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Edited by

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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.

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.

Editors' Introduction

Dear Readers,

As of 2023, the Hong Kierkegaard Library's *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* had been in existence for over 40 years. Now, in December 2024, we are bringing the publication to a new platform as an open-access, peer-reviewed journal, making its contents available to students and scholars through libraries, databases, and other online resources, and reshaping it in terms of content, depth, and reach. Among other things, we have introduced the new title *International Journal of Kierkegaard Research* (IJKR). We are pleased to present here the theme and scope of this transformed publication.

A specialist journal has everything to do with the paradox of community. Our challenge is to "upbuild" what is there, the current field of study—supporting, nurturing, inspiring, and promoting—but to do so without drawing boundaries around it that exclude the surprising, the challenging, the different, and the critical. The IJKR seeks to publish research that opens Kierkegaard's texts anew for our "present age."

Kierkegaard conjured the single individual of modernity by appealing to his singular reader, and his impact on our empirical world would be difficult to overstate. To become a reader, for Kierkegaard, is to be changed by the text: goaded—as by a Socratic gadfly—to a more earnest responsibility. The IJKR aims to facilitate the back and forth of original text and scholarly response, of conversation and exchange, and of the sharing that happens between scholarship and the demands of "actuality." It hosts a virtual space in which writing on Kierkegaard questions and invigorates our experience, and in turn, tests and inspires what happens today.

With its roots in the Hong Kierkegaard Library, which supports students and scholars from around the world in coming together and accessing resources for reading Kierkegaard, the IJKR aims to provide a platform for the fruits of this research. Then, following the Editors' own connections with both the Hong Kierkegaard Library in Minnesota and the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen, we hope to foster

further dialogue between two traditional centers of research (the one Anglo-American-leaning, the other European-leaning), as well as to stimulate cross-readership between existing circles of scholarship.

Outstanding essays should be available to others to read, and the IJKR aims to support scholars producing excellent work in a way that is indexed and recognized by the broader academic community. This is the goal of the Journal: to strengthen the field of Kierkegaard studies, from undergraduate to doctoral students through established and already-esteemed scholars, in such a way that "strengthening" might also mean opening and broadening.

In this spirit we solicit rigorous and imaginative essays from scholars in diverse fields, including philosophy, religious studies, psychology, politics, literature, and from those scholars working at the intersection of disciplines on subjects inspired by Kierkegaard's texts.

The first issue of the *International Journal of Kierkegaard Research* includes eight pieces distributed over four sections: four peer-reviewed articles, one student article, an invited contribution, and two book reviews. It is available to anyone both through Manifold, an open-source platform for scholarly publishing, as well as through downloadable PDFs. Please see the "Notes on Contributors" for more information on the contributors to this issue.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Manifold, and in particular, St. Olaf College and the University of Minnesota for taking on this "instance" of Manifold for our new publication. We are especially grateful to Ben Gottfried with Rølvaag Memorial Library, St. Olaf College, for his kind efforts in helping us navigate this online platform, and to our student employee Kiara Fitzpatrick for her research and learned expertise in bringing the website to fruition. We would also like to thank our peer reviewers for their time and hard work, both in guaranteeing the quality of our publications and in offering feedback that helps enhance the research of our community of scholars. Likewise, we are grateful to the members of our advisory board for their support, to Brian Söderquist of St. Olaf College for his willingness to brainstorm during the inception stage, to the editors of the *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* for their collaborative spirit, to our Managing

Editor, Dawna Hendricks, for her excellent organizational skills and professional oversight, and to Colleen O'Reilly for her meticulous copyedit. Finally, we thank our readers and contributors for their openness and support. We look forward to continuing to build community and scholarship together around the work of Kierkegaard in the times to come.

Sincerely,

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

SEEING HOPE IN TRIAL: KIERKEGAARD AND SHI TIESHENG READING JOB

BY LUYING CHEN

Abstract: This essay compares the theme of suffering as a trial in *Repetition* (1843) and Shi Tiesheng's *Fragmented Writings between Sicknesses* (2002). I identify four movements of the young man reading Job: turning inward, identifying with Job, identifying a false theology that suffering is a divine punishment, and teaching about "trial" affirming contending with God and pointing to hope. In similar moves, Shi reads Job to refute the Buddhist concept of suffering as karmic retribution. Shi's narrative of becoming an individual and an author echoes Kierkegaard's warning about the crowd. Doubting the existence of a preternatural heaven, Shi does not commit to the Christian religious subjectivity. He offers an antithesis to Kierkegaard's individual, sharing existing Chinese literary and religious subject positions that he must reject in order to exist. This reading illuminates Shi's thinking pattern in its affinity with and departure from Kierkegaard, clarifying the nature of Shi's "religious syncretism."[1]

Keywords: suffering, Job, trial, hope, individual, antithesis

Dubbed "the Job among Chinese writers,"[2] Shi Tiesheng 史铁生 (1951–2010) became well known in China for his essay "Wo yu Ditan" 我与地坛 (I and the Altar to Earth, 1991).[3] Recounting his retreats to Beijing's Altar to Earth Park for years after he was

[1] I thank Ms. Chen Ximi for patiently answering questions from me over the past decade on Shi Tiesheng's works and sending me books. Many friends from China and America tirelessly searched for articles for me: Dr. Zhang Jianfei, Dr. Duan Lijun, Ms. Shen Hongmei, and Dr. Lang Chen. I thank Cynthia Lund and Elizabeth L. Black from the Hong Kierkegaard Library for welcoming me into the library. Finally, my thanks to the anonymous reviewers and to Colleen O'Reilly, Anna L. Söderquist, and Dawna Hendricks.

[2] Xia Weidong 夏维东, "Shi Tiesheng: Zhongguo zuojia li de Yuebo 史铁生：中国作家里的约伯"[Shi Tiesheng: the Job among Chinese writers], *Jintian*, May 26, 2011, https://www.jintian.net/today/?action-viewnews-itemid-29768.

[3] Shi Tiesheng 史铁生, "Wo yu Ditan" 我与地坛 [I and the Altar to Earth], in *Shi Tiesheng Zuopin Xilie* 史铁生作品系列 [Shi Tiesheng works in series], vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 2011). English translations are mine.

paralyzed at age twenty-one, Shi confesses his preoccupation with three questions: "First, do I want to die? Second, for what do I live? Third, why do I want to write?"[4] In 2003, Shi won the Sinophone Literature and Media Award from China's politically outspoken newspaper, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, for his life-long achievement as a writer. He was commended for *Bing Xi Suibi* 病隙碎笔 (Fragmented writings between sicknesses, 2002, hereafter *Fragmented Writings*),[5] a book of six chapters containing 243 essay fragments written between his hospital visits for dialysis. Meditating on finding purpose in suffering, history, truth and subjectivity, aesthetics, and bioethics, among other topics, Shi references many literary and philosophical texts from around the world. He explains a key concept informing his idea "xinliu" 心流 (the heart's movement) as what Søren Kierkegaard "probably means by subjective truth."[6]

Scholars have begun to note a connection between Shi and Kierkegaard. In our respective studies, Gu Lin 顾林 and I explain the context for the above fragments mostly by paraphrasing Shi's own words.[7] Li Tao 李涛 engages with Kierkegaard a bit more when connecting Shi's views on disability to Kierkegaard's *Sickness Onto Death*.[8] However, a more thorough comparison of Shi and Kierkegaard is called for. This essay examines their shared vision of suffering as a trial leading to hope and the author's position as a singular individual. In section one, I identify the concept of Job's trial as the core of the story of suffering in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*: *A Venture in Experimenting Psychology* (1843, hereafter *Repetition*), attributed to the pseudonymous author Constantin Constantius.[9] In section two, I explain how Shi reads Job as proceeding through a series of conceptual movements that are parallel to the young man in *Repetition*. In section three, I engage in the debate about Shi's "religious syncretism" by comparing his narrative on becoming an author

[4] Ibid., 14.

[5] Shi Tiesheng 史铁生, *Bing Xi Suibi* 病隙碎笔 [Fragmented writings between sicknesses] (Xi'an: Shan'xi Normal University Press, 2002). The book has had several reprints and an edition by China Braille Press in 2008. References are to the original Chinese book, with chapter followed by section number and page number. English translations are mine, with assistance from Matthew Venker.

[6] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, II:39–40, p. 90.

[7] Gu Lin 顾林, "信仰与救赎—史铁生思想研究" [Faith and salvation: research into Shi Tiesheng's thought] (PhD diss., Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2015), p. 56. Luying Chen 陈陆鹰, "The Solitary Writer in Shi Tiesheng's *Fragments Written at the Hiatus of Sickness*." *Chinese Literature Today* 6, no. 1 (2017): pp. 73–74.

[8] Li Tao 李涛, *Canji yu aiqing: lun Shi Tiesheng de liangge shengming mima* 残疾与爱情—论史铁生的两个生命密码 [Disability and love: on Shi Tiesheng's two life codes] (Master's thesis, Xinan Daxue 西南大学 [Southwest University], 2011), pp. 4–12.

[9] SKS 4, 7–96 / R, 123–231.

with Kierkegaard's warning about the crowd in *Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author* from *The Point of View*.[10] Shi offers an antithesis to Kierkegaard's individual, emphasizing the subject positions that he rejects more than affirming a religious position.

1. From Suffering to Trial: Reading Job in *Repetition*

At the beginning of *Repetition*, the narrator Constantin associates repetition with happiness: "Repetition . . . if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy."[11] As a confidant to an anonymous young man whose melancholy has worsened after he fell in love with and became engaged to a young woman, Constantin concludes that the young man, though "deeply and fervently in love," was "able to recollect his love" a few days later. He was "essentially through with the entire relationship."[12] In Part Two, the young man sends letters to Constantin after breaking off his engagement with his fiancée in which he details his reading of the Book of Job. After discoursing on the meaning of Job's trial, he awaits his thunderstorm, expecting to repeat Job's experience of regaining double his losses, so that he would be "fit to be a husband" and to have his honor "saved" and his pride "redeemed."[13] In his last letter, the young man describes regaining his selfhood upon reading in the newspaper of the young woman's marriage to another man: "Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning?"[14]

Much scholarly attention has been given to explaining why Constantin fails to experience repetition during his second trip to Berlin while the young man succeeds in achiev-

[10] Shi's widow, author and editor Chen Ximi 陈希米, shared that Shi read three books that informed his writing of *Fragmented Writings*: Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Cunzai Zhuyi* 存在主义 [Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre], trans. Chen Guying 陈鼓应, Meng Xiangsen 孟祥森 and Liu Qi 刘崎 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1987); Luther J. Binkley, *Lixiang de Chongtu: Xifang shehui bianhua zhe de jiazhi guannian* 理想的冲突: 西方社会变化的价值观念 [Conflict of Ideals: Changing Values in Western Society], trans. Ma Yuande 马元德 et. al., (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983); and Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真 [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994). WeChat direct message to author, June 24, 2023.

[11] SKS 4, 7 / R, 131.

[12] SKS 4, 14 / R, 136.

[13] SKS 4, 81 / R, 214.

