trust in our cognitive faculties, held to in full awareness of the possibility of doubt. Although Kierkegaard does give an important role to the will, and I think sometimes does move too far in a voluntarist direction, what is most basic for him is not decisionism, but an attitude of trust in what is ultimately beyond our control. I am not trying to identify what Climacus calls belief in "the ordinary sense" with the religious faith considered in *Fear and Trembling*.[8] But there are, I think, some suggestive parallels between them,[9] and I shall argue, there is a sense in which for Kierkegaard ordinary belief does ultimately rest on belief in the religious sense. I will start, in section 1, by giving an overview of Climacus' views on skepticism and belief; I will then, in section 2, consider the questions of doxastic voluntarism and the (un)reasonableness of belief, engaging both appreciatively and critically with Quanbeck's account; and in section 3 I will consider a response to the at least quasi-Kierkegaardian account that emerges from that discussion, one that comes from a more radical form of skepticism than Kierkegaard explicitly deals with. I will conclude by suggesting a reply to that radical skepticism that is at least implicit in Kierkegaard's writings.

## 1.

Kierkegaard develops his epistemology in implicit, and sometimes explicit, dialogue with ancient Greek philosophy and, in particular, with the Stoics and Skeptics. He agrees with

[7] This is particularly stressed in Sharon Krishek, "The Existential Dimension of Faith" in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: a Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 106–121.

[8] Climacus explicitly distinguishes belief in the ordinary sense from belief "in the eminent sense," by which he means Christian faith. See SKS 4, 285–286 / PF, 87–88.

[9] Though there are also important differences. I am not suggesting that epistemic belief in the ordinary sense is "on the strength of the absurd" or anything like that.

the Stoics that perception is not a mere confrontation with a brute sensory given, but is the (sensory, of course) presentation to us of a putative fact.[10] A perceptual state has propositional content: it presents to us, e.g., that the book is on the table. It is then up to us to give or refuse assent to that presentation. Most of us do tend, hastily and unthinkingly, to assent to presentations that are not clearly correct and indeed to do so without really being aware that we are doing so. The Stoics recommended that we should become conscious of what we are doing, and that we should suspend judgement (about the truth of the presentation, not, of course, about the fact of it being presented to us) until we come to a presentation that really is certain; that carries its correctness on its sleeve, as it were. (These they called "kataleptic" presentations, from the Greek word for grasping. These are what we can really grasp.) But even this falls short of full knowledge, which only the wise can have; that seems to involve connecting the truths we have gathered from kataleptic presentations, and what we can infer logically from them, into a cohesive system.[11] Stoic epistemology was sharply criticized in ancient times by the Skeptics. Their debate focused on the question of kataleptic presentations. The Skeptics, in accordance with their general practice of avoiding positive philosophical commitments of their own,[12] did not have any theory about the nature of sensory presentation; but they did agree that it was possible—although difficult—to refuse to assent to what sense-experience (or popular opinion, etc.) suggested was the case. But, unlike the Stoics, they denied that there were any kataleptic presentations. Hence, as Peter Adamson puts it: "The difference between the two schools [is] that the Stoics thought we should suspend judgement when we are not certain. The Skeptics agreed, but added that as far as we can tell, certainty is never available, so we should always suspend judgement."[13] (Both schools also gave accounts of how we could operate practically in the world even without

[10] See Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 560. As Piety notes, "Sense experience, according to Kierkegaard . . . is, in a way, an interpretation of the reality we believe lies behind. It is only because it is an interpretation that it can be mistaken." Piety, *Ways of Knowing,* p. 75.

[11] See the selections in Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson, eds., *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), pp. 112–114, 124–125, 126. Although the Stoics thought all knowledge began with sense-perception (ibid., 128–129), they did also allow for presentations that were not directly sensory—as when general opinion in my society presents some course of action as good or bad—and analyzed them in the same way.

[12] Of course, they faced the uncomfortable question of whether this was itself a positive philosophical commitment.

[13] Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 61.

giving assent to (many or any) presentations; both thought that we could properly allow ourselves to be guided by appearances, even without endorsing them as true.[14])

Kierkegaard—in the Climacus writings and elsewhere—agrees with the Stoics and Skeptics about the possibility of suspending judgement. It is part of our finitude that we are sensibly affected beings, but part of our "infinitude" that we are able to step back and assess whether we should give assent to sensible (or emotional, or other) presentations. And on the issue of kataleptic presentations, he sides explicitly with the Skeptics; at least in principle, judgement can be suspended in all cases.[15] In the *Postscript* he asserts that from the "study of Greek skepticism . . . one learns . . . that sensate certainty, to say nothing of historical certainty, is uncertainty."[16] He explains this more carefully in the *Fragments*, where he notes that "the Greek skeptic did not deny the correctness of sensation and immediate cognition, but, said he, error has an utterly different basis—it comes from the conclusions I draw. If I can only avoid drawing conclusions I shall never be deceived."[17] He illustrates this with familiar examples of sensory illusions—a stick looks bent, but I draw no conclusion as to whether it really is bent.[18] So the point is that I don't doubt that that appearances are as they are (that is what is given by "sensation and immediate cognition") but I refrain from drawing the natural conclusion that things really *are* as they appear. So the "sensate certainty" that is dismissed as an illusion is the idea that we can draw conclusions from our sense-experience that can be certain.

Climacus agrees with the Skeptics that to conclude from things appearing thus-and-so to their being thus-and-so is natural for us—so natural that we usually aren't conscious of making any such step—and that it requires self-conscious attention to become aware of and then inhibit this natural tendency. As he says, to properly recognize the uncertainty of all sensory-based belief "will always require time and practice and discipline."[19] For the Skeptics, universal doubt was not a merely intellectual exercise, but a means to the attainment of *ataraxia*, peace of mind, and was therefore something that needed to be *appropriated* (in Kierkegaard's sense); deeply internalized and made a basis for living one's

[14] For the Stoics, of course, this was a sometimes practically unavoidable second-best, when kataleptic presentations were not available; for the Skeptics it was what we needed to do all the time.
[15] See SKS 4, 243–244, 248, 280–284 / PF 38–39, 42–43, 81–85; SKS 7, 44, 81, 288 / CUP 1, 38, 81, 316.
[16] SKS 7, 44 / CUP 1, 38. This is, of course, a general claim about the uncertainty of sensory presentations as a class.
[17] SKS 4, 281–282 / PF, 82.
[18] SKS 4, 282 / PF, 82–83.
[19] SKS 7, 44 / CUP 1, 38.

life. Climacus notes, quite correctly, that ancient Skepticism was motivated by a (broadly speaking) ethical commitment; a vision of the good life as one free from belief. (It is, of course, questionable whether the Skeptics could really be consistent in basing their recommendation of a universal suspension of judgement on such an ethical commitment; shouldn't they also be suspending belief about the desirability of *ataraxia*?[20]) According to Climacus, "the skeptical *ataraxia* was . . . an existence-attempt to abstract from existing."[21] This is obviously paradoxical; like Stoicism, Skepticism tried to use the "infinite" power of the mind to step back from the immediate deliverances of experience in order to gain freedom from the vulnerability that we feel through being dependent on contingencies. Hence, both philosophies were attempts to "abstract from existence." This is, indeed, why Kierkegaard in the end rejects them; he sees them as forms of escapism, driven by a desire to be in control at all costs, a fear of vulnerability, dependence, that is deeply at odds with Kierkegaard's own ethico-religious views.[22] But he does admire the way in which Stoicism and Skepticism presented their project as a difficult and demanding task, one which was supposed to transform the lives of its adherents; hence they were both existential philosophies, rather than merely theoretical ones. (Climacus sarcastically continues: "In our day, one abstracts in print, just as in print one doubts everything once and for all."[23])

That everything *can* be doubted (that there are no "kataleptic presentations") is for Climacus (and Kierkegaard) true, though it is exceedingly difficult to hold to and fully appropriate that truth. But it doesn't follow that we *should* always suspend judgement. Climacus emphasizes that the Skeptics

> doubted, not by virtue of knowledge but by virtue of will . . . This implies that doubt can be terminated only in freedom, by an act of will, something that every Greek skeptic would understand, but he would not terminate his skepticism, precisely because he *willed* to doubt . . . Greek

[20] They were aware of the problem and tried (not very convincingly in my view) to respond to it. See e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.12, in Inwood and Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 307–308.
[21] SKS 7, 289 / CUP 1, 318.
[22] For a detailed comparison of Stoicism with Kierkegaard—and a Kierkegaardian critique of Stoicism—see Rick Anthony Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), though I don't think Furtak really does justice to the underlying metaphysical and religious motivation of Stoicism—the concern to live in harmony with the deep rational order of the universe.
[23] SKS 7, 288 / CUP 1, 318.

> skepticism . . . unfailingly used cognition only to preserve the cast of mind which was the main consideration.[24]

Presumably with "time, practice and discipline" the Skeptic may become habituated to suspending judgement, so that it may come naturally, without the need for conscious acts of will. (Though this endpoint may never fully be reached, just as for many of the Stoics, the state of the sage with full knowledge and free from passions was an ideal to be approached rather than one which could be fully attained.)

Climacus uses this account of doubt in order to sketch a contrastive account of the opposite state, belief (*tro*). He is careful to explain in this context that he is discussing belief/faith in the "ordinary" sense as opposed to the "eminent" sense where it refers to religious and indeed specifically Christian faith.[25] Epistemologists usually think of (ordinary-sense) belief as a component of knowledge (knowledge as true belief plus various bells and whistles) but Climacus contrasts belief and knowledge: "Belief is not a knowledge, but an act of freedom, an expression of will."[26] This distinction seems to depend on his using "knowledge" in a "strict" sense which implies necessity and (therefore) certainty. As Marilyn Piety notes, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms sometimes use "knowledge" in this way, but also sometimes use it in a looser sense, where we can be said to "know" something if it is sufficiently probable.[27] "Belief," by contrast to strict-sense knowledge, is the term for our cognitive grasp of contingent matters which can never be entirely certain. To call it an "act of freedom" does make it sound like a deliberate conscious act, a decision, taken after one has recognized the possibility of doubt, to set that possibility aside. (So the denial that belief is "knowledge" refers not simply to its lack of certitude, but to its arising from a personal decision, rather than emerging automatically as a conclusion from necessitating premises.)

A little later Climacus reiterates, "Belief and doubt are not two kinds of knowledge,"[28] and continues that "for neither of them is a cognitive act, and they are opposite passions.

[24] SKS 4, 281–282 / PF, 82–83.

[25] See SKS 4, 285–286 / PF, 87. *Tro*, like the German *Glaube*, has the same ambiguity in this respect as the English "belief" and "faith."

[26] SKS 4, 282 / PF, 83.

[27] See Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, pp. 71, 79. Piety notes similar shifts in Kierkegaard between "strict" and "loose" senses of truth and justification as well as knowledge; see ibid., pp. 53, 60. See also C. Stephen Evans, "Realism and Anti-Realism in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 165.

[28] It might seem odd that someone would think doubt to be a kind of knowledge, but presumably the idea is that doubt would be the knowledge that contingent matters do not admit of certainty.

Belief is a sense for coming into existence and doubt is a protest against any conclusion that wants to go beyond immediate sensation and immediate knowledge."[29] A "sense for coming into existence" might seem to be something more intuitive and immediate than an "act of freedom"; something that might describe our initial unconscious acceptance of the deliverances of our senses, prior to the raising of doubts. Perhaps then one could further articulate Climacus' account by sub-dividing "belief in the ordinary sense" further into two kinds: firstly, a basic intuitive trust in our senses (but also in the deliverances of our reason, our consciences, our memory, in testimony, etc.); and secondly, a consciously chosen commitment to affirm that trust even in the face of doubts that cannot simply be refuted on an intellectual plane. Some such distinction is, I think, in any case necessary; it is very implausible to suggest that a conscious act of will is needed whenever we form sensory beliefs, especially the ones we simply act on without formulating explicitly to ourselves. So, Climacus' picture is that we start, unreflectively, with trust in our experience. Even this is not simply a basic animal response to stimuli;[30] once we have learned as young children to conceptualize and thus make sense of our experience, what our experience then gives us are indeed "presentations" in the Stoic sense—appearances that things are thus-and-so. We naturally tend to accept these presentations at face value and do so without conscious awareness that we are doing so. But doubts *can* be raised and Climacus agrees with the Skeptics that they cannot be dismissed on a purely intellectual level. But this remains an intellectual result; it remains up to us to decide what significance it should have. Being averse to error, and drawn by the promise of a tranquility that can come from remaining uncommitted, the Skeptic chooses the (arduous) path of training him or herself to refuse assent to all presentations (whether simple, neutral sensory ones, or emotionally toned ones, e.g. "the tiger is dangerous!"). But one can also choose, once skeptical possibilities have been raised, to refuse them; this is belief in the second sense, as a conscious act of will. "Doubt can be terminated only in freedom, by an act of will."[31] Such an act is not arbitrary (at least not in the sense of random, whimsical); what underlies it, though, is not knowledge but "passion" and—ultimately—the passionate judgement that the life of suspension and *ataraxia* recommended by the Skeptics is

[29] SKS 4, 283 / PF 84. Presumably he means that they are not *exclusively* cognitive acts; clearly they do involve an element of cognition.

[30] I will set aside the important and interesting question of how more complex non-human animals make sense of their experience; cats, dogs, monkeys, and dolphins are not mere stimulus-response machines, but I wouldn't attribute full-blown conceptual consciousness to them either.

[31] SKS 4, 281 / PF, 82.

not a good life. Climacus' (Kierkegaard's) critique of skepticism is, therefore, essentially an ethical one.

**2.**

The account of Climacus so far makes him sound decisionistic; even if my basic perceptual beliefs are acquired without any conscious decision, to affirm them in the face of doubts (belief in the second sense) does require a deliberate act of will. This raises the question of doxastic voluntarism. Can I *decide* to believe something? Kierkegaard has sometimes been interpreted as holding a kind of Direct Doxastic Voluntarism (DDV), according to which I can, by a conscious act of willing, make myself believe that something is the case.[32] I think most Kierkegaard scholars would now agree that Kierkegaard/Climacus accepts only a kind of Indirect Doxastic Voluntarism (IDV).[33] I can try to make myself believe something by choosing to direct my attention in certain directions, choosing to ignore certain considerations, making an effort to see things in one light rather than another; as a result, belief may come (though that isn't guaranteed). Jamie Ferreira has influentially compared the transitions between the spheres of existence to gestalt shifts; I come to see this situation as requiring ethical action from me, where I had previously seen it simply as offering me amusement as a spectator. And just as I can make a conscious effort to see an ambiguous figure as a duck, rather than a rabbit, so I can make an effort to "see" or interpret things around me more generally in one way rather than another. But I cannot simply decide to see a figure as a duck and have that happen; and similarly with the more general case.[34]

[32] See e.g. Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984), ch. 5, and *Religious Belief and the Will* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 70–74, 146.

[33] See e.g. C. Stephen Evans, "Does Kierkegaard Think Beliefs can be Directly Willed?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 26*, (1989): pp. 173–184, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00142862.

[34] See Jamie M. Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 34–36, 72–76, 109–110 and "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay & Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 216–221. One could say that all the objects of perception (let alone those of thought) are ambiguous figures—that is, capable of being interpreted differently. The disanalogy would be that a) at least in many cases (simple perceptual beliefs) we are (almost?) all likely to just take one interpretation as obvious, without even considering the possibility of other options and b) while a duck-rabbit figure is neither "really" a duck nor "really" a rabbit, we do assume that things generally really do have one character or nature

Quanbeck has recently reopened this issue, arguing that a sophisticated form of DDV is both attributable to Kierkegaard and philosophically defensible in its own right. He recognizes that many of our beliefs are acquired involuntarily, and accepts that the IDV account does explain some of our more deliberate belief-formation. However, he argues that, according to Climacus, we can sometimes will to believe more directly: "Climacus's use of voluntaristic language—e.g., his references to the will (*Villie*), resolution (*Beslutning*), and decision (*Afgjørelse*)—strongly indicates that he takes the leap to belief to consist in a *free, voluntary decision*."[35] This does not involve gritting our teeth and just making ourselves believe in some proposition by sheer willpower. Firstly, Quanbeck doesn't think that such decisions need always be consciously introspectable acts of will; as he notes, most of our voluntary actions do not involve any such standing-at-the-crossroads moment of deliberate choice, but are still voluntary for all that.[36] And, secondly, he thinks that doxastic decisions can be direct without being unmediated. The "free voluntary decision" he refers to is not *immediately* a decision to believe p, but "to cease reflecting, close inquiry, and settle the question of whether *p*."[37] On this view "our voluntary control over our beliefs is mediated by our voluntary control over whether we inquire and which epistemic risk attitudes we adopt."[38]

Quanbeck admits that it may be, to some extent, a terminological issue whether what he is proposing is really a form of DDV, or a new form of IDV.[39] But in either case, his substantial proposal is interesting and important. On his view,

> Kierkegaard takes there to be three distinct ways in which we can exercise direct voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes via our direct control over whether we inquire: 1) by deciding whether to take an "interest" in some question and thereby adopt a doxastic attitude

rather than another. (Perhaps we can see some forms of radical anti-realism in philosophy as questioning this assumption.)

[35] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 559. It should be said that Quanbeck thinks (as I do) that Kierkegaard is expressing his own epistemological views in the Climacus writings: see "Resolving to Believe," p. 549.

[36] "Kierkegaard (along with some of his pseudonyms) holds that our volitions can be *unconscious* to varying degrees. We often act freely and voluntarily without consciously deliberating or forming an occurrent intention to act." Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 561.

[37] Ibid., p. 559.

[38] Ibid, p. 563.

[39] Ibid.

> (namely, suspension of judgment), 2) by deciding whether to close inquiry and thereby believe, and 3) by deciding whether to reopen inquiry and thereby suspend judgment.[40]

This supposes that when I am (sincerely) investigating whether some proposition is true, I am (necessarily) suspending judgement about it (stage 1).[41] I may, during my investigation, assign a probability to the proposition and increase or decrease it as the investigation continues, but I don't reach a state of belief until I *decide* to conclude the investigation and take the proposition as a settled result (stage 2). My "credence"—my sense of the probability of the proposition—does not automatically determine my belief in it:[42]

> Belief is *not* merely a high degree of confidence. Rather, belief is differentiated from credence in virtue of involving a resolution that closes inquiry. Moreover, believing by closing inquiry does not require modifying one's credence, as it is a qualitatively different mental state that one can have *in addition to* a credence.[43]

Exegetically speaking, this distinction between the hypothetical, probabilistic activity of the intellect and the act of will that closes inquiry does seem a plausible articulation of what Climacus is getting at when he asserts that "[empirical] truth is an approximating whose beginning cannot be established absolutely . . . every beginning, when it is *made* . . . does not occur by immanental thinking, but is made by virtue of a resolution, essentially by virtue of faith."[44] And it fits with what Kierkegaard asserts under his own name when he writes: "Knowledge places everything in possibility . . . there is no decision in knowledge; the decision, the determination and the firmness of personality are first in the 'ergo,' in belief."[45]

Closing inquiry for now and deciding to believe that Quanbeck is exegetically right about Kierkegaard's views, I want to raise some questions about the plausibility of

[40] Ibid., p. 556.
[41] This could be questioned. Couldn't someone seriously inquire into whether God exists, or whether there are human rights, while continuing to believe in those things?
[42] Of course, as Quanbeck is well aware, there are interesting regress problems that emerge. If I take the proposition p that is under investigation to be 65% likely, is *that* proposition (call it q = "p is 65% probable") one that I *believe* or merely hold to be probable? (and how probable? 65%? 99%?) If the latter, then what about r (the proposition that q is x% probable)? And so on. This can indeed be used as an argument that a decision is needed to end the regress.
[43] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 554. See also Quanbeck, "Kierkegaard on Belief and Credence."
[44] SKS 7, 174 / CUP, 1, 189.
[45] SKS 9, 232 / WL 230–231.

Kierkegaard's position, so construed. Firstly, I wonder whether such decisions to close inquiry necessarily (or perhaps ever) lead to *belief*. An alert inquirer who is aware of making a "*free, voluntary decision*" might describe it as a decision to accept p for now as the best working hypothesis we have, rather than a decision to *believe* it. The inquirer's judgement is that continuing to investigate p itself is a less worthwhile use of time than taking p as the basis for developing further hypotheses and going on to investigate them. None of this need involve *belief* that p. (Popper warned scientists against actually believing in any of their "conjectures.") Some of the Greek Skeptics (the Academics, as opposed to the Pyrrhonists) were willing to accept the use of probability in forming judgements, given that nothing appeared to be certain; one might say that they were content to work with claims that had a high credence, but without venturing to believe them. This also applies in many practical cases; we need to decide what's best to do (which path to take while wandering lost in the forest) but that isn't really deciding what to believe/what to hold as true. Believing involves more than simply taking a hypothesis as the best basis for action[46] (*pace*, perhaps, an extreme version of Pragmatism) but, granted that one can will the latter, can one also will the former?

One might also criticize the idea that we can decide to believe from an opposite angle. While some scientific and historical propositions are adopted tentatively, without belief, aren't there others which are now so firmly established that the possibility of doubting them—and thus the need for a *decision* to close further inquiry into them—comes to seem at best purely notional? An investigator may decide to adopt p tentatively, as a working hypothesis; but as he or she gets used to working with the assumption that p, and finds it fruitful, he or she may come to abandon any Popperian hesitations and to simply feel, "OK, this is true." This is belief, but was there a *decision* to believe? Perhaps, depending on how broadly we construe the notion of decision, but it seems more like one of Ferreira's gestalt shifts than an act of will. In any case, it is something different from, and subsequent to, the initial decision to close inquiry.[47] So in such cases, the initial decision leads to belief, but in an indirect (IDV) way. Furthermore, investigators never start from scratch. Many scientific/historical claims are simply taught as established fact in schools, textbooks, etc. (e.g. heliocentrism, or the claim that Napoleon was Emperor of France in the early 19th Century). Most students dutifully come to believe them as such (and are, I

[46] Including the "action" of continuing one's theoretical inquires in a certain way.

[47] One starts by accepting p tentatively, thus closing inquiry into p (decision without belief) and then, as one works with p one gradually comes to take it as true (belief without decision).

think, right to do so). As with basic perceptual beliefs, the skeptic would have to make an effort to remind him or herself that they are not *absolutely* certain; but, as also in the perceptual case, the non-skeptic might simply shrug off such doubts as unreasonable and unprofitable. Of course, this is still a voluntary movement of some sort. Is it properly construed as an act of will, *rather* than an epistemic act, though?

Quanbeck does want to argue that, for Kierkegaard, it is always something extra-epistemic that closes inquiry. "Climacus's (and Kierkegaard's) view seems to be that doubting, inquiring, and suspending judgment about any contingent proposition about the external world is *always* epistemically permissible."[48] Hence, whether one does suspend judgement, or end the suspension by believing, must depend on extra-epistemic factors (we can call them "practical," taking the term in a broad sense).[49] I wonder, though, whether a clear distinction between what is practical and what is epistemic can be maintained. Suppose someone refuses to believe that that the Earth is round, or that Napoleon actually existed rather than being a purely legendary figure. Suppose that person continues to doubt, despite patient recitals of all the relevant evidence. Surely a scientist or historian would say that this person was being unreasonable. Kierkegaard, as Quanbeck interprets him, would agree that the person would be unreasonable if he/she refused to adjust his/her credences in accordance with the evidence. But what if the person says: "Yes, I know that it is 99.9999 . . . % probable that the Earth is round, but I'm still suspending judgement"? Or even: "Yes, I know that it is 99.9999 . . . % probable that the Earth is round, but I'm still choosing to believe that it is flat"? According to Quanbeck, "Kierkegaard holds that having a certain (rational) credence (other than 0 or 1) never *rationally* necessitates either suspending judgment or believing."[50] I would want to say that it can be irrational not to believe something, even if one is not rationally necessitated to believe it—as I suppose "2+2" would rationally necessitate me to believe "4." Is this, however, a case of practical, rather than epistemic (ir)rationality? A teacher might say to

[48] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 555.

[49] I am using "practical" pretty much as a shorthand for "non-epistemic." Quanbeck does claim that the relevant extra-epistemic factors will sometimes but not necessarily be practical ones ("Resolving to Believe," p. 564). I'm not quite sure what he thinks the non-epistemic but non-practical factors might be, but it does seem that he thinks the practical ones are the most important. In another paper he claims that "the Pyrrhonian Skeptics intentionally *chose* to doubt for practical (rather than theoretical) reasons" ("Doubt, Despair, and Doxastic Agency," p. 17). And it matters for his overall position that "Kierkegaard maintains that we have distinctively *practical* agency over our beliefs in virtue of our ability to believe at will" ("Resolving to Believe," p. 571).

[50] Quanbeck, "Resolving to Believe," p. 554.

a skeptically inclined child, whose doubts about fundamentals cannot be non-question-beggingly refuted: "You just have to accept this if you are going to get on in science/history!" Well, that is no doubt true, but the reason to accept the sphericality of the Earth is surely that all the evidence points that way, not just that we will get on better if we accept it. The child is being epistemically irrational, not just practically obstreperous.

Kierkegaard certainly does think there are cases where practical—in the sense of ethical—considerations should make me decide to believe something, even when strictly epistemic considerations leave the options open. In the section of *Works of Love* titled "Love Believes all Things,"[51] he argues that I am required, as part of my duty to love my neighbor, to interpret his or her behavior lovingly—i.e., as generously or charitably as possible. I should form beliefs about others that are based on love, rather than mistrust. And in this context it seems that these must be *beliefs*: I don't just decide to *act* as though you are innocent, although I continue to suspect that you may well not be; love required me to actually believe in your innocence. In his argument here Kierkegaard relies on precisely the epistemological principles set out in more detail in the Climacus works. Knowledge, strictly speaking, is hypothetical, concerned with possibilities. The observable facts about somebody's behavior could always be interpreted either cynically or charitably; hence we need something beyond knowledge to make the decision—not in this case whether to trust my senses, but whether to trust or mistrust another person. "Love is the very opposite of mistrust and yet it is initiated into the same knowledge. In knowledge they are, if you please, indistinguishable . . . only in the conclusion, and in the decision, in *faith* (to believe all things and to believe nothing) are they the very opposite."[52]

I think Kierkegaard has an important point here, which he (partly) obscures by exaggerating it. As in the more theoretical cases considered above, it seems that, while knowledge of the observable facts about someone's behavior may *sometimes* leave open a genuine multiplicity of possibilities for interpretation, it does at other times point overwhelmingly to the likelihood that the person in question really has (let us say) acted despicably. Kierkegaard says that the choice between love and mistrust occurs once "knowledge has placed the opposite possibilities in equilibrium,"[53] but at least much of the time, knowledge *doesn't* leave everything in equilibrium, and the fact that I can't be *absolutely* certain does not mean that I should never conclude that someone has acted

[51] SKS 9, 227–245 / WL, 225–245.
[52] SKS 9, 230 / WL, 228.
[53] SKS 9, 236 / WL, 234.

badly. Indeed, sometimes it would be ethically wrong of me to give them the benefit of whatever residual doubt there may be, as when trusting someone too much may put not only myself, but others, in danger.[54] But although what Kierkegaard says may be an exaggeration, it is a salutary one. Kierkegaard reminds us that when something seems obvious to us about another's moral behavior, that may be due to the assumptions—and perhaps the vices (cynicism, mistrust)—that we are bringing to the situation and using as interpretive lenses. And what he says stands as an injunction to us to judge as generously as is compatible with intellectual and moral responsibility.

One might also still wonder whether, even when the objective evidence is in something like equilibrium, it is right to talk of *deciding to believe* lovingly. As in other case, both perceptual and more theoretical, one usually starts not with complete uncertainty, but with appearances that solicit some belief or other. I see someone acting suspiciously (as it seems to me)—but then I can step back and question that seeming. Is he really up to no good, or is it just my nasty suspicious mind? In such a case, I might well have to exercise a conscious act of will, telling myself: "Come on! I don't really know what happened here. Maybe it's just gossip. I should try to be charitable." Certainly volition is playing an important part here, but it seems to me that this is still most plausibly interpreted in IDV terms: I am making an effort to look at the situation in a way that I hope will induce me to acquire charitable beliefs, but I'm not willing those beliefs directly. But while most of us may have to consciously struggle to see things charitably, one may think of the loving person, someone who has really acquired and internalized the virtue of love (and I think Kierkegaard does regard love as a virtue[55]) as needing to make no decision. He or she just naturally responds to others with the most charitable interpretation. (The saint, one might think, has made the gestalt-shift from mistrust to love and become habituated to immediately see everything and everyone lovingly.) But although no decision is involved—even in an IDV sense–the saint's perception is not a purely intellectual affair—it involves an affective state of the whole person.

[54] Perhaps we could act on the balance of probabilities without belief in someone's depravity? Psychologically that would not be easy, though it might be possible. But in some cases—e.g., when a spiritual advisor is trying to get someone to face up to his real guilt rather than evading it—a full belief in the other's guiltiness is required for a properly loving response to the person in question.

[55] I have argued elsewhere that Kierkegaard has a fairly traditional view of faith, hope, and love as theological virtues, not so far, in some ways, from Aquinas' account of them: see Anthony Rudd, "Kierkegaard on Hope and Faith," *Religions* 14, no. 12 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121458.

The saint, on my view, always perceives lovingly, but doesn't always believe the best of people. He or she has the ability to see when it is *reasonable* (broad-sense rationality) to conclude that someone has acted badly. It is possible for someone to judge reasonably in this way, but not lovingly; but the saint's epistemic strength is that his or her ability to see what is really going on is not distorted by malice or wishful thinking or any of the other vices that warp our perception of (moral) reality. So I think we can say that the saint's virtue includes an element of *intellectual* virtue, which enables him or her to know or see better what is going on in the world.[56] Kierkegaard doesn't investigate the intellectual virtues and vices as a distinct topic,[57] but he is very much concerned with the epistemic functioning of moral virtues and vices: "Vanity, conceit, complacency believe everything flattering that is said; envy, malice, corruption believe everything evil that is said; mistrust believes nothing at all . . . but love believes all things."[58] The moral vices he mentions here function as intellectual vices also, in that they interfere with knowledge or the pursuit of truth; what the vain or malicious person is inclined to believe may in fact be true, but that person is inclined to form such beliefs whether or not they are true, so vanity and malice are dispositions that inhibit our ability to see the world truthfully.

I do think the notion of intellectual virtue may be the key to resolving Quanbeck's question about when to close (or open) inquiry.[59] For even in epistemic cases, such as

[56] Though there are specifically intellectual virtues, it is also true that general moral virtues have intellectual components. I shall not try to sort out the complex but intimate relation between moral and intellectual virtues here, but I would certainly want to avoid any position that would make moral virtues such as charity or generosity into intellectual vices, which would prevent us from seeing things as they are. On intellectual virtue (and vice) in general see Linda Zagzebski's important book, *Virtues of the Mind; an Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[57] There has been a good deal of recent work on Kierkegaard as a virtue theorist in ethics: see e.g. Robert C. Roberts, *Recovering Christian Character: The Psychological Wisdom of Soren Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2022); also the special edition of the journal *Religions* (Vol. 14, 2023), *Kierkegaard, Virtue and Vices*. There has been less attention paid to the topic of Kierkegaard and *intellectual* virtue, though see Eleanor Helms, "Thoughtlessness as an Intellectual Vice in Kierkegaard and Aristotle," *Religions* 14, no. 11 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111401; and Robert C. Roberts, "Kierkegaard's Virtue Epistemology: a Modest Initiative" in *Why Kierkegaard Matters*, ed. Marc Alan Jolley and Edmon L. Rowell (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010).

[58] SKS 9, 228 / WL, 226.

[59] I should perhaps make it clear that I am (like Zagzebski) concerned here with intellectual virtues in a "rich," Aristotelian sense, as states of character, and not just with well-functioning cognitive faculties, as in Ernest Sosa's "virtue-reliabilist" theory. See Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Vol 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

scientific or historical ones, which are not (at least not obviously) ethically freighted, the intellectual virtues (and vices) are involved.[60] When one scientist or historian says that another is being "unreasonable" in either withholding or forming beliefs (given the relevant evidence) it's really a complaint that the other is failing to find the Aristotelian mean between the intellectual vices of credulity and suspicion.[61] To be reasonable is not just to give one's assent to the conclusions of strict deductive arguments, and nor is it just about giving one's assent to probable propositions when the probabilities reach a precise, defined-in-advance limit. The intellectually virtuous researcher (whether in academic or in everyday contexts) is one whose beliefs are sensitive to the evidence in algorithmically unformalizable ways, whose gestalts shift when the *right* amount or kind of evidence has come in—that *rightness* being something that cannot be quantifiably specified in advance.[62] One could say that the "reasonable" person is one who can sense a pattern before all the evidence is in.[63] Rather than *deciding* to believe, he or she follows this unfolding pattern, trusting his or her developing perception of where things are going. This is voluntary activity, and it may sometimes involve an act of conscious will (to set aside doubts, to follow one's sense of things). But it is still epistemic (not *merely* practical) for all that.

Although this account of reasonableness and intellectual virtue might seem to go against some of what Climacus says when he uses "knowledge" and "reason" in the "strict" senses, it actually fits well with what he says in other places. For instance, he considers the example of a serious philological scholar preparing an edition of Cicero.[64] Such a scholar, is, at every turn, faced with some measure of uncertainty, but the choices he makes are not blind decisions; rather, they are guided by his "acumen," "ingenuity," "diligence," and "competence," and by the sense of likelihood shaped by his extensive background knowledge of classical culture. Although he doesn't say so explicitly, Climacus is clearly talking about intellectual virtues here. We should note that he is happy to

[60] Of course, even when the subject matter of the inquiry is ethically neutral, *moral* vices like vanity or malice may lead me to believe my own pet theory too quickly, or disbelieve my colleague's, and moral virtues may be necessary to combat such tendencies.

[61] Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood take this mean to be a combination of courage and caution; see their *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 8.

[62] In other cases, of course, the intellectually virtuous person may not form a belief, but still decide that the hypothesis looks plausible enough to work with for now, as in the sorts of cases mentioned above.

[63] Of course, as the Skeptics pointed out, we never are in a state when we can be sure that literally all the evidence is in.

[64] SKS 7, 33 / CUP 1, 25–26.

talk about the scholar's "intimate knowledge of antiquity"[65]—this is knowledge in the "broad sense," derived from the exercise of rationality in the broad sense (since it clearly isn't, for the most part, a matter of deductive rational necessitation). In this looser, non-algorithmic sense of rationality, to hold egregiously false beliefs about Cicero's text—let alone to believe that Napoleon never existed, or that the Earth is flat—is not reasonable, and indicates a lack of intellectual virtue. Such judgements about the reasonableness or unreasonableness of an inquirer seem to me to be both epistemic and practical, for the category of intellectual virtue in general blurs the line between the epistemic and the practical. I do think Kierkegaard's/Climacus' insistence (at times) that reason or knowledge is motivationally inert and that belief always requires something extra-epistemic, depends on his using (at times) a narrow view of reason (or knowledge). What his reminders of the importance of volitional and evaluative factors in belief-formation really point to is not that we need to supplement reason (narrowly conceived) with an extra-rational decisionism, but that we need a richer and more flexible notion of reasoning, one which includes elements of interest, passion, and virtue.[66] We need to think of reasoning as an activity carried on by existing human beings, and bound up with their senses of what is significant, perspicuous and valuable.

**3.**

So, either coming to believe, or continuing to suspend belief, may, depending on the circumstances, be unreasonable—even though its wrongness can't be strictly *proved*. And in some cases, either belief or suspension may be morally wrong as well. So an investigator demonstrates his or her intellectual virtues or vices in the judgements that he or she makes about when to close, or not to close inquiry; and, in many cases, a person may demonstrate his or her moral virtues or vices in doing so as well. To some extent in the last section I have turned away from the issue of philosophical skepticism, which aims to doubt all our presentations, and have been considering things from the perspective of an engaged inquirer (e.g., a scientist or historian) for whom some beliefs are clearly more reasonable than others. And from this perspective, the skeptic who is determined to *always* suspend belief because there is always at least a notional possibility of doubt in any

[65] SKS 7, 33 / CUP 1, 26.

[66] See Marilyn Gaye Piety, "Kierkegaard on Rationality" in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), pp. 59-74.

presentation, is being both unreasonable and immoral.[67] Perhaps this is unfair to the skeptic, though; for, as Climacus reminds us, the philosophical skeptic is not just an overly scrupulous empirical inquirer, but someone driven by a vision of the good life, one that rejects on ethical (or at least, more broadly evaluative) grounds the aim of increasing knowledge that drives the scientist or historian. What is reasonable from the perspective of the skeptic's desire for *ataraxia* is something different from what is reasonable from the perspective of a working scientist. And a further, meta-skeptical, question now arises: How can we decide which of these senses of what is reasonable is itself the more reasonable one to adopt? To put the point in another way: what counts as a virtue (moral or intellectual) ultimately depends on what view of the good one has.[68] (The good of inquiry or the good of a human life as a whole, though the former will ultimately need to be an aspect of the latter.[69]) If two people differ in their view of what the good is, they may disagree as to whether the skeptic's disposition to suspend judgement whenever there is uncertainty is a virtue or a vice. But how, without circularity, is such a disagreement to be resolved? And if we admit that it is rationally unresolvable, then it seems that the skeptic wins.

We can further strengthen this renewed case for skepticism if we if we distinguish between the kind of skepticism that Climacus mostly considers—which points to the ineradicable presence of doubt in each particular presentation—and a more radical kind. For even if we did agree that it would be crazy (intellectually vicious) for someone within the framework (paradigm, episteme, language-game) that constitutes scientific or historical inquiry to doubt whether the Earth orbits the Sun or that Napoleon existed, those frameworks themselves can be doubted. And, more fundamentally still, perhaps, we can doubt whether our faculties (sense, reason, memory) put us in touch with any independent reality at all.[70] Kierkegaard doesn't very clearly or explicitly distinguish between such radical, global skepticism and skepticism about particular presentations, but he was

[67] Sometimes it is morally required that I trust and believe someone, so it is morally wrong to say I should never do so.

[68] This does not mean that one can specify what the good is entirely independent of the virtues; on Aristotle's view, developing certain virtues is constitutive of the good life, not just a means to a distinct end.

[69] As Kierkegaard keeps reminding us: to make scholarship, with its distinctive goods, central to one's life, is itself an existential decision, not a scholarly one.

[70] When I talk about our "faculties" I mean that in a loose common-sense way; I am not committing myself to any controversial "faculty psychology."

certainly aware of the former kind.[71] And—although this requires some extrapolation—I think his response to it, like his response to the skepticism that focuses on particular presentations, is basically a moral, or evaluative, one. I want to approach this by looking briefly at the debate between Hume and Thomas Reid; I hope it will become clear that this is not a digression.

Hume was an unusual kind of skeptic, and there is a scholarly controversy as to whether he was really a skeptic at all, or, rather, a naturalist. I think the answer is that Hume carried out a naturalistic (empiricist, associationist) inquiry into the workings of our belief-forming faculties, which resulted in the radically skeptical conclusion that we had no reason to suppose that the beliefs that those faculties produced were true.[72] This conclusion was, he agreed, impossible to hold on to in one's everyday life;[73] one naturally and unavoidably fell back into relying on those faculties. Skepticism, therefore, "can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections that may be raised against them."[74] Finding this conclusion unacceptable, Reid was provoked into developing an anti-skeptical philosophy based on trust in our faculties. On his account, sensations immediately give rise to "that conception and belief in the external object that we call perception"[75] so immediately that we are not usually aware of any distinction between the sensation itself and the belief that is "suggested" by it. Reid uses "suggestion" as a technical term for the process that immediately, without conscious inference, gives rise to belief when certain sensations are given. For instance, "certain

[71] These are sometimes distinguished as "Cartesian" and "Pyrrhonian" Skepticism. The Greek Skeptics didn't use scenarios as "globally" disconcerting as the Evil Demon or the Brain in a Vat, though they did make fairly radical claims about the (un)reliability of our faculties in general. Globally disconcerting scenarios are certainly pre-Cartesian, though; see e.g. Al-Ghazali, "The Rescuer From Error" in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 61–64.

[72] Hume's skepticism therefore is based on what a classical Skeptic would have considered a "dogmatic" naturalistic outlook, which is, however, itself undercut by the skeptical conclusions it leads to. The classical Skeptic could, however, argue that it is *possible* that Hume's naturalistic theory is correct, in which case our faculties would not be reliable. Whether or not they are is itself something we cannot rationally determine.

[73] See David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 316–317 (Book I, Part 4, section 7).

[74] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), p. 111.

[75] *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man,* in Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), p. 207.

sensations of touch, by the constitution of our nature, suggest to us extension, solidity and motion, which are nowise like to sensations."[76] The term "suggestion" is perhaps unfortunate, as it makes the process sound tentative and hypothetical; but for Reid it produces immediate, unhesitating certainty.

So far this sounds rather like Climacus' account of our initial, unreflective belief-acquisition. And like Climacus, Reid does acknowledge (even if a bit grudgingly in his case) that, although such beliefs are immediate and natural, we *can* step back from them and subject them to skeptical questioning.[77] In particular, he concedes that the object of perception and the mental act by which I perceive it are distinct, so that the latter (my mental state of *apparent* perception) could exist without the former.[78] Why then should I infer the former from the latter? Reid gives three answers. Firstly, it isn't in my power to cease doing so. The faculty of suggestion is irresistible and can't simply be turned off at will. Secondly, even if I could suspend judgement about external objects, it would not serve me well in practical matters if I did so. As Reid was aware,[79] Hume would agree with both these points, but would add that the psychological impossibility of doing without a belief does not show that it is true.[80] Reid's third answer, however, is very un-Humean: "I consider this instinctive belief as one of the best gifts of Nature. I thank the Author of my being, who bestowed it upon me . . . I yield to the direction of my senses, not from instinct only, but from confidence and trust in a faithful and beneficent Monitor."[81] So Hume and Reid agree that our minds naturally produce beliefs, which we cannot in practice resist holding, although they give different accounts of how they do this.[82] The important difference, though, is that Reid insists that the beliefs in question are (generally)

[76] *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind* in Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays,* ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), p. 25.

[77] Although at times he seems to argue that skeptical doubts are parasitic on the post-Cartesian "Way of Ideas" (of which he sees Hume's philosophy as an unintended *reductio*) and will simply fade away if we reject that (see e.g. *An Inquiry*, pp. 3–12) at other times he concedes that skepticism cannot be exorcised quite so straightforwardly. (Nor indeed do I think he breaks quite as decisively from the Way of Ideas as he takes himself to do.)

[78] See Ibid., p. 84. Or perhaps some object causing my perceptual state might exist but be radically different from the apparent object I experience.

[79] E.g., Ibid., p. 40.

[80] Nietzsche would concur: "Life is not an argument; the conditions of life might include error." (*The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), sec. 121.

[81] Reid, *An Inquiry*, pp. 86–87.

[82] Hume gives a detailed, though clearly inadequate, empiricist/associationist account; Reid doesn't really give any explanation for how sensations "suggest" beliefs, and even calls the process "a natural kind of magic" (Reid, *An Inquiry,* p. 43).

true. And, although he only occasionally makes the point explicitly, this insistence is grounded theologically. God has given us this nature to ensure that we track the truth, so its functioning is not just a brute-fact psychological mechanism. Ultimately, it is trust in God's benevolence that underpins Reid's conviction that the beliefs our minds produce are in fact true, rather than just what we are (practically, unavoidably) stuck with.

As far as I know there is no evidence that Kierkegaard had read either Hume or Reid,[83] but they were both discussed by German thinkers he was familiar with, including Kant, Hamann, Jacobi, and Hegel, and he was certainly aware of Hume's main ideas from secondary sources.[84] Both Hamann and Jacobi appealed explicitly to Hume in arguing that our epistemic relation to reality depends on extra-rational factors that they both call "faith" (*Glaube*).[85] Jacobi, annoyed that his critics had taken this appeal to "faith" to involve a religiously-based irrationalism, wrote a book provocatively titled *David Hume on Faith*, in which he insists that

> only the assertion of identical propositions is apodeictic and carries absolute certainty . . . any assertion of the existence of a thing in itself, outside my representation, can never be of this kind or carry absolute certainty with it. So an idealist, basing himself on this distinction, can compel me to concede that my conviction about the existence of real things outside me is only a matter of faith. But then, as a realist, I am forced to say that all knowledge derives exclusively from faith, for things must be given to me before I am in a position to enquire about relations.[86]

This passage could have been written by Climacus.[87] (Although the *Postscript*'s attitude to Jacobi is rather ambivalent, I suspect that he was indeed a significant direct influence

[83] Although they had both been translated into German, so it wouldn't have been impossible.

[84] See Thomas Miles, "David Hume: Kierkegaard and Hume on Reason, Faith, and the Ethics of Philosophy" in *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 5, tome 1 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 23–32; and Jyrki Kivelä, *On the Affinities Between Hume and Kierkegaard* (Helsinki: Philosophical Studies From the University of Helsinki, , 2013), ch. 2. On the widespread interest in Reid and Scottish Common Sense philosophy in Germany see Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768–1800: A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

[85] Hume talks about "belief," which, although it can have a specifically religious application, has a more secular feel to it than "faith" (though that can be used in secular contexts too.) *Glaube,* like *Tro*, can be translated either way.

[86] Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, "David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism: a Dialogue," in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Allwill,"* ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994) p. 256.

[87] Note that the sharp distinction between reason and faith made in this passage depends on a "narrow" construal of reason. Jacobi, like Kierkegaard, goes back and forth between broader and narrower senses,

on Kierkegaard's epistemological thinking.[88]) As with Reid, knowledge here is seen as depending on a basic trust in our faculties as reaching out to an independent reality. But although he was familiar with Reid,[89] Jacobi doesn't explicitly distinguish here between Hume's brute-fact acceptance that our faculties will compel us to believe what is against reason (the reality of an external world), and Reid's grateful celebration of them as God-given means of putting us in touch with reality—even if we cannot prove that they do. Kierkegaard does not, as far as I know, explicitly address this difference either. But both Jacobi and Kierkegaard were both realists and theists, and I think it is clear that when they appeal to *Glaube/Tro* they are not referring to a mere (though irresistible) psychological mechanism.[90] In rejecting (without claiming to have disproved) skepticism, they consciously affirm (belief in the second sense) that the psychological mechanisms (which give us belief in the first sense) do genuinely connect us to reality.

But is that affirmation reasonable? Kierkegaard certainly doesn't think it is possible to "prove" the external world or to "refute" skepticism using reason in the narrow (strictly deductive) sense. But nor do I think he would even take our trust in our faculties to be reasonable in a probabilistic sense. With a great many background assumptions in place, we can decide that heliocentrism is overwhelmingly probable; but, if all background assumptions are erased by radical skepticism, I don't know how we could then decide that the likelihood of our being brains in vats, say, was a mere 0.00001% and therefore something we could safely dismiss.[91] I would suggest, though, that Kierkegaard would consider such trust in our faculties to be virtuous, and the opposite state, skeptical mistrust, to be a vice—or an expression of a deeper underlying vice. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard condemns the attitude of mistrust in others' moral character. Such a mistrustful person is

though it has been plausibly argued that his ultimate aim is not to oppose or even limit reason, but to develop a "substantive, less formalistic conception of reason, one that takes into account its organic context and the psychological conditions that anchor its operation." Benjamin Crowe, "F. H. Jacobi on faith, or what it takes to be an irrationalist," *Religious Studies* 45, (2009): p. 320.

[88] See SKS 7, 98–101, 227–228 / CUP 1, 100–104, 250–251.

[89] See George di Giovanni, "Introduction," in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Allwill,"* ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), pp. 28–30.

[90] This means that Jacobi's appeals to Hume—like Hamann's—are both tactical and somewhat ironical.

[91] Of course, we could conclude that, because they arise outside of all frameworks, radical skepticism's doubts become unreal or even meaningless. On such a view, our only conception of reality is what our faculties give us access to, so we can't even raise the possibility that they might fail to connect us to reality. But this is the anti-realist response to skepticism (pioneered by Berkeley); Kierkegaard, as a realist, would not be willing to take this route.

not as such a philosophical skeptic. But, as Quanbeck has argued, the philosophical skeptic can be seen as guilty of a higher-level mistrust, based on an ultimately sinful desire for self-sufficiency, a refusal to accept vulnerability, dependence. Quanbeck argues that various doxastic attitudes can be mapped onto the forms of despair distinguished in *Sickness Unto Death*, and that Pyrrhonian Skepticism can be seen as manifesting the despair of defiance.[92] The Pyrrhonians' active, voluntary, and practically rather than theoretically motivated doubt "reflect[s] a prideful insistence on maintaining one's own autonomy and self-sufficiency by seeking to avoid vulnerability to and obligations towards others."[93]

By contrast, a higher-level philosophical trust in my—our—cognitive faculties (the opposite of the higher-level mistrust of the Skeptics) would open me to a wider reality, and make possible a deeper relation to it than the merely provisional and pragmatic going-along-with-appearances, which the skeptic recommends. I have argued that conscious epistemic belief (belief in the "ordinary sense," but the second form of that) is more a matter of trust than of willpower; and we can now see the trust that underlies our beliefs as a virtue, both moral and intellectual. (It would indeed be the most basic of intellectual virtues; the one that makes all the others possible.) The opposite of mistrust in *Works of Love* was (of course) love. But love trusts. And it is closely connected in Kierkegaard with faith (in "the eminent sense"—religious faith) which is itself a kind of trust. I'm not suggesting that the trust that underlies ordinary-sense belief can be equated to religious faith; Climacus, indeed, as I noted before, takes pains to distinguish them. There is a structural parallel between them: faith/belief in both senses is a "second immediacy." But I think there is more than just that to connect them, and I will try to indicate this briefly by expanding on Quanbeck's point that for Kierkegaard our basic epistemic attitudes to reality are underpinned by evaluative/existential ones. And it is not just skepticism that is expressive of a despairing (=sinful) mindset. To see the world in a Schopenhauerian way, as if "underlying everything were only a wild fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything . . . if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything";[94] or, as in standard atheistic materialism, as a mere conglomeration of material objects interacting mechanistically without value or purpose; or

[92] Quanbeck, "Doubt, Despair, and Doxastic Agency," section 3.3. This connection of doubt with despair does depend on there being a voluntary element in our doxastic attitudes, but doesn't, I think, require (though it obviously fits well with) Quanbeck's specific form of DDV.
[93] Ibid., p. 17.
[94] SKS 4, 112 / FT, 15. This was written before Kierkegaard had read Schopenhauer, but this passage expresses eloquently something very close to Schopenhauer's view of things.

monistically, as in Spinoza's pantheism (or panentheism); these would be non-skeptical, indeed realist views, but they would, for Kierkegaard, still be expressive of despairing attitudes. Such views do not arise, any more than skepticism does, from a purely neutral examination of objective data, but from a schema, expressive of the inquirer's basic evaluative attitude, which determines how the data are interpreted. (I am talking here about ultimate metaphysical schemas, not the more specialized ones used in the particular sciences.) And this is true of all basic worldviews. They are not formed by a mythological faculty of "pure thinking"[95] but by human beings whose relation to the world is fundamentally affective and evaluative, and whose narrow-sense reasonings are themselves exercised in contexts set by broad-sense rationality.

So to point out that a certain metaphysical or epistemological outlook is an articulation of a more basic affective/evaluative stance, is not by itself a debunking move. (Though it can serve to debunk a philosophy which claims, self-deludingly, that it *is* based on "pure thinking.") But it does open up the possibility of an ethical and/or religious critique of those affective/evaluative stances—as with Kierkegaard's response to Greek Skepticism, which had, for him, at least the merit of being open about its ultimately practical, evaluative underpinnings. Kierkegaard's own worldview is, of course, also based on such underpinnings; according to *Sickness Unto Death*, the opposite of despair in all its forms is faith (in the religious sense), and faith, like despair, has its epistemic consequences. For Kierkegaard, the right schema to bring to our (ultimate, metaphysical) interpretation of the physical world is one based on (religious) faith. In his view, the world should be seen as a gift, and our faculties also as gifts which enable us to experience and appreciate the world:

> Surely no one would seriously think that what the lily and the bird rejoice over, and comparable things, are nothing to rejoice over! Therefore, that you came into existence, that you exist . . . that you became a human being; that you can see—bear in mind, that you can see!—that you can hear, that you can smell, that you can taste, that you can feel; that the sun shines for you and for your sake, that when it becomes weary, the moon begins to shine, and the stars are lit; that winter comes, that all nature disguises itself, plays the game of stranger, and in order to delight you; that spring comes, that the birds return in great flocks, and in order to give you joy.[96]

[95] SKS 7, 276–282, 285–286, 299–309 / CUP 1, 304–309, 313–314, 328–338.
[96] "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air" in SKS 11, 43–44 / WA, 39–40.

One can see this as a more passionate and lyrical version of Reid's trust in God as grounding our epistemic self-confidence. And this attitude is the basis for Kierkegaard's ultimate answer to skepticism: to deny the (basic) reliability of our faculties, and to doubt the reality of the world they make available to us, is an act of ingratitude. By contrast, for him, belief in the ordinary sense—both our initial trust in our senses, and our conscious reaffirmation of that trust—does depend on, and is an expression of, belief in God.[97] I don't think Kierkegaard wants to say that one cannot reject skepticism without endorsing this religious attitude. His strictly epistemological analysis leads to the conclusion that skepticism cannot be directly refuted, but that its rejection is not an arbitrary act of will; it is rather expressive of a basic trust in our faculties. For him, that basic trust is bound up with his wider religious outlook, but for others, such a trust may be contextualized differently.

The skeptic will still retort that such trust is not itself reasonable; it is a (rationally) arbitrary attitude, even if not an arbitrary act of conscious willing. Clearly, one cannot answer the radical skeptic by a rational argument to prove the reliability of our reason (as Descartes tried to). But one could, more modestly, start from a basic trust in our faculties, and then try to show that there is a plausible explanation for our having the faculties we do which would also (unlike Hume's explanation) establish that they were in fact (basically) reliable. So our trust in them would be non-arbitrary at least in the sense that it would be grounded integrally in a coherent overall philosophical or religious worldview. One might also try to show that some worldviews should be preferred in that they can give us more confidence in the reliability of our faculties than others, or even that some worldviews can be ruled out by showing that their explanations of our faculties undermine our confidence in their reliability and thus undermine themselves. (Plantinga and Nagel have tried to show that this is the case with standard atheistic naturalism, for instance.[98]) If such a plausible positive account of our faculties can be given (or, indeed,

[97] What Climacus defines as faith in "the eminent sense" (SKS 4, 285–286 / PF, 87–88) is specifically Christian faith—belief in the Incarnation. What underpins his epistemology is a more generic faith in God as Creator. Although, if faith in the specifically Christian sense is needed to overcome despair, and if despair inevitably expresses itself in the epistemic, as well as other, attitudes of fallen humanity, the specifically Christian faith would have an epistemological significance.

[98] See Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 10; Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 4. Plantinga and Nagel disagree about whether the best alternative is theism (Plantinga) or an immanent teleology (Nagel).

several competing ones[99]) that would show reliance on them to be (broad-sense) reasonable, rather than just something we cannot, psychologically, avoid, even though none of this would amount to a knock-down refutation of the skeptic.

So reason does have a part to play, and the trust in our faculties can (if rationally contextualized in this way) be considered a reasonable trust. But in the end, the skeptic can still point out the necessarily circular nature of that reasoning (as I noted, it *starts* from trust in our faculties) and refuse the invitation to trust. Ultimately the objection to such a determined skeptic remains practical—in the sense of ethical. The skeptic can go along with appearances, but without belief for everyday pragmatic purposes. But what good is he or she achieving by such an uncommitted, detached life? Kierkegaard's unfinished narrative *Johannes Climacus* was intended to show that the attempt to doubt everything would lead to a diminished life, while *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or* were intended to indicate the human costs of what one might call practical or ethical skepticism—radical ironism and reflective aestheticism. Kierkegaard's ethical critique of skepticism is based on his trust in our knowledge of God/the Good—a knowledge that is, in his view, innate in us all, though often buried and repressed.[100] The skeptic will, of course, question that trust too, arguing that it is intellectually irresponsible and based on wishful thinking; and Kierkegaard will respond by questioning the skeptic's motives for making these charges. The dispute between them is, in the end, unavoidably an ethical one.

[99] If there are several plausible accounts of how our faculties might be reliable, even if we are not able to choose between them, that might properly increase our confidence that they are in fact reliable (one way or another).

[100] See e.g., Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, pp. 116–125; C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard, Natural Theology, and the Existence of God," in *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith*, ed. Paul Martens and C. Stephen Evans (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. 25–38. This is true up to the level of Religiousness A, at least; what is distinctively Christian comes to us from outside, through revelation. Whether Christianity, on Kierkegaard's view, is against, above, or in accord with reason is far too large a question to address here—but I don't think it is necessary to address it for my current purposes.