[14] SKS 4, 87–88 / R, 220–221.

ing repetition. For example, Claire Carlisle defines repetition as "a movement of becoming, of truth coming into existence."[15] Constantin's failure results from his preoccupation with the "externality," or "external aspects of existence" instead of inwardness.[16] His intellectual perspective limits him "to discover repetition's movement into actuality."[17] The young man's "movement away from Constantin symbolizes the transformation taking place within his consciousness: the transition from ideality to actuality, from philosophy to existence, which is expressed in the concept of repetition."[18] Carlisle identifies "inwardness, difference, faith and love" as themes that "constitute truth as the movement of repetition" in the young man.[19] Ionuț-Alexandru Bârliba agrees with Carlisle on these points.[20] Bârliba further identifies "three progressively linked moments that determine" the process of the young man's "inner transformation." Moment one is "the confessional relation, friendship with Constantin Constantius." Moment two is the young man "putting his own existence under the example of Job's trials." Moment three is "the re-turn, the re-discovery of the self as an expression of repetition."[21] With attention to moment two, Bârliba redirects the discussion from repetition to the theme of suffering, to which Andrew J. Burgess had called attention two decades ago.[22]

Burgess urged us to see that the book has "at least two" themes and is "two stories told at once." The story of suffering "as felt by the unnamed young man" is as important as that about repetition.[23] A critical part of this story of suffering, I argue, is the young man's process of reading Job leading up to his discourse on Job's "trial." Seeing Job's trial, the young man acknowledges suffering, but more importantly, affirms that, with suffering such as Job's, an individual's contending with God points to the direction of hope. I

[15] Claire Carlisle, "Kierkegaard's *Repetition*: the Possibility of Motion." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (2005): p. 522.
[16] Ibid., p. 531.
[17] Ibid., p. 523.
[18] Ibid., p. 534.
[19] Ibid., p. 532.
[20] Ionuț-Alexandru Bârliba, "Søren Kierkegaard's *Repetition*: Existence in Motion," *Symposion*: *Theoretical and Applied Inquiries in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2014): pp. 23–49. The above quotes from Carlisle are found on pp. 27, 35, 44, and 39.
[21] Ibid., p. 36.
[22] Ibid., p. 40; see also Andrew J. Burgess, "*Repetition*—A Story of Suffering," *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 6: *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), p. 247.
[23] Burgess, "*Repetition*—A Story of Suffering," p. 247.

identify four distinctive movements in Bârliba's moment two: turning inward by declaring independence from the external world's judgment and establishing his position as an author (A), identifying with Job (B), critiquing the false theology of Job's friends (C), and offering "trial" as a correct understanding of Job's suffering (D). Seeing the deep suffering of Job, the young man, and Kierkegaard himself, Burgess maintains that "with Job and those who are taught by his example . . . patient suffering promotes the understanding of suffering by avoiding the detached reflection and by sharing the situation of the sufferer."[24] I will do my part of this "sharing" by quoting and paraphrasing the young man's own words as much as possible.

In the first movement (*Repetition* A, August 15 letter), the young man declares his independence from Constantin by diagnosing the latter's pathology. He describes Constantin as having "a demonic" and "indescribable" power that holds him "captive" and makes him anxious. He admires Constantin, and yet at times Constantin seems "mentally disordered" to have subjected "to such a degree, every passion, every emotion, every mood under the cold regimentation of reflection!" He criticizes Constantin's "calm and cold good sense" in advising the young man to pretend to be a despicable person and a deceptive lover to the young woman. He forbids Constantin from answering his letter, thereby switching from the position of the one who suffers silently to an author who controls the narrative of his suffering. [25]

Three stages of identification with Job mark the young man's second movement. First, he gives a sweeping summary of the entire Book of Job that affirms Job's lament as a sign of having faith (*Repetition* B1, September 19 letter). He uses the phrase "professional comforters" for those who prescribe to the distressed Job's declaration "the Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord."[26] In this context, "professional comforters" do not empathize with the one who is suffering. Calling Job's the "voice of the suffering, the cry of the grief-stricken, the shriek of the terrified, and a relief to all who bore their torment in silence," he identifies "fear of God" in Job's complaint to God. Referencing Job 38 to 42, where God answers Job in the thunder, he concludes that even if God's answer "crushes a man," it is "more glorious than the gossip and rumors about the righteousness of Governance that are invented by human wisdom." Even though he

[24] Ibid., p. 254.
[25] SKS 4, 59–60 / R, 189–190.
[26] SKS 4, 66 / R, 197, referencing Job 1:21.

has not lost as much as Job did, he identifies with Job, who has lost his beloved and his "honor and pride and along with it the vitality and meaning of life."[27]

The October 11 letter describes the young man's second stage (*Repetition* B2), experiencing and slowly exiting a phase of loathing existence matching Job in Job 3. At first living with confusion as to whether he was guilty in ending his engagement, he eventually defends his own innocence, deciding that if he marries the young woman, "she is crushed."[28] He mentions his "spiritual actuality,"[29] but also states, "there is no one who understands me. My pain and my suffering are nameless, even as I myself am nameless."[30]

In the third stage (*Repetition* B3, November 15 letter), the young man exits the above phase of lethargy, entering Job's world of protest. Every word by Job is "food and clothing and healing for my wretched soul." Repeatedly reading the book, he calls Job's friends "evil men . . . who have brought all this grief upon Job," and "sit there barking at him." He weeps when developing "a nameless anxiety about the world and life and men," so much so that "everything crushes" his soul.[31] He enters Job's silence during the seven days when Job goes through a second trial with physical suffering.[32] He makes Job's cries his own: "Alas, if only a man could take God to court as a child of man does his fellow."[33] This passionate identification with Job leaves the young man with horror, "as if by reading about it I brought it upon myself, just as one becomes ill with the sickness one reads about."[34]

In contrast, the December 14 letter demonstrates the young man, a convalescent, making a third and fourth movement: identifying a false theology (*Repetition* C) and asserting the correct reading of "trial" (*Repetition* D). He calls Job's position "in the right," and says that Job's friends are wrong to insist that Job's calamity is "a punishment; he must repent, beg for forgiveness, and then all will be well again."[35] He states that Job tries, in vain, to "move his friends to compassion" by pleading "have pity on me." Job's "cry of anguish

[27] SKS 4, 66–67 / R, 197–199.
[28] SKS 4, 69 / R, 201.
[29] Ibid.
[30] SKS 4, 71 / R, 203.
[31] SKS 4, 72–73 / R, 204–205.
[32] See Job 2:13. Unless otherwise noted, my references to the Bible are to the English Standard Version.
[33] SKS 4, 74 / R, 206, referencing Job 16:21. This translation of the passage in Job is made "according to the older Danish version" of the biblical passage, as found in Kierkegaard's text (see translator's note R, 372 n. 32).
[34] Ibid.
[35] SKS 4, 76 / R, 208.

becomes more and more intense as his friends' opposition drives his thoughts even deeper into his sufferings."[36]

The young man then explains that Job's suffering is "a trial." For the sake of tracing the parallels with Shi's "trial," I group his ideas into four sub-points. First (D1), a "trial," which describes a man's relationship to God, is beyond the explanation of science because it "exists only for the individual."[37] Second (D2), an individual must go through a difficult period of ethical self-reflection: "First of all, the event must be cleared of its cosmic associations and get a religious baptism and a religious name, then one must appear before ethics for examination, and then comes the expression: a trial [*Prøvelse*]."[38] Third (D3), as if anticipating and contending with Kierkegaard in the "Upbuilding Discourse" on Job 1:21, he maintains that Job's greatness is not in the famous words found in that passage, which Job never repeated. He argues instead that "Job's significance is that the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out in him, that the colossal revolt of the wild and aggressive powers of passion is presented here" and that Job gives "temporary alleviation."[39] Fourth (D4), Job's trial began with "Satan's creation of discord between God and Job and ends with the whole thing having been a trial."[40] The category of "trial" is "not esthetic, ethical, or dogmatic;" it is transcendent and it "places a person in a purely personal relationship of opposition to God, in a relationship such that he cannot allow himself to be satisfied with any explanation at second hand."[41] To quote Bârliba, "the individual doesn't need to seek for explanations or rationalizations for his suffering."[42] The category of "trial" affirms that the individual has space to continue asking God, in suffering.

From a silent sufferer, to an author of letters who can verbalize the extent of his suffering, to the author of "the category of trial," the young man rises to the position of a teacher about the universality of Job's story. The Book of Job supports the authority of

[36] Job 19:21, New International Version; SKS 4, 77 / R, 208–209.

[37] SKS 4, 77 / R, 209.

[38] Ibid., trans. mod. from "ordeal" to "trial." Job 23:10 uses "prøver" (verb), commonly translated as "test" or "trial," and in this context, Kierkegaard clearly uses "Prøvelse" to reference "trial." I thank Cæcilie Varslev-Pedersen for confirming the translation in Danish.

[39] SKS 4, 77 / R, 209–210.

[40] Ibid.

[41] SKS 4, 77–78 / R, 210.

[42] Bârliba, "Existence in Motion," p. 47.

his voice. God vindicates Job in front of his friends, declaring that Job speaks more rightly about Him than they do.[43]

The development of *Repetition* illustrates that "trial" is a transcendental category. The young man in existence did not know how his story would evolve. Initially, falling short of his vision in the trial discourse, he expects the same result as Job's, in a moment full of self-irony in the February 17 letter when he wishes to regain his lover. In an earlier ending to *Repetition*, the young man, out of despair, ends his life in the fashion of Goethe's Werther.[44] A development in Kierkegaard's own life, the news of his former fiancée Regine getting married, prompted him to write a new ending.[45] Kierkegaard initially felt dismayed and bitter at this news.[46] However, in the May 31 letter, the fictional young man describes the young woman's generosity in granting him freedom. Asking how "a repetition of worldly possessions," which is "indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit," could compare with a repetition of the self, i.e., regaining the self, he affirms the spiritual. Job did not receive his children double again, "for a human life cannot be redoubled that way. Here only repetition of the spirit is possible, even though it is never so perfect in time as in eternity, which is the true repetition."[47] Apparently, the writing reflects the writer's own spiritual growth.

Growth is not linear, as is already clear in the picture of the young man waiting for his thunderstorm. The young man's return as the author of "The Story of Suffering" in *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), in which he names his depression as a reason for his inability to marry his fiancée, reveals the intensity, depth, and long period of his suffering, echoing the October 11 letter in *Repetition*. However, this only proves the truth of "trial" as a category. It points to hope, not immediate happiness. In his critique of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in *Postscript*, the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus affirms the young man's concept.[48] Also mentioning a connection between *Repetition* and "The Story of Suffering,"[49] Climacus says "there is still hope for" the young man, calling his

[43] Job 42:7–8.
[44] Claire Carlisle, *Philosopher of the Heart*: *The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 163.
[45] Ibid., pp. 167–168.
[46] Ibid.
[47] SKS 4, 88 / R, 221.
[48] SKS 7, 239 / CUP1, 263
[49] SKS 7, 264 / CUP1, 289.

situation "essentially depression of thought."[50] Both the young man's "trial" and this notion of "depression of thought" point to hope in suffering, toward spiritual growth.

2. Reading Job, Refuting Karmic Retribution

Shi enters this space of reading the Book of Job as a suffering person, seeing the direction of hope. According to Chen Ximi 陈希米, Shi read both the Book of Job and *Repetition*, but reading Job was more life changing.[51] Shi published his fragments on Job before he read *Repetition*.[52] However, he makes movements similar to the young man's, although not in exactly the same order: declaring independence from the external authoritative judgment (Shi A), affirming Job's faith (Shi B1), theorizing suffering (Shi C), and naming a false perspective on suffering (Shi D). Writing no longer as a young man but an established author, Shi's fourth movement reveals his former stage of contending with God (*Repetition* B2, loathing existence) during the days when he retreated to the Altar to Earth Park.

Shi's first movement includes both *Repetition* A and C. The young man sees pathology in Constantin; Shi sees the wrong in an authoritative interpretation of suffering, in his case, the popular Buddhist view of karmic retribution. *Fragmented Writings* I:3 acknowledges that for over half of his forty-eight years of life, "before one illness leaves, the next has already arrived." Even worse than his physical suffering, he encounters in others "a certain point of view" that living in his condition is "a punishment—for bad deeds committed in a previous lifetime."[53] Shi disagrees that suffering is divine punishment for misdeeds (*Repetition* C). He also rejects the practice of going to the temple to burn incense and asking for blessings for better health. He feels instead that praying should be thanksgiving. He learns to be content and to understand that "each catastrophe could be worse."[54] Even though losing his mobility felt like losing his humanity at the time, he is thankful that he did not lose his eyesight, as the doctors had feared. He reflects: "Humans have this bad habit of forgetting the good fortunes and remembering the bad. That is . . .

[50] SKS 7, 271 / CUP1, 297.

[51] WeChat direct message to author, April 25, 2020.

[52] Shi only read Chinese translations of works written in non-Chinese languages (see Shi, *Fragmented Writings* II:40). The first Chinese translation of *Repetition* was published a year after the publication of Shi's chapter in *Huacheng* 花城 no. 4 (July 1999): pp. 53–69. *Chongfu* 重复 [Repetition], trans. Wang Baihua 王柏华 (Tianjin 天津: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2000).

[53] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:3, p. 5.

[54] Ibid., I:4, p. 6.

an injustice to the *shenming* 神明 (divine)."[55] This is not exactly like Job worshipping God in Job 1:21, but Shi acknowledges that the divine does not owe him anything. His object of thanksgiving is not yet clear, hence he uses the term *shenming* 神明, a traditional Chinese general term for the divine.

Comparable to *Repetition* B1, Shi affirms Job's faith and acknowledges God's sovereignty with a view of the entire Book of Job. He summarizes Job's contending with God as to why he, being so pious, suffers so much? Then he goes right to Job 38–42:

> God scolded Job and his friends for not understanding the meaning of suffering. God pointed Job to His mighty creation. What He meant was: "This is the entirety that you must accept, a reality of incomparable might; this is the whole world, from which you cannot simply remove suffering."[56]

This alludes to Job 40:2, where God challenges Job's questioning of His justice: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it." And also to Job 40:8: "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?" Like the young man, Shi believes that for Job, seeing God's power is more important than getting an answer to why he suffers. In terms of Job's eventual understanding, Shi argues, God is omnipotent, which reflects Job's repentance to God in Job 42:2: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

In the same fragment, Shi makes a third movement (Shi C) evoking *Repetition* D, sharing a theological perspective on suffering. In the biblical text, God does not scold Job for "not understanding the meaning of suffering." Rather, in Job 42:8, God deems Job more right than his friends. Shi's addition emphasizes the meaning of suffering with a standard theological interpretation of the Book of Job.[57] Further, Shi's view regarding the limitation of science to explain human suffering matches *Repetition* D1 in the young man's "trial." Shi synthesizes Job's theistic view of the universe with the Daoist conception of human beings being in harmony with the universe.[58] He reframes the whole problem by placing humans in a theistic universe. The whole cannot change its purpose because of a part: "This is perhaps why God does not answer every prayer request. This is perhaps

[55] Ibid., I:5, p. 6.

[56] Ibid., I:6, p. 7.

[57] See for example, D. A. Carson, "Job: Mystery and Faith," in *How Long O Lord?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), pp. 153–178.

[58] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:7-8, pp. 7–8.

also the permanent predicament of humanity."[59] There are sufferings which cannot be explained scientifically or rationally. God's non-interference in the human world, such as not removing suffering, does not mean He cannot do it. In terms of Job's eventual understanding, Shi argues, God is omnipotent.

Shi's fourth movement displays three aspects simultaneously. First (Shi D1), Shi takes a step similar to *Repetition* C by seeing Satan's role in Job's test (see *Repetition* D3) and reiterating the real source of Job's suffering as the result of a false belief. Summarizing the biblical text from Job 1:9 to the end of Job 2, Shi notes that initially, Job did not succumb to Satan's logic that Job's faith in God is dependent on God's blessings. But, Job was "almost lost because of a different distortion of faith: 'Job, all of your suffering must have been because you have offended God!' These words terrified Job more than the devil himself. Job started to feel wronged, and he began to complain that God was unjust."[60] This focus on the horror inflicted by Job's friends matches the essence of the young man's reading of Job in *Repetition*. For Shi, the popular Buddhist view is the same as the distorted faith of Job's friends and the cause of his bitterness: "Many times people have told me that maybe, at some point in the past, I was careless and let a few bad words about Buddha slip out, so that this might be the cause of my constant illness. Hearing this, I became as bitter as Job."[61]

"I and the Altar to Earth" offers a glimpse into Shi's bitterness at the time. He struggled with unemployment, feelings of guilt after his mother's sudden death, disability and suffering in the world, and his own anxiety from the pressure to publish. At each moment of crisis, he speaks about "Shangdi" 上帝, a term for the divine existing in Chinese classics that Matteo Ricci adopted as the Chinese name for the Christian God.[62] The first two moments ended with him understanding God as a provider and a protector. Reaching peace similar to *Repetition* 2B3, he turns his eyes to the natural beauty in the park. However, a third crisis, provoked by him seeing a little girl with an intellectual disability, leaves him uncertain: "Things in the world often make God's intention suspicious." One "can complain to God about why he has sent so many tribulations into the world" or "strive to eliminate all kinds of suffering and enjoy feeling noble and proud." But, "if you

[59] Ibid., I:8, p. 8.
[60] Ibid., I:9, p. 9.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Qi Guohua 戚国华, "Si yu xin: Shi Tiesheng yu Yuebo Shangdi guan de bijiao" 思与信：史铁生与约伯上帝观的比较 [Thinking vs. believing: a comparison of Shi Tiesheng's Shangdi with Job's God], *Hubei shehui kexue* 湖北社会科学 [Hubei Social Sciences] 2013, no. 4: p. 124.

think a little further, you'll fall into a deep abyss, and get lost there: can a world without suffering exist?"[63] The Daoist view on differences as complementary enables Shi to come out of the abyss:[64]

> If ugliness didn't exist, how could beauty sustain its luck? If evil and despicability didn't exist, how could goodness and nobility define itself to become a virtue? If there weren't disabilities, would people become so used to health that they feel bored?. . . Seen from that perspective, differences must always exist. It seems that you must accept suffering—the entire script of the theatre of humanity requires it. Existence itself requires it.[65]

Shi reluctantly agrees, "it seems that God is, once again, right." However, when it comes to individual fate, he despairs again: "Who is to play the suffering roles? Who is to showcase worldly happiness, pride, and pleasure? You can only leave it to chance."[66] Writing became Shi's way to seek salvation and meaning.

By calling the accusation of karmic retribution identical to the false belief of Job's friends, *Fragmented Writings* I:9 resolves his fruitless questioning in "I and the Altar to Earth": "Also, when I say that we're all prone to complaining like Job, I mean that we all complain that fate is unjust when things don't go our way."[67] Now he overcomes his bitterness: "But life is just as God showed Job it is: Dangers are everywhere and ever-present, and no one gets special treatment for being additionally pious."[68]

Instead of waiting for a thunderstorm to have his health restored, Shi immediately transitions from Job's faith in trial to the discourse of faith as hope:

> God makes no promises of glory or fortune, but he will always protect your hope. Humans can't avoid suffering, but also can't abandon hope. It is precisely in this sense that God exists. Fate takes no bribes, but hope coexists with you. This is the true meaning of faith and the true path of the faithful.[69]

Recalling a friend enduring a terminal illness, bedridden for three years, Shi concludes: "I learned this from Job's story: in front of true faith is a vast open space. There is only

[63] Shi, "I and the Altar," p. 13.

[64] For an overview of this Daoist concept, see *Daodejing* 道德经, ch. 2 in Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, trans. *Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), pp. 79–81.

[65] Shi, "I and the Altar," p. 13.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:9, p. 9.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid., I:10, p. 10.

hope, nothing else, even if you want more."[70] Faith's "blessing only comes when we walk through hardships."[71]

Bidding farewell to the past, Shi names his former erroneous way of praying and identifies his "shen" 神 in distinction from the false gods. Inside the Altar to Earth, when praying to the "shenming" 神明 (gods), his heart was full of personal desire.[72] Shi identifies two kinds of unreliable "shen" 神 (gods). The first kind is always "tooting his own horn, bragging and boasting of its omnipotence. In reality, we see plenty of instances where the Dragon frequently floods the Dragon King's temple."[73] "Long Wang" 龙王, the Dragon King, is worshipped in religious Daoism. This second kind of god "likes pranks, playing with chance, and causing people to lose their way."[74] Both kinds of "gods" are unpredictable and unreliable. Declaring "I have been looking for him for years and so I have some personal experience [of what each god is like]," Shi affirms the third God. Extremely benevolent and absolutely perfect, this God is "the only one worthy of your trust" because "in equating the way with the act of walking it, he promises to be with you always," blessing you with "everlasting hope."[75]

3. Becoming an Individual, Not Kierkegaard's "Individual"

By seeing suffering as a trial, Shi and Kierkegaard's young man "met" with Job in the middle part of Job 23:10, "But he knows the way that I take; *when he has tried me*, I shall come out as gold" (emphasis added). Neither the young man nor Shi declares Job's firm faith. Both Kierkegaard and Shi depict an "I" in the process of becoming. As Burgess concludes, the young man [in *Repetition*] "provides an important link with many of Kierkegaard's later religious works," especially Part Three, "The Gospel of Suffering, Christian Discourses" in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.[76] Qi Guohua 戚国华 uses the letter M to describe Shi's wavering faith and lack of commitment to a specific God,[77] in

[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., I:11, p. 11.
[72] Ibid., I:12, p. 12. In the original Chinese text, Shi switches from "shenming" 神明 in section 12 to "shen" 神 in section 13. I am using "gods" for Shi's first two kinds of "shen" in the same sense that Psalm 86 references "the gods" in distinction from "God."
[73] Ibid., I:13, p. 12.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., I:15, pp. 13–14.
[76] Burgess, "*Repetition*—A Story of Suffering," pp. 261–262.
[77] Qi, "Si yu xin," p. 125.

contrast to the letter N which characterizes Job's faith journey from a strong believer in a God with a name to one who questions and contends with God and finally to a firm believer in the same God. Shi leaves behind a posthumously published essay "Zhou Xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo" 昼信基督夜信佛 (Believing in Christ during the day and in the Buddha at night).[78] As Chloe Starr summarizes, Shi has been called a "Wheelchair humanist," a "Christian writer," and a "Buddhist apologist."[79] Lang Chen 陈朗 argues that Shi's religious views were "rooted deeply in the rich syncretic tradition of Chinese religion and became fully pronounced in the final, posthumously published essay."[80]