# THE POWER OF CONTRADICTION: THE BOTH/ANDS OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD

BY MICHAEL STEINMETZ

*Abstract*: Either/or is a constant refrain throughout Kierkegaard's writings, yet he endorses two specific both/ands: the individual is *both* himself *and* the race and Christ is *both* God *and* man. What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? I argue that Kierkegaard is consistently inconsistent with his preference for either/or throughout his works while endorsing these two both/ands. I start with examining Hegel and his Danish followers, focusing on the contention Kierkegaard has with a Hegelian both/and. Second, I investigate the two both/ands Kierkegaard endorses. Last, I note the nature of contradiction, paradox, and faith, demonstrating that Kierkegaard's both/ands do not go against his penchant for either/or. The power of the contradiction of Kierkegaard's both/ands acts as a mirror, pushing individuals toward authentic faith.

*Keywords*: either/or, both/and, Hegel, paradox, contradiction, faith

## 1. Introduction

In *The Moment*, no. 1, Søren Kierkegaard states, "I, who am called Either/Or, cannot serve anyone with: both-and."[1] "Either/Or" is a consistent theme throughout Kierkegaard's writing project, beginning with *Either/Or* and continuing until the final pages of *The Moment*. Such consistency is no mere coincidence, for Kierkegaard claims a unified vision throughout his life as an author.[2] In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard declares the following:

[1] SKS 13, 141 / M, 101.

[2] As discussed below in more detail, various scholars do not agree with Kierkegaard's claims of a unified vision in his authorship. The purpose of the paper is not to *prove* that Kierkegaard is accurate in his own self-assessment of having a unified vision but rather that one *can* read his authorship that way. For more on reading Kierkegaard "backwards" from PV, see Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, "The Retrospective Understanding of Søren Kierkegaard's Total Production," in *Kierkegaard: Resources and Results*, ed. Alastair McKinnon (Montreal: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), pp. 18–38.

 

> It is Governance that has brought me up, and the upbringing is reflected in the writing process. To that extent, then, what was developed earlier, that all the esthetic writing is a deception, proves to be in one sense not entirely true, since this expression concedes a little too much along the lines of consciousness. Yet it is not entirely untrue, because I have been conscious during the upbringing, and from the beginning.[3]

Kierkegaard avers a grand vision from beginning to end, focusing on "the issue: becoming a Christian."[4] The phrase "either/or" aligns with Kierkegaard's self-professed mission: *either* one becomes a Christian *or* she does not. While Christendom is a birthright, authentic Christianity is a choice; one must take the leap to faith "because the leap is the category of decision."[5]

What does Kierkegaard mean that he cannot serve anyone with both/and? Any both/and? If that were the case, then Kierkegaard uses hyperbole, for we cannot avoid both/ands in our daily lives. Kierkegaard was *both* a brother *and* a son. For lunch, he often chose to have *both* sherry *and* coffee.[6] The object of Kierkegaard's ire is the Hegelian both/and of dialectical mediation. G. W. F. Hegel states in *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "mediation is nothing beyond *self-moving selfsameness*, or is reflection into self, the moment of the 'I' which is for itself pure negativity."[7] "Self-moving selfsameness" is a blurring of qualitative categories between things, as Kierkegaard explains in one of his journals from 1854:

> Either you have a quality in common, or you are of a different quality—but not this ["]also sort-of,["] ["]well, not entirely, but nevertheless also sort-of.["] But in relation to that which is qualitatively different from oneself, what is important is that even if one were, if you will, the nearest approximation to it—what is important is that one have the honesty of ideality so that one is unwilling to listen to any talk of approximations, but insists solely upon qualities, so that one therefore *finds one's joy solely in pointing to that which is a qualitative level higher*.[8]

[3] SKS 16, 56–57 / PV, 77.
[4] SKS 16, 11 / PV, 23.
[5] SKS 7, 97 / CUP1, 99.
[6] Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 290–291.
[7] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 11 (emphasis added).
[8] SKS 26, 106, NB31:140 / KJN 10, 104–105 (emphasis added).

Kierkegaard's sees either/or as a corrective against a fusion of Danish Hegelianism and Christianity, a fusion which turns Christianity into blasphemy.[9]

Yet is Kierkegaard *truly* consistent throughout his writing when endorsing either/or while eschewing a Hegelian both/and? Kierkegaard clearly affirms two both/ands in his works that appear to side with a Hegelian concept of mediation.[10] In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard's Vigilius Haufniensis stresses "that man is *individuum*, and as such simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race."[11] A human is *both* an individual *and* the entire race concurrently. This sounds similar to Hegel's concept of the development of *Geist* in world-history through the process of human reflection. A second both/and derives from Johannes Climacus' reflection on the God-man in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "The thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox."[12] In respect to the god, Climacus says the individual "must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him."[13] In respect to man, in order for humanity to know the god, the god must take on flesh: "The god will appear in the form of a *servant*."[14] Jesus Christ is *both* God *and* man, and humanity needs both aspects in order to take the leap to faith: to *either* believe *or* be offended.[15] Jesus Christ sounds to be a Hegelian *mediation* of God and man into a new third of God-man.

[9] SKS 12, 40–45 / PC, 26–31. Scholars disagree on whether Kierkegaard's criticism is of Hegel himself or of Danish Hegelianism. For the purpose of this paper such discussion is a moot point. Kierkegaard refers to "Hegel" or "Hegelianism" in his writings without differentiation from the Danish theologians he encountered, and I will follow Kierkegaard's lead.

[10] The issue of Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms always rears its head. I take the above statement in PV as my point of departure. As for "Kierkegaard's" view in relation to the voice of a pseudonym, I believe Kierkegaard gives us a clue in PV. By signing his name as editor on both PF and CUP he gives us "a hint, at least for someone who is concerned with or has a sense for such things" (SKS 16, 18 / PV, 31–32). I take this "hint" as Kierkegaard espousing the view while maintaining indirect communication. Regarding CA, we know that Kierkegaard almost signed his name to the work, opting for a pseudonym at the last moment (Pap. V B 42 / CA, 177). For more on reading Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, see Michael Nathan Steinmetz, *The Severed Self: The Doctrine of Sin in the Works of Søren Kierkegaard*, Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series 38 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), pp. 13–22.

[11] SKS 4, 335 / CA, 28.

[12] SKS 7, 198 / CUP1, 217.

[13] SKS 4, 251 / PF, 46.

[14] SKS 4, 238 / PF, 31.

[15] SKS 12, 122 / PC, 115.

What are we to make of Kierkegaard's contradictory position on "either/or" and these two "both/ands"? One solution is to deny an organized unity in Kierkegaard's works. Louis Mackey sees Kierkegaard as an author who beckons his readers to engage in his poetic musing, never having a unified religious purpose:

> Can it be anything but disingenuous when Kierkegaard points to the "essential" ambiguity in his work and then, before the dust has settled, explains it all away? The duplicity is so carefully plotted, the explanation so breathlessly (hysterically?) offered. . . . To the charge that he began as an aesthete and ended, when older (senile?), in religion. . . . Unless, of course, he was lying—to his readers and/or to himself.[16]

Mackey argues Kierkegaard's statements in *The Point of View* "might be the cunningly contrived deceit of a poet who wanted to pass for religious."[17] For Mackey, we encounter no problem; we merely have another opportunity for reflection while reading Kierkegaard.

A second possibility is that while Kierkegaard, in hindsight, believed he had a consistent, overarching purpose, he was in fact developing his thought as each work progressed. Kierkegaard mentions "an irresistible inner need, the only possibility for a depressed person" to publish his thoughts.[18] One working out his faith with fear and trembling is bound to change points of view. The young Kierkegaard of *Either/Or* may see the world differently than the elder Kierkegaard of *The Moment*. Arne Grøn concurs, particularly regarding the both/and of the individual/universal:

> The fact is that a crucial change of meaning [regarding the universal] occurs in the course of Kierkegaard's writings. In *Either/Or* the universal means what commits one ethically. . . . However, in the later writings, Kierkegaard emphasizes a different notion of the universal. Here he writes about the universally human that resists the "differences"; that is to say, the differences that exist between people and that give a society occasion to evaluate who is the most important.[19]

Kierkegaard, the explanation goes, adapts over time. There is not one definitive position concerning Kierkegaard and either/or.

[16] Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard,* Kierkegaard and Postmodernism (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1986), pp. 182–183.
[17] Ibid., p. 183.
[18] SKS 16, 12 / PV, 24.
[19] Arne Grøn, *The Concept of Anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard,* trans. Jeanette B. L. Knox (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), p. 125.

I find both of these answers to our riddle lacking. I take Kierkegaard's statement in *The Point of View* regarding a unified, religious purpose in his writing at face value, but in so doing I create a new either/or. *Either* Kierkegaard is consistent *or* inconsistent. Or, in a bit of irony that would make both Socrates and Søren smile, can both be true? Is Kierkegaard consistently inconsistent? In this paper, I argue these two specific both/ands—the human as *both* an individual *and* the race and Christ as *both* God *and* man—are not inconsistent with Kierkegaard's penchant for either/or. In fact, these two both/ands highlight three common either/or themes in Kierkegaard's writings: the absolute distinction between God and humanity, the necessity of choosing to become a Christian, and that God must reveal himself to humanity in order for humanity to know Him. These both/ands are apparent contradictions, and as Anti-Climacus declares in *Practice in Christianity*, "A contradiction placed squarely in front of a person—if one can get him to look at it—is a mirror."[20] The purpose of a mirror is to cause us, his readers, to reflect upon ourselves, to expose our foibles and presuppositions, to look inward, to become subjective, to take the leap to faith. These two both/ands pertain to the paradox of authentic faith rather than Hegelian mediation and thus are not contradictory to Kierkegaard's insistence on either/or.

To achieve our goals, we start with Kierkegaard's preference for either/or as opposed to both/and. Kierkegaard's first work *Either/Or* is a declarative statement against the Danish Hegelianism present in Copenhagen at the time of his authorship.[21] We will examine Hegel and his Danish followers, explaining in detail what exactly Kierkegaard loathes about the phrase "both/and." Once clarifying Kierkegaard's understanding of either/or and both/and, we investigate the two both/ands in question—the individual as himself and the race in *The Concept of Anxiety* and Jesus Christ as God and man in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Third, we examine the nature and purpose of contradiction, paradox, and faith, showing that Kierkegaard's both/ands do not go against his insistence on either/or.

[20] SKS 12, 131 / PC, 127.

[21] By "first work" I am referring to Kierkegaard's understanding of EO as the start of his writing career (SKS 16, 11 / PV, 23).

## 2. Either/Or vs. Both/And

The discussion of either/or and both/and has its roots in Hegelian philosophy, particularly with the logical principle of the excluded middle. Copi and Cohen define the law of the excluded middle as "*every statement is either true or false*."[22] In the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline* Hegel challenges the rationality behind the excluded middle: "With the positive and the negative, one thinks that one has an absolute difference. Both, however, are in themselves the same and one could, for that reason, name the positive also the negative and, vice versa, the negative the positive."[23] We can use cardinal directions to illustrate the issue. One cannot understand "north" without its opposite of "south." Let us consider the question, "Is the state of Louisiana to the north or to the south?" The answer, according to Hegelian thinking, is *both* to the north *and* to the south. For the one living in Canada, Louisiana is to the south. For the one living in Mexico, Louisiana is to the north. The differences between "north" and "south" are *relative* differences, not *absolute* differences as the law of the excluded middle would have us believe. As Shannon Nason clarifies, "Hegel argues that *all* logical and ontological properties *only* have relative opposites. . . . A relative opposite is classically understood to involve the notion that some property and its opposite are *necessary* for each other to obtain."[24]

The either/or of the excluded middle, Hegel argues, only *seems* intuitive to an existing person in the moment, yet "the aim of philosophy, by contrast, is to ban the indifference and come to know the necessity of things so that the other appears standing opposite to *its* other. . . . Instead of speaking in terms of the principle of the excluded middle . . . one should rather say: everything is opposed."[25] As Hegel explains in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the human existing without philosophically reflecting on her place in the world is *being-in-itself* rather than *being-for-itself*. To move past either/or to both/and, one must mediate the apparent either/or via logic to come to the truth: "It is reflection that makes the True a result, but it is equally reflection that *overcomes the antithesis* between the process of its

[22] Irving M. Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic*, 12th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2005), p. 356 (emphasis original).
[23] G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1: Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Klaus Brinkmann, Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 184.
[24] Shannon Nason, "Opposites, Contradictories, and Mediation in Kierkegaard's Critique of Hegel," *Heythrop Journal* 53, no. 1 (January 2012): p. 26.
[25] Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 185.

becoming and the result."[26] If logical properties only have relative opposites, then the ground of knowledge is different from classical formulations. As Hegel explains, "The *ground* is the unity of identity and difference; the truth of what the difference and the identity have turned out to be—the reflection-in-itself that is just as much reflection-in-another and vice versa. It is *the essence* posited as *totality*."[27] To make sense of our place in the world, we *must* mediate between our own self-consciousness and our experiences with the other. Thus, we are always in a process of becoming, relating to relative opposites as we reflect on our situation: "Concrete existence is the immediate unity of reflection-in-itself and reflection-in-another. It is thus the indeterminate set of concretely existing entities as reflected-in-themselves that are at the same time just as much a shining-in-another."[28] María Binetti clarifies the process: "The movement of self-consciousness shows the reflective structure of the actual, according to which the immediacy of the substance is *mediated by the infinite reflection of thought*, and *resolved in a third relational and reciprocal subject*, both real and ideal, contingent and necessary, existential and rational."[29] Either/or is a negative position that yearns for a positive. Only by positing a third position—a mediation—does one move toward the True. In fact, Hegel classifies either/or as "*dogmatism* because, due to the nature of the finite determinations, it had to assume that of *two opposite assertions* . . . one had to be *true* while the other was *false*."[30] As Jon Stewart summarizes, "Dogmatism sees truth on the one side or the other of individual disjunctive pairs, whereas speculative philosophy *overcomes these immediate contradictions* and sees them as compatible by viewing such pairs from a different, more abstract perspective."[31] Dogmatism—the either/or—is a naive way of living life. The true thinker moves beyond either/or to both/and.

[26] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 12 (emphasis added).
[27] Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 186.
[28] Ibid., p. 190.
[29] María J. Binetti, "Kierkegaard's Relations to Idealism Demystified," in *Kierkegaard in Context: A Festschrift for Jon Stewart*, ed. Lee C. Barrett and Peter Šajda (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2019), p. 100 (emphasis added).
[30] Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 71.
[31] Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 186 (emphasis added).

### 3. Danish Hegelianism

Hegelian philosophy greatly influences the theological discourse of Kierkegaard's epoch. For example, in *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard speaks favorably of Hegel, and he uses Hegelian concepts and terms throughout his writings.[32] While Kierkegaard appreciates some of Hegel's work, he does not uncritically accept Hegel's views, particularly how they were adopted by his contemporary Danish theologians and philosophers. As Stewart comments, "If Kierkegaard looked to Hegel for inspiration, he rarely confined himself to merely parroting him. Instead, he appropriated Hegel's ideas for his own purposes by changing them slightly and placing them in new contexts."[33] In the wake of Hegel's death, his students formed into "Right" Hegelians and "Left" or "Young" Hegelians, and both "schools" existed in Copenhagen during Kierkegaard's life. The Right Hegelians sought to incorporate Hegelian philosophy with orthodox Christianity while Left Hegelians had "a commitment to overturn the conditions of human self-alienation in its myriad forms," including the orthodoxy of state churches and bourgeoisie life.[34] Right Hegelianism is the primary focus of Kierkegaard's opposition to both/and, and as Stewart mentions, "[Kierkegaard] saw in the left-Hegelian criticism of Christianity a useful supplement of his own critique of Christendom."[35]

Kierkegaard is not the first thinker to challenge the Hegelian both/and. The issue was a hot topic in Copenhagen, and the pro-either/or Bishop J. P. Mynster and the pro-both/and H. L. Martensen had an academic back-and-forth in the journal *Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik*.[36] In his article "Rationalism, Supernaturalism" Mynster states the following:

[32] A clear example is the opening of SUD, where Kierkegaard heavily borrows Hegelian language when he declares the self as a "relation that relates itself to itself" (SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13).
[33] Jon Stewart, "Hegel: Kierkegaard's Reading and Use of Hegel's Primary Texts," in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Tome I: Philosophy*, ed. Jon Stewart, vol. 6, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 140.
[34] Paul Lewis, "Young Hegelians," in *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Protevi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 616.
[35] Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard's View of Hegel, His Followers and Critics," in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Jon Stewart, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy 58 (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 62.
[36] For a helpful summary of the conversation, see Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 188–192.

> Whereas rationalism thus thinks that reason can help itself, and naturalism thinks that nature can help itself, *supernaturalism is recognized as man's drive to another and higher help*. What supernaturalism is, lies in the word; we are not satisfied with the miracles with which nature everywhere surrounds us, and we are not satisfied with the miracle of reason in our inner being.[37]

Supernaturalism is not a form of rationalism. Divine revelation must come to aid humanity in its rational investigations: "*Aut/aut*; one can mediate between opposites but not between contradictions."[38] The law of the excluded middle says we must choose. A both/and signifies that supernatural revelation is unnecessary, for mediation, as Hegel says, "is nothing beyond self-moving selfsameness."[39] Martensen fires back with a pro-speculation position, arguing that Jesus Christ is the perfect mediation of divinity and humanity, the middle term between the either/or of man and God. According to Martensen, Hegelian thought

> permits one to view Christianity as the *immanent* determination of God's essence and the divine world order. . . . [The God-man] cannot be understood in the sense of the *principium exclusi medii*, for then it would belong to the standpoint of the Old Testament, which conceives man's relation to God as exclusively that of creation to *the Creator*, while not recognizing the unity of the divine and human nature and the doctrine of the Trinity connected with it, in which the dogma of the creation is only a moment.[40]

Martensen sees both/and as *the* Christian position, for Christ is the both/and par excellence. An excluded middle—an either/or—cannot make sense of the Christian faith.

Kierkegaard indirectly enters the ring with *Either/Or* via pseudonym Victor Eremita. Eremita discovers the writings of the aesthetic A and the ethical Judge William, and Eremita presents the two as opposing worldviews. The Judge has a curt word for the nameless A: "You yourself are a non-entity, an enigmatical figure on whose brow stands Either/Or."[41] Judge William chastises A's *lack* of decision. A summarizes his existence as "continually *aeterno modo*"—meaning he never settles down to make ethical decisions,

[37] Jakob Peter Mynster, "Rationalism, Supernaturalism," trans. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), pp. 577–578 (emphasis added).
[38] Ibid., p. 582.
[39] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 11.
[40] Hans Lassen Martensen, "Rationalism, Supernaturalism and the *Principium Exclusi Medii*," in *Mynster's "Rationalism, Supernaturalism" and the Debate about Mediation*, ed. and trans. Jon Stewart (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2009), pp. 134–135.
[41] SKS 3, 157 / EO2, 159.

living in a constant state of flux.[42] A chases after poetic longing, yet he remains existentially bankrupt, "timorous as a *sheva*, as weak and muted as a *daghesch lene*."[43] Judge William exhorts A to flee despair and make a choice: "I choose the absolute, and what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity."[44] A cannot waffle back and forth ad infinitum, avoiding the either/or of ethical life. His becoming concrete, choosing to become ethical, "is his salvation."[45]

Judge William seems to promote a simple either/or—lining up with Mynster's position—a rejection of a Hegelian concept of mediation. By *choosing* a life of ethical living, A can mature into a proper citizen like the Judge. In fact, the Judge frequently references orthodox Christian doctrine, mentioning that his essays are "notes to Balle's catechism."[46] Julia Watkin comments that Judge William "appears to know more than the average layman about Church teaching," and therefore Christian orthodoxy informs the Judge's ethical criticisms of A.[47] Does this settle the discussion then? Kierkegaard desires people to become Christians, to choose to follow God. Judge William, informed by church teaching, beckons A to an either/or. As Jon Stewart states, "As modern commentators have also noticed, Kierkegaard seems clearly to *weight the argument in favor of Judge Wilhelm's position*."[48] Yet a careful reading belies such an assessment: Kierkegaard offers a word against both A and the Judge. *Either/Or* ends with a sermon from the Pastor, a close associate of Judge William. The main point of the sermon cuts to the core of both characters when the Pastor honestly declares that "in relation to God we are always in the wrong."[49] Judge William is in the wrong just as much as A. While the Judge masquerades as an ethical man, he is just as fluid as A in his worldview. As Robert Perkins explains, "Though [the Judge] is familiar with the Lutheran form of Christianity, Judge William presents here only a phenomenological description of its congealed sentiments, stripped of their salvific content."[50] By placing the Pastor's sermon at the end of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard

[42] SKS 2, 48 / EO1, 39.
[43] SKS 2, 30 / EO1, 22.
[44] SKS 3, 205 / EO2, 214.
[45] SKS 3, 207 / EO2, 216.
[46] SKS 3, 305 / EO2, 323.
[47] Julia Watkin, "Judge William—A Christian?," in *Either/Or, Part II*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, International Kierkegaard Commentary 4 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), p. 120.
[48] Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 194 (emphasis added).
[49] SKS 3, 332 / EO2, 353.
[50] Robert L. Perkins, "Either/Or/Or: Giving the Parson His Due," in *Either/Or, Part II*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, International Kierkegaard Commentary 4 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), p. 217.

declares that *both* Mynster *and* Martensen's positions are incorrect regarding the either/or.[51]

For Kierkegaard, the problem with both/and is twofold. First, it makes unbelief the *relative* opposite of faith rather than the qualitative opposite. Kierkegaard via Anti-Climacus states "that the qualitative difference between God and man is pantheistically abolished" with mediation. He continues, "No teaching on earth has ever really brought God and man so close together as Christianity, nor can any do so, for only God himself can do that, *and any human fabrication remains just a dream, a precarious delusion*."[52] Assigning speculation as the way to truth makes the individual the foundation of God-knowledge rather than a God qualitatively distinct from humanity who desires to communicate. Stewart summarizes Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegelian thinking well: "[Kierkegaard] is critical of the idea that Christianity can be reduced to concepts or can be fully explained or understood conceptually. This misses the inward, non-conceptual nature of Christianity, which often involves paradoxes, contradictions, and absurdities that cannot be grasped or explained by philosophical thought."[53]

A second issue Kierkegaard has with both/and is its never-ending process. As the individual mediates relative opposites into a new position, the process starts anew. If such a process is accurate, then no one will ever arrive at faith, for faith is a new position which beckons for continual development.[54] As Climacus states in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "The great secret of the system (yet this remains *unter uns* just like the secret among the Hegelians) is close to Protagoras' sophism 'Everything is relative,' except that here *everything is relative in the continuous progress*."[55] The both/and leaves no room for a decision, for it relies on the objective deliberations of the individual to sublate the opposites into a new position. Kierkegaard points out that the speculative philosopher views Christian-

[51] Martensen obviously rejects either/or. Mynster sees the either/or as the need for God to give humans the knowledge necessary to formulate doctrine. He states, "In the midst of this world of miracles of manifold divine revelations, we build a second world of miracles, which is distinguishable from the first one" (Mynster, "Rationalism, Supernaturalism," p. 578). The supernatural gives humans the *data*, the *objectivity* of faith, rather than faith being subjectivity.

[52] SKS 11, 229 / SUD, 117 (emphasis added).

[53] Stewart, "Kierkegaard's View of Hegel," p. 56.

[54] Johannes de Silentio consistently pokes fun at Hegelian continual development: "Every speculative monitor who conscientiously signals the important trends in modern philosophy . . . is unwilling to stop with doubting everything but goes further" (SKS 4, 101 / FT, 5).

[55] SKS 7, 40 / CUP1, 33 (emphasis added).

ity as a mere historical event, and "to the historical the greatest certainty is only an *approximation*."[56] Approximations are indefinite, and any new data may force a rebalancing of the entire equation. The both/and leads to a Christendom where no one actually decides to be a Christian: everyone simply "is" one because of cultural progression. As Climacus claims, "Now, the speculative point of view has the good quality of having no presuppositions. It proceeds from nothing, assumes nothing as given. . . . Yet one thing is assumed: Christianity as given. It is assumed that we [in Denmark] are all Christians."[57] If one assumes his faith as a default position, then there is no need to make an either/or; one never embraces the passion of subjectivity. A cultural Christendom propagates.

Kierkegaard's insistence upon either/or is not necessarily about rationalism vs. supernaturalism or a declaration that mediation *never* occurs. It is about a transcendent God, qualitatively distinct from humanity. This God needs no opposite to exist, yet he beckons people to *choose* to enter into the life of faith. As Anti-Climacus puts it in *Practice in Christianity*: "Now the issue is: will you be offended or will you believe. . . . Then forget the understanding; then you say: Whether it is a help or a torment, I want only one thing, I want to belong to Christ, I want to be a Christian."[58] Kierkegaard loathes Christendom and speculative philosophy because it causes people to never truly reflect on their status before the God of Christianity.[59]

### 4. Both/Ands: Individual/Race and God/Man

Having covered Kierkegaard's passion for either/or, we now turn to the first both/and of our investigation. In *The Concept of Anxiety* Haufniensis contemplates the relation of anxiety to hereditary sin, a common, contentious topic in theology. Throughout history orthodox Christianity has condemned Pelagianism, the belief stemming from the thought of the fourth century monk Pelagius who taught that original sin had no bearing on the individual's ability to will righteousness from his unaided faculties. As Jaroslav Pelikan succinctly defines, Pelagianism "[asserts] the possibility of achieving sinless perfection

[56] SKS 7, 30 / CUP1, 23.
[57] SKS 7, 55 / CUP1, 50.
[58] SKS 12, 122 / PC, 115.
[59] Anti-Climacus states that the only life wasted is the one who "never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit . . . never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that 'he,' he himself, his self, exists before God" (SKS 11, 142–143 / SUD, 26–27).

in this life without grace."[60] Rejecting Pelagianism affirms that human nature is marred or deficient because of the actions of Adam. If all humans are sinners because of Adam, then why is any individual condemned before God? She could not do otherwise. Does this not make God unjust toward humans, judging them for something they are powerless to *not* do? How can someone be culpable of sin if she had no ability to avoid it?

Haufniensis wants to affirm the inevitability of sin while concurrently denying sin as a necessary attribute of humanity.[61] To achieve his goal, he states "at every moment the individual is *both* himself *and* the race."[62] Like Adam, each individual *willingly* chooses to sin against God: "Just as Adam lost innocence by guilt, so every man loses it in the same way."[63] Yet, we would be foolish to think that the actions of others do not negatively affect our individual endeavors. Humans do not exist in isolation but rather live within a nexus of communal relationships. Haufniensis states, "The quantitative accumulation left behind by the race now makes itself felt in the individual."[64] How is it "felt" in the individual? The answer is in *anxiety*, which Haufniensis defines as "freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility. . . . Anxiety is *a sympathetic antipathy* and *an antipathetic sympathy*."[65] We, as individuals, encounter possibilities all throughout our day. For example, what will I eat for breakfast? Toast? Eggs? Nothing? What do I do with my options? As Grøn explicates, "What evokes anxiety is that we not only can but *must* take a stance towards our situation, a situation that opens before us as *indeterminate or unsettled*."[66] Anxiety is the unease we experience when we are faced with a choice, "the dizziness of freedom."[67] I will not know which option is best—toast or eggs or nothing—until *after* I choose. Furthermore, the nature of being an existing individual is that the interrelationship between myself and others drastically informs what I choose. Let us say that I was born into poverty, and since I had very little growing up, I always look for an opportunity to save money. When the possibility of breakfast arrives, I choose "nothing" because it is free, and I then convince myself that breakfast is *not* the most important meal of the day.

[60] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 313.
[61] Haufniensis explicitly distances himself from Pelagianism in numerous places. See SKS 4, 335, 341, 343, 363 / CA, 28, 34, 37, 59.
[62] SKS 4, 335 / CA, 28 (emphasis added).
[63] SKS 4, 342 / CA, 35.
[64] SKS 4, 357 / CA, 52.
[65] SKS 4, 348 / CA, 42.
[66] Grøn, *The Concept of Anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 15 (emphasis added).
[67] SKS 4, 365 / CA, 61.

I then go to work hungry, which makes me more irritable. I then snap at a coworker, and now he is presented with a possibility: how to respond to my rudeness. The reverberation of the action continues throughout the race, echoing with every new possibility. While this may be a silly example, it illustrates the interconnectedness of choice, possibility, and the world around us. As Lee Barrett correctly comments, Haufniensis "employs 'anxiety' to show how the coinherence of the individual and the race can be regarded as a psychological phenomenon in everyone. The race is neither an automatic multiplication of the members of an animal species, nor is it a collection of atomistically separated individuals."[68]

The both/and of the individual and the race is a *paradox* not a mediation. In his personal journals, Kierkegaard explains the paradoxical nature of original sin:

> That "Original Sin" Is "Guilt["] is the real paradox. How paradoxical it is can best be seen as follows. It is formed from a composite of *qualitatively unlike categories*. To "inherit" is a category of nature; "guilt" is an ethical category of spirit. The understanding says, How could it ever occur to a person to put them together, to say that something can be inherited that according to its concept cannot possibly be inherited[?] It must be believed. The paradox in the Christian truth is always linked to the fact that it is the truth as it is for God. A superhuman measure and criterion is employed, and in relation to this only one relation is possible, that of faith.[69]

We see that the both/and of individual/race pertains to Christian faith, and it *neither* dissolves the qualitative distinction between God and humanity *nor* delays individuals from accepting Christian faith.