A missing piece in this discussion is Shi's indebtedness to Kierkegaard's discourse on the individual versus the crowd, which Shi read from the excerpt "The Single Individual" from Kierkegaard's *Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author*.[81] In Note No.1, Kierkegaard explicates the crowd as representing "untruth," as opposed to "truth," by which he always means *eternal truth*. Referencing Paul's idea that "only one reaches the goal," found in 1 Corinthian 9:24 and Philippians 3:14, Kierkegaard claims that everyone "essentially should speak only with God and with himself."[82] God "surveys these countless millions and recognizes each and every individual."[83] Where "there is a crowd or where decisive importance is attributed to the fact that there is a crowd, there is no working *there*, no living there, no striving there for the highest goal but only for some earthly goal." "Each individual who escapes [*flygte*] into the crowd and thus cowardly avoids [*flye*] being the single individual . . . contributes his portion of cowardliness to the 'cowardliness' that is: a crowd." As the "supreme example" of the crowd as untruth, Kierkegaard states that it was in a religious crowd, not as an individual, that the people spat on Christ and crucified him. As a second example, Kierkegaard distinguishes the purpose of doing "devout work" as "the truth-witness" from being part of a political crowd. The former "does his utmost to see to it that he is not confused with a politician," aiming "to become involved with everyone if possible, but always individually." The purpose is that these individuals might

[78] Shi Tiesheng, "Zhou xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo" 昼信基督夜信佛 [Believing in Christ during the day and the Buddha at night], ed. Chen Ximi 陈希米 (*Shouhuo* 收获 [Harvest], 2012), 1:5–12, repr. in *Zhou xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo* 昼信基督夜信佛 (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012). References are to this latter book.

[79] Chloe Starr, "Shi Tiesheng and the Nature of the Human," *Christianity & Literature* 68, no. 1 (2018): p. 104.

[80] Lang Chen 陈朗, "Disability Theology Despite Itself: Shi Tiesheng, Religion, and Social Criticism in Post-Socialist China," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 24, no. 4 (2020): p. 403.

[81] See Note 9 above.

[82] SKS 16, 86 / PV, 106; see PV, 319 n. 80.

[83] SKS 16, 87 / PV, 107. Kierkegaard is possibly alluding here to Proverbs 15:3.

"go home from the gathering and become the single individual" who has a personal relationship with God. On the contrary, though politics has its own legitimacy, Kierkegaard says that it "becomes untruth when it is carried over into the realms of the intellectual, the spiritual, and the religious" and that "politics etc. has nothing to do with *eternal truth*." Thirdly, Kierkegaard calls "the public" that reads "the daily press" and judges a person in anonym "untruth." Referencing Jesus' first and second commandments, he writes: "To honor every individual human being, unconditionally every human being, this is the truth and is to fear God and to love *the neighbor*." Kierkegaard ends this note calling for the individual: "A crowd is formed of individuals; consequently each one has the power to remain what he is—an individual."[84]

The Chinese excerpt Shi read also includes two passages from Kierkegaard's "Note 2: On My Work and 'the Single Individual.'" In the first passage, Kierkegaard describes his task "as a lowly servant . . . *without authority* . . . to prompt, if possible, to invite, to induce the many to press through this narrow pass, *the single individual*." Kierkegaard continues, "if I were to request an inscription on my grave, I request none other than that single individual; Even if it is not understood now, it surely will be." A footnote accompanying the passage reads: "The reader will recall that this was written in 1847. The world upheavals in 1848 have forced the understanding considerably closer."[85]

After witnessing the upheavals of China's Cultural Revolution in a social experiment along the lines of what Kierkegaard had referenced in 1848, Shi writes his narrative of becoming an individual as if answering Kierkegaard's call. He distances himself from the religious crowd and the political crowd. In *Fragmented Writings* I:15, Shi also emphasizes a permanent distance between humans and God. He credits Liu Xiaofeng's 刘小枫 work for this idea; Liu was in fact introducing Karl Barth's theology criticizing Nazi German ideology.[86] Shi warns that "disaster will follow" if "worldly power abuses human belief in God, and the authority to define hope falls into the hands of powerful bandits."[87] Shi affirms the value of literature in helping us to seek the truth and ask questions: "After Auschwitz, people became skeptical about poetry. But perhaps this very skepticism has allowed people to hear the message of poetry anew."[88]

[84] SKS 16, 87–91 / PV, 107–112.

[85] SKS 16, 98–99 / PV, 118 (emphasis in original).

[86] Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, "Shangdi jiu shi Shangdi" 上帝就是上帝 [God is God], in *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真 [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994), pp. 56–57.

[87] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:13, p. 12.

[88] Ibid., I:15, p. 14.

Adopting the Pauline triple framework of faith, hope, and love, Shi nevertheless positions himself as a seeker of God rather than a believer in a religion. He insists on an individual's solitary relationship with God, apparently driven by the fear of the political and religious crowds. Shi writes about his personal repentance with Kierkegaard's insistence on writing "without authority." While composing his 1996 novel *Wuxu Biji* 务虚笔记 (Notes on Principles),[89] he realized: "I have all of the same thoughts and behaviors of all of the characters I'm writing about," though some are still dormant.[90] Writers "should not preach," but "should contribute stories of how they got lost."[91] As an example, Shi confesses his lack of righteous action during the Cultural Revolution. He participated as a Red Guard storming into a professor's home, but was later sidelined for not being "red enough."[92]

Becoming an individual became Shi's redemption. Working in a Shanxi village in Northwest China during the "Shangshan xiaxiang" 上山下乡 (Up to the mountains, down to the countryside), Shi suddenly "saw through that game: I am not 'we,' and I don't want to be 'them,' so I can only be [the indeterminate] 'you' . . . 'We' can be strengthened through isolating 'them.'"[93] Shi echoes Kierkegaard's point regarding how a person contributes his portion of cowardliness when escaping into the crowd. If someone had demanded that he chose sides, he too would not have dared to take a stand different from the crowd.[94] He writes that "it was probably around this time that I started becoming terrified of 'we.'" He also states that "we" emanates a "magic spell" which "so confuses people that they yearn to be swallowed into 'we.'" The position of "we," Shi cautions, can easily "turn into a magic law and constrain individual thoughts and feelings." This "magic law" was at work when "the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution were perpetrated." As the expression of "loyalty [to the leader] became more passionate, valiance turned into savage violence. Reason fell apart. Belief degenerated into frenzy."[95] The Cultural Revolution is, in essence, "an instance of the catastrophe of belief."[96] In addition, Shi also references China's Taiping Rebellion (Taiping Tianguo 太平天国), whose leader, Hong

[89] Shi Tiesheng, *Shi Tiesheng Works in Series*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2011).
[90] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:16, p. 14.
[91] Ibid., I:16, p. 15.
[92] Ibid., I:18, p. 16.
[93] Ibid., I:19, pp. 17–18.
[94] Ibid., I:20, pp. 19–20.
[95] Ibid., I:21, p. 19.
[96] Ibid., I:22, p. 19.

Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1812–1864), claimed himself to be a younger brother of Jesus.[97] Even when acknowledging the final judgment,[98] Shi hesitates between believing and not believing in heaven.[99] Conversion lands one "zai lu shang" 在路上 (on the way).[100] Heaven exists on this way.[101]

To become a self and to define writing as an act of love, Shi creates an antithesis to Kierkegaard's "individual" by stressing existing subject positions that he must negate. Calling the suffering of the entire generation of the "sent-down youths" a trial, he rejects the Buddhist path to leave the world to escape suffering as well as existentialism. Acknowledging life can be absurd, Shi continues:

> Perhaps this human world is nothing more than a purgatory? We come here to serve out a prison sentence, to search our souls and to be tried, and to be reeducated (transforming the objective and subjective worlds at the same time). Going down to the countryside and descending to the world of the immortals both lead to the same result.[102]

Shi lists three fictional characters from two classical Chinese novels as examples of the mythic characters who "go to the human world" to deepen their "understanding of suffering through spending some time in a prison of flesh."[103] Zhu Bajie 猪八戒 (a.k.a., Pigsy) and Sun Wukong 孙悟空 (a.k.a. the Monkey King) are two of the four disciples to Xuan Zang 玄奘 (Tripitaka) in *Xiyou ji* 西游记 (The journey to the west),[104] a fictional narrative of the historical Tang monk's (c. 596 or 602–664) journey to India to seek out Buddhist scriptures. After causing havoc in the Daoist Yudi's 玉帝 (Jade Emperor) heaven, Wukong was trapped by Buddha under a mountain. After drunkenly flirting with the moon goddess, Bajie, the former Marshal of the Heavenly Reeds, was punished by banishment to

[97] Ibid., III:24, p. 117.
[98] Ibid., I:28, I:29, pp. 24–25.
[99] Ibid., I:35, p. 29.
[100] Ibid., I:50, p. 43.
[101] Ibid., I:51, p. 44.
[102] Ibid., I:54, p. 45.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Wu Cheng'en 吴承恩, *The Journey to the West*, volumes 1–4, trans. Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980–1983).

Earth, where he became a fiend.[105] The Bodhisattva Guanyin 观音 converted them to Buddhism.[106] The group then endures eighty-one tribulations and finally arrives in India. Wukong achieves Buddhahood and leaves the world. Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉, the protagonist in *Shitou ji* 石头记 (The story of the stone),[107] was previously a stone in the celestial realm yearning to experience the human world of poetry and prosperity. Born into the aristocratic Jia family carrying a piece of jade in his mouth, Baoyu grows up rejecting his family's high hope that he become a Confucian official. He prefers the life of an aesthete among his female cousins in a family garden. He eventually leaves his family in a move that is interpreted as him becoming a Buddhist monk. Shi says that for the fictional characters, leaving the world is seemingly a relief, "as if Sisyphus' Road has finally come to an end, as if one day he could go home and everything would be fine."[108] In a suffering existence such as his, he does not see hope in escaping from the world. He must move beyond any existing subject position.[109]

Analyzing Shi's deep engagement with Christian ideas, Chloe Starr concludes that Shi "points towards the great biblical narratives of creation and suffering, to myths and dreams for insight." However, Starr clarifies the differences between Shi's ideas and Christian theology:

> Where a theologian like David Kelsey . . . presents a theocentric and trinitarian account, asking what "a specifically Christian conviction that God actively relates to humans" implies about who we are and how we are to be (Kelsey 159), Shi parts company: while God relates to humans, that relationship is all but unfathomable. The process of understanding is our undertaking. For Shi, it is not so much the Cross that points to eschatological consummation as the way of the cross; Christ's suffering does not atone so much as reveal the meaning of human life.[110]

[105] Yu's translation refers to Bajie abstaining from "five forbidden viands" and "three undesirable foods" as soon as he was converted (ibid., vol. 1, p. 193). "Eight Precepts" is a standard literal translation of "Bajie." "Wukong" translates literally to "Wake to Vacuity" (ibid., p. 82).

[106] Ibid., pp. 180–197.

[107] Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Shitou ji* 石头记, *The Story of the Stone: A Novel in Five Volumes*, trans. David Hawkes and John Minford (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973). The novel is also known as *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 [The dream of the red chamber]. "Jia Baoyu" literally means "fake jade."

[108] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:54, p. 46.

[109] Elsewhere I identify Shi's negation of other collective positions, including the exile, the Daoist, the disabled, and the nationalist. Chen, "The Solitary Writer," pp. 69–72.

[110] Starr, "Nature of the Human," p. 113. Starr quotes David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

Shi's narrative of becoming an author indicates how he adheres to the idea of trial as he deeply engages with Christian ideas. Describing his left hand holding his right hand, he sees "I," the writing subject, advising "him"—the physically suffering Shi Tiesheng—to see this world as a place of "trials and tempering."[111] He writes: "I see his heart's movement [xinliu 心流] entering the dark of night again and again. Death is not the end. His blessing is but one sentence, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"[112] In John 20:25, Thomas had announced "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." When the resurrected Jesus later appeared to Thomas, Thomas called him "My Lord and My God." Then Jesus said the quoted blessing. Within Shi's context, the reference to John 20:29 reads like Shi acknowledging his belief in Christ's resurrection, and that he indeed understood Kierkegaard's "subjective truth."

However, quoting this blessing later, Shi wavers between believing and not believing in Christ's divinity. On the believing side, *Fragmented Writings* III:33 reiterates "believe though having not seen" and the importance of repentance in personal encounters with God.[113] Shi also calls "the kitchen god, the god of wealth, the goddess that sends children to people" worshipped in Chinese culture "idols" because they "have nothing to do with spiritual salvation."[114] He prefers "righteousness through faith."[115] Shortly after, Shi expresses uncertainty regarding God's personalness and an ambiguity about Christ's divinity. He admits that for living, he has benefited from "Jidu jingsheng" 基督精神 (Christ's spirit), but regarding death, he agrees with the Buddhist teaching, that "what is usually meant by death refers to an end of the physiological phenomenon."[116]

In *Fragmented Writings* V:30, Shi refers to "kuruo de Shangdi" 苦弱的上帝 (the suffering and weak God), Liu Xiaofeng's rendition of Dietrich Bonhoffer's "suffering God."[117] It seems that Shi views God through the lens of this translation. In a letter dated June 25, 2003 to writer Wang Shuo 王朔, who had apparently shared thoughts with Shi about the

[111] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, II:42, pp. 92–93.
[112] Ibid., II:43, p. 94.
[113] Ibid., III:33, pp. 123–124.
[114] Ibid., IV:1, p. 131.
[115] Ibid., IV:3, 7, pp. 133, 137.
[116] Ibid., IV:10, p. 139.
[117] Liu Xiaofeng, "Fendan Shangdi de Kuruo" 分担上帝的苦弱 [Sharing in God's suffering and vulnerability/weakness], in *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真 [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994), pp. 133–163.

Buddhist belief, Shi again quotes John 20:29.[118] In a second letter to Wang, dated July 15, 2003, Shi asks Wang to read Liu Xiaofeng, and then continues: "Christ's God is a suffering and weak God. Except for sending his son to be with the suffering in the world, and to advocate love, He has no other option."[119] He calls Jesus a human being just like Moses.[120] In a 2008 essay titled "Believe Though Having Not Seen,"[121] Shi again prefers "justification through faith." Addressing Chinese people's suspicion of Christianity because of its association with "some hegemony,"[122] Shi separates Christ from the Christian religion. Calling Jesus the son of God, Shi also compares Ksitigarbha saying "if I don't go to hell who will" to Jesus' being nailed to the cross.[123]

In "Zhou Xin Jidu," Shi confesses that the fear of offending people was his "guji" 痼疾 (chronic illness). He desires to mediate between Christians and Buddhists.[124] He admits that he adopts the Christian spirit to face suffering and to live with love, but he also accepts the Buddhist idea of staying away from the world and suffering, as a form of therapy for nightly personal restorations.[125] Shi's contemporary, writer Deng Xiaomang 邓晓芒, sees this as the main idea of the essay.[126] In Shi's words, he recognizes a weakness in Christianity in providing such restoration.[127] This matches his perception of the "suffering and weak God."

Chen remarks that Shi moved back to Buddhism.[128] However, Shi rejects, until the end, the Buddhist explanation of suffering and the concept of reincarnation.[129] A pattern in *Fragmented Writings* demonstrates his thinking: using a Christian idea and adding another

[118] Shi Tiesheng, "Gei Wang Shuo de Xin" 给王朔的信" [Letters to Wang Shuo], in *Zhou xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo* 昼信基督夜信佛 (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), p. 157.
[119] Ibid., p. 163.
[120] Ibid., p. 164.
[121] Shi Tiesheng, *Fulun wenlu, Wangxiang yu dianying* 扶轮问路，妄想与电影 [Ask for the way in a wheelchair, fantasy films], in *Shi Tiesheng Works in Series*, vol. 7 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2011), pp. 63–68.
[122] Ibid., pp. 65–66.
[123] Ibid., p. 66.
[124] Shi, "Zhou xin Jidu," p. 3.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Deng Xiaomang 邓晓芒, "Shi Tiesheng de zhexue—Tiesheng 67 sui shengri" 史铁生的哲学—铁生 67 岁生日 [Shi Tiesheng's philosophy: on Tiesheng's 67th birthday], *Aisixiang*, January 21, 2018, https://www.aisixiang.com/data/107981.html.
[127] Shi, "Zhou xin Jidu," p. 9.
[128] Lang Chen 陈朗, "佛陀的歸來: 史鐵生的文学与'宗教'" [The Return of Buddha: Shi Tiesheng's Literature and "Religion"], *Dangdai Zuojia Pinglun* 当代作家评论 [Contemporary writers review] 2018, no. 1: p. 76.
[129] Shi, "Zhou xin Jidu," see pp. 5, 17, and 25.

religious name next to it. Shi mentions Buddha and Buddhist teaching thirty-one times throughout the book, but only *Fragmented Writings* I:24 is close to acknowledging Buddha as a deity. Shi describes conversion as the moment when humans are called to turn to God's light, "whether you call it the way of Buddha's law or God [*Shangdi*]." Shi then references the biblical concept of original sin. His language of light, interrogation and repentance as "God's deep concern for us" echoes John 8:12.[130] Clearly, the main concepts are from Christianity. In V:18, he declares that "God exists before his name is revealed." Sharing the Chinese creation story of the goddess Nüwa 女娲 and Fuxi 伏羲, he continues: "There is no need to be concerned about God's name. When God's nature is clarified, God's appearance can adapt to local customs."[131] This is appropriating Christianity.

4. A Concluding Thought

Speaking of the "historical importance" of *Repetition*, Carlisle suggests that "one might go so far as to say that 'existentialism' began in 1843 with Kierkegaard's proclamation of repetition as philosophy's 'new category'" in *Repetition*.[132] On the other hand, Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, addressing the Chinese familiarity with "cunzai zhuyi" 存在主义 (existentialism), calls attention to a theistic "cunzai zhexue" 存在哲学 (the philosophy of existence), which Kierkegaard developed.[133] The young man's concept of "trial" affirms contending with God in suffering and seeking hope and happiness, thus fitting Liu's "philosophy of existence." Shi, who was familiar with Liu's book,[134] agrees with Liu on seeing hope in Job, not in existentialism.

Both Kierkegaard and Shi acknowledge that no human could grasp the depth of their sufferings. Toward the end of his life, Kierkegaard told his best friend Emil Boesen that his life was "a great suffering, unknown and inexplicable to other people."[135] The words were almost identical to those of the young man in *Repetition*.[136] However, even knowing

[130] Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:24, p. 21. Shi alludes to John 8:1-11 in *Fragmented Writings* III:27–28, pp. 118–120.
[131] Ibid., V:18, pp. 155–156.
[132] Carlisle, "Kierkegaard's *Repetition*," p. 539.
[133] Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, "Cong juewang zhexue dao shengjing zhexue" 从绝望哲学到圣经哲学 [From philosophy of tragedy to Biblical philosophy], in *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真 [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994), p. 39.
[134] Chen Ximi, WeChat direct message to author, September 21, 2024.
[135] Carlisle, *Philosopher of Heart*, pp. 247–248.
[136] SKS 4, 71 / R, 203.

that his remaining resources had just been spent on his final publication, Kierkegaard was "very happy," and at the same time he was "very sad, because I cannot share my joy with anyone."[137] Though loved by many fellow writers, Shi too suggested that he was lonely.[138] Like Kierkegaard, he wanted to be understood. And he was honest about the fact that his writings do not constitute any scholarly discourse.[139] Committed to the ideal of being the "singular individual," he did not create a theology to be followed.

[137] Carlisle, *Philosopher of Heart*, p. 248.
[138] See the description of his left hand holding his right hand in Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, II:42, p. 92.
[139] Ibid., II:6, p. 55.

KIERKEGAARD, HOUGH, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

BY JOHN J. DAVENPORT

Abstract: This essay responds to ideas in a later portion of Sheridan Hough's book, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector*. It reviews the difficulty of discerning Kierkegaard's position on the theological problem of evil in its traditional forms. As a way into this tangle, I focus on the theme of "good and perfect gifts" that Hough develops. I then review several approaches to theodicy that respond to the existential aspect of the problem of evil, looking for resonances with Kierkegaard's themes. This analysis rules out simple "soul-making" approaches and any theodicy that implies a divine fine-tailoring of evils that human beings and animals experience. Instead, I conclude that a Kierkegaardian approach that takes the existential problem seriously should focus on free will and what is nomologically possible in a law-governed universe.

Keywords: Good and Perfect Gifts, existential suffering, soul-making, open theism, horrendous evils, theodicy

1. Introduction: James' Paradoxical Dictum

This essay takes its start from a particularly poignant section of Sheridan Hough's many searching reflections in *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector*. In her "Postlude," Hough (LTC)[1] draws a tentative link with one vital but underappreciated aspect of what I generically call "the theological problem of evil." Hough's four-stage analysis of Kierkegaard's vision takes as a leading clue his reflections on the apostle James' dictum that "every good and perfect gift is from above."[2] As she notes, this motif runs throughout Kierkegaard's work from his early upbuilding discourses[3] to his late

[1] Sheridan Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Hough actually attributes her work to an authorial persona abbreviated LTC. However, for convenience, with apologies to Hough as "editor," I will usually ignore this complication.
[2] Ibid., p. 27.
[3] SKS 5, 129–158 / EUD, 125–158.