We discover the second both/and—that Christ is both God and man—in various places throughout Kierkegaard's corpus, but we will focus on how Johannes Climacus posits the problem in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Postscript*. Climacus starts with Socratic recollection, noting that if the Socratic teacher is merely a midwife to the student's recollection, then "every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge."[70] Yet, if we believe that the teacher actually brings knowledge to the learner, then "the moment in time must have such decisive significance that for no moment will I be able to forget it, neither in time nor in

[68] Lee Barrett, "Kierkegaard's 'Anxiety' and the Augustinian Doctrine of Original Sin," in *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, International Kierkegaard Commentary 8 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), p. 58.
[69] SKS 23, 103–104, NB16:13 / KJN 7, 103–104 (emphasis added).
[70] SKS 4, 220 / PF, 11.

eternity, because the eternal, previously nonexistent, came into existence in that moment."[71] If we need a teacher to bring us knowledge, then we have a problem when attempting to learn something eternal. How can the finite know the infinite? "Eternal" is a qualitatively different category from "contingent," so, argues Climacus, it is impossible to know the eternal unless the god grants the individual "the condition for understanding the truth."[72]

The individual's inability to know the eternal truth is not the fault of the god, for he "prompts the learner to be reminded that [the learner] is untruth and is that through his own fault."[73] Because the teacher gives the condition to the learner, the teacher becomes savior, deliverer, and reconciler:

> Let us call [the teacher] a *savior*, for he does indeed save the learner from unfreedom, saves him from himself. Let us call him a *deliverer*, for he does indeed deliver the person who had imprisoned himself. . . . And if that teacher gives him the condition and the truth, then he is, of course, a *reconciler* who takes away the wrath that lay over the incurred guilt.[74]

The learner becomes a *follower* through conversion and repentance, "becoming aware of that it was through his own fault, and with this consciousness he takes leave of his former state."[75] As C. Stephen Evans comments, "Kierkegaard recognises that even 'damaged' reason must not be so damaged that it is impossible for it to recognise that truth about its condition."[76] The god as teacher desires "to bring about equality" of reciprocal love.[77] As Hugh Pyper elucidates, "The role of the teacher, then, is to point to the realizability of possibility in the learner's life."[78] The new possibility of knowing the eternal comes with another conundrum: how does the god communicate? If the god appears in his glory to the learner, then the god will not achieve a loving relationship, for being in the presence of greatness will cause the learner to forever realize that he cannot properly love the

[71] SKS 4, 222 / PF, 13.
[72] SKS 4, 223 / PF, 15.
[73] SKS 4, 224 / PF, 15.
[74] SKS 4, 226 / PF, 17.
[75] SKS 4, 227 / PF, 19.
[76] C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 104.
[77] SKS 4, 235 / PF, 28.
[78] Hugh S. Pyper, "The Lesson of Eternity: Christ as Teacher in Kierkegaard and Hegel," in *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, International Kierkegaard Commentary 7 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994), p. 143.

god. For the teacher to reach out so that the learner enters a reciprocal, loving relationship, the god *must* take on the form of a servant.[79] Because of the qualitative difference between humanity and the god, the god must become both God and man.

Becoming a servant is, indeed, what God does in Jesus Christ. Being God means that Christ can communicate divine truth to individuals who "[have] forfeited and [are] forfeiting the condition."[80] Being a servant means that Christ sympathizes with humans, "precisely because the god is not zealous for himself but in love wants to be the equal of the most lowly of the lowly."[81] With Jesus Christ we have *both* God *and* man, "the ultimate *paradox* of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think."[82] For Hegelianism "thought cannot think" this paradox because mediation seeks a solution to relative opposites. For Kierkegaard, the absolute opposites *are* the solution. This both/and—like the individual/race—does not blur qualitative distinctions between God and humanity. While Jesus Christ is both God and man, he is not a third "something" of mediation. The Council of Chalcedon proclaims that Christ "must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, distinctly, inseparably [united], and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person and subsistence." [83] A Hegelian mediation of Christ would be Eutychianism in modern dress. Kierkegaard, via Anti-Climacus, stresses the *synthetic* role of spirit in the dynamics of the self: "a synthesis is a relation between two," *not* a sublation/mediation/*Aufhebung* between the two.[84] While Christ is both God and man, he is not fused into a third of God-man, otherwise Christ would not be *truly* God and *truly* man. For Kierkegaard, the poles of body/soul retain their properties but *relate* properly *via* spirit, not fusing into a third *of* spirit.

[79] SKS 4, 238 / PF, 31.
[80] SKS 4, 224 / PF, 15.
[81] SKS 4, 240 / PF, 34.
[82] SKS 4, 243 / PF, 37 (emphasis added).
[83] Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., "The Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon," in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, trans. Henry R. Percival, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser., vol. 14 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), pp. 264–265.
[84] SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

### 4. Contradiction as a Mirror: Paradox, Offense, and Faith

Upon first examination, the two both/ands discussed are contradictions. Anti-Climacus explains the power of contradiction in *Practice in Christianity*:

> A contradiction placed squarely in front of a person—if one can get him to look at it—is a mirror; as he is forming a judgment, what dwells within him must be disclosed. It is a riddle, but as he is guessing the riddle, what dwells within him is disclosed by the way he guesses. The contradiction confronts him with a choice.[85]

A contradiction, a paradox to the understanding, confronts us with an either/or: *either* we attempt to explain away the enigma *or* we accept the paradox. We can explain away a relative paradox because it "is related to a relative difference between more or less sagacious people."[86] Relative differences *can* be mediated with Hegelian logic. Paradoxes which relate to faith, though, are absolute paradoxes because they concern the qualitative difference between God and humanity. Climacus explains in *Postscript*:

> Christianity has itself proclaimed itself to be the eternal essential truth that has come into existence in time; it has proclaimed itself as *the paradox* and has required the inwardness of faith with regard to what is an offense to the Jews, foolishness to the Greeks—and an absurdity to the understanding. It cannot be expressed more strongly that subjectivity is truth and that objectivity only thrusts away, precisely by virtue of the absurd, and it seems strange that Christianity came into the world in order to be explained.[87]

For Kierkegaard, "the understanding" cannot mediate an absolute paradox. From the Hegelian perspective, all opposites are relative and therefore logic can mediate them. Declaring that an opposite *cannot* be sublated is absurd to the one who buys into the Hegelian system. The contradictions, the both/ands which pertain to faith, arrest the speculative thinker, causing him to look in the mirror and ponder anew. We see such a dynamic in *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes de Silentio is baffled by Abraham's offering of Isaac at Mount Moriah. He states: "Thinking about Abraham is another matter, however; then I am shattered. I am constantly aware of the prodigious paradox that is the content of Abraham's life. . . . I cannot think myself into Abraham."[88] Silentio confesses to lacking

[85] SKS 12, 131 / PC, 127.
[86] SKS 7, 198 / CUP1, 217.
[87] SKS 7, 195 / CUP1, 213.
[88] SKS 4, 128 / FT, 33.

faith, for he attempts to understand faith within the framework of Hegelian thinking.[89] Silentio cannot get past the absurdity of Abraham's faith, for Abraham moves beyond the ethical to the religious—something Hegelian philosophy is impotent to do. The paradox is a mirror—Silentio looks back at himself, realizing that Abraham runs afoul of the system.

The absurdity of the paradox is offensive to Silentio and all people who have not taken the leap to faith. When we see the word "absurd" in philosophical discourse, we tend to define it as "irrational" or "nonsensical," but this is not how Kierkegaard uses the term. In *Postscript* "absurd" is defined as "that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc."[90] Why is a statement of orthodox Christianity labeled "absurd?" From the perspective of the Hegelians of Kierkegaard's time, an either/or—an absolute difference between God and humanity—was "absurd," for as Hegel states, "Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward."[91] For Martensen and his ilk, to discover God, we must look to God's development through world history.[92] Moving beyond world history to a truly supernatural, absolutely distinct God does not fit the speculative program. Rather than using "irrational" as a synonym to "absurd" in Kierkegaard's thought, I follow Jorge Luis Ortiz Rivera's use of "the term 'nonrational' to indicate what is found in a different sphere from the 'rational.'"[93] Kierkegaardian absurdity is nonrational—meaning it does not follow the "scientific" logical system of Hegelianism.

To a culture steeped in a speculative philosophy encroaching on theology, a nonrational view of God was passé. The apparent contradictions found in essential doctrines of the Christian faith act as a mirror. A mirror allows us to see ourselves, both in exposing our

[89] Olivia Blanchette comments that "*Fear and Trembling* is a polemic against philosophy that uses philosophy to overcome philosophy, largely Hegelian philosophy." Olivia Blanchette, "The Silencing of Philosophy," in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, International Kierkegaard Commentary 6 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), p. 30.
[90] SKS 7, 193 / CUP1, 210.
[91] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 6.
[92] Hans Lassen Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics: Compendium of the Doctrines of Christianity*, trans. William Urwick, Clark's Foreign Theological Library 12 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866), pp. 12–14.
[93] Jorge Luis Ortiz Rivera, "Un salto bienaventurado en la eternidad. Exigencias del hombre de fe según el pensamiento de Sören Kierkegaard en *Temor y temblor*," *Intersticios* 14, no. 31 (July 2009): p. 131 (my translation).

faults and in causing us to reflect on who we truly are. Will we accept that God is nonrational, meaning we cannot completely understand him and all his ways through our unaided exercise of logic, or will we be offended? Anti-Climacus states, "The person who abolishes faith abolishes the possibility of offense."[94] There is no offense of a mediated God-man in Hegelian thinking: it is the natural progression of Spirit in the world. If God is the transcendent God of Christianity, then it is highly offensive to the rationalist philosopher that the only way he will ever meet this God is from God's direct revelation of himself rather than the philosopher's own intellectual discovery of the truth. The contradictions of Kierkegaard's both/ands hold up the mirror to the Danish Hegelians: they simply endorse Pelagianism with a new coat of paint. True orthodoxy is abandoning the system and taking the leap to authentic faith.

## 5. Conclusion

Kierkegaard is correct in his later assessment—he is "called Either/Or, [who] cannot serve anyone with: both-and."[95] By examining Kierkegaard's disagreement with Hegelianism, we see why Kierkegaard opposes a Hegelian both/and. The Hegelian both/and understands all properties as relative opposites, erasing any concept of a qualitative difference between God and humanity. The both/and of Hegel makes the choice of faith moot: faith is not something one arrives at from a decisive moment but rather a continual process of speculative reflection.

Kierkegaard's both/ands are categorically different than the Hegelian both/and. In fact, Kierkegaard's both/ands force Hegelians to reflect on the nature of God, rationality, and nonrationality. How one responds to the paradox reveals what she truly believes. Ironically, Hegel states that an either/or is mere dogmatism, championing the both/and of speculation as the preferred way of thinking. Kierkegaard's both/ands—that an individual is *both* himself *and* the race and Jesus Christ is *both* God *and* man—are both dogmatic tenets of orthodox Christianity. Kierkegaard's both/ands *are dogmatism*, for they derive from faith rather than speculation. Some may challenge such a reading of Kierkegaard. By emphasizing an either/or, an absolute, qualitative distinction between God and humanity, is not Kierkegaard now defining a paradox? Would not clarity nullify a paradox? Would not dogmatism simply be another system? Does not Climacus even say something

[94] SKS 12, 146 / PC, 143.
[95] SKS 13, 141 / M, 101.

similar in *Fragments*, where he comments, "If the difference cannot be grasped securely because there is no distinguishing mark, then, as with all such dialectical opposites, so it is with the difference and the likeness—they are identical."[96] My answer, and I believe Kierkegaard's as well, is either/or. Either we come to know God by his revelation to us, or we come to know God through our exercise of reason.[97] The Hegelianism of Martensen creates, as Emil Brunner eloquently states, "a God who does not speak *to* me so much as *out of* me—a God who is nothing other than the depth of my own spirit; therefore a God who is neither personal nor the creator."[98] For Kierkegaard, Hegelianism creates a God who is the established order, an everyday immanence, a reflection of our values, rather than a God who reveals himself specifically to us.

Kierkegaard is consistently inconsistent in his use of either/or and both/and. By challenging the philosophical presuppositions of his day, Kierkegaard took "indirect polemical aim at that enormous illusion, Christendom."[99] Having both/ands which relate to absolute distinctions indirectly assaulted the Hegelianism popular amongst the academic elite in Copenhagen. Kierkegaard's writings give all of us pause, causing us to look into the mirror of contradiction: either believe or be offended.

[96] SKS 4, 250 / PF, 45.
[97] In various places, Kierkegaard states we must be taught by God to know him (SKS 4, 251–252 / PF, 46–47), that one cannot know her sinfulness unless God reveals it (SKS 11, 207–208 / SUD, 95–96), and that there is a qualitative difference between a genius and an apostle (SKS 11, 98–101 / BA, 174–177).
[98] Emil Brunner, *God and Man: Four Essays on the Nature of Personality*, trans. David Cairns (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1936), pp. 53–54.
[99] SKS 16, 11 / PV, 23.

# KIERKEGAARDIAN DESPAIR IN CONTEXT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON *THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH*

BY JOSHUA GRIFFITHS

*Abstract*: In 1849, Søren Kierkegaard published his systematic and dialectical definition of "despair" in his text *The Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaardian despair is defined as a spiritual malady resulting from misrelations between the internal components of our human selves, for which uncompromising faith is the one true salvation. On the surface, this text represents Kierkegaard's authorial turn toward a more polemical and critical theology in his later writing career. With attention to the text's urban and intellectual environment, this article strives to understand Kierkegaardian despair as an idea shaped by its distinct historical moment and urban audience. Scholarship on Kierkegaard is often divided between deeper textual or broader biographical studies; this article attempts to bridge the divide by engaging with textual devices through a historical lens. The modernization of Denmark and its intellectual *coteries* were crucial influences for Kierkegaard's critiques of modern Christendom and its spiritual crisis of despair.

*Keywords*: despair, faith, Copenhagen, consumption, modernity, Christendom

## 1. Introduction: Defining Despair

"The single individual is what I am fighting for, and it is true that the kingdom of Denmark has been and is the most hostile soil for this, for here coterie is everything."[1] Søren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) represents a significant turning point in his writing career, situated between his initial philosophical career of the early 1840s and his later polemical works of the early 1850s.[2] In this text, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus diagnoses humanity with a pervasive spiritual despair, defined as a misrelation between the internal aspects comprising a human self that results in a spiritual discordance *within* and *between* oneself and God. Anti-Climacus takes the perspective aspired to by Kierkegaard throughout his life as an author,

[1] SKS, 40, NB6:55 / KJN 6, 55.
[2] Clare Carlisle, "Publishing *The Sickness unto Death*: A Lesson in Double-Mindedness," in *Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death: A Critical Guide*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Sharon Krishek (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 39.

 

that of an "extraordinary Christian."[3] In the title, Anti-Climacus references the Biblical story of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead, when Christ proclaims that a mortal death does not amount to suffering "the sickness unto death."[4] According to Anti-Climacus,

> to be sick *unto* death is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death. . . . This sickness of the self [is] perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death.[5]

The desire to rid oneself of this burden and escape hopelessness arises as an essential human quality of despair, both its simultaneous defect and advantage.[6] One can attempt to escape despair in many ways, but for Anti-Climacus the difficult path of faith is its only salvation.[7] Notably, Anti-Climacus defines despair as a *universal*, pervasive, and multifarious sickness of the spirit through which one's relation to God is discordant or rejected entirely. It is thus striking, through the text, that Anti-Climacus also associates manifestations of this despair with *particular* personal, social, and ideological trends evident in the modernizing city of Copenhagen.[8]

Charles Taylor characterizes the post-Enlightenment period as an enculturation of the belief in humanity's ability to transform their own stance toward the world.[9] The technological and political optimism of this period in Europe simultaneously brought a "disenchantment, division, [and] fragmentation, in our stance to nature, to our self and meaning, and to each other."[10] The transformative potential of rationalism and its realization of human agency produced an industrial, "instrumental mode of life."[11] Kierkegaard's critical attitude toward nineteenth-century Christendom correlates with many elements of this characterization, and this is especially apparent in his diagnosis of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, which was shaped by societal developments in Denmark during the 1840s. His urban readership was experiencing a profound process of modernization, commercialization, and democratization during this

[3] Hereafter, I will refer to Anti-Climacus as the text's author; Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 596.
[4] The Holy Bible, New International Version, John 11.
[5] SKS 11, 133 / SUDH, 18.
[6] SKS 11, 130 / SUDK, 21.
[7] SKS 11, 135 / SUDK, 27.
[8] Jeffrey Hanson and Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 4.
[9] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 449.
[10] Ibid., pp. 500–501.
[11] Ibid.

tumultuous decade. Many aspects of Kierkegaard's dialectical definition of despair reflect his observations of urbanizing Copenhagen, and contain criticisms aimed at prominent Danish Church figures whom he was personally acquainted with.

In Part One of *The Sickness unto Death,* Anti-Climacus writes that "a *human being* is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis," but a *self* is the relation between these two elements which then relates back to itself, so that "*this relation* is the positive third, and this is the self."[12] The pervasiveness of despair within the world, this text suggests, indicates a collective discordance within humans, and between humans and their faith.[13] These unconscious discordances within the self, manifesting in or cloaked by various earthly or temporal sufferings, exacerbate the inescapability of one's despair.[14] With reference to the Lazarus story, Anti-Climacus argues that Christianity teaches one the courage needed to face despair as the "sickness unto death" and to understand the radical impossibility of salvation without faith, through what Simon Podmore calls the "authentic sense of the immensity of the abyss of sin."[15] The process of understanding one's own despair is a central purpose of Kierkegaard's text and crucial to his critique of Christendom.

Part Two of the text both builds on and departs from the analysis of despair in Part One.[16] The forms of despair analyzed in Part One are reiterated through a greater Christian focus in Part Two, from which Anti-Climacus concludes that faith can only be achieved through a complete freedom from despair.[17] This religious shift is what Alastair Hannay sees as Kierkegaard's own personal response to the despair and "malaise of Danish society."[18] Despair is reframed as sin, and likewise within every form of sin there is an underlying despair. In *The Sickness unto Death,* despair before God takes the shape of three conscious forms of sin: despairing over one's sin, despairing over the forgiveness of sin, and the despair of rejecting Christianity entirely.[19] The acceptance of one's sinfulness before God—that is, one's condition of being in despair—and the overcoming of despair through hope, love, and charity represent the

[12] SKS 11, 129 / SUDK, 19 (emphasis added).
[13] SKS 11, 130 / SUDK, 20.
[14] SKS 11, 124 / SUDK, 14.
[15] SKS 11, 124 / SUDK, 14; Podmore, "Lazarus and the Sickness unto Death: An Allegory of Despair," pp. 488–489, 511–514.
[16] Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard,* ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 342.
[17] Roe Fremstedal, "Sin, Despair, and the Self," in *Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death: A Critical Guide,* ed. Jeffrey Hanson and Sharon Krishek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 121.
[18] Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," p. 344.
[19] Fremstedal, "Sin, Despair, and the Self," p. 118.

"noninstrumental goods essential to coherent selfhood," [20] a movement of the self which seemingly responds to what Charles Taylor characterizes as the despair experienced through the "instrumental" modern life.

This article will analyze Kierkegaard's concept of despair and situate it within mid-nineteenth-century Denmark. The city rapidly transitioned from a medieval, monarchical city to a highly congested, urbanized, and politically shifting capital, producing a rich array of novel social phenomena.[21] In section one, I will argue that this urban backdrop was fundamental to shaping Kierkegaard's observational philosophy, and to the publication of the text, by highlighting examples of urban change, bourgeois life, and commerciality, which structure the text's analysis of despair. In section two, I will focus on the influence of Danish Church figures on the critical theology of *The Sickness unto Death*—figures who inspire representations of Kierkegaard's disapproval of contemporary religion and the spiritlessness of his age. In section three, I will extend this argument to include Kierkegaard's distaste for emerging forms of bourgeois consumption, which created an ambiguous tension between the invisibility of faith and the visibility of class and leisure. Kierkegaard implicitly and explicitly situated the text in relation to an urban audience that it attempted to diagnose and treat. The dialectical and theological qualities of despair can be reconsidered against this backdrop of Kierkegaard's own context and his intended audience.

## 2. The Modern City in *The Sickness unto Death*

Lasse Horne Kjældegaard has suggested that the mid-nineteenth century was an "original age of anxiety" with rapid social, technological, and intellectual changes brought on by the acceleration of industrialization.[22] Challenging the nomenclature of the "Danish Golden Age" (c. 1800–1850), recent secondary scholarship sides with Kierkegaard's own perspective to resist a Romantic and progressivist view of history during this time period.[23] Copenhagen suffered a significant economic depression and military losses following the Napoleonic Wars, during which British vessels bombed the capital's harbor and the Danish lost control of Norway.[24] This period of urban

[20] Ibid., pp. 122–127; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 500.
[21] David Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter: An Edifying and Polemical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 33.
[22] Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, *The Original Age of Anxiety: Essays on Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries* (Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 4–9.
[23] Ibid., p. 12.
[24] John Lippitt and George Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 29.

weakness, despite a cultural flourishing of art throughout the beginning of the century, accentuated the visibility of commercial and political change within Copenhagen. Kierkegaard spends the entirety of *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* developing his interpretation of anxiety, the "dizziness of freedom" arising from a realization of the infinite possibilities of change, and its manifestation in despair. These texts, the former penned and published in 1844, the latter in 1849, were shaped by Kierkegaard's interpretation of urban life in Copenhagen and present a drastically new approach to faith. I will argue that Kierkegaard's critiques of the weakened urban and rural forms of Christianity in Denmark were greatly influenced by this context of societal change.

Part One of *The Sickness unto Death* centers around a distinctly observational and psychological analysis of despair, pretexting Anti-Climacus' theological argument in Part Two. I will therefore argue that Part One requires a particular focus on contextualization to understand Anti-Climacus' description of despair. Organized in an ascending "ladder of despair," the increasing consciousness of the self from physical to psychical faculties results in a progression of despair from unconscious, to conscious, and finally to defiant forms of despair.[25] Anti-Climacus first examines a psychological understanding of despair without the revelation of the individual's relation to God—a first rung on the ladder of despair.[26] For example, one's inner despair can be foremost caused by unconsciously allowing the self to be absorbed in external pleasures, what Anti-Climacus calls "living in immediacy."[27] This may involve the pursuits of physical beauty, wealth, fame, developing one's talents or becoming an "efficient" and instrumentalized individual in the modern economy.[28] This unconscious despair arises from the pursuit of maximum pleasure, minimum pain, and a harmony between the physical and psychical qualities of the human being without any ethical responsibility for one's own choices.[29] The increasing severity of despair toward states of increased consciousness, such as the creation of one's own ethical viewpoint separate from faith in God, which develops into an ultimate "demonic" rejection of God with the belief in oneself as essentially self-created.[30] Anti-Climacus' psychological analysis

[25] Ibid., pp. 111, 117; Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 101–103.
[26] Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 96.
[27] SKS 11, 166 / SUDK, 69.
[28] Gregory R. Beabout, *Freedom and Its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), p. 93.
[29] Ibid., p. 88; Edward F. Mooney, *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 336–337.
[30] SKS 11, 193–195 / SUDK, 103–104.

of despair therefore relates to the dissonances existing between components of the self and their interactions with a rapidly shifting urban and social environment—the interplay between self and city, faith and vocation.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard's works, as *The Sickness unto Death* shows, point toward a need for an internal, invisible, and incredibly difficult movement toward faith, which entails accepting one's sin and resting oneself in God's will.[31] As Roe Fremstedal suggests, Part One presents a problem of the self that we cannot solve on our own, and Part Two moves on to spiritually diagnosing and treating despair in the "theological self," requiring an awareness of being in relation to God.[32] Contrary to the outward trends of the time, Kierkegaard thus directed the individual's attention inward. His notion of despair requires a subjective approach; despite the pervasiveness of the malady in society more generally, only individuals can apprehend and respond to the condition of despair. The ultimate manifestation of the Christian became, to Kierkegaard, the idealized "knight of faith" who lives a simple and non-ascetic life within the modern world, resting their balance of selfhood "transparently in the power that established it."[33]

Kierkegaard earned a public reputation for quite literally *observing* life in Copenhagen and translating these experiences into his nightly writings. Spending the daylight hours wandering the city, often meeting and strolling with companions, Kierkegaard would return to his study and write by candlelight into late hours of the night.[34] Often seen as a social recluse, despite his personable reputation amongst his closest interlocutors, he came to epitomize a certain wandering and perceptive quality of the modern philosophical thinker. Bruce Baugh has situated Kierkegaard's philosophical style in the emerging nineteenth-century occupation of the *flâneur*, a creative wanderer immersed in their environment.[35] The *flâneur* was a modern phenomenon ridiculed by some foreign critics, particularly those critical of Copenhagen which was seen as a congested and backward medieval city with a vanity-obsessed bourgeois culture of aspirational Parisian styles.[36] Kierkegaard's reference to himself as a *flâneur* in his work

[31] Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion: Purity or Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 122–123.
[32] Ibid., pp. 114, 121.
[33] Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 142; SKS 11, 242 / SUDK, 131.
[34] Bruce Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," in *Philosophers' Walks*, ed. Bruce Baugh (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2022), p. 116.
[35] Ibid., pp. 113–114.
[36] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 46.

*The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (composed in 1848 and posthumously published in 1855) is in reference to his public perception in Copenhagen: "a street-corner loafer, an idler, a *flâneur*, a frivolous bird."[37] Kierkegaard's ability to skillfully converse with anyone in the city and penchant for walking with friends arm-in-arm likely provided him with a consistent stream of insight into contemporary culture and significantly broadened his conception of despair.[38] It is possible that the *Corsair* magazine's ridiculing of Kierkegaard's unusual behavior in 1846, after which his disdain for Copenhagen only intensified, struck him so deeply due to his fondness for such wandering.[39] Furthermore, Kierkegaard reflects on the dangers of his popularity as an author, stating that he "found a satisfaction in that life, in that inverted deception . . . that I was in vogue proclaiming a gospel of worldliness."[40] He stresses the importance of resisting the temptations of success, and instead strives "to safeguard an existence in absolute isolation . . . against worldly esteem and against the bestial flattery of the crowd."[41] Kierkegaard's contemplations on the ambiguous *flâneur,* one who both stands out and blends in, may represent his awareness of its unique vantage point for seeing various states of despair around Copenhagen.[42]

Anti-Climacus, the extraordinary Christian, assumes this observational viewpoint to both analyze and critique despair in urban society. Such examples of despair permeate the text, including descriptions of men who lose themselves to worldly pursuits of success, business, marriage, and family life, forgetting their spiritual self and blending into the urban crowd.[43] Anti-Climacus describes every self as "angular," but one that "is to be polished" instead of being "ground down" when becoming part of the crowd—a loss of individualism all too noticeable in the congested markets of Copenhagen.[44] Hindered by its restrictive and medieval foundations, this "Golden Age" saw Copenhagen become the most crowded European city of its time, with an average of two square meters of housing per person.[45] Through observing commercial activity in

[37] SKS 16, 42 / PV, 61.
[38] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 115.
[39] There is evidence that Kierkegaard almost entirely ceased to be seen publicly after the *Corsair*'s mocking articles about him in 1846, which may suggest his writing of *The Sickness unto Death* occurred in a more private context and with a lesser degree of wandering, perhaps while synthesizing observations made earlier; Clare Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), pp. 193–194.
[40] SKS 16, 43 / PV, 62.
[41] SKS 16, 40 / PV, 59.
[42] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 115.
[43] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[44] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[45] Horne Kjældgaard, *The Original Age of Anxiety*, pp. 11–12.

Copenhagen, which he constantly ridiculed as a "market-town," Kierkegaard imbues his critique of public life with a financial diction. The despairing self that strives for success grinds itself down to be "smooth as a rolling stone, as *courant* as a circulating coin," and is unconscious of its own despair, as the loss of "five rixdollars" is more noticeable than the loss of oneself.[46]

Kierkegaard dedicates one lengthy footnote in this section of *The Sickness unto Death* to describing the state of "feminine despair."[47] Anti-Climacus describes feminine despair as lacking the "decisive sense" and "intellectuality" for *defiance*, and instead as arising primarily from a *weakness* of not willing to become oneself.[48] Moreover, despairing due to "lacking primitivity" or the inability to assert oneself results in "emasculation," and Kierkegaard uses the distinctly gendered term "*afmandet*."[49] Anti-Climacus writes, "devotedness is a woman's sole possession . . . but the fact that devotedness is the woman's nature reappears in despair and returns as the mode of despair."[50] Anti-Climacus may be directly speaking to a perception of new bourgeois preoccupations with Parisian fashions, excessive consumption, and social comparison, which are seen to corrupt one's devotional nature and impede on an individual's deeper self. Anti-Climacus thus seems to echo many of the contemporary conservative critiques of the lascivious and tasteless cosmopolitan culture emerging in Copenhagen, viewing women as particularly harmed by these new trends. The Romantic view of Nature as feminine, free, and immediate may have influenced Kierkegaard's discussion of some forms of despair as "feminine," as this section of the text is situated directly before his discussion of the "man of immediacy."[51] Anti-Climacus takes a perspective which links femininity with devotion as an instinctive spirituality which can "see more clearly when blind than does the most sighted reflection."[52] Stressing the importance of rightful devotion as a sense beyond the faculties of sight, Anti-Climacus appears to associate feminine despair with the markedly visual "culture of spectatorship" and new social interests in stereoscopy, the daguerreotype, photography, and theater.[53] The visual and comparative nature of fashion at this time was seen to provoke a constant exchange of glances, directing one's gaze toward worldly materialities

[46] SKS 11, 148 / SUDK, 43; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 63.
[47] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65–66.
[48] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65.
[49] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44; Bruce H. Kirmmse, ""Out with It!": The Modern Breakthrough, Kierkegaard and Denmark," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 31.
[50] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65–66.
[51] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, pp. 57–58.
[52] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65–66.
[53] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 47.

instead of spiritual selfhood.[54] As with many of Kierkegaard's dialectical analyses of despair, his pseudonym Anti-Climacus seems to believe this inner potential for feminine devotion is misdirected toward the temptations of appearance and hedonism.

Further to the despair which emerges from an imbalance toward worldly obsession, Anti-Climacus writes that this may result in ethical narrow-mindedness, rejecting the higher demands of the self by merely becoming a number and living out a repetitive existence of "perpetual monotony (*Einerlei*)."[55] With no dreams or hope, an individual becomes bounded by fatalism and "necessity" itself becomes their God.[56] One forgets themselves amidst a crowd of others and conforms by "busying oneself with all sorts of worldly matters."[57] This swaying of the self into complete finitude and worldly obsession has been interpreted as characteristic of the aesthete figure, which is seen as an "organized self, but not self-organized" and lacking an inherent value from within.[58] Anti-Climacus sees the "heart of happiness" and its ideals of tranquility, security, and satisfaction as the hotbed of despair, as despair becomes more pronounced through its concealment.[59] Such an approach to life may also develop toward being overly prudent and produce a kind of political or spiritual silence.[60] When one never ventures beyond this comfortable silence, Anti-Climacus appears to mirror Kierkegaard's own critiques of the rampant urban press as a vocal minority amidst a voiceless urban crowd. Anti-Climacus asks himself:

> For if I have ventured wrongly, well then, life helps me with chastisement. But if I have not ventured at all, who will help me then? . . . I cravenly win every earthly advantage—and lose myself![61]

A balance must be struck between the forces of infinitude and finitude in the self, as both states of imbalance are forms of despair exacerbated by the intellectual and social life of Denmark in the late 1840s.

Leading on from his analysis of anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*, freedom becomes crucial to the experience of despair as described in *The Sickness unto Death,* as it directly relates to human will.[62] The experience of anxiety and the consciousness of human

[54] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, p. 21.
[55] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[56] SKS 11, 156 / SUDK, 53; John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 108.
[57] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[58] Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," pp. 336–339.
[59] SKS 11, 138–143 / SUDK, 31–35.
[60] SKS 11, 150 / SUDK, 45.
[61] SKS 11, 150–151 / SUDK, 45–46.
[62] SKS 11, 144–146 / SUDK, 38.

freedom is the criterion which distinguishes humans from animals.[63] The two forms of conscious despair, according to Anti-Climacus, occur when the self "wills *not* to be itself" out of *weakness*, or "wills to be itself" out of *defiance*.[64] Anti-Climacus' short parable of a tenant who chooses to live in their home's cellar instead of the first or second floors, symbolizes the preference of many people to only occupy the sensuous and "primitive" faculties of the self.[65] The ludicrous and self-centered nature of despair is revealed, as no outsider could ever suggest the tenant live in the *belle étage*, as it is their own home![66] Kierkegaard's personification of the home as the self, privately tiered and structured for a certain destined style of living, illustrates some direct influence of contemporary urbane living in Copenhagen on his thought.

The bourgeois home became a place of physical self-fashioning as well as personal mystique, and the privatization of upper stories resembles the inward and spiritual contemplations of the self.[67] Hans Christian Andersen's *The Shadow* (1847) is an obscure text warning against the dangers of learnedness and self-image, in which the fellow Danish writer articulates the symbolic bourgeois status granted to houses lining the streets of Copenhagen.[68] Theodor Adorno goes even further, analyzing Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity as reflecting his contemporary value for the "*intérieur*"—the physical and private space of the upper-class home.[69] Drawing from these analyses, *The Sickness unto Death* was undoubtedly conceived in a divided residential space where the interiority of the self was privileged over the outside world, in radical separation from the "others" of society.[70] Just as Kierkegaard was only seen writing in his home by candlelight during the late hours of the night, his philosophical process was similarly enclosed in these hidden upper stories of his four-story home on Rosenborggade.[71] After moving into this apartment in April 1848 while writing his text, Kierkegaard was met with the unfortunate and percolating stench of nearby tanneries,

[63] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 352.
[64] SKS 11, 130 / SUDK, 20; Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 101 (emphasis added).
[65] SKS 11, 158–160 / SUDK, 56–57.
[66] SKS 11, 158 / SUDK, 57.
[67] See also Petra Ten-doesschate Chu, "Fragmentation and Bricolage in Victor Hugo's Hauteville House," *Word & Image (London, 1985)* 37, no. 1 (2021).
[68] Hans Christian Andersen, *Stories and Tales*, trans. H. W. Dulcken (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2003), pp. 378–380.
[69] Henriette Steiner, "On the Unhomely Home: Porous and Permeable Interiors from Kierkegaard to Adorno," *Interiors: Design, Architecture, Culture* 1 (2010): p. 137.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 116; Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, pp. 532–533.

inescapable even in his residential privacy.[72] Joakim Garff suggests that Kierkegaard's focus on the balance of the self-synthesis in *The Sickness unto Death* reflects the importance "*harmony* was to the neoclassical house in Rosenborggade where it was written."[73] The existence of despair in one's self as compared to the disharmony of willingly living in one's cellar challenges some of the common metaphors for despair in medieval and early modern devotional texts. Rather than an image of despair as an individual hopelessly lost at sea, a poisonous snake striking from the weeds, or a spiritual trial to conquer on the path to holiness, Kierkegaard instead chooses an urbanized image for despair as a simple choice in living and comfort.[74] The cellar tenant parable may have been directed toward his fellow bourgeois residents, challenging the perceived security and status of the home. The despair one faces cannot be shielded against with this symbolic structure of security and success, as it lingers in its very foundations like a miserable odor.

### 3. The Danish Peoples' Church in *The Sickness unto Death*

The theological and religious context enmeshing Kierkegaard's authorship in Denmark is crucial to his critical and diagnostic writings on despair. Lutheranism held ideological prominence in urbanized Denmark, which Kierkegaard saw as central to the emergence of Danish Christendom and its compromises with the secular world. Kierkegaard's thought was shaped by many aspects of this religious context, however he came to associate Lutheran theology with a broader weakness and complacency of the Reformed Church toward Luther's original teachings.[75] Luther stressed the importance of the individual's relationship with God as one of love and exceeding all mediation and ethical law, which constitute forms of corrupt human reason—a crucial basis for Kierkegaard's concept of the "teleological suspension of the ethical."[76] Luther

[72] Kierkegaard's expenses on lavish meats and food suggest a considerable amount of time was spent within his home, particularly in the evenings when he preferred to write. Following Garff's conclusion, his greatest expenses being for food and carriage rides suggest a tension between the need to write and desire to escape the unsanitary city with trips to the countryside. See also Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, pp. 534–540.

[73] Ibid., p. 541.

[74] Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 169–171.

[75] Michael Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34, no. 2 (1983): pp. 256–257.

[76] The teleological suspension of the ethical is the movement of faith in Kierkegaard's interpretation of the binding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. All ethical beliefs are suspended in a paradoxical movement of complete faith in God's mercy. See also Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 135; and Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 83.

also saw the productive capacity of despair for religious becoming, as a precursor to hope and a pathway for God to heal the self from the abyss of inevitable struggle.[77] In believing one is damned, depraved, and sinful, one can initiate a progression from complacency or false belief to eventual hope in God's salvation.[78]

In addition to the particular Danish context of Lutheranism, despair in the Christian tradition can be traced back to earlier conceptions of dread and Godly fear: states of emotive hopelessness with the spiritual purpose of redirecting one's morality and faith toward God.[79] The medieval Christian conceptions of despair may have had an important theological effect on Kierkegaard's concern with subjectivity based on early forms of Christian existentialism. Paul Megna stresses the importance of this longer tradition prior to Kierkegaard, and despite Kierkegaard's more explicit reference to contemporary philosophy in *The Sickness unto Death*, the impact of Christian understandings of despair in the *longue durée* should still be considered.[80] Affective states such as dread and melancholy were central to many mystical and ascetic Christian traditions, which sought to achieve authentic faith through negative emotions; to "dread lovingly."[81] The importance of these emotive states in worship were echoed throughout medieval worship, particularly in St. Anselm's affective piety which influenced many devotional texts and public sermons—what Sarah McNamer terms the "emotional scripts" of dread-based worship.[82]

By the nineteenth century, melancholy had gathered a complex mix of connotations and was seen to manifest in temporary spouts of apathy and ill-humor, a residue of hereditary sin even in the faithful.[83] While a "cult of melancholy" appeared in Romantic artistic circles as a response to nineteenth-century optimism in human progress, this emotional state traces back to the Christian notion of "acedia" as a sinful, spir-

[77] Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 252.
[78] Elizabeth Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God: Luther, Kierkegaard, and the Binding of Isaac* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), p. 145.
[79] Paul Megna, "Better Living through Dread: Medieval Ascetics, Modern Philosophers, and the Long History of Existential Anxiety," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 130, no. 5 (2015): pp. 1286, 1294.
[80] Ibid., p. 1285. See also Paul Megna, "Dreadful Devotion," in *The Routledge History of Emotions in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
[81] Ibid., p. 1288.
[82] Ibid., pp. 1286–1288.
[83] Mooney, *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, pp. 149–150.

itual sloth, and was often the target of the emotive Moravian sermons that Kierkegaard attended with his father.[84] Augustine considers the "chaste fear" of being severed from God's love as having a highly productive quality for faith, such as the power of dread in the trial of Abraham.[85] Augustine greatly inspired Luther's assertion of the corruption of human reason and inescapability of sin in the Augsburg Confession (1530), based on which Kierkegaard acknowledged anxiety as the precondition to this inherited sin, and despair as its final result.[86] Christian figures such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe engaged in forms of emotive worship through a fear and dread of God, which was a method of ridding oneself of doubt and gaining an authentic hope for salvation.[87] While Kierkegaard was writing for the "common man" and against the Danish bourgeois elite, his vision of faithfulness was not an ascetic world-denial through this medieval form of dreadful devotion but diverged as an overcoming of one's despair through an inner relationship of faith.[88] Despite some emotive qualities of despair surfacing in the text, *The Sickness unto Death* largely distances itself from these older Christian conceptions of despair as an external threat beyond the human will or as a form of devotion.[89] The emotional concepts of dread and melancholy can be viewed in adjacency to despair through their shared tradition in Christian upbuilding literature for the individual. However, Kierkegaardian despair has a restrictively dialectical basis and, for the most part, resists emotive interpretation by focusing on the depth of despair within selfhood and beyond feeling.

Many of Kierkegaard's contemporary theologians, including the Grundtvigians, Jakob Peter Mynster, and Johann Ludvig Heiberg, followed the German Protestant ethic and shaped the Danish Church around the values of education, citizenship, family, public order, and religious personalism.[90] Kierkegaard saw these tamer Lutheran values as domesticating the intensity of *imitatio Christi* and the ideals of Lutheran orthodoxy, and *The Sickness unto Death* instead seeks to reignite uncompromising Biblical faith within the modern subject.[91] While Luther saw despair as in constant flux with

[84] Alastair Hannay, "Despair as Defiance: Kierkegaard's Definitions in 'The Sickness unto Death,'" *Open Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2018): p. 41; Megna, "Better Living through Dread," p. 1295; and Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 77.
[85] Megna, "Better Living through Dread," pp. 1288–1289.
[86] Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, pp. 80, 83.
[87] Megna, "Better Living through Dread," pp. 1291–1293.
[88] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," pp. 265–266; Christopher B. Barnett, *From Despair to Faith: The Spirituality of Soren Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 35.
[89] Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, pp. 170–71.
[90] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," pp. 249–252.
[91] Ibid., pp. 255–257.

states of hope, Anti-Climacus interprets despair as the misrelations within the self *before* faith can be achieved.[92] In both cases, sin is the pervasive and constant force affecting humanity; however, Kierkegaard sees despair as universal, largely unconscious, and situated before faith, not in tandem with it.[93] To Kierkegaard, the God-relationship is essential to conceiving one's morality, and freeing one from despair.[94] Luther's analysis of the binding of Isaac differs from Kierkegaard's, as Luther situates Abraham's despair in his hesitancy of faith during a spiritual trial and considers the story to be evidence for the hopelessness of humanity when relying on rationality without faith.[95] Luther thus considers despair as a periodic spiritual lack of hope and presence of the devil which has the utility of redirecting one toward faith—a framework that only partially influences Kierkegaard's deeper and more dialectical conception of despair.[96]

Kierkegaardian despair departs from this Lutheran theology and adapts to several elements of nineteenth-century idealism and dialectical philosophy. Luther's passive state of sinfulness only forms the premise of Kierkegaard's definition of sin. In *The Sickness unto Death,* Anti-Climacus references the Augsburg Confession in which "a revelation from God is required in order to enlighten the human being about what sin is and how deeply it is lodged," but follows this definition with a suggestion that it "still needs to be completed" and that sin is "before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself."[97] Anti-Climacus is challenging the Socratic notion of sin as ignorance that requires a revelation of sin's deepness within the self. This ignores the need to overcome an *unwillingness* (rather than ignorance) of the self in order to understand one's sinfulness.[98] The importance of will is where Anti-Climacus departs from these earlier concepts of sin. Kierkegaard places faith as a much higher qualifier of the self by binarily opposing it to sin, most likely perceiving a greater threat in modernity's disregard for the essential intensity of Christian ideals. The definition of sin as despair extends beyond the passive hereditary sin of Luther into an active form of sin, continuously manifesting through one's becoming and as a perpetual and self-consuming sickness.[99]

[92] Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God*, p. 148.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 104.
[95] Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God*, pp. 84–89.
[96] Ibid., pp. 145–146.
[97] SKS 11, 208 / SUDK, 125, 182; Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion*, p. 113.
[98] SKS 11, 207–208 / SUDK, 124–125.
[99] SKS 11, 134 / SUDK, 26.

Kierkegaard's relationship with his contemporary theologians in Copenhagen is one of deep resistance and critique, despite their many personal influences on his life. His perspectives on contemporary society and religion are formulated as textual oppositions to those of various appointed Church officials in Denmark. Merold Westphal characterizes Kierkegaard's philosophical approach as one of "ideology critique," in that "his quarrel with prevailing theory has its *telos* in his quarrel with prevailing practice."[100] In the context of the ongoing establishment of a constitutional parliament in Denmark, Kierkegaard witnessed growing protest and unrest in 1848 outside the city hall on Nytorv, the street on which he resided when writing *The Sickness unto Death*.[101] A new Danish nationalism emanating from this urban crowd evoked particular concern in him—a concern over the loss of the individual and the diminishing influence of the Danish Peoples' Church.[102] Kierkegaard's application of despair to these contextual events is clear—the loss of one's individual, inner faith to a barbarous mass leaves one spiritually astray while intellectual *coteries* and secular governance displace religious authority. In his private journals he writes, "the 'masses' are, by definition, always misled—for if they were led in the right way, there would be no masses; when they are correctly guided, eternally understood, there are no masses."[103] The perpetual "dying" of individualistic faith and selfhood, which is the cause for widespread inner despair, is a central argument of *The Sickness unto Death*. Contemporary theologians in Denmark became central figures for Kierkegaard's critiques of Christendom, as he saw them as pandering to this crowd and mistakenly reconciling religion with nationalism, Romanticism, and secular ideologies.

N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) was a key theologian of the early nineteenth century in Denmark, having been raised in a Pietistic-Lutheran home and deeply influenced by Schelling and other Romantics in his attempts to revive a sense of nationalism for Denmark.[104] Grundtvig then became an influential figure for the Danish Pietist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, emerging predominantly from its longer history in Moravia and the Western Jutland countryside.[105] This spiritualist movement found prominence in the freedom of faith driven by a common "folk spirit," and placed devotion and awakening above dogma and orthodoxy.[106] Drawing poetic connections

[100] Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 120.
[101] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 59–60.
[102] SKS 20, 339–340, NB4:114 / KJN 4, 340–341.
[103] SKS 20, 330, NB4:87 / KJN 4, 331.
[104] Martin Schwarz Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 206.
[105] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 76–77.
[106] Ibid., p. 76; Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, p. 214.

between Danish-Nordic mythology and Christian scripture, Grundtvig's idealistic theology of a free church for a free congregation was difficult to reconcile with Lutheran *sola scriptura*, which contradicted the desire to emulate a free church as it would have existed before the written New Testament.[107] Grundtvig came to occupy a polarizing position within the reforming Danish Peoples' Church and many conservative theologians opposed his Pietistic views of individual subjective awakening.[108] In an 1810 sermon, Grundtvig criticized priestly chatter as an overuse of human communication for divine teaching, echoing Kierkegaard's dislike of the same urban and rural priestly classes who preached from safety and luxury.[109] Despite the similarities between Grundtvig's and Kierkegaard's subjective religiosity and between their mixed Lutheran and Pietistic upbringings, Kierkegaard critiqued Grundtvig in a similar fashion to Hegel; too much importance was placed on historicizing Christianity to find a universal understanding of faith through human nature and civilizational progress.[110] Within the context of the democratizing Peoples' Church, Kierkegaard criticized both the extreme Grundtvigian and elite-priestly wings. He saw the popular lay movement of spiritual renewal as destabilizing Church authority, while the existing priestly authority were failing to live by scriptural teachings and secluded themselves in private exorbitance.[111] Freedom of religion was constitutionally ensured in June 1849, resulting in the Danish Peoples' Church becoming established by law and civic rights being ensured to Danes regardless of religious affiliation.[112] Kierkegaard's fear of a spiritless and secular age was becoming a reality.

The production and publishing of *The Sickness unto Death* occurred at the end of a crucial decade for the restructuring of the Danish government and the establishment of the Danish Peoples' Church. The uncertain future of these radical revolts against absolutism in Denmark is reflected in Anti-Climacus' critical tone within this text, especially through his critiques of life in Copenhagen and its intelligentsia, the nexus of which was the state of despair. The 1848 democratic revolutions occurring across Europe demanded universal male suffrage and the creation of a parliamentary form of governance.[113] Many of Kierkegaard's contemporaries in the Danish Church were also deeply critical of this secularizing pressure. Jakob Peter Mynster (1775–1854) mirrored many of Kierkegaard's critiques of the democratic revolt in Denmark, along with

[107] Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, pp. 207–211.
[108] Ibid., p. 214.
[109] Ibid., p. 206.
[110] Ibid., p. 275; Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 18, 27–30.
[111] Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, pp. 163, 206; Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, pp. 621–622.
[112] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 210.
[113] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 30–31.

the speculative and totalizing philosophy of Hegel which ran counter to both of their theologies of religious personalism.[114] Mynster had a short-lived, but positive, influence on Kierkegaard's theology of despair, as Kierkegaard partly understood Mynster's view of Christianity as a place for relief from the world before his critical turn against religious complacency in the late-1840s.[115] For a time, Kierkegaard agreed that he found solace praying under the statue of Christ in the Church of Our Lady; however, he developed a stark sense of opposition between the Church and the world after his critique of comfort-seeking and the delusions of despair.[116] Despite Mynster's monarchical and social conservatism, Kierkegaard severed his allegiance with his father's priest, attacking his expensive dining habits and his association with the rest of the elegantly urban theologians of a weakened faith.[117] Mynster's dismissal of Kierkegaard's request to become a pastor in June 1849 brewed a terrible disappointment in him, and may have been due to Kierkegaard's public ridicule in *Corsair*—three days later, Kierkegaard sent away the manuscript of *The Sickness unto Death* for publication and committed to his pathway of isolated, critical authorship.[118] Bruce Kirmmse argues that Kierkegaard may be making implicit reference to Mynster in a section of the text where he describes an individual who believes they understand Christ's suffering while seeking pleasantry and thanking God for their happiness.[119] The extreme difficulty of living in faith was a belief which fundamentally shaped Kierkegaard's highly critical viewpoint of weak, philosophized forms of faith.

Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–1884), a popular young pastor succeeding Mynster, brought a more liberal-Hegelian theology which prioritized both experience and individualism.[120] However, he appeared to Kierkegaard as merely sanctifying worldly pursuits and bourgeois culture.[121] In a similar fashion to Kierkegaard's critiques of the democratic revolution and its threat to Church governance, Martensen championed an "eclectic theology" of plurality, drawing from idealism, Romanticism, orthodoxy, and conservatism.[122] His ties with Hegelian systematization and attempts at rational-

[114] Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 619; Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," p. 252.
[115] Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 619.
[116] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," pp. 128–132; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 81–84.
[117] Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 622.
[118] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 211.
[119] SKS 11, 204 / SUDK, 119, 180.
[120] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," p. 253.
[121] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 17–18.
[122] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," p. 253.

izing Christianity fiercely stoked Kierkegaard's opposition. Anti-Climacus sees Christendom's great suffering as the increasingly popular doctrine of the "God-Man," a growing sense of indifference between humanity and God.[123] Under the influence of Martensen's speculative philosophy, the separation of humans from God has been "abolished, first in dignified, speculative fashion, then by the mob in the streets and alleys," and Martensen has spread a "doctrine of the superiority of the generation over the individual."[124] This doctrine is disastrous not only for the Christian individual, but also dangerously enticing for the belief that one can escape their own despair through secular or collective pursuits. It is amidst his rejection of uniformity with his theological peers that Kierkegaard defines his own all-encompassing critique of the pervasive despair in the secular world and established Church, and the dangers of harmonizing the paradoxical, radical, and deeply emotive Christian life with the allures of modern consumption.

## 4. Despair and Consumption

The increasingly public culture of theatergoing, artistic consumption, pedestrianism, and the loosening of limitations on public assembly and press during this decade of democratic reform greatly influenced Kierkegaard's criticisms of aesthetic living and the urban crowd. The emergence of a new visual culture shaped by early photographic technology and new habits of leisurely consumption had particular resonances for Kierkegaard's view of human despair.[125] In his eyes, new forms of consumerism represented a loss of spiritual vigor, including the belief that one can shape themselves through their appearance and visuality, to become oneself *through* others.[126] While mirroring a common conservative religious stance—to preserve the influence and tradition of the Church—Kierkegaard rejected reconciliatory approaches aimed at harmonizing secular and religious life. Copenhagen's modernization was irredeemable to Anti-Climacus, as it exacerbated one's state of spiritual despair through a loss of the "eternal" in man to pleasurable worldly pursuits and the aesthetic life.[127] This culture of consumption grew through the emergence of "Golden Age" theater and the adoption of Parisian styles in street design.[128] Østergade was a notoriously thin, cramped

[123] SKS 11, 229 / SUDK, 153.
[124] SKS 11, 229 / SUDK, 153–154, 184.
[125] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 48.
[126] Ibid., p. 47.
[127] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 500–501; Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 128; Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, pp. 19–20.
[128] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," pp. 113–114.

yet luxurious shopping street and, as Kierkegaard saw it, epitomized the buzzing distraction of the worldly.[129] Kierkegaard consistently calls Copenhagen a "demoralized market town" in his private journals, which came to encapsulate his criticism of its print media, bourgeois-philistine class, and spiritless preachers.[130] Coming under repeated public ridicule for his clothing style and posture in the *Corsair* magazine in 1846, he disdained the threatening power of the Danish *coteries* toward a public individual.[131] While beginning as a predominantly republican publication, *Corsair* focused on the satirical mocking of Danish cultural figures in the 1840s, as its sales became primarily driven by its entertainment value.[132] Avidly writing about this disastrous *Corsair* affair in his journals, Kierkegaard loathed the silence of Danish intellectuals to the rampant press and found his only relief in writing.[133] The scandal had a serious effect on Kierkegaard's view of Denmark and its "degeneracy," influencing both his cultural and social critiques of the amorphous crowd and the despair caused by their obsession with appearance, chatter, and superficiality.[134]

The Tivoli Gardens are emblematic of a new cosmopolitanism sprouting from a medieval Copenhagen, and the popular attention toward this attraction fed into Kierkegaard's conception of despair. The gardens opened in 1843 and boasted tobacconists, patisseries, a daguerreotype studio, picture galleries, and from a religious or political viewpoint, a thoroughly distracted public.[135] The publication *Tivoli-Avis* (1844–1846) educated visitors on how to enjoy the attractions, such as how to properly listen to music, mirroring the style of an instructional text expected for religious or scholarly matters.[136] While Tivoli may be considered an early prototype for the modern marketplace, as free trade laws and night lamps were employed in the walled gardens a decade before their widespread use in Copenhagen, some observers saw the potential drawbacks of this urban project.[137] Johann Ludvig Heiberg commented on the sense of awkwardness expressed by the emerging urban crowd in Copenhagen, as urbane living required a sense of self-discipline and adaptive behavior

[129] Ibid.; Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, pp. 9–10, 14.
[130] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 197; SKS, 15 / KJN 6, 11
[131] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 193–194.
[132] Bertel Nygaard, "Visual Republicanism in Copenhagen: Corsaren During the Early 1840s" (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2022), p. 56.
[133] SKS 21, 350 / KJN 10, 361; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 197.
[134] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 50.
[135] Martin Zerlang, "Orientalism and Modernity: Tivoli in Copenhagen," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 20, no. 1 (1997): p. 88.
[136] Zerlang, "Orientalism and Modernity," p. 86.
[137] Ibid., pp. 88–89.

which the insular Copenhagener struggled with during this transitional period.[138] As Heiberg observed in an 1828 essay, the new coffee houses and streets were noisy, cramped, and social classes were disharmonious.[139] British visitors were impressed by Tivoli, but still critiqued its latency compared to other cities around Europe.[140] This represents a common foreign view of the "backwards Dane" and was possibly fueled by residual animosity after the British naval attack on Copenhagen during the Napoleonic Wars.[141] Swedish writer Frederika Bremer was reminded of the Athenians when visiting Copenhagen with its "treasures and artists, its learned men and their lectures . . . it may well be called the Athens of the North."[142] She also warned the Copenhagener from becoming too headstrong and losing their "good-nature," while also characterizing Kierkegaard's contemporary "philosophy of the heart" as something which must only be popular amongst women—a critique presumably not appreciated by Kierkegaard, based on his negative stance toward feminine despair.[143]

Amongst a panoply of perspectives on the changing city, Kierkegaard considered the inherent harm many of these new intellectual, democratic, and consumerist trends posed to its religious core. An individual can become "too sensate to have the courage to dare be, and endure being, spirit," becoming resolved in their happiness and its "illusory security and peace."[144] Tivoli became a popular and secluded locale for a mixture of social groups to explore foreign forms of conspicuous consumption.[145] Critical of the "rabble-barbarism" of urban entertainment throughout his works, Kierkegaard envisioned his pure "knight of faith" in *Fear and Trembling* as a common city-dweller who could even come to enjoy a trip to the boisterous Deer Park, invincible to worldly excess through their unwavering inner faith.[146] This paradoxical world-affirmation of pure faith complicates Kierkegaard's view of urban life. However, it may still represent

[138] Ibid., pp. 84–85.
[139] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, pp. 8–10.
[140] Ibid., p. 11.
[141] Ibid., p. 8.
[142] Ibid., p. 10; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 213.
[143] Clare Carlisle situates the moment when Kierkegaard reads Bremer's magazine piece in August 1849, which would be a few months after he sent his manuscript of *SUD* to his printer in June 1849. However, Kierkegaard's negative attitude toward "feminine despair" and attention to fashion was an ongoing critique of his, evident in his article in *Copenhagen's Flying Post* during the 1830s, which criticized female emancipation, through to the 1850s when he criticized wives and mothers for an "aggressive egotism." See also Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 590; SKS 11, 164–166 / SUDK, 65–66; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 115, 123, 237.
[144] SKS 11, 142–143, 158 / SUDK, 34–35, 56.
[145] Zerlang, "Orientalism and Modernity," p. 86.
[146] John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 50; Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 53.

an increase in his critical attitude toward modernization in the late 1840s. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus sees a public lavishing in shallow interests without the priority of each person's inner faith. The urban retreat of Tivoli was a dangerous temptation for the despairing self and supplanted one's faith with the bourgeois-philistinism of Copenhagen elite culture.