Christian Discourses and last writings.[4] But as Sheridan's book beautifully shows, James' dictum has several layers of meaning for Kierkegaard—appearing within the transition from aesthetic attitudes to an ethical life view, again in infinite resignation, and finally in a faith that affirms a basic equality of all persons. In particular, Christianity involves faith that every person, no matter how they may interact with us or view our debts to them, is the gift of an opportunity to love.[5]

Yet this teaching, as Hough says, is far more difficult and "alarming" than it first appears. As the faithful tax collector of *Fear and Trembling* shows, at the religious level, its meaning for Kierkegaard includes the idea that literally any contingent outcome of our efforts and hopes can be received as God's gift, in which even the bitterest disappointments and wrongs suffered are transformed into goods when we take them to God in faith.[6] Said in a lightminded way without the enigma that Kierkegaard recognizes in it, this paradoxical dictum could be reduced to the naïve aesthetic view that an income and similar embodied needs will "all work out with God's help".[7] Or James' dictum could seem extraordinarily cruel, making it sound as if none of our earthly loves, efforts, or losses matter at all. This could mislead readers to imagine that Kierkegaard is endorsing the very quietism that Pelagius devised his doctrine of free will to resist.[8]

On the contrary, as Hough effectively emphasizes, James' teaching must often leave intact our fallible judgment that someone's action was wrong in harming us or others.[9] The potentially edifying significance of James' saying can only emerge as a modification and transformation of our efforts to reason objectively about states of our world,[10] our ethical judgments, and our efforts to bring about finite goods to the extent that we are able.[11] "The faithful sufferer" does not deny her grievous condition, but "'takes' it to

[4] Another convincing argument for the crucial role of the James giftedness theme is developed by Craig Hefner in his *Kierkegaard and the Changelessness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).
[5] SKS 5, 152–158 / EUD, 152–158.
[6] Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 30.
[7] SKS 22, 32, NB11:47 / KJN 6, 29.
[8] Sometimes Kierkegaard's late Christian reflections on the "lilies of the field and birds of the air" are misread in just this fashion, as a recipe for quietism.
[9] Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 120.
[10] Ibid., p. 123.
[11] Ibid., p. 142.

God."[12] At the highest level, this includes rejecting options that amount to vengeance, even if at the ethical level within our ordinary lifeworlds, social systems must enforce demands for criminal punishment or restitution. Without such ethical work to resist and repair human evils and natural misfortunes, the transformation wrought by faith in the face even of terrible harms would lack its starting point.[13] Without moral care, the motif of everything being a "perfect gift" loses its authentic mystery and is misunderstood as merely going-with-the-flow like superficial aesthetes who are "carried along on the wave of the present."[14]

This means that the picture of the joyful tax collector that so moves Hough and others[15] must be incomplete in one respect: it shows us certain aesthetic details—he gets his wonderful stew or does not, he gets his beloved or loses her—and their transformation by embracing the apparent absurdity of faith,[16] but it hides the middle movement of ethical life that must always be there to leaven these two.[17] At that level, the tax collector is pursuing the particular purposes of his trade and adjusting his tactics according to the finite evidence relevant for everyday beliefs and actions. And, so that he is not an aesthete, the tax collector must have some inward commitment—which Silentio does not describe—to important human goods that he finds in his social roles as a husband, fair assessor for government revenue, daily observer of his home city, and perhaps more. Likewise, Hough suggests that the joy of Silentio's tax collector must have *aufgehoben* within it the penitent ethical movement of the Gospels' tax collector, who exemplifies authentic humility according to one of Kierkegaard's Friday Communion discourses.[18]

All of this is what the joyful tax collector suspends by virtue of the absurd, in hope for the seemingly impossible through which concrete earthly fulfilment of his ideal is

[12] Ibid., p. 123; compare SKS 5, 51 / EUD, 43.
[13] See SKS 7, 428 / CUP1, 471–472.
[14] SKS 5, 42 / EUD, 33.
[15] Edward Mooney's work has also often referred to the crucial importance of this figure in Kierkegaard's cast of characters. Hough's story to some extent vindicates parts of Mooney's great enthusiasm for the tax collector.
[16] Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 29.
[17] On this idea that several of Kierkegaard's key motifs, including "good and perfects gifts," have three interconnected layers of meaning, see John J. Davenport, "Kierkegaard on 'Sobriety:' Christian Virtues, the Ethical, and Triadic Dyads," *Religions* 14 (2023): pp. 1–22.
[18] Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 115; see SKS 11, 167–168 / WA, 132.

now realized. He accepts everything as an unmerited gift that his efforts alone, or even a lot of combined human efforts, could never have guaranteed or made certain. While gratitude and sorrow are each sometimes appropriate earthly ethical attitudes towards new events and outcomes, the knight of faith's higher joy underlies and embraces such particular responses: it expresses firm trust that God always knows what is most needful for us, even when we traverse a vale of shadows. As Craig Hefner recently argued, the real object of the perfect gift is always "Godself," which never varies.[19]

In this way, as Hough recognizes, it seems that Kierkegaard at least obliquely addresses the theological problem of evil, which is the topic of her haunting Postlude. There are few accounts of Kierkegaardian themes more humanly necessary or more existentially important than this. One needs only to think of Syria, where the world let genocide prevail yet again, as in Darfur and Rwanda and many other places, thereby denigrating the millions of named and nameless appeals that past victims have left to us.

But Hough's topic is not the problem of evil understood as an intellectual puzzle (as it is commonly taught in philosophy). Rather, her focus concerns how human persons can respond to horrendous evils and the sense of divine abandonment that especially seems to go with them.[20] This theme has recently been explored in an insightful dissertation by Angela Sager titled *The Existential Problem of Evil*. In what follows, I will draw on Sager's claim that there is a practical threat of despair that arises from the "second-order suffering" involved in doubting that there can be ultimate meaning in the face of overwhelming first-order pains and familiar forms of emotional agony.[21] Among other things, I will suggest that this personal problem of evil, which Hough so keenly recognizes, always lies just out of view behind some of Kierkegaard's major themes. But there is good reason for him to address it in the oblique way that Hough indicates.

2. Kierkegaard and the Existential Problem

To understand why Kierkegaard is inexplicit about the problem of evil will itself require an indirect route, by exploring possible comparisons and contrasts with a few recent

[19] Hefner, *Kierkegaard and the Changelessness of God*, pp. 120–123.
[20] SKS 11, 256–257 / WA, 121.
[21] Angela Sager, "The Existential Problem of Evil: Theodicy, Theosis, and the Threat of Meaninglessness" (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2021), ProQuest (28496133).

philosophical efforts to address its existential dimension. This requires caution because, as far as I know, there is little scholarly discussion of Kierkegaard and the problem of evil (at least in English).[22] That is not surprising, given that in his published books, Kierkegaard seems not to directly confront the metaphysical and moral issues that Leibniz (for example) meant to resolve in his *Theodicy*—although Kierkegaard knew this text and probably also Gotthold Lessing's endorsement of Goethe's defiant humanist rejoinder in his "Prometheus" (along with the related Pantheism Controversy).[23] Kierkegaard does not describe natural and moral evil as a challenge to faith that is distinct from the "offense" to reason posed by the demands of faith as a second movement built upon infinite resignation.[24] This may be partly because Kierkegaard had a personal affinity with the sort of view that Eleonore Stump finds in Gregory the Great's commentary on Job, namely that the person living according to the revealed Word about the Kingdom to come will be more inclined to fear prosperity and good fortune in this world as a temptation, rather than being thrown into doubt by terrible evils.[25]

To that extent, it seems that Kierkegaard might agree with Terrence Tilley's view that "the evils of theodicy" are a disease of the Enlightenment, which sought rational defenses of a more Platonic form of theism without Christology or the richness of

[22] There is one article in Polish which argues that Kierkegaard thought that divine hiddenness was necessary and denied that a direct experience of God's presence in one's consciousness is vital to faith: see Marek Dobrzeniecki, "Kierkegaard wobec problemu ukrycia Boga / Kierkegaard and the Divine Hiddenness Problem," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 67 (2018): pp. 65–82.

[23] See Susan Neiman's rich account in *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 57–59.

[24] There is an entry on Evil in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome III* within the series *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, ed. Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2013), and evil is referenced in many works on *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. But the problem of evil as a challenge to faith rarely receives explicit discussion because Kierkegaard focuses instead on the difficulties of recognizing sin and accepting the Incarnation. The challenge posed by suffering is sublimated within the difficulty in accepting scorn and vilification as the price of rejecting worldly values. Thus he is more interested in Lessing's sincere rejection of the Resurrection as a basis for eternal happiness (SKS 7, 104 / CUP1, 107; SKS 7, 112 / CUP1, 116n) than in Lessing's response to finite earthly unhappiness.

[25] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 15. This work includes Stump's own truly insightful account of everything becoming a gift within our "second-personal connection to God" (pp. 443–450). Compare SKS 10, 163 / CD, 155 on worldly prosperity moving one farthest from the true goal.

religious experiences.[26] In other words, Kierkegaard might say that the existential problem cuts to the core for contemporary people because we are children of Francis Bacon, who have found much more to value in ordinary life and society than our medieval ancestors could, or that the Buddha could in a world that he perceived as *samsara*. Moreover, as Tilley argues, our baseline assumptions already include less conviction that a perfect personal creator exists even before we consider the problem of evil: this shifts the burden of proof so that evils more easily seem to imply God's non-existence, and theoretical defenses of God's goodness seem more urgent.

Thus it is tempting to say that Kierkegaard would simply dismiss the contemporary "logical" and "evidential" problems of evil as false problems that result from trying to approach religion through metaphysical speculation—just as (it is often alleged) Kierkegaard would regard perfect being theology and proofs of God's existence as false starts. After all, he wrote that "to think through doubt" as a theodicist might "is a delusion."[27] He also said that reflectively doubting everything and developing systemic answers to doubt became a professional role that undermined faith—much as pursuit of historical evidence did—by disengaging people from the ethico-religious work in which faith is realized.[28] Thus, in an essay on Augustine's free will theodicy, Clare Carlisle reports that "Kierkegaard had little interest in solving the metaphysical problem of evil: he focused on the human condition and the existential task of Christian faith," although he liked Augustine's ideas on negativity and freedom.[29]

This is probably what most Kierkegaard scholars would say if they wondered why he does not refer explicitly to the problem of evil in the terms familiar to us today. Yet that might be too quick: after all, as some commentators have noted, there are ontological portions of the *Fragments* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, and the absolute paradox seems to

[26] Terence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), pp. 221–224. I do not agree with Tilley's claim that medieval and ancient Christian apologists saw the challenges that evils of various kinds pose to faith *very* differently than the moderns. While their perceived burdens of proof, audiences, and framing contexts were unlike ours in important ways, Augustine and Aquinas (like some medieval Islamic thinkers) recognized something close to the need for theodicy.

[27] SKS 8, 370 / UDVS, 274.

[28] SKS 13, 90–91 / FSE, 69–70.

[29] Clare Carlisle, "Evil Part 3: Does Freedom Make us Evil?" *The Guardian* (Oct. 29, 2012): https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/29/does-freedom-make-us-evil. This is one essay in an eight-part series on evil, one of Carlisle's many remarkable pieces of public service in making philosophical themes accessible to wide audiences.

have a metaphysical side. It is also a mistake to imagine that Kierkegaard did not "see" that great evils can cause even faithful people to experience excruciating doubt, or that he dismissed all such doubts as *merely* a disease of modernity. For that, he was too influenced by Kant's ideas that a good will needs practical religious "postulates," as well as objective uncertainty about God—and too aware of how deeply ancient Christians like Augustine felt the existence of evils to be an important challenge to their faith.[30] He introduces the theme of good and perfect gifts with a prayer recognizing that it sometimes seems like God closes God's generous hand,[31] and he mentions a person whose earnest sorrows lead to infinite resignation.[32] In addition, his harshest comments on doubt mostly concern its speculative rather than personally engaged forms.