A culture of immediacy and worldly consumption was seen to restrict deep religious contemplation and exacerbate one's despair through an imbalance toward the finite over the infinite, and the world over spirit. In *The Sickness unto Death*, an imbalance of the temporal aspect over the eternal aspect of the self is one cause for despair, and Anti-Climacus describes the "eternal" as the timeless and final qualifier of one's selfhood before God.[147] Despair, as he suggests, requires a paradoxical acknowledgement of both temporality and eternality by finding a balance of faith in the "the moment" (*Øieblikket*)—as David Lappano describes, "temporality, then, is the place that commands our attention and our activity, but it is the eternal that qualifies such attention and activity."[148] Like the image of a rower, pushing forward blindly each day with their back to eternity, Anti-Climacus finds no compromise in escaping from or denying the world, but instead sees the necessity of faith *within* the world.[149] This idea is similarly developed through Kierkegaard's concept of the "knight of faith," who can pass as a humble man living in a crowded city, resting his faith entirely in God. This is a paradoxical, invisible, and inner "movement" beyond externally visible signs in existence. For Kierkegaard, living a purely external life also results in a deepening of despair, as one believes one's entire self can be based on the dialectical balance of body and psyche, and a mediation of the finite and infinite, through one's own invented ethical framework. In summary, all forms of despair ultimately prevent "self-actualization" of complete faith, and Kierkegaard sees Copenhagen's physical and intellectual modernization as entirely ignorant of the necessary rigor of religious life.[150] Kierkegaard's exemplary "knight of faith" represents the primacy of faith over the world, but still a faithful existence *within* the world. Anti-Climacus attempts to explain this paradoxical idea in *The Sickness unto Death* and, in doing so, provide a manual for Christian upbuilding and a guide for one to live faithfully in urban modernity.[151]

[147] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 109, 111.
[148] Ibid., pp. 110–111, 124.
[149] Ibid., pp. 110, 123.
[150] Ibid., p. 120.
[151] Michael Theunissen and Helmut Illbruck, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 113.

## 5. Conclusion

Division is a crucial theme in *The Sickness unto Death* and lies at the core of Kierkegaardian despair. A divided self, split between balanced physical and psychical faculties, is in the constant tension of becoming through Kierkegaard's vision of embracing paradoxical faith in an inconceivable God. *Fortvivelse* and *Verzweiflung*, Danish and German translations of despair respectively, have shared etymological connotations of "double mindedness" and division.[152] Kierkegaard's world was divided between traditional Christian faith, in its uncompromising striving for Biblicism, and the modern influences of historical, democratic, and rationalist philosophies championing humanity's self-produced ethics and reason. These urban changes of the 1840s occurred within a city still outgrowing its medieval heritage. Following a distinctly medieval tradition, the city gates were still being locked every night and the keys delivered to the monarch himself.[153] This static paternalism was rapidly eclipsed by the pressures of a commercial and constitutional democracy. As the first railways opened in Denmark, attention flooded to new Parisian fashions, Østergade and Tivoli teemed with new bourgeois attractions, and city newspapers began to ridicule the town's peculiar thinkers. Kierkegaard viewed these popular trends, along with the populist preachers of the Danish Church who appealed to the same consumptive habits, as deeply harmful to the faith of the Danish people. He found the only salvation for widespread despair in a changing world to be the act of resting one's own self in the *changelessness* of God.[154]

David Lappano writes that "much of *The Sickness unto Death* is a response to what Kierkegaard sees in German Idealism as a philosophy of *self-production in immanence*."[155] I would argue that this notion of self-production is also a common ideological current that Kierkegaard sees throughout the modernization of Copenhagen and political reforms in Denmark: an ability to shape and produce oneself through social identity and secular life. The political and social movements of the mid-nineteenth century were seen to be deeply harmful to one's selfhood and one's faith, causing various forms of despair within every individual and severing the influence of the Church. Whether conscious or unconscious, stemming from weakness or defiance, hidden or explicit, all forms of despair come from an inability of the individual to face the question of conscience, ethics, and faith. Lappano writes, "No public, not even public reason or

[152] Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God*, p. 248; Barnett, *From Despair to Faith*, p. 125.
[153] George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life: Between Romanticism and Modernism: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 8.
[154] Carlisle, "Publishing The Sickness unto Death," p. 41.
[155] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, p. 126 (emphasis added).

law, no class, no national identity, and no race can ask or answer this question on one's behalf," encapsulating the preoccupation of the modern subject with new forms of identity, rationalist faith, and cultural belonging as impinging on true faith and cause for Kierkegaardian despair.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus offers a deconstructive approach to describing forms of despair in increasing levels of consciousness and intensity.[156] Examples of despair in the text include various misrelations of the finitizing and infinitizing forces within the self: abstract imbalances in oneself between what is necessary and possible, what is temporal and eternal.[157] A coherent selfhood is a *synthesis*, which Michael Theunissen describes: "The synthesis is realized as the unity of these movements . . . 'getting away from' and 'coming back to' itself."[158] This structural view of the self is concluded with Anti-Climacus' requirement of faith, where "the self rests transparently in the power that established it."[159] Kierkegaard was shaped by the various intellectual movements occurring before and around his authorship. He interacted with these ideas by partially appropriating and extending them, while also criticizing and challenging their incompleteness. Luther's understanding of despair and hope, including the need for revelation and an individual relationship with God to develop hope and reach salvation, echoes throughout Kierkegaard's text. His upbringing in Luther's theology predisposed Kierkegaard to critique the ongoing accommodations of the Church around him and develop a more extreme notion of faith.[160] *The Sickness unto Death* stands as Kierkegaard's outcry to Christendom regarding the distractions, accommodations, and delusions drying Christianity of its spirit and leaving the self in unknowing and hopeless despair. Studying Kierkegaard's concept of despair requires a Janus-faced attention toward the modernizing world he was speaking to and the past voices he was drawing from. In adopting such an approach, the tightness of his dialectical philosophy becomes more spacious and vivid, reflecting a tiled mosaic of his personal and historical context.

[156] SKS 11, 115 / SUDK, 1.
[157] Theunissen and Illbruck, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, p. 108.
[158] Ibid.
[159] SKS 11, 242 / SUDK, 131.
[160] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," pp. 256–257.

# EXISTENTIAL COMMITMENTS IN KIERKEGAARD AND KNAUSGAARD: ON DEATH, FAITH, AND WRITING[1]

BY MICHAEL STRAWSER

*Abstract*: In this contribution I reflect on the works of the Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard and the contemporary Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard to reveal the important existential commitments to questions of faith and death in their writing. The dichotomous view that Knausgaard champions secular faith in opposition to Kierkegaard's championing of religious faith is undermined to show a greater complexity that emerges particularly through consideration of Knausgaard's reading of Kierkegaard in his novel *The Morning Star*. The thought of death palpably permeates the writing of both Kierkegaard and Knausgaard, and questioning the meaning of life and death leads to further questions about the self and writing that will always be greater than the answers one attempts to give in response.

*Keywords*: existentialism, religious and secular faith, death, literature, self

## 1. Introduction

Welcome! Thank you all very much for being here. Thank you, Brian Söderquist, for your kind introduction. Thank you, Joe Westfall, for all your efforts in arranging this banquet, what a great location you found! I would also like to thank the other members of the Søren Kierkegaard Society Executive Committee for all their efforts. Thank you, Tom Millay, for organizing the panel that will speak tomorrow morning. Thank you, Amber Bowen, for participating in tomorrow's panel and for also organizing the upcoming APA sessions. Thanks also go out to Elizabeth Li, our SKS secretary who is in Copenhagen

[1] This is a revised version of the presidential address delivered at the annual banquet of the Søren Kierkegaard Society in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. This event was held at the Union Kitchen & Tap Gaslamp in San Diego, CA, on Friday, November 22, 2024. I am grateful to my colleague and friend, Bruce Janz, for his comments on the earliest version of this paper, and to an anonymous reviewer for insightful comments that have led to the further development of this work. I would also like to thank Anna Söderquist and the editorial staff of *IJKR* for their kind support.

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and could not be with us tonight, for all her help in sending out all our messages and for updating our website.

I should also say a few words on the occasion of this address. As I think you all know, Professor Gordon Marino was scheduled to be our distinguished speaker tonight, but a little over a month ago now, he had an emergency medical situation that required immediate surgery and thus was unable to make the trip to join us here tonight. While we were all saddened by this event, I am sure that we are even more grateful to know that Gordon is recovering well and that he would love to give his talk to us in Boston next year. After his emergency, Gordon told me that he almost bought the farm when this happened, and I would suspect this leads us to reflect not only on how sometimes, as we say, life can get in the way of things, but also how death is a part of life. This is a thought that Kierkegaard wanted us to take with utmost seriousness. It is likely a thought which lies lurking in the shadows throughout Kierkegaard's writings.

Consequently, a little over a month ago, I was not planning on delivering an address to this esteemed audience. I had, however, for much of the last year been doing research on the questions of death that arise in Kierkegaard and other writers, such as Paul-Louis Landsberg, Albert Camus, and Karl Ove Knausgaard. And thus, you may begin to see how this talk came together in a very short time, as it is related to the research I have been conducting most recently. I am aware that there are several different types of presidential addresses, and that humorous and light is often the kind delivered, especially when the address is given in conjunction with a festive banquet in which the focus is also on fine food and drink. And, of course, there is a great deal of humor in Kierkegaard—one frequently laughs aloud, I find, in reading his texts—but it is seldom of the light or superficial variety, for as we all also know in Kierkegaard's texts there is a most significant weight, a tremendous gravity, that arises in seeking edification through earnestness. We also know that he under the guise of a pseudonym conceived it as his task "to make difficulties everywhere,"[2] which is to say to bring more weight to one's life by reflecting on one's existence as an individual. So, instead of what may be the more common lighthearted address, mine shall deal with what I suppose are heavy topics, although I would like to think that this is not at all inappropriate for an audience of Kierkegaard scholars.

I shall not only be speaking about Kierke-gaard tonight, but also about Knaus-gaard, for I have been playing in both "yards" (*gaard*, *gård*) for the last little while, initially in

[2] SKS 7, 172 / CUP1, 187.

the "cemetery" (*kirkegård*), but now also by the cliff (*knaus*). Perhaps, then, it is fair to say that each writer in his own way leads readers on a perilous venture in thinking by a graveside. Knausgaard is a fascinating contemporary writer who shares a general cultural and linguistic tradition with Kierkegaard, and he provokes insights into and contrasts with Kierkegaard that are not only interesting but deeply significant for thinking about the mysterious meaning of existence. And if we can still speak of existentialism, I would argue that Knausgaard is one of the major existentialist writers today.

Have you read Knausgaard? Not only has Knausgaard taken the literary world by storm, but he has taken it with the force of a category five hurricane (the effects of which, as a long-time resident of central Florida, I am well familiar). Knausgaard earned critical acclaim for his earliest novels, but his massive six-volume series of autofictional works titled *My Struggle* (published as *Min Kamp* in the original Norwegian from 2009 to 2011, 2014 to 2018 in English translation) has not only fascinated readers but also reinvigorated discussions about the genres of autofiction and life writing. While he has been called "the Proust of Norway," readers in his native country were so fascinated by *My Struggle* "that offices [had] to declare 'Knausgaard-free days' during which no employee could hang around the break room arguing about his books."[3] Most recently, readers have been put on edge by his latest series of existential novels starting with *The Morning Star* (2022), which have become the subject of discussions in literary and theological circles in Scandinavia. In fact, it has even been claimed that "Knausgaard is [a] more skilled theologian than most,"[4] which is an argument that I shall not pursue here, although it is clear that

[3] William H. Willimon, "The Proust of Norway," *The Christian Century*, vol. 132, no. 9, April 29, 2015, https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2015-04/proust-norway.

[4] Daniel Wistrand, "Knausgård skickligare teolog än de flesta," *Dagen*, February 3, 2021, https://www.dagen.se/kultur/2021/02/03/knausgard-skickligare-teolog-an-de-flesta/. *Dagen* is a Christen-based news outlet, and Wistrand is writing about a *Dagen* podcast in which the hosts, well-established theologians Patrik Hagman and Joel Halldorf, devote an episode to a discussion of Knausgaard's *The Morning Star*, which they describe on the website as "bursting with theological and religious questions." (*The Reader Podcast*, season 1, episode 51, "'The Morning Star' by Karl Ove Knausgård," *Dagen*, February 1, 2021, 59 min., 55 sec., https://lasarpodden.libsyn.com/avsnitt-51-morgonstjrnan-av-karl-ove-knausgrd [my translation]. My thanks to Ludvig Nyman, a doctoral student in Biblical Studies at Lund University in Sweden, for this helpful information). As already suggested, the reception of Knausgaard's works in his native Norway has been intense, and Willimon also writes in "The Proust of Norway" about how "hip Norwegian Lutherans and Methodists" introduced him to Knausgaard's *My Struggle*. Further, Claus Elholm Andersen (University of Helsinki) has published a comparative study titled "Knausgård/Kierkegaard: The Journey Towards the Ethical in Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*" in *Scandinavica*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2014): 29–52. Andersen argues for a new perspective considering the influence of Kierkegaard's existentialism on Knausgaard, who

Knausgaard's latest novels call us to think about the *mysterium tremendum* far more intensely than most.

The most significant philosophical and religious questions—those concerned with the meanings of life, death, and selfhood—permeate Knausgaard's writing, and he also raises interesting questions about reading Kierkegaard and writing about him, as well as the commitment to write in general. Perhaps surprisingly, however, there is no discussion of Kierkegaard in Knausgaard's voluminous *My Struggle*,[5] a work in which his everyday life is put on display in an exceedingly detailed manner, for one of the details of his life as a late teenager that is left out and appears in a separate essay is that he would quote Kierkegaard's phrase "subjectivity is truth" in letters he wrote. Thus, Kierkegaard's core existential insight became for Knausgaard in his formative years a personal slogan, one that "kind of said it all."[6] This raises several interesting questions. Can Knausgaard's *My Struggle* be interpreted as an expression of Kierkegaard's claim that truth is subjectivity? On the surface, at least, such an interpretation seems plausible. But can one's life ever be fully brought out into the open? Could the omission of this (in)significant detail from *My Struggle* perhaps suggest a secrecy or hiddenness of subjectivity that can never be brought to light? Is this not what the Kierkegaardian slogan can be taken to express? But could it also signify the fact that the meaning of one's life can never fully be understood—or, more pointedly, that the quest to know oneself can never be fulfilled? Is this a point on which we could find agreement in the writings of Knausgaard and Kierkegaard? Let these questions with all their weight remain for us in suspense.

in turn is read as portraying himself as an ethicist in *My Struggle*. In Denmark, if one is to judge by the references available at the University of Copenhagen website, much of the discussion of Knausgaard's works has been within the context of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, but a conference for priests and theologians was held at the Faculty of Theology on "Language for the Sacred—Between the Unspeakable and the Unpredictable" (September 2021), which included separate contributions on Kierkegaard and Knausgaard.

[5] There are a couple mentions of "Kierkegaard" in the last two volumes of *My Struggle*, but these occur within sentences listing a variety of thinkers and without a discussion of his works or philosophical views. See Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, *Book Five*, trans. Don Bartlett (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2015), p. 310, and Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book Six*, trans. Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2018), p. 828.

[6] Karl Ove Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," in *In the Land of the Cyclops*, trans. Martin Aitken (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2021), p. 257.

## 2. On Faith

While the relationship between the writings of Kierkegaard and Knausgaard stands in need of more focused scholarly attention, especially within philosophical circles, one possible way of thinking about this relationship can be found in an interesting recent study, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* by Martin Hägglund, professor of comparative literature at Yale University. Here Kierkegaard and Knausgaard are read as antipodes, with one proclaiming the height of religious faith in his account of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* and the other championing secular faith in his momentous *My Struggle*. In Hägglund's work, Abraham is viewed as acting recklessly towards his son Isaac and this is seen as a consequence of his religious faith. But this is an easy attack, one which, it seems to me, not only leaves out the "fear and trembling" that must always remain and would have little bothered Johannes de Silentio. For he has the courage to maintain that Abraham was a murderer—for he drew his knife with every intention of ending his son's life—while also maintaining paradoxically that Abraham was a person of faith, a view which is unsurprisingly beyond all mediation.

Let us consider some of the details of Hägglund's account. By "secular faith," Hägglund understands the devotion to a life understood to be finite, and it is the "sense of finitude"[7] that is said to make life meaningful, if not miraculous, and that grounds commitment and responsibility to others. A finite life necessarily involves projects that will break down and ends in death. It is as Kierkegaard writes in his discourse "At a Graveside": "then all is over!"[8] According to Hägglund, "for the question of how I should lead my life to be intelligible *as* a question, I have to believe that I will die."[9] On this view, then, death is productive.

In contrast, religious faith centers its focus on eternity and in doing so devalues our finite lives. Religious faith is pernicious, Hägglund claims, for it views "our finite lives as a lower form of being."[10] This argument echoes Nietzsche's critique of religion, particularly of "the afterworldly" and "the preachers of death" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,[11] although Hägglund will later differentiate himself from Nietzsche's perspective. What is

[7] Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2019), p. 5.
[8] SKS 5, 442 & 444 / TD, 71 & 73.
[9] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 5.
[10] Ibid., p. 6.
[11] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 142–145 and 156–158.

most significant in Hägglund's account, however, is that religious faith is held to prevent us from taking responsibility for our lives and caring for others. This is no doubt surprising, if not paradoxical, when we consider that it is often proponents of religious faith and members of faith-based organizations who are the first to help others in times of crisis and need. John Caputo makes this point when he writes:

> If, on any given day, you go into the worst neighborhoods of the inner cities of most large urban centers, the people you will find there serving the poor and needy . . . will almost certainly be religious people—evangelicals and Pentecostals, social workers with deeply held religious convictions, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, men and women, priests and nuns, black and white.[12]

For Caputo "religious people are lovers; they love God, with whom all things are possible," and "they are down in the trenches, out on the streets, serving the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, while the critics of religion are sleeping in on Sunday mornings."[13] But, of course, it is also the case that religious people often confuse themselves and their beliefs with God and end up sacrificing the love of others for what they take to be the love of God. Such is arguably the case in the story of Abraham, the central paradigm of Western religious faith, and the horrific Akedah. Thus, crucial to Hägglund's account is a careful analysis of the faith of Abraham as portrayed in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling*. So, to help further clarify this sharp distinction between secular and religious faith, we must consider this account.

Through a carefully developed reading of what is arguably Kierkegaard's most perplexing work,[14] Hägglund shows how the abandonment of care and responsibility take place in the story of Abraham. The religious faith of Abraham expresses brutality, carelessness, and irresponsibility towards his son Isaac, for Abraham or any so-called knight of faith is "literally insensitive to the fate of the finite."[15] Hägglund writes:

> But it is easy to see that the consequences of Abraham's religious faith is that he is utterly reckless with regard to Isaac. Abraham *loves* Isaac with all his heart, but because of his religious faith Abraham is deprived of the ability to *care* for Isaac, in the sense of being responsive to what happens to him. He does not try to protect Isaac, feels no remorse for sacrificing him, and

[12] John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 92.
[13] Ibid., p. 92.
[14] See my review of Daniel Conway, ed., *Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling*: A Critical Guide*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal* (January 2016), https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/kierkegaard-s-fear-and-trembling-a-critical-guide/.
[15] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 142.

> does not tremble when he draws the knife to kill him, since he has complete faith that Isaac will be restored no matter what happens to him.
>
> Abraham's brutality is a direct effect of giving up secular faith through the double movement of religious faith.[16]

This is a strong indictment against religious faith. Although we might question the ability to understand Abraham's emotional state, especially when Johannes de Silentio repeatedly emphasizes that Abraham cannot be understood, as well as the "fear and trembling" pervading such faith, but these considerations do not themselves invalidate the claim that Abraham is irresponsible with regards to Isaac. Religious faith protects Abraham from despair, but it does so because he is not truly vulnerable to loss. He believes by virtue of the absurd that with God all things are possible, so it really does not matter whether Isaac is killed or not. Either way it is all the same. Whatever happens to the knight of faith "he is just the same," for "he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher, because his remaining in finitude would have no trace of a timorous, anxious routine."[17] Remember that in his work de Silentio is describing movements that he can recognize but not fully understand, and perhaps there is no greater lack of understanding than when considering this expression of the calm acceptance of the goodness of finitude, an acceptance that we will see developed in Knausgaard's writing when he turns to Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. But does this acceptance not assume an infinite responsibility for oneself before the (w)hol(l)y Other?

In his important work *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida explores the concept of responsibility and shows how Abraham's responsibility is bound to singularity, secrecy, and silence.[18] Further, Derrida writes: "What the knights of good conscience don't realize, is that 'the sacrifice of Isaac' illustrates . . . the most common and everyday experience of responsibility," which even the "most cursory examination of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to affirm."[19] Derrida explains:

> Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and ties me in my absolute singularity to the other as other. God is the name of the absolute other as other and as unique

[16] Ibid., p. 150.
[17] SKS 4, 135 / FT, 40.
[18] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 60.
[19] Ibid., pp. 67–68.

> (the God of Abraham defined as the one and unique). As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my absolute singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty. I am responsible to the other as other, I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others. An infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other* [*tout autre est tout autre*], every one else is completely or wholly other.[20]

Hägglund has also written on Derrida, whose work for him is informed by a radical atheism,[21] but notwithstanding this perspective, it is surprising that the argument in *The Gift of Death* is overlooked when interpreting the faith of Abraham brought into focus through Derrida's careful reading of Kierkegaard's text.

In general, religious faith is said to be focused on the "blessedness of infinity,"[22] while secular faith is centered on finitude, and the latter thus involves the unwillingness "to sacrifice the finite for the eternal"[23] even though one recognizes the brutal fact that finite life will end in a senseless death. In *Fear and Trembling* Johannes de Silentio frequently draws readers attention to the paradoxical nature of faith, and although Hägglund does not do so with regards to secular faith, we can see that secular faith is also paradoxical. As Hägglund explains,

> the peril of death is an intrinsic part of why it matters what we do . . . . We have to take care of one another because we can die, we have to fight for what we believe in because it lives only through our sustained effort, and we have to be concerned with what will be passed on to coming generations because the future is not certain. This is the double movement of secular faith. You run ahead into the risk of irrevocable death . . . and yet you are resolved to make the most of the time that is given. . . . You see that death is utter darkness and yet you seek to maintain the light that will be extinguished.
>
> Every time you care for someone who may be lost or leave you behind, every time you devote yourself to a cause whose fate is uncertain, you perform an act of secular faith. Through your passion, you apprehend that death is constitutive of life and yet you do not renounce your

[20] Ibid., p. 68.
[21] See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 1.
[22] SKS 4, 135 / FT, 40.
[23] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 146.

> commitment to living on. You do not give in to death but seek to prolong the life of what you love. You see that death is senseless and yet you seek to make sense of life.[24]

This is one of the clearest statements of secular faith provided by Hägglund, but does it ultimately make sense? Is it compelling? Can meaning be founded on meaninglessness? Why should one choose to maintain "secular faith in the irreplaceable value of a finite life"[25] given the certainty of the bleak outcome that awaits? Granted, while one is still living it is easy enough to fall into patterns of attachment that affirm the value of life, but one can also easily fall into episodes of despair. This is because we cannot actually judge the value of life while we are still living, and thus in the face of death we feel moments of vacillation which contribute to a pervasive mood that cannot be eliminated.[26]

Although Kierkegaard's "ultimate aim is to defend a version of religious faith," Hägglund explains how Kierkegaard's "own work provides insights into the dynamic of secular faith that he seeks to overcome."[27] These insights include understanding faith as a risk involving "necessary uncertainty, existential commitment, [and] motivational force,"[28] such that according to Hägglund, "Kierkegaard can . . . be seen to have a deep grasp of the dynamic of secular faith."[29] This account thus raises the question of whether religious faith includes secular faith, which presents itself as a possibility in contrast to a binary view that the two "faiths" are strictly antithetical. Consider that Hägglund refers to Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside," which he calls a "remarkable text" that shows how "the thought of death is the source of any 'earnest' engagement with life."[30] Kierkegaard writes: "The thought of death gives the earnest person the right momentum in life and the right goal toward which he directs his momentum."[31] This of course raises the all-important question: What is the right goal? The answer to this question is no doubt something that all persons must find for themselves, for as Kierkegaard writes in a well-

[24] Ibid., p. 168.
[25] Ibid., p. 170.
[26] For a further development of this argument see Michael Strawser, "Between Mood and Spirit: Kierkegaard's Conception of Death as the Teacher of Earnestness," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, eds. Peter Šajda, Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter Brill, 2023), pp. 143–160.
[27] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 128.
[28] Ibid., p. 129.
[29] Ibid., p. 131.
[30] Ibid., p. 133.
[31] SKS 5, 453 / TD, 83. It is worth noting that this text speaks of a common person of faith who could be seen as unifying both secular and religious faith, although readers will find some ambivalence here as discussed in my "Between Mood and Spirit."

known early journal entry, "the thing is to find a truth that is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*."[32] A few lines later Kierkegaard adds an important clarification that "to find *the idea*" is more correctly put as "to find [one]self."[33] But what if one can never truly accomplish this feat? What if uncanniness forever reigns supreme? The answers to these questions do not come easily, if they come at all, and they mark a restlessness that can be found in the writings of both Kierkegaard and Knausgaard.

Further, is it certain that Knausgaard is best viewed as a champion of secular faith, as Hägglund maintains? Is Knausgaard's work to be read as first and foremost a work that is not only based on the distinction between religious and secular faith, but one that also provides an implicit argument for the affirmation of the latter as opposed to the former? To be fair, Hägglund's study focuses on Knausgaard's *My Struggle* and appears before the publication of *The Morning Star* series of novels, which open more religious dimensions. But there are, of course, other possibilities when reading Knausgaard. Perhaps his work is entirely beyond the discussion of faith altogether and borders on nihilism, or perhaps it implies a form of faith that is at once both secular and religious (after all, Abraham's faith was for this life, and as we know, Kierkegaard lamented that if he had had faith, he would have stayed with Regine), in which case the binary distinction breaks down, for it is faith within the world and yet for a presence of life that cannot be reduced to the world. Or perhaps it is best read as a question of how the secular and the religious ultimately hang together. Perhaps, then, we do best to promote a hermeneutic in favor of the unknown or undecidable, such as I have argued previously regarding Kierkegaard,[34] for is this not most appropriate when considering writings about life, literatures of life, that continually expose the failure of our ideas to capture and hold fast to any meaning of life?

### 3. On Death

Central to each writer, Kierkegaard and Knausgaard, is a preoccupation with death,[35] which is frequently, if not paradoxically, viewed as the condition of a valuable or

[32] SKS 17, 24 / KJN 1, 19.
[33] SKS 17, 25 / KJN 1, 20.
[34] See Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), especially "Conclusion: Rereading Kierkegaard as a Postmodern Philosopher," pp. 227–245.
[35] In their introduction to *Kierkegaard and Death*, Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben write that Kierkegaard had a "remarkable, lifelong preoccupation with death." See Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben,

meaningful life. In "At a Graveside," Kierkegaard writes that "death in earnest gives life force as nothing else does; it makes one alert as nothing else does."[36] And as I have argued in a recent article, "the conception of death as the teacher of earnestness emphasizes earnestness for this life, such that a reflection on one's own death is transformed into a reflection on one's life, and it changes the emphasis of earnestness to focus on meaningful actions that produce the good to be experienced by others as well as oneself in our finite conscious lives."[37]

Death is literally everywhere in Knausgaard's writings, from the beginning to the end of *My Struggle* to his latest series of novels to his book on Edvard Munch's art and even his book on "the beautiful game" of soccer. In Book Six of *My Struggle* Knausgaard directly addresses the relationship between life and death when he writes: "Death is the background from which life emerges. Had death not existed, we would never have known what life is."[38] This passage is quoted by Hägglund, who argues that such a view of death is also a condition of secular faith, which, as we have seen, he takes to be central to Knausgaard's work. While Augustine's *Confessions* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* stand as monumental works of religious faith for Hägglund, Knausgaard's *My Struggle* is a testament to secular faith. Instead of struggling with one's absolute duty to God, one should struggle to attach oneself to one's own life, which calls to mind the search for existential authenticity and lucidity. In Book Two of *My Struggle* Knausgaard writes: "The life around me was not meaningful. I always longed to be away from it. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, this was my struggle."[39] Thus, contrary to the effort to detach oneself from one's worldly life in turning towards God, "the animating principle of Knausgaard's writing is . . . one of *attachment*," and as Hägglund further explains, the existential imperative of *My Struggle* is to "attach yourself to what you see, focus your gaze by attaching yourself to what you see."[40] But just how does one perform this attachment—how does one focus one's reflective gaze in order that one becomes attached to one's own life? The language here is worrisome, and perhaps one could just

"Introduction," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2011), p. 1.