Of course, philosophical reasoning about these issues cannot by itself bring a person to faith as a lived existential stance engaging the whole person in a way that risks oneself infinitely. But that is consistent with a believer who strives daily for subjective appropriation of a religious promise around which she orients her life, still being led through that engaged attitude to ontological doubts that have very painful practical imports.[33] Even if her doubts have no adequate solution accessible to natural reason in Kierkegaard's view, her ontological fears can stymie her practical self-formation in ways that are not mere flights of rationalist escapism or weak excuses for failure to trust in God. Call these earnest or wholehearted doubts.

We seem to enter this category, as Thomas Tracy suggests, when we consider cases like Ivan Karamazov's children whose intense suffering seems never to provide them any proportionate benefits: at best, it looks like they are sacrificed to the larger aims of a utilitarian creator.[34] Although philosophers focus on whether there is a combination of credible metaphysical and ethical theses that would divert blame for such cases away from God, experiences of enormous natural and moral evils can motivate a doubt that is

[30] See Neiman's explanation of the problem of evil (and the misalignment of happiness and virtue) as central to Kant's thought: *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 61–67. Kant's view that "we must believe that all our efforts to be virtuous will be completed" by God in nature in ways we cannot comprehend (p. 66) is not so far from James' dictum as Hough and I are interpreting it.

[31] SKS 5, 41 / EUD, 31; compare SKS 13, 328 / M, 269.

[32] SKS 5, 43–44 / EUD, 35–36.

[33] Thus MacIntyre pointed out in *After Virtue* that a personal interest in metaphysical questions can grow out of their relevance to practical aspects of one's existence.

[34] Thomas Tracy, "Victimization and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Ivan Karamazov," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 no. 3 (1992): pp. 304–306.

completely existential—a fear, personally appropriated in inwardness, that we are abandoned in a universe without any ultimate significance, or even that we are betrayed by a God who is not Love.[35] What Sager and Tilley call the "existential" problem of evil—"the supplication of a Job or a Jeremiah, overwhelmed by unbearable trials"—is connected, in ways that are hard to spell out, with the more familiar logical and evidential problems.[36]

Because of that connection, the existential problem operates at another level than what has been called the "pastoral" or psychological problem of evil. In the words of Dan Speak, that is the problem of "how to live with it: how to survive it and even counteract it [evil], in our own lives and in the world generally."[37] This pragmatic problem is continuous with ethical questions about how to prevent and respond to evils of multiple kinds, and such therapeutic questions as how to move past trauma and PTSD. Yet that description from Speak was motivated by a meeting with an excellent student who wanted to know if the philosophical theodicies and defenses could reconcile God's goodness with the heinous experiences she went through as her father was slowly dying of ALS. Such a student might simply have been hoping for some technique or cognitive therapy, a way of framing the experience that would help her process it and deal with (probably unwarranted) survivor guilt. But it might instead have been something more subtle than the "pastoral" designation indicates. In addition to all of the first-order suffering that her father and the student herself underwent, she was also shaken by doubting God's existence or goodness—a kind of higher-order suffering or complex neg-value that may dwarf any alleged "complex goods" realized in responding well enough to the many first-order evils in this situation. In short, perhaps she hoped that a theodicy might console her spiritual wound.

We cannot, then, reply that theoretical responses to the logical and evidential problems are not designed to play this role: the existential problem of evil requires them to be capable of inspiring personal consolation. Otherwise they are not adequate *even as*

[35] Compare SKS 8, 367–368 / UDVS, 270.

[36] See Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, p. 229, quoting Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Evil* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1963), p. 60. The deeper link between the pastoral and theoretical aspects is evident, I think, in a recent essay by Jerome Gellman critiquing skeptical defenses against the evidential problem of evil: see Jerome Gellman, "On a New Logical Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 32 no. 4 (2015): pp. 439–452.

[37] Daniel Speak, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Polity Press, 2015), p. 16.

theoretical contributions. David Ray Griffin put this well in his process theodicy: "the theoretical side of the problem of evil is a significant aspect of the existential problem to be met."[38] This connection between ontological theory and personal formation through commitment and inward conviction is evident in the phenomenology of responses to great evils by both believers and nonbelievers in a personal God. Theodicy is originally motivated by heartbreak and horror, by infinite personal need for sound grounds to believe that God has good reasons for creating a world with such evils, and can overcome them. Bad theodicy can destroy faith. Anyone who thinks otherwise I invite to watch Will Smith in the film *Collateral Beauty*, which portrays a father shattered by the suffering and death of his young daughter.[39] Even when no theodicy up to this task can be offered, an authentic response must affirm the need for it by tracing out the empty space where such an existential theodicy would go.

One scholar who ties Kierkegaard's thought directly to this existential problem is Martin Matuštík, who argues that the need for a new kind of radical hope becomes urgent in the face of diabolical evils for the sake of pure cruelty that Kant refused to see.[40] Matuštík finds an anti-religious exceptionalism in transcendent forms of cruelty that exceed ordinary ethical evaluation—in agreement with Kierkegaard's descriptions of defiant despair. But Matuštík also distances his project from traditional theodicy and looks for a kind of indirect answer in agapic love.[41] Tellingly, though, his poetic and subtle account never gets free of the unmet need for some way to understand God's relation to the whole range of evils (including the diabolical). Similarly, while he seemed to ignore theodicy, Kierkegaard's unpublished essay on doubt, titled *Johannes*

[38] David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 16. Tilley effectively criticizes Griffin's theodicy as inadequate for this existential task, but he cannot deny that it needs theoretical inputs: see Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, p. 230. Notably, Griffin's preface to the 2004 edition of his book now agrees with Adams that "a fully satisfactory theodicy requires an eschatology" that promises a kind of "ultimate victory of good over evil" (Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004], p. 10).

[39] *Collateral Beauty*, dir. David Frankel (New Line Cinema, 2016). Thus I am inclined to respond to Tilley both that (a) the burden of proof shifted onto theists not only because of science's implicit naturalism but also because of earlier doubts arising due to experiences of horror; and (b) this burden that he traces to Enlightenment *sources* supports David Griffin's claim that the existential problem now makes theoretical confusions about God's relation to evils more personally urgent.

[40] Martin Matuštík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 5–9.

[41] Ibid., pp. 16, 243, and 263–264.

Climacus, introduces an existential version of Pascal's Wager, arguing that in an epistemically ambiguous life-situation, it is worth the risk of being deceived in order not to miss out on the chance of being correct about the divine. While commentators have made connections with Reformed Epistemology, this argument is linked with his theme in *Works of Love* and several discourses that faith is never deceived. Kierkegaard recognizes the existential problem of evil even more clearly when writing on James' motif.

In his first discourse on Good and Perfect Gifts, Kierkegaard imagines a person overcome with anger at God for his sufferings[42]—anticipating the later description of demonic rebellion that wants to spite God for some personal cross, as described in *The Sickness Unto Death*.[43] It is only a short step from this to Ivan Karamazov's almost infinite fury with God on behalf of the innocents who have experienced heinous cruelties in this world. It is plausible that an ethical life-view could bring a person to an Ivan-like point of denouncing God, if that is what it takes to stand fully with the victims. And yet Kierkegaard does not directly address this looming personal obstacle to faith, even though he candidly recognizes horrors which seem to show that "humanly speaking," we cannot absolutely rely on anyone, "even God in heaven."[44] That is, no human calculation or way of invoking God can shield us.

However, I will explore the possibility that, even while seeming to demand a faith that dispenses with theodicy, Kierkegaard's indirect approach indicates a way towards addressing the existential problem of evil on its own level. To see this requires considering a few strengths and weaknesses of recent proposals, each of which seems to resonate with some Kierkegaardian themes.

3. Kierkegaard and "Soul-Making"?

Here are four closely related and problematic positions to which someone might mistakenly assimilate Kierkegaard's convictions. First, his many remarks on suffering imply that, like most Danes in his time, he imagined that God providentially controls the details of the history's unfolding, such as who gets ill and dies during a plague, or

[42] SKS 5, 46–47 / EUD, 38.
[43] Anger or wrath, we are told in the third discourse on Good and Perfect Gifts, is always an obstacle to righteousness (SKS 5, 141 / EUD 138; compare SKS 13, 327 / M, 268).
[44] SKS 10, 271 / CD, 257–258.

who gets rich or poor, so as to prompt spiritual growth. This image of governance as divine stage-managing of particular events in life, which is sometimes called "meticulous providence," underlies accounts like C.S. Lewis' famously inadequate suggestion that pains are God's clarion call to wake us up from our sins—as if people's massively different sufferings are proportioned to the jarring that each one needs according to their inner faults.[45] Lewis had to rethink this view later, when his young wife died of cancer: he finally recognized what his successors have since come to call "gratuitous evil" that is not necessary for spiritual growth, or that fails to occasion greater spiritual goods sufficient to outweigh it in this life.

Second, as William Hasker has argued, this evidence contrary to meticulous providence also affects Molinist conceptions which imagine God as creating the best combination of feasible persons to minimize evil results, given choices that all possible creaturely persons *would* make in each possible choice-circumstance. If we accept that there are such subjunctive facts about unmade free choices, then God at least sometimes creates person A in part because A's evil choices will bring out the best in person B. But Kierkegaard, like later existential thinkers, rejects such Molinist personal essences prior to the person's existence. Third, "skeptical" defenses argue that we cannot know enough about all the possible good outcomes connected with great evils. Unfortunately, this reasoning applies equally to possible knock-on *bad* consequences and thus hardly makes theism more probable, given our experiential evidence.[46]

A fourth route includes less meticulous soul-making accounts, which focus on the complex goods that become feasible (although not necessarily actual) through our *chosen responses* to simple harms or first-order bads and their secondary effects. These approaches have also grown more subtle over time. Hasker considers the early (1985) version of Eleonore Stump's Thomist theodicy claiming that God must—even though we cannot grasp the details—be governing the moral evils resulting from misuses of human free will so that *each individual*'s suffering is outweighed by a sum of inner and

[45] See C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1962), pp. 96–97. Lewis admits that he does not know why the distribution of pain is what we see (p. 104), but he is sure this is part of a larger "tribulational system" designed to purify us of worldliness (p. 105)—as we also see in Abraham's trial (p. 101).