[36] SKS 5, 452 / TD, 83.

[37] Strawser, "Between Mood and Spirit," p. 158.

[38] Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book Six*, p. 624.

[39] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book Two: A Man in Love*, trans. Don Bartlett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 67.

[40] Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 95.

as well wonder how one could not be attached to one's own life. But either way, is this a clear and strong enough basis to support secular faith? While there is much to value in Hägglund's study, as I have argued above, his reading of Knausgaard as a champion of secular faith is limited and ultimately fails to convince. And the same holds for his critical perspective on Kierkegaard's perhaps impenetrable *Fear and Trembling*.

There are relatively few references to Kierkegaard throughout Knausgaard's writings, but in *The Morning Star*, the turn to Kierkegaard is particularly significant and opens up new interpretive possibilities. Although we do not find a detailed discussion or presentation of Kierkegaard's ideas, they nevertheless appear to influence the novel's characters in decisive ways. One of the main characters, Egil, is introduced at the beginning of the "Second Day" after the mysterious morning star appears, and we learn right away of his biblical knowledge when he wakes up thinking that "the Morning Star" is strangely used to refer to both Jesus and the Devil in the Bible.[41] We learn that Egil had been spending much of his time thinking about the role of Christianity and whether it was "mainly a social phenomenon" or instead "turned away from the social domain"[42]—a distinction related to the persistent research question for Kierkegaard Studies on the individual's relation to society—and in Egil's mind, Jesus and death were connected.

> Jesus had been a loner, he had all the features. He rejected his mother and brother, didn't want to know about them. The disciples he attracted were no substitute family—the relationship was one way only: Jesus spoke, the disciples listened; Jesus dictated, the disciples obeyed. Weeks in the wilderness. A clear longing for death.[43]

Such was the thinking of Egil, who had left "the Church of Norway at the age of sixteen," an act that the young Syvert, a central character in the follow-up novel *The Wolves of Eternity*, also wants to perform. Egil "felt nothing but contempt for Christianity—and all other religions too, for that matter—but [he] was still interested in faith as a phenomenon," for it "gave meaning to life . . . and meaning interested [him]."[44] He was well familiar

[41] It is worth noting that Knausgaard served as a consultant for the Norwegian Bible Society and their publication of a new Norwegian translation of the Bible in 2011. While this translation became a bestseller, the recent attempt at another translation has not been met with the same enthusiasm. See Ken Chitwood, "For Norwegians So Loved the Bible, a New Translation Made Many Mad," *Christianity Today*, January 5, 2023, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/01/norway-bible-translation-controversy/.
[42] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, trans. Martin Aitken (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2021), p. 386.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., p. 387.

with Nietzsche's attack on Christianity and thought of faith as something "for the feeble of mind, those lacking independence, the submissive, who gladly allowed themselves to be led."[45] It is within the context of these musings on Christian faith that the first reference to Kierkegaard appears, for Egil had "read Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and realized there was another way of believing, and a Christianity other than the one Nietzsche had attacked."[46] *Fear and Trembling* is often the first work one reads by Kierkegaard, and although it is not exactly known when Egil had read this work, we gather it was during his late teenage years and after he had left the Church of Norway at sixteen. As Egil understands, the way of faith illuminated in Kierkegaard's work leads away from the social realm, away from the world. Here is the brief synopsis of *Fear and Trembling* given in Egil's self-reflection:

> Kierkegaard's book contains a number of strange vignettes concerning the weaning of a child from a mother's breast, that first relationship in a child's life, the symbiosis, warmth and security it was suddenly denied, and one could almost see the desire for what no longer was there, and the turning outwards towards everything else, which to the child as yet barely existed. Other people, the social world, society. Faith was thus a turning away from the realm of the social, again toward something that as yet barely existed. This was where Abraham went when he climbed the mount to sacrifice his son to God. He was filled with a father's love, and his faith directed him toward an abyss. Perhaps what awaited him there was simply emptiness, the terrible void. His faith surmounted his fear, which made faith inhuman, for what person can kill is son with intent and leave the human realm to face the unknown that perhaps indeed was the terrible void?[47]

Now, the case can easily be made that *Fear and Trembling* is Kierkegaard's most difficult work to interpret, as a glance at the voluminous secondary literature readily shows, and the weaning passages in "The Attunement" are among the most challenging to decipher, so it is interesting that Egil is drawn to these passages as well as to the act that is central to Abraham's faith. For both of these are connected with death, which is perhaps just another word for the ultimate unknown, the (perhaps) terrible void. Although relatively few scholars have attended to the weaning passages in Kierkegaard's work, Vanessa Rumble suggests that they represent a covert theme that is literary, philosophical, psychological, and biographical all in one, much like the portrayal of various themes in

[45] Ibid., p. 388.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Knausgaard's writings. On this reading, weaning represents the profound suffering of individuation and the traumatic loss of the other.[48] As we know, Kierkegaard was all too well acquainted with the experience of loss,[49] so it is reasonable to believe that he learned at a youthful age "the desire for what no longer was there."

The second connection involves the more obvious movement to death made by Abraham. Although Egil found Abraham's willingness to "leave the human realm to face the unknown" compelling, "it meant nothing to [him], it was without consequence, there was no way [he] could absorb it into [his] own life."[50] Nevertheless, "something must have happened," for Egil "had become converted." The experience of conversion was "an indescribable moment of joy," which he took to be an insight from his soul. This insight faded with time, however, perhaps in conjunction with the thorny theological questions that led to doubts about his faith. Although he tried to maintain the insight, he worried that it may have been the cause of his coming to live a "hermit-like existence" in which he had only himself to think about.[51] He remembered how reading *Fear and Trembling* had initially produced an impulsive enthusiasm for "Kierkegaard's thinking and the style of his writing,"[52] which led him to order the collected works in Danish. But oddly, his enthusiasm waned almost immediately, and he surprisingly never opened even one of the more than fifty volumes that comprised Kierkegaard's collected works until a day in which he surprised himself by asking God for a sign, and then, by chance, a bird appeared. Upon returning to his house, Egil scanned the volumes in his bookcase and his eyes fell on *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, and because "bird" stood out to him in the title he took the book and read the sermon it contained. Unlike *Fear and Trembling*, which he had read so long ago, the effect of reading this sermon was immediate, as Egil "was filled with an emotion so immense [he] hardly knew what to do with it. Thoughts were suddenly nothing, nada, nichts."[53] And yet as he tended the wood burner on a cold winter

[48] Vanessa Rumble develops this reading in "Why Moriah?: Weaning and the Trauma of Transcendence in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 247–262.

[49] The youngest of seven siblings, Kierkegaard was outlived by only one member of his immediate family, having lost his three sisters, two brothers, and his mother when he was twenty-one, and his father when he was twenty-five. Only his brother Peter Christian survived him.

[50] Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, p. 388.

[51] Ibid., pp. 388–389.

[52] Ibid., p. 396.

[53] Ibid.

day there was one thought that presented itself repeatedly to his mind, and it was as immense as the emotion that burned within him: "God's kingdom was here."[54]

When Egil later in his life read *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* he found it "hard to understand exactly what had made such an impression on [him] the first time around,"[55] as he could not attribute the immense emotion he had felt to any particular passage from the text. He reflects on how common it is to think that "thoughts are isolated units, apart not only from our emotions, but also from the surroundings in which they are conceived" when in fact they "cannot get by on their own."[56] Egil then directs his attention to the following passage from Kierkegaard's text:

> Would that in the silence you might forget yourself, forget what you yourself are called, your own name, the famous name, the lowly name, the insignificant name, in order in silence to pray to God, "Hallowed be your name!" Would that in silence you might forget yourself, your plans, the great, all-encompassing plans, or the limited plans concerning your life and its future, in order in silence to pray to God, "Your kingdom come!" Would that you might in silence forget your will, your willfulness, in order in silence to pray to God, "Your will be done!"[57]

In Kierkegaard's words Egil recognizes something different from the common religious call to abandon oneself to God, something that he identifies with as he finds himself in the midst of a world of nature that speaks in silence. This paradox can perhaps be understood in various ways, but what Egil realizes is not that nature is silent, for that would falsify the soundscapes with a richness equal to visual landscapes. No, the external sounds of nature reverberate boldly, but they come from a place of silence. They lack the inner turmoil that rages inside us as human beings. Egil reflects on his reading of Kierkegaard:

> The silence in which one might forget oneself was like the silence of the forest and the silence of the sea. Even when the sea rages loudly, he wrote, it is nonetheless silent . . . . The forest keeps silent; even when it whispers, he wrote, and I listened to the forest as it whispered, and to the silence in its whispering, and I knew that silence, for the clamor of my own inner life resounded so clearly against it. When I was with others, I never heard it, the clamor then being

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., p. 407.
[56] Ibid.
[57] SKS 11, 24 / LB, 34–35.

> everywhere, generated by our every will, our every plan, our every ambition, our every quest for pleasure, but when I was out walking here, in the silence that is here, I heard it.[58]

Reading the passage from Kierkegaard's sermon leads Egil to conceive that "God's kingdom was the moment."[59] For "the trees, the forest, the sea, the lily, the bird, all existed in the moment. To them, there was no such thing as future or past. Nor any fear or terror."[60] This he understands as "the first turning point," but it should not go unobserved that the deep insight Egil experiences comes from an inner self longing, if not raging, to be free.

Then Egil comes to his second turning point, when he reads this sentence from Kierkegaard's text: "*What happens to the bird does not concern it*."[61] This strikes him as "the most radical thought [he] had ever known," one that "would free [him] from all pain, all suffering."[62] Egil realizes:

> This required absolute faith and absolute abandonment to God, as the lily of the field and the bird of the sky exemplified. Even in deepest sorrow, with so frightful a tomorrow, the bird was unconditionally joyful. Sorrow and tomorrow did not concern it, but were given over to God.[63]

In this moment in the summer house with the powerful storm raging outside Egil puts his inner self at peace through the reading of Kierkegaard's text. For Egil now knows that he exists for God and "God's kingdom [is] here."[64] In an interview, Knausgaard explains:

> Kierkegaard writes about how if a bird's nest is destroyed, the next day he's happily rebuilding it. The future just doesn't exist if you're a bird. And I read this with, you know, such an incredible desire. A friend of mine has wood pigeons who build a nest, lay eggs, have chicks, and there's a hawk that comes and takes them. That's happened four years in a row. But the pigeons still go to the same place because, for them, the future doesn't exist. Maybe they're in what Kierkegaard would say is the kingdom of God.[65]

[58] Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, pp. 408–409.
[59] Ibid., p. 409.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid. In Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* the passage reads: "everything of this sort that happens to [the bird] does not really concern it" (SKS 11, 34 / LB, 57; emphasis in original).
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Quoted in Jeffrey Howard, "Kierkegaard, Knausgaard, and the 'Kingdom of God'," *Erraticus*, December 9, 2018, https://erraticus.co/2018/12/09/kierkegaard-knausgaard-kingdom-god/.

He will always remember these insights, although they will require a struggle to maintain, for how can one ever fully and continuously realize the calm acceptance of the knight of faith as described by Kierkegaard's de Silentio and illustrated by Knausgaard's Egil?

The final part of *The Morning Star* is a separate essay titled "On Death and the Dead" by Egil Stray. Thus, here in Knausgaard we also find an author within an author. This begins as a quasi-academic reflection on the subject named in the title, and it is here that Knausgaard has Egil return to Kierkegaard. The reflection again concerns the second momentous passage from the text discussed above. Let me read the entire passage:

> Søren Kierkegaard, that singular and inconceivably original Danish writer, sought God in the Divine in the moment, which to him was the very gateway into the kingdom of God. In one of his sermons, he takes as his point of departure a discourse given by Jesus concerning the birds of heaven and the lilies of the field, holding up their existence, so completely and fully obtaining in the moment, as an ideal. Certainly, Kierkegaard's treatise is not without irony, yet it seems quite as clear to the reader that he is indeed in search of paradise, considering that it may be found only in the event that we relinquish awareness of the self and all that belongs to it—a matter that requires insight into both past and future in order to be sustained—and give ourselves blindly up to the moment. Our every worry, our every trouble, our every anxiety will then fall away—*what happens to the bird does not concern it*, he wrote. Our burdens are given up to God. Such innocence, which is the innocence still of the animals and the smallest children, was torn from us by the awareness of death, which made us and our godless world.[66]

In Egil's interpretation we find expressed not only the longing but also the Kierkegaardian method for attaining paradisal eternity, which is given in the moment. Is it possible to regain such innocence, especially when it does not seem possible to remove our awareness of death, as much as philosophers like the Stoics and Spinoza might encourage us to do so. "A free person thinks least of all of death," writes Spinoza in his *Ethics*,[67] but is this view not very far from Kierkegaard, who in the discourse "At a Graveside" emphasizes the thought of death and encourages us to derive earnestness from it? Indeed, is it not because of the awareness of death that Kierkegaard gently urges us to become like the bird? The irony emerges, then, in the absence of concern that may appear problematic when conjoined with an understanding of death's decisiveness.

"*What happens to the bird does not concern it*." Egil shows us the emotional effect of reading Kierkegaard, but also how it may vary depending upon one's situation, and thus it is

[66] Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*, p. 622.

[67] This is proposition 67 in Part IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*, as translated in Steven Nadler's *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 175.

possible to experience different emotional responses at different times, if not also sometimes simultaneously, due to the complexities of human situatedness. Clearly Egil is now compelled by such a view, which leads him to look beyond death, although he will find surprisingly that this does lead to the relinquishing of relatedness and an awareness of selfhood. We find that his relationship with his son is very important, and perhaps even more important is his relation to his mother, which continues after her death and becomes prominent at the close of the book. So, as readers we may continue to question the validity of the position of those unconcerned with what happens to them in their lives. Egil, of course, is just one ambivalent character in a vast series of novels that seems far from completed, and I await with great interest to find out if and how he returns in a future novel. The author within an author who leaves us with an essay on "Death and Dying" at the close of the first novel must return,[68] and when he does let us hope that he takes up the question posed by Kierkegaard's philosophy of the individual alone before God who is at the same time also related to and concerned for others in the world as well as for the natural world itself.[69]

At first glance, I did not think that very much could be made from a handful of references to Kierkegaard in an otherwise vast novel. However, telling the story of these

[68] Egil Stray does reappear very briefly at the end of Part Three of *The School of Night* (originally published in Norwegian as *Nattskolen* [2023] with the English translation scheduled to be released in January 2026), but this is only when his home on a Norwegian island is inhabited by the main character of this novel, Christian Hadeland. Thus, while a deeply profound contrast between these two characters begins to emerge, this mention is without greater significance for the present study, and must await a future one.

[69] In a recent study that also brings together Kierkegaard and Knausgaard, Marius Timmann Mjaaland focuses on the question of the relationship between the individual and nature in Kierkegaard's *The Lily in the Field* and Knausgaard's *The Morning Star*. Significantly, Mjaaland emphasizes the ambivalence towards nature expressed in Kierkegaard's writings as well as the ambivalence expressed by the character Egil Stray, who is not only a reader of Kierkegaard but also of Nietzsche. Nevertheless, Mjaaland projects a path from despair to "the singing joy of the bird" when he writes: "Reading *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) in dialogue with *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849) or rather, reading the latter as response to the former, opens up radically new perspectives on human despair. When the human being, the human as Spirit, is cut off from its natural surroundings, from the conditions of life and death embedded in our natural conditions, it can hardly avoid the vicious circle of despair" (p. 349). This is an important argument, and one that Mjaaland writes is "only the starting point for a more comprehensive re-reading of later works in Kierkegaard's authorship" (p. 348), but through perhaps an earnest reflection on the starting point of ambivalence one cannot help but wonder about the natural conditions of life and death, which of themselves contribute to the mood of despair. After all, it seems far from clear that birds share in the understanding of their own deaths. See Marius Timmann Mjaaland, "Ecophilosophy and the Ambivalence of Nature: Kierkegaard and Knausgård on Lilies, Birds and Being," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, eds. Peter Šajda, Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 325–350.

passages shows us how Knausgaard manages to capture the immense power and challenges that come from reading Kierkegaard. This is no doubt the underlying cause that brings us together as a community of Kierkegaard scholars, that brings us together here tonight.

**4. On Writing**

The commitments to death and faith are obvious in our authors, at least insofar as they entail a deep inquiry into the meanings of these notions, and so too is the means through which these commitments manifest themselves, namely, writing. In his essay titled "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," which appears in the collection of essays *In the Land of the Cyclops* (2021), Knausgaard writes that "a few weeks earlier [he] had committed [himself] to writing about Kierkegaard."[70] Why would one commit oneself to write and why would one commit oneself to write about Kierkegaard, that indirect author of the ecstatic either/or that may come to haunt the careful reader when confronted with a decision. Here the advice of A would be: If you write about Kierkegaard, you will regret it, if you do not write about Kierkegaard you will regret it, if you write about Kierkegaard or do not write about Kierkegaard you will regret it, whether you write about Kierkegaard or do not write about Kierkegaard you will regret both.

Knausgaard comes late to reading Kierkegaard, which he admits is strange, "given that [Kierkegaard] is one of the few major writers [he] can read with full benefit in the original language."[71] But "coming from Kierkegaard's own cultural and linguistic sphere," he writes, he "always felt as if he had read him" and "known what [he] needed to know about him and his writings," from the pseudonyms to the stages, the broken engagement to the ridiculous affair with the Danish press, to his loathing of philosophical systems, and assistant professors. And, as we have seen above, Knausgaard even remembers using the slogan "subjectivity is truth" as a teenager in his letters.[72]

Regarding the strength of the commitment to write for both of our authors we have the greatest amount of evidence. This commitment is so great in Kierkegaard that it perhaps passes into compulsion, and it has led Joakim Garff to diagnose Kierkegaard "as a

[70] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 256.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., p. 257.

'graphomaniac' suffering from 'hypergraphia,'"[73] and it is not unlikely that a similar case could at some point be made for Knausgaard, who has also expressed a dizzying level of productivity, and who also calls forth the question of why one would write about Kierkegaard, a question that goes hand in hand with why one would read Kierkegaard. "In other words," Knausgaard writes, "what [does] this middle-class philosopher, living and thinking in a minor European province a hundred and seventy years before, have to say to people in our day and age?"[74] It is a good question, and I'm sure that over the next few days we will hear many good responses to this question. Knausgaard knows what Kierkegaard teaches. Namely, it is up to each individual alone to find their way. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, we learn from Kierkegaard that each individual loses their innocence and becomes guilty on their own, "uniquely, [not collectively,] in exactly the same way as Adam did."[75] As Kierkegaard writes, "innocence is always lost only by the qualitative leap of the individual."[76] Such is also the case with faith, as we know from *Fear and Trembling*. Past generations cannot help us to find that higher immediacy, which comes into the world, if it does so at all, through the individual's relational activity before the absolute. "We are alone," Knausgaard writes following Kierkegaard, "but we are alone in the same way."[77]

But perhaps writing—that paradoxical activity in which we can "express our individuality only in what is common to all"[78]—is different. And we can perhaps learn to write, or better, become compelled to write, through our reading of authors such as Kierkegaard and Knausgaard. Naturally, they illuminate their own lives, but they also produce in readers the desire to find themselves, and they show the way through writing about one's life. Whether it is done indirectly and without authority or more directly through autofiction, our authors both affirm the strange responsibility to write in the search for oneself. "Such as responsibility keeps its secret, it cannot and need not present itself," Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death*, for "it declines the autobiography that is always auto-justification,

[73] See Eric Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 21, where he quotes Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 458.
[74] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 258.
[75] Ibid., p. 259.
[76] SKS 4, 344 / CA 37.
[77] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 259.
[78] Ibid.

*égodicée*."[79] That this is because the self in question must always tremble with its own uncertain identity, it may very well be, as Derrida's text suggests.[80] And whether this commitment expresses religious or secular faith, I do not know for sure.[81] If forced to answer I would likely want to say that it is both/and, just as writing is both a solitary and a profoundly relational act, an action that both distances oneself from the world while also attempting to communicate with the world. So, the existential commitment to writing is something we do learn from reading these great writers, as they compel us to want to write about our very existence, our relationships with others and to a world conditioned by absurdity, ambivalence, and uncanniness.

Both our authors are acutely aware of the ironic question of distance that the existentialist writer must face. In *Home and Away: Writing the Beautiful Game*, Knausgaard writes:

> This often happens to me, I write something which sounds good enough, only to realise, after an hour to several years later, that it is never like that, never so simple, never one thing or the other. This is actually a question of distance and is a fundamental literary issue, I think: writing establishes a distance to what you are writing, and distance simplifies. Form simplifies even further. If you consider literature an autonomous entity it is no problem, then it has no responsibility for what it represents. If, however, you want to write about life, simplification is a great danger, which you must constantly guard against. You do that by going as close as you can to where all the broad sweeps, all the higher-level generalizations, no longer apply and are nowhere apparent. For me, the way I see it, this is the task of literature. Not necessarily in the

[79] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 62.

[80] In *The Gift of Death* Derrida writes: "The question of the self: 'who am I?' not in the sense of 'who am I' but 'who is this "I"' that can say 'who'? What is the 'I,' and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the 'I' trembles *in secret*?" (p. 92).

[81] Although perhaps not surprising, it may be interesting to note in this context that the challenges and ambiguities of Derrida's text have led to very divergent readings. One the one hand, in *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Hägglund suggests that "a radical atheism informs Derrida's work from beginning to end" (p. 1), while in *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson suggest that in Derrida's work, especially *The Gift of Death*, one reads Derrida "sliding from a radicalized phenomenology to a determinate theology" (p. 130). Although I do not have the space to analyze the relevant passages in detail, this conflict of interpretations seems to support the alternative claim that Derrida expresses neither definitive position, but rather playfully expresses both the possibility of a secret God-relationship while also questioning whether "what I call God in me" is not also perhaps calling myself God (p. 108), and he goes on to write that "God is in me, he is the absolute 'me' or 'self,' he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard's sense, subjectivity" (p. 109). At its best, Derrida's work expresses the significance of the question—"As often happens, the call of or for the question, and the request that echoes through it, takes us further than the response"—which begins the final paragraph of his text, and the final sentence expresses sheer ambivalence: "Nietzsche must indeed believe he knows what believing means, unless he means it is all make-believe" (p. 115).

> form of realism and description of reality, but as a stubborn, tireless insistence on, and search for, the disintegration of the structure of that which we know.[82]

When Kierkegaard reflects on why he writes in "A First and Last Explanation" appended to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we find that it is not because he wants to make "any new proposal, some unheard-of discovery, or [to found] a new party . . . but precisely the opposite," for he wants "to have no importance, [but . . .] at a remove that is the distance of double-reflection, once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships."[83] In this case, Kierkegaard does precisely what he says he wants to do, and this leads us to find ourselves desiring to follow suit, wanting to read through the original texts of our lives in a deeper way, whether we put pen to paper (which is surprisingly now a mostly metaphorical expression) or not. This is precisely what Knausgaard does, and he does it very well, and because of this I think we can say that Knausgaard is a Kierkegaardian. For reading Kierkegaard leads him to see, as he writes, that "my life is surface, depth my yearning. The feeling that the essential is possible, the authentic a reality, is strong." "This is the question of meaning," Knausgaard continues, "and meaning is in life. The more life is threatened, the greater its meaning becomes, and it becomes greatest in death."[84] Here Knausgaard reflects again on his dead father, which he had written about at great lengths in *My Struggle*, and he leaves us with these questions, which I will end with tonight: "Is it merely alertness to the circumstances of life? Not as thoughts, for thoughts are remoteness, but as feelings? And is this why Kierkegaard ventures so far toward the edgelands of our human existence, where everything is acute, precarious, shimmering with life and meaning?"[85] Such a precarious venture might be likened to a walk along a steep cliff overlooking a cemetery.

Thank you all very much for your generous attention. Now to add more weight to the evening let us "eat [our] food and be happy, drink [our] wine and be cheerful."[86]

[82] Karl Ove Knausgaard and Fredrik Ekelund, *Home and Away: Writing the Beautiful Game*, trans. Don Bartlett and Séan Kinsella (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), p. 17.
[83] SKS 7, 573 / CUP1, 629–630.
[84] Knausgaard, "Life in the Sphere of Unending Resignation," p. 272.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ecclesiastes 9:7.

**Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric with Historical Glossary of Kierkegaardian Terms*, trans. Alexander Jech (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2024).**

**Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: A New Translation*, trans. Bruce Kirmmse (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2022).**

**Reviewed by Stacey E. Ake, Drexel University**

Translation is a necessary, if occasionally thankless, task. After all the research, the pondering, the debating about whether to be accurate or precise, about whether to use a cultural equivalent or stay with the given idiom, you are then left with trying to see whether it all makes sense. Does it reflect the intent of the author? Does it reflect the historical context? Does the translation communicate the "feel" of the author's text? Does the translation "speak" to today's audience? After all that, the translation is published, and you wait for the salvos to drop. For then come the invariable critiques. Someone disagrees about a verb tense. Someone else believes that another noun would have been more apt. Yet another person simply says that you got it wrong.

Is all this a screed to caution you against undertaking translation? No. It is simply to point out that all translations are interpretations. Translation is not transcription. It is not something that can be done by AI. It is not about the words per se but about understanding those words. Both authors discussed here understand the words, but in some cases their interpretations are quite distinct. In part, I believe this is due to their backgrounds—Bruce Kirmmse is an historian and Danish translator of renown; Alexander Jech is a professor of "the practice of philosophy" at Notre Dame. But what also creates the difference between their translations is their intended audiences.

Jech's translation, published by Hackett, is intended to be a teaching translation. It is an excellent one. It is, like other Hackett publications, aimed at the upper-level undergraduate or graduate student. What makes it an exceptional introductory text is the over 200-page "Historical Glossary of Kierkegaardian Terms," which makes up more than half the book. This "Glossary" elaborates on many English-language Kierkegaardian terms by giving the original Danish term, the definition and etymology of that term, and cited examples of where it can be found in Kierkegaard's published works. This makes the

book perfect for the student in search of an overview of Kierkegaard's ideas as well as hints to where those are found within the Kierkegaardian opus.

Kirmmse's translation, published by Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, is a milder, more religious translation of *Fear and Trembling*, more sensitive to the reader's experience of the text. While it, too, could be used as a teaching text, I do not think that is where its best use lies. It seems to be aimed for more personal use. Not exactly as a devotional, but perhaps as something to be discussed in a group setting. It has a phenomenal "Translator's Introduction," wherein the translator sets out his approach to translating the text. Perhaps one of the indicators that this translation is meant for personal use, rather than academic use, is the absence of an index.

Now for the translations themselves. Let us start with the *Forord*. Here is a simple question. Should you translate it as "Foreword" as Jech does (5*ff*) or "Preface" as Kirmmse does (3*ff*)? It is a subtle change. Foreword seems more obvious and direct, but Preface alludes to Nicholas Notabene's *Prefaces*. Here we are talking about a translation precedent. Does one stay with tradition or does one change it to relate to a new audience? Let's consider the section title *Forelobig Expectoration*. While Jech translates it as the traditional "Preliminary Expectoration," Kirmmse gives a wonderful explanation of why he chooses to translate it as "Preliminary: Getting Something Off My Chest." It is accurate in terms of what Johannes de Silentio is doing existentially at that moment, but it does not capture the fact that expectoration is something that comes from within the body. Preliminary expectoration is a fancy way of saying "clearing one's throat," which is what one does before they have something painful or important to say.

As for tradition versus novelty, how does one translate *Viv* in the phrase "*min Hukommelse er en trofast Viv*" (SKS 129)? Since this is a metaphor and not a philosophical point about the feminine, Kirmmse translates it as "spouse" (40), resulting in a more gender-neutral reading. But one must ask, is it possible (or desirable) to create a gender-neutral reading of Kierkegaard? There are other things that are perhaps a little pedantic to inquire about, such as the question of whether it is better to translate *Citharspiller* (*SKS* 123) as "lyre player" as Kirmmse does (33) or as "zither player" as Jech does (27). Because this instrument is referred to in the story of Orpheus, the correct translation is "lyre player," which is a kind of harp. Zither is a completely different instrument. An important question to ask, though, is whether Kierkegaard got it wrong. If so, Jech has the correct translation of Kierkegaard's text, but Kirmmse is conceptually correct given the actual literary context. In the 1845 *Danish-English Dictionary* by Farrall and Repp, *Cithar* is translated as

"cithern." A cithern is a cheap, easier-to-play version of a lute, which evolved into the guitar. This brings up the broader problem of what to do with errors in the Kierkegaard's original text. Keep them or correct them? For instance, in *Problema III*, where de Silentio is expanding on a story from Aristotle's *Politics* (SKS 182), he uses the term "augers" (*Augurerne*). Jech points out rightly in a note (113) that augur is a Roman term for a person who observes animals, thus determining whether a course of action is a propitious one. It is not a Greek term. Kirmmse solves this problem by using the word "diviners" (107).

We have yet another challenge: words that have been lost to cultural change within Danish as well as words that have changed within English. At the end of *Forord*, we have the words *Registrator* and *Paragraphsluger* (SKS 103). According to the 1845 dictionary, *Registrator* means register, but I certainly have no idea what register meant in 1845. Register of wills? Jech has some fun with these terms. Jech translates *Registrator* as "enterprising archivist" (60). Why not? And *Paragraphsluger* as "paragraph-gobbler" (60). It certainly has the right feel. Kirmmse, on the other hand, chooses to go for something more elegant and explanatory: a "busy scholarly bureaucrat, who gorges on paragraphs" (7). Again, "paragraph-gobbler" is something that would immediately grab the attention of a younger audience.

There are other differences in translation that may reflect the translator's background or intent. One of the more curious differences is for the section title *Stemning*. Kirmmse chooses "Tuning Up" (9*ff*) as if one were listening to an orchestra before a performance. This makes sense when one considers that the root of *Stemning* is *Stemme* or voice. Jech, who has a background in music and an interest in ballet, observes in a note that *Stemning* in Danish is "an artistic miniature used to establish a particular mood" (15). Moreover, he adds that Kierkegaard made a marginal note about the Greek word for "introduction" in his text. Because of this, Jech chooses the word "Prelude" (11*ff*).

Now we come to the troublesome word *Anfægtelse*. In his "Translator's Note," Kirmmse makes it quite clear that he will consistently translate *Anfægtelse* as "spiritual trial." For Jech, it is another matter entirely. While he acknowledges that it has traditionally been translated "spiritual trial," Jech chooses to translate *Anfægtelse* as agon (141*ff*). I do not know whether he was intending to convey the pain, the agony, that Abraham must have gone through in responding to God's command to sacrifice Isaac, but the word simply does not work. It is too alien a word in English to communicate any immediate meaning. Perhaps the term "spiritual ordeal" would have worked better as it implies more pain and

effort than "spiritual trial" does. Nonetheless, it is good to be reminded that not only the meanings, but the emotional valences, of words change as language evolves.

For instance, when in *Problema II* it is said that the Knight of Faith can say "*Du til Gud I Himmlne, medens selv den tragiske Helt kun tiltaler ham i 3die Person*" (SKS 168), it is meaningless to translate "*3die Person*" as "third person." It simply does not reflect English grammar. Both translators explain that "*Du*" means the informal you in Danish, the pronoun reserved for family and friends. But I think the answer is that the Knight of Faith no longer needs to say "*De*" to God, which is the formal you in older Danish. Today, you would still address a member of the Royal Family this way. However, "*de*" (not capitalized) is the third person "they" in Danish. Did Kierkegaard make a mistake?

An interesting difference between the two translations is how they go about presenting supplementary information. Kirmmse uses traditional endnotes, found, as you might expect, at the end of the book. Jech does something more unusual. He has end-of-each-section notes. At first this was annoying, but it made perfect sense once I realized that he has a "Historical Glossary" at the end of the book. Kirmmse's endnotes are helpful for explaining Biblical, literary, philosophical, and historical mysteries. However, Jech's are by far the more detailed. He has been a zealous researcher. I assume many of these notes are to be found in the *Realkommetar* to *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, but one also wonders whether Kirmmse's *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* as well as the Kirmmse-coedited *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries* were not also sources. Furthermore, a scholarly addition to Kirmmse's text is his placement of the pagination of SKS within the book. This enables any reader with his translation to look up questions they might have about the original text. Not only is this invaluable to the person who is beginning to take an interest in Kierkegaard's Danish, it also helps the Kierkegaard scholar move back and forth between the Danish critical edition and the English translation. I hope more translators of Kierkegaard's works follow this precedent in the future.

I do have a question, though. What is the best way to interpret Kierkegaard's historical and literary references? Do we actually know what they are? Or do we merely infer them? If this is the case, what might we be missing? We all have had the experience of reading a text whose allusions are outdated. Many of us have had the experience of explaining such an allusion to students who have nothing in their experience to give it context. The classic example of such a phrase whose context has been long lost is Homer's "wine-dark sea." We simply don't know what he meant. Any culture that might have explained this phrase is long gone. Similarly, where de Silentio writes "*der har tømt Giftbægeret*" in

*Forelobig Expectoration* while talking about the Knight of Resignation (SKS 136), the cup or chalice refers to the nature of the Knight's love, but what he means by that is ambiguous. Kirmmse agrees with the traditional interpretation: the phrase alludes to the death of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates is given a cup of hemlock to drink as a means of execution (156). Jech gives us a different interpretation (49). He relates it to the story of Tristan and Isolde from Wagner's opera of the same name. The lovers agree to drink a cup of poison together, which Tristan believes might kill him; however, Isolde's maid has substituted a love potion. Nonetheless, in the end, both lovers die. It seems Tristan was right.

One can dither about all day talking about picayune differences in translation. It is said that a difference that makes no difference is merely a distinction. A translator can wonder whether the choice of a particular word moves the translation in a different theological or philosophical direction. Does it alter too drastically the "feeling tone" that Kierkegaard is trying to create? These are all valid academic concerns, but they are not relevant to the non-Kierkegaard scholar. They are not relevant to the person picking up Kierkegaard for the first time. Given this, I can recommend both translations highly—with the caveat that they are directed at different audiences. Kirmmse's is a more personal book. Jech's text is to be used in teaching. Depending on what you want, decide for yourself which text to read.

**Maria Balaska, *Anxiety and Wonder: On Being Human* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2024).**

**Reviewed by Peter Joseph Fritz, College of the Holy Cross**

Contemporary culture seems convinced that anxiety debilitates and impedes, nothing more. We must rid ourselves of it, at great cost. We must fear it, lest it tighten its grip. We must treat it psychologically, attack it with apps, meditate our way out of it. For some people, who suffer acutely from anxiety, this is necessary. Others, faced with ordinary forms of anxiety, ought to reassess it and their relation to it.

Balaska contests common-sense pathologization of anxiety, examining it instead, inspired by Kierkegaard, in terms of possibility (14). She joins anxiety to wonder, since both are experiences that throw us into the question of existence (2). Both face us with vertigo: "The experience of dizziness serves as a bridge that connects wonder to anxiety" (74). With anxiety and wonder alike, we can learn from our moods (5). What do we learn? That we are in a world, and that we are sense-makers (9). These may not seem like earth-shattering revelations, but Balaska makes a persuasive case that anxiety and wonder's capability for making them explicit can effect a powerful shift in how people live.

The core aim of the book is to advocate for a "more complex view of the affective life" based on "the complex status of the presence of meaningfulness" (76). Pursuit of this aim leads Balaska back to the origin of philosophy, whose prime task is to deal with the givenness of the world's intelligibility (78). I find Balaska's aim laudable. We all could reckon more carefully with our emotional and sensed lives, the uncanny human ability to apprehend reality, to arrange it, to be moved by it, to mold it—but also reality's equally uncanny resistance to such efforts. Recollection of philosophy's primal gesture, such as Balaska urges, bears perennial importance.

Balaska conjugates this primal gesture by presenting anxiety and wonder as dynamic experiences of objectlessness, the nothing or no-thing that exceeds (while never severing ties from) our everyday rapport with objects and things. Dread and awe interrupt these surface relationships. She chooses as chief interlocutors Freud and Lacan (chapter 2), Heidegger (chapters 3 and 4), Plato (chapter 4), Arendt (chapter 4), Wittgenstein (chapter 5), and, above all, Kierkegaard (throughout). This last author exerts influence on all the others. Balaska treats each adroitly, with remarkable focus and concision, drawing from each a little more insight into the open-endedness of human life, which we would

do well to enact with greater creativity, rather than avoiding by squelching our anxiety and deadening our wonder.

For scholars (and enthusiasts) of Kierkegaard, Balaska's extended exegesis of key moments (pun intended) in *The Concept of Anxiety* will delight (49–61). Balaska crisply renders Kierkegaard's masterful account of the ambivalence of spirit that shines through anxiety. Her work on this shows its importance in chapter 5, where, in a successful attempt to bring the best out of Wittgenstein, Balaska deftly directs his skepticism toward "wonder at the world's existence" in the direction of Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian appreciation for paradox as a viable "*form* of understanding rather than its breakdown" (94, emphasis original). Competency in paradoxical understanding leads Kierkegaard, after all, to write so compellingly about anxiety as possibility.

*Anxiety and Wonder* is not a practical guide to living anxiety-free or seeking after wonder, nor does it pretend to be. Its task is more modest, yet, as I see it, monumental for that (even in a slim volume). Balaska offers this book as an opening, a statement of possibility, a call to creativity. I often worry, as did Kierkegaard, and so it seems does Balaska, that people ignore the openness that ought to define them. I say this not as a criticism, but a little as a lament. In our day of constant bombardment with information (including information about how to prevent or assuage anxiety, though not so much—how telling!—about how to enjoy wonder), it is not overblown to state that we are actively prevented from recurring to the personal depths on which Balaska fixes her and her readers' attention. Balaska's excellent book exhorts listening to a call that issues from these depths, which manifests itself in anxiety and wonder. Should readers heed her word, possibilities will open. Quite possibly, the change will be invisible, but for those who listen, "the orientation of their lives is shifted, and the overall tone is different" (103). *What* to do (specifics) will now have a different why and how. The closure that seems to define us will be breached. This is why we read philosophy in the first place: to awaken to our dizziness and, insofar as we are able, to embrace its implications, namely, that we are free, and should live that way.

**Petr Vaškovic, *Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky: The Search of the Authentic Life and the Problem of Existential Entrapment* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024).**

**Reviewed by Ville Hämäläinen, Tampere University**

Petr Vaškovic's monograph *Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky: The Search of the Authentic Life and the Problem of Existential Entrapment* revives the scholarly tradition of reading two existential authors and thinkers together. As Vaškovic, like many before him, remarks, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1888) were contemporaries who dealt with intriguingly similar themes of Christianity and existence—and yet, they knew nothing about one another. Vaškovic's main aim is to examine the similar ways in which these two authors address the search for the authentic life. Throughout the book, Vaškovic reads Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard by turns and points out similarities in their ways of depicting the obstacles of pursuing authenticity. The book is composed of three parts: The first part deals with similarities between Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's thought (including the introduction of the preexisting tradition of reading them together). The second part, then, introduces the stories of entrapment, with focus on the various obstacles to the individual's ethical-religious development. This part includes the main readings of both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. The last part provides some ways out of entrapment.

Vaškovic argues that the characters in the books by both authors are not ready-made but struggle in order to become authentically ethical and religious individuals. Vaškovic calls the various ways in which each character's progress is hindered "existential entrapment." By existential entrapment, Vaškovic refers to moments when an individual wishes to progress towards the ethical-religious, but for one reason or another is unable to take any steps. The obstacles of existential development include, but are not limited to, daydreaming, indecisiveness, and obsession with an idea. The study is well-structured and easy to follow. In each chapter, Vaškovic alternates between Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky (instead of devoting independent chapters for each author, say), which works well, and at the same time, proves how strikingly similar Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky are.

Considering the vast corpus that Vaškovic works with, the book is rather concise, 269 pages in total. Despite the brevity, Vaškovic manages to provide an overview of each text he analyzes and combine his original text analyses with summaries of reasonable length of various works by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. I consider his readings of Dostoevsky better, as they less often build an argument on a kind of psychologizing of the characters, and involve more literary history. That might stem from

Vaškovic's "methodological" distinction of reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher and Dostoevsky as an author. Since philosophy and literature were not particularly distinctive fields in Golden Age Denmark, Vaškovic could have contextualized Kierkegaard more within the literary field of his time. I will leave Vaškovic's readings of Dostoevsky mostly aside, as this review focuses on the approach to Kierkegaard.

The analyses of Kierkegaard's writings have their pros and cons. Beginning with the achievements, it is overall a welcome idea to closely read Kierkegaard's novelistic works. Vaškovic devotes sections to texts that are undeservedly overlooked in Kierkegaard's corpus, such as "Silhouettes" in *Either/Or*. Similarly, Vaškovic offers detailed analyses of some posthumous books that are often left out of the Kierkegaardian core (such as *Johannes Climacus, or, De omnibus dubitandum est*, and *The Book on Adler*).

Vaškovic makes some linguistic remarks on both Kierkegaard's Danish and Dostoevsky's Russian. That is refreshing against the backdrop of the Anglophone dominance of this area of study. For instance, he analyzes the overabundant use of various Russian words referring to shame in Ivolgin's dying speech in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* (90), and how the prefixes change the meaning of the same root form (112). Similarly, he recurrently comments on the various possible translations for Danish words. However, some core concepts would have benefited from more discussion. Vaškovic quite loosely uses the terms "imagination," "fantasy," and "dreaming," even though "imagination" in particular is a multifaceted key term in Kierkegaard's thought. Vaškovic presents imagination almost as if it should be avoided, even though for Kierkegaard it allows us to imagine one's better self, and as such, it could provide another way out of entrapment. Similarly, Vaškovic adopts the Hongs' translation for *Tungsind* as "depression," despite the anachronism. Regarding the definitions of imagination, *Tungsind*, and moods in general, a consideration of Vincent McCarthy's work would have been an asset.[1] Since Vaškovic reads Russian, the study would have also been more relevant if it had introduced some previous studies of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky in more detail. For instance, Piama Gaidenko's dissertation receives only a passing mention, when it could have perhaps deepened Vaškovic's undertheorized account of characterological analysis.[2]

Vaškovic aims to make a characterological analysis of Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's heroes, but it is difficult to determine what kind of theoretical framework he is using. At least, it is not drawn from literary studies, and certain concepts and theories

[1] See e.g., Vincent McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978); Vincent McCarthy, *Kierkegaard as Psychologist* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015).
[2] Piama Pavlovna Gaidenko, *Tragediia estetizma: K kharateristike mirovozzrenii S. K'erkegora* [The Tragedy of Aestheticism: On the World-View of Søren Kierkegaard] (Moscow: Iskysstvo, 1970).

from literary studies could have improved the argument. Vaškovic does not pay attention to the unreliable narrators both in Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, and he seems to overlook the metafictional nature present in the imaginary psychological constructions of *Repetition* and *Stages on Life's Way*. Thus, Vaškovic's interpretation of novelistic works contains some of the main weaknesses of the study.

The readings also occasionally suffer from carelessness. Vaškovic rushes into interpreting, at the expense of reliable framing. For instance, he frames *Repetition's* Young Man as someone who chooses "to poeticize rather than experience the romantic relationship, his existence takes on a dream-like quality. He lives in his imagination, fantasizing about his love and paying little attention to other people or events unfolding around him" (83). That seems rather a strange statement, since the Young Man actually tries to avoid becoming a poet, and he makes recurrent remarks on Constantin Constantius and their relationship.

Vaškovic argues that the Young Man pays "very little attention to what was 'objectively real,' i.e., what was present within the intersubjectively established space they share with other individuals" (102). If that is true, it makes it hard to explain how the Young Man seems to care more about Constantin Constantius' judgment of him than the beloved girl's opinions. After *Repetition* takes its turn into an epistolary novel, relatively little happens, but everything that does happen takes place exactly in "the intersubjectively established space" between the Young Man and his confidant. *Repetition* seems not to support Vaškovic's discovery of the Young Man's isolated dreaming. Moreover, the account overlooks the novella's main theme of suffering as something beyond any imagination.

Furthermore, the analysis of the final letter by the Young Man goes as follows: "Some might argue that the Young Man's joy at seeing his ex-lover's marriage proves that he actually cares for her. But would he be any less happy if this woman were to free herself from him not by marriage but by death? Probably not" (103). But the Young Man is not happy at all. His apparent joyfulness is bittersweet at best, the Young Man's clumsy attempt to become ironic.

Vaškovic's speculation over the alternative ending and the Young Man's feelings about it brings us to the next criticism. On many occasions, Vaškovic reads the writings as if the characters were real people, and sometimes veers too closely in the psychological readings to diagnosing the characters. For one, when discussing Marie Beaumarchais in "Silhouettes," Vaškovic posits that "Marie's ability to switch quickly between often contradictory opinions and beliefs might still seem to be an advantage rather than a pathological existential state," and "that Marie's mind is so extraordinarily flexible that she can quickly and effortlessly change even the most ingrained of

her opinions" (134). However, I would argue that neither Goethe's *Clavigo* (from which her character is borrowed) nor *Either/Or* provides us access to Marie's mind, since she is a fictional character.

Unfortunately, psychologizing characters or pseudonyms is a constant undercurrent in the history of Kierkegaard research. In the 1930s, L. C. Knight made a similar observation about Shakespeare studies, and advocated a shift from characterological analysis to thematic approaches, in a wittily titled paper, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" Knight implied that the scholars kept themselves busy with such ridiculous questions. Occasionally, Kierkegaard scholars seem to be too tempted by Kierkegaard's psychologically rich characters, with the consequence of dismissing the textual and structural choices in his *oeuvre*. I do not claim that this only happens in Kierkegaard research, but dealing with literary artifacts seems difficult whenever literary texts are used to illuminate philosophical or psychological phenomena. However, some promising counterexamples occur, too: Kresten Nordentoft's *Kierkegaards psykologi* succeeds in combining the thematic level of psychology with the linguistic-structural level.[3] Nordentoft was, of course, a literary scholar. Vaškovic's psychological insights have their value, but lack that kind of balance between the psychological and literary aspects.

If there were a single lesson to be learned from literary studies, it would be that the characters do not have any agency by themselves; rather, the author has designed them in a certain manner to communicate something to the reader. That should be our main interest, not further speculation on the destinies of individual characters. We should always bear this artificiality in mind, and more precisely, take it into account while writing about novels, or any other literary narratives. What is the author's purpose behind such characters, events, and so forth? For one reason or another, Vaškovic often refers to Dostoevsky's authorial purposes while analyzing his novels, but whenever Kierkegaard's writings are in question, he treats the pseudonymous authors or characters as if they were real people with purposes of their own.

The first introductory chapter on polyphony seems a bit unnecessary, as Vaškovic employs the notion of polyphony only once in the rest of the book. Polyphony has become a widely used term, and as such, it has relatively little to do with Mikhail Bakhtin's initial theory of the polyphonic novel. In its original sense, polyphony is rather a simple concept: the author places multiple voices, independent from the author's worldview, in a single novel. However, Vaškovic presents the term quite poorly,

[3] Kresten Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards Psykologi* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1972). For the English translation, see Kresten Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse, Duquesne Studies, Psychological Series 7 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978).

as he uses Johannes Climacus' reading of Judge William's part of *Either/Or* as an example of polyphony, when it is rather a case of intertextuality. *Either/*Or, in and of itself, with Aesthete A, William, and the priest from Jutland, or *Stages on Life's Way*, with various characters and life-views, would have illuminated polyphony well enough. Perhaps Vaškovic misrepresents polyphony and treats Kierkegaard's pseudonyms in a different manner than Dostoevsky's characters for the same reason: he aims to read Kierkegaard as a philosopher and Dostoevsky as an author. Thus, Vaškovic seems to read Kierkegaard's novels almost as if they were not novels. At the same time, Vaškovic sporadically goes on to examine authorial intention by referring to both of the writers' journals and early drafts of the works. That seems unnecessary, and worse still, contradicts the polyphony that Vaškovic presents at the outset. Polyphony, in the Bakhtinian sense, is disinterested in the author's final word, for it is the variety of characters' truths that matters.

Even with these shortcomings, Vaškovic's study eloquently foregrounds the existential depth of both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. As such, the study emphasizes the role that literature has in existential thinking. Although Vaškovic leaves this undertheorized, the combination of profoundly existential literature and philosophical-religious questions speaks for itself. As mentioned above, in terms of Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*, Vaškovic reads books that are rarely touched on in the current Kierkegaard research, like *Stages on Life's Way* and its deliberately tedious Quidam's Diary. As such, the study participates in the ongoing existential approach to Kierkegaard. His original idea of existential entrapment captures what some other scholars have approached in terms of the failing life-views of various pseudonyms. Here it is easy to agree with the author that the three existential stages do have their value in regard to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous characters. Vaškovic builds his argument without delving too deeply into the theory of indirect communication. Indirect communication is an age-old problem in Kierkegaard research, mainly revolving around whether Kierkegaard was a religious author from the outset and thus, aimed to mislead the readers by means of the vivid pseudonymous oeuvre. Vaškovic shows that the existential questions in Kierkegaard (and Dostoevsky) are valid and rich despite the debate around the indirect communication. Thus, Vaškovic approaches the existential questions at eye level with each literary character.

**Anthony Eagan, *Kierkegaard's Concept of the Interesting: The Aesthetic Gulf in Either/Or I* (London: Lexington Books, 2024).**

**Reviewed by Peter Bock Nielsen, University of Lund**

Anthony Eagan's *Kierkegaard's Concept of the Interesting: The Aesthetic Gulf in Either/Or I* provides a compelling analysis of one of the most intriguing concepts in early Kierkegaard, namely his explorations of the concept of the interesting. Eagan believes that the entirety of *Either/Or I* can be read through the concept of the interesting, and with his analysis he seeks to demonstrate this. It is Eagan's bold claim that "no thorough exegesis of the first volume of Either/Or exists" (xix), and whether or not this is the case, it is my assessment that Eagan succeeds in his endeavor. As a rule, Eagan dedicates a chapter to each chapter in *Either/Or I,* thus mimicking the structure of the book he analyzes. The soundness of his methods is demonstrated by the fact that his analysis confirms mainstream views on Kierkegaard and his work, while also providing new insights and perspectives.

Eagan deserves praise for his analytical rigor and clear reasoning. Despite the complexities of his subject matter, the reasoning is always clear, and the presupposed knowledge of Kierkegaard, his works, and his time is as a rule either kept to a minimum or accompanied by a thorough explanation. This quality makes the book suited for a variety of uses—in addition to appealing to the experienced Kierkegaard scholar, Eagan's book could also serve as a general introduction to *Either/Or I* and the intellectual context of its time for the interested student. Chapter 1, "From the Beautiful to the Interesting," deserves special mention in this regard, wherein Eagan in a concise but never unfairly reducing manner lays out the philosophical history of aesthetics and beauty leading up to the intellectual milieu in which *Either/Or I* was written. This chapter alone could serve as an introductory text to the historical views on aesthetics and beauty from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century.

In this chapter, Eagan demonstrates how aesthetics in these years changed from a focus on the beautiful to a focus on the interesting, and how especially Schlegel's establishing of the interesting as a distinct philosophical category should be viewed as a turning point away from the aesthetic universalism of ancient Greek thought, as well as from his immediate predecessor, Kant. Whereas these aesthetic concepts of the past viewed beauty as the core category of the aesthetic, the modern turn to the interesting poses many difficulties. While the beautiful as viewed by Kant is a harmonious experience of union between oneself and the objective world, the interesting is an inherently unstable concept in constant conflict with its surroundings, since the

fundamental quality of the interesting is the conflict between what is outwardly visible and determined and what is internally experienced. According to Eagan, the emergence of the interesting as an aesthetic category was a result of a crisis in Kantian thinking, since the latter's harmonious view on aesthetics could not account for the pleasant quality of much seemingly unpleasant art. Yet, according to Eagan, Kierkegaard's aim in *Either/Or I* is not primarily to discuss various views on the interesting. Eagan writes: "The modern aesthetic category is elevated to a heightening existential dilemma in Kierkegaard, and these works express how deeply embedded within the modern experience is the evidently aesthetic issue which the concept of the interesting ultimately illuminates" (23). Eagan shows that Kierkegaard's discussion of the interesting distinguishes itself from the discussion of his contemporaries in that the category of the interesting for Kierkegaard is not only aesthetic, but also existential. According to Eagan this is exemplified by the fact that Kierkegaard easily could have defined a clear philosophical understanding of the interesting yet decides not to. Thus, *Either/Or I* should probably not be viewed as a discussion but rather as an exploration of the interesting from different points of view.

From Don Giovanni to Johannes the Seducer, the unifying principle in Eagan's analysis is the conflict between inner and outer as the foundational quality of the interesting. Eagan even gives his analysis a narrative structure of its own by exemplifying how the insights of one chapter in *Either/Other I* can logically lead to the chapter following. This provides great clarity to his analysis. However, when considering the literary aspects of *Either/Or I,* this approach might give rise to some challenges. As expressed by Viktor Eremita in the foreword to *Either/Or I,* A's theses (the chapters in *Either/Or I*) are found in what appeared to him to be a random order, and he decided the structure for the published work. It should be noted that Eagan does acknowledge this in his argument for excluding Diapsalmata in his analysis (xviii), but when at the end of his chapter 3 on "Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern" he writes "Where, then, is an aesthete to turn?" (83), this could be read as presupposing a continuity in A's reasoning, the absence of which might in itself be a deliberate literary device. I want to emphasize that this does not necessarily weaken Eagan's analysis, but it risks giving the impression that *Either/Or I* is a more coherent and structured work than seems intended by the author.

Eagan is right, however, that from "Immediate Stages of the Erotic, or Musical Erotic" there seems to be a progression in consciousness of the conflict of the interesting, from the near-unconscious Don Giovanni to the conscious culmination with Johannes the Seducer. According to Eagan, Don Giovanni is characterized not only by a lack of knowledge of the conflict between inner and outer; his entire modus vivendi

as a seducer is oriented around not acknowledging this conflict. By indiscriminately seducing as many women as possible, Don Giovanni manages to keep his anxiety at bay. This is possible due to his low consciousness of himself and the conflict of the interesting.

According to A, art can heal the interestingly tormented individual in two ways: through escapism, as seen with Don Giovanni, or through mirroring, as seen in the following chapter in both books: "Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern." Here the interesting is situated in contrast not with the universal as earlier discussed but with fate, which in itself is a mode of the universal. Oedipus has two choices. If he surrenders to fate, he brings himself in alignment with the universal, and thus he relinquishes his interestingness. Only when he decides to defy his fate, a conflict between inner and outer emerges, and Oedipus becomes an interesting character in the modern sense and thus transcends his ancient Greek origins.

In "Shadowgraphs," Eagan makes the interesting the cornerstone of the analysis by investigating how the status of the deceived is not shown in the outer, thus again making the inner-outer conflict the center of his analysis of the interesting. In the following chapters on "The Unhappiest One," "The First Love," and "Crop Rotation," Eagan makes similar analyses and reaches rewarding insights, before the book culminates in an analysis of "The Seducer's Diary," where the concept of the interesting reaches its climax. According to Eagan, the word "interesting" and its derivations appear more than 50 times on the approximately 120 pages that constitute "The Seducer's Diary." Eagan demonstrates how the interesting is not only a feature of the modern, replacing Kant's concept of the universal as the predominant aesthetic category, but also serves as its existential heir. Since the modern individual cannot rely on a feeling of universal connectedness to satisfy their existential needs, the interesting must serve this function. In his analysis, Eagan shows how Johannes exemplifies this new way of living, as he through repeated seductions tries to make as many interesting moments as he possibly can. Eagan also shows how this not only has internal consequences but social consequences as well, since Johannes tries to transform Cordelia from a beautiful individual to an interesting one, thus making a literary gestalt out of Cordelia as exemplary of the development from beauty to the interesting in the eighteenth century. Thus, Johannes' mode of seduction is demonstratively different from that of Don Giovanni, even though the conflict of the interesting is the foundational principle behind both.

In addition to his thought-provoking and compelling analysis, Eagan also possesses an admirable ability to communicate his ideas and concepts clearly. As such *Kierkegaard's Concept of the Interesting* comes highly recommended.

# Notes on Contributors

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