[46] William Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), ch. 7, pp. 171–197. I selected Hasker's analysis as one of the best accounts I have found within contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

outer goods that it produces (or facilitates) *for that individual*. These benefits flow, she suggested, mainly through the way that suffering can bring people "to turn to God in faith and repentance."[47]

Hasker condemns this account as "absolutely appalling" because, as D.Z. Phillips warned, it could undermine our will to respond appropriately to the sufferings of others.[48] It is easy to see why, if we start to imagine that sufferings which we could alleviate or prevent might actually be the "medicine" that a sick soul needs. While there are times when it may be morally right to make such a paternalistic assessment, they must be few and far between for any moral view that is adequately concerned to reduce human suffering. The implausible notion that no suffering is really gratuitous for its subject could make us second-guess all individual and collective efforts to address needs or prevent injustices—and thus revive the danger of quietism.[49] Kierkegaard seems instead to insist that even if we think (a) our neighbor P could well end up better off in the long run if they suffer a looming harm H, because it will teach them a needed lesson or remind them of what really matters, etc., (b) it would (normally) be morally wrong for us not to prevent H when we could easily do so. He even insists that we reduce a wrongdoer's shame, while maintaining his understanding of his fault, by expressing our fundamental equality with that wrongdoer.[50]

Yet some of Kierkegaard's claims might easily be taken in a Stumpian direction. For example, he writes that an apostle knows that his "thorn in the flesh is given him so that he will not be arrogant."[51] In later religious writings such as *Christian Discourses*, he says that Christians must discover "eternity's hope" planted in our "innermost being" through hardships;[52] give others hope through mustering faith while in dire poverty;[53] be willing to give up every earthly good for a proper relation to God; and bring troubles

[47] Ibid., pp. 189–190.
[48] Ibid., p. 191. Compare Tracy, "Victimization and the Problem of Evil," p. 308. However, this is virtually the only point that Hasker finds compelling in Phillips' many-sided Wittgensteinian anti-theodicy, which Hasker thoroughly and perhaps decisively demolishes (Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, pp. 42–54).
[49] Compare Tracy's point that in a world where natural evils were proportioned to moral desert, external carrot and stick incentives would crowd out the Kantian good will (Tracy, "Victimization and the Problem of Evil," p. 307).
[50] SKS 9, 333–335 / WL, 338–340.
[51] SKS 5, 319 / EUD, 329.
[52] SKS 10, 121 / CD, 110.
[53] SKS 10, 127–128 / CD, 116.

on ourselves voluntarily by challenging worldly values.[54] In 1849, we find journal passages reemphasizing his claim that "every earthly hope" must be lost before true faith can emerge.[55] Kierkegaard also wrote a whole discourse on the theme that "the School of Sufferings Educates for Eternity."[56] That certainly *sounds* like soul-making,[57] although he did not present it as a theodicy.

The resonances become even stronger if we consider Stump's later and deeper elaboration of her theodicy derived from Aquinas and bolstered by the insight that we often know too little about "the inner life and psychic trajectory of the sufferer" to guess why God would allow their particular suffering.[58] Yet Stump does not rely solely on this skeptical move; she nuances it by referring to her own extensive argument that second-personal narrative can give us some insight into the complex inner life of persons as they interact with other people and with a divine presence—even if they often do not realize that they are "wrestling with God." Glimpses of that interaction within their life stories may make it more plausible that God allows their individual pains "because, through their suffering and only by its means, God gives to each of the protagonists something that these sufferers are willing to trade their suffering to receive," once they understand that these or similar sufferings are necessary for them to come to a deep personal relationship with God.[59]

Thus Stump defends "the fractal nature of providence," meaning that the benefits for each person defeat that person's involuntary and unmerited sufferings (setting aside just punishments for chosen evils).[60] For God "cannot be close" to a human person who is volitionally fragmented; faith requires "an act of will that is a global second-order

[54] SKS 10, 190 / CD, 179.
[55] SKS 22, 66, NB11:118; KJN 6, 62.
[56] SKS 8, 347–360 / UDVS, 248–263.
[57] Yet the main theme of this discourse is that we can, if we choose, appropriate sufferings inwardly in a way that calms the unrest which arises from selfishness, and helps us to obedience. While it portrays sufferings as potentially "medicinal" or educative by weaning us from addictive pursuit of riches, fame, status, etc., it is most focused on willfulness as an inward obstacle to accepting the need for forgiveness. Although this sounds like soul-making, the discourse does not explicitly argue that these potential complex goods *justify God in allowing* specific sufferings, nor does it imply that God tailors them as individual therapy. So its theme is not a response to the problem of evil per se.
[58] Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 373.
[59] Ibid., p. 375. I take this passage to be a statement of the main thesis in Stump's deep and subtle tome on the problem of evil.
[60] Ibid., pp. 378–384.

desire [or volition] for a will that wills the good"—compare this with Kierkegaardian purity of heart. That unity is impossible without the "medicinal" value of even massive and undeserved suffering.[61] Or at least, Stump says, that is plausible within any epistemic perspective that does not *already* rule out heaven, resurrection, or beatitude on grounds unrelated to the theological problem of evil. Nor does this account deny that people can and often will choose to respond to their sufferings in ways that move them farther from God.[62] This Thomistic account only requires that (a) their sufferings could be medicinal for such sufferers if they allowed it and (b) some such sufferings on this order are plausibly necessary for many (perhaps all) human persons' spiritual growth.

All of this sounds like Kierkegaard's "Gospel of Sufferings." After all, he writes that innocent suffering is an opportunity to learn;[63] and earthly adversity can help to turn a person towards eternity and enable her to comfort others.[64] Unlike more abstract skeptical theodicies or Molinist free will defenses, Stump confronts existential crises directly in the personal narratives that she considers. She thus meets the existential problem of evil on its own level as an intrapersonal crisis and authentic threat to faith. So maybe we should just conclude that this is what James' motif of everything being a perfect gift means for Kierkegaard. But I think not, for two reasons.

First, the sufferings that Climacus and then Kierkegaard find most spiritually valuable are those that we voluntarily accept as the likely price of ethical efforts to love and be religious witnesses, rather than other entirely "accidental" sufferings or "misfortunes."[65] Thus he wrote that "common human sufferings" are not by themselves "the narrow way" of faith, although faith involves dealing patiently with them.[66] Second,

[61] Ibid., pp. 395 and 399.
[62] Ibid., pp. 403–404. If this is combined with complete divine foreknowledge of human futures, it implies that God allows particular enormous sufferings even when God knows that these will not bring the human soul around: God gives such people their best opportunity even while knowing the medicine will not work in their case. An open theist view reduces this tension.
[63] SKS 8, 353 / UDVS, 255.
[64] SKS 10, 163–165 / CD, 155–157.
[65] See, for example, SKS 5, 319–321 / EUD, 330–331 on divine comfort that requires the higher suffering of spiritual trial; SKS 7, 404–405 / CUP1, 445 on religious suffering; and SKS 8, 348–349 / UDVS, 250 on choosing to suffer; compare SKS 10, 109 / CD, 97 on choosing to see all one's earthly sufferings as lasting for a brief moment, even if they continue for seventy years.
[66] SKS 13, 89 / FSE, 67.

there is a way of taking Kierkegaard's meditations on James' dictum that goes in the more enigmatic direction to which Hough points. Before trying to describe her unique contribution, let me clarify the main problem that motivates her account.

4. Horrendous Evils and the Existential Inadequacy of Soul-Making Theodicy

The great difficulty with the world-picture offered by Stump's subtle theodicy, despite its many riches, is that it still envisions God as undertaking a *particular tailoring* of each suffering to each individual (and to the extent that this allows, also to groups). Such tailoring is implied at several junctures in Stump's descriptions. God "allows" Job to suffer great loss at the hands of raiders who freely choose to attack his household; God "allows Samson's dreadful suffering" as a curative; God sometimes tests his best servants with harder trials; and God even permits wars and other causes of enormous sufferings for whole societies without which their trajectory would be worse (although human limits prevent us from knowing how such worse counterfactuals would unfold).[67] Stump tries to meet Hasker's objection that this theodicy would callously encourage us to allow other people's sufferings: in response, she retreats to the skeptical point that we cannot (absent some special revelation) know that any particular suffering looming for others is one that God wants to allow. Thus we should *not* second-guess our inclinations to help someone avoid that suffering.

Yet a dilemma arises from combining this skeptical response with belief in any non-Molinist form of libertarian free will (which both Stump and Kierkegaard endorse).[68] For if it is true in a given case with looming suffering S that God either (a) wills to allow S for soul-making reasons, or (b) wishes to prevent S because it will not ultimately help the victim V, then it seems our free choice might defeat God's plans either way. If (a), then a good Samaritan helper H may intervene to stop S and even credibly think that morality requires this of her. This holds unless we stipulate that H's

[67] Ibid., pp. 393, 399–400, and 409. However, I think the picture of the world as an arena or stage on which people are tested, which Kierkegaard also sometimes seems to endorse, is different than the picture of the world as a kind of hospital for souls who are like children too young to understand the therapies they need to survive.

[68] Kierkegaard could not have accepted Molinism, which he would have known in its Leibnizian form, because his central idea that free will is only an *existing* process in time is a rejection of the notion that any specifics hold true *sub specie eternitatas* about what a merely logically possible free being would choose in particular choice-circumstances.

choices can never be effective in blocking any suffering that God wills for soul-making purposes—say, because God can always facilitate some equally effective alternative suffering that cannot be defeated by human efforts to aid others.[69] Or if (b), then there will be cases in which some human beings are able to cause or facilitate S by their intentional acts or omissions—unless we stipulate that God can always reverse S-promoting effects of their choices, whether directly or via the agency of persons concerned to prevent S.

This problem is not avoided by invoking the popular distinction between God's "perfect" and merely "permissive" will (although that contrast may play a useful role later, as we will see). For the problem is not about whether God merely permits useless suffering to happen to a victim V, or permits a well-meaning person H's efforts to save V from useful suffering, as part of a *general policy* to sustain free human efforts. Rather, it concerns whether or not God is (i) able to intervene to ensure that S or similarly efficacious suffering comes about no matter what V and H choose, and thus (ii) perfectly wills S (or its equivalent) *as a particular* spiritual medicine for V, no matter what else God permissively wills—and the opposite when S would be spiritually useless or counterproductive for V. If we think God often permissively wills that persons like H prevent S due to God perfectly willing meaningful, free creaturely agency, even though S was needed for V's spiritual progress, then we have rejected (ii).

So we can only make libertarian freedom compatible with Stump's soul-making theodicy by positing that God (normally) undoes the effects of free choices that would otherwise prevent medicinal suffering or cause non-medicinal suffering. This carries the existentially disastrous implication that each actual serious suffering is perfectly willed *qua* particular, or handpicked by God. It also radically reduces the significance of human

[69] This first horn of the dilemma briefly indicates apparent metaphysical difficulties with imagining that the levels of suffering we see are *just right* for each individual's spiritual progress towards beatitude, to the extent that being metaphysically compatible with each other allows. So the alignment between teaching Satan a lesson and upbuilding Job that Stump finds in the Book of Job (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 219) cannot be universalized. For a level of suffering that might be necessary to bring individual A around to a relation with God may take her towards beatitude on a route that involves causing or allowing suffering for other people B, C, etc. vastly in excess of what they spiritually need on a Thomist view. If so, then for each individual to receive at least the minimum needed amount of spiritual medicine, some must be massively overdosed—maybe to the point of defeating their pilgrim's progress. Notice that this argument does not deny the plausible idea that some complex goods may be psychologically possible only through responses to great evils.

efforts to prevent or remediate suffering, because it allows us to succeed or fail in preventing sufferings only insofar as that still leads to the precise pattern of suffering-outcomes that God selects as optimal means to soul-making, given whatever else God is directly causing. Instead of making us second-guess our good motives, this defense makes our choices superfluous either way relative to spiritually needed suffering. Are Christians who take the Fall seriously, as Stump and Kierkegaard do, to say that even this defeated none of God's plans?

But there is another even more important cause for doubt: the existential problem of evil seems to rebel especially against the idea of particular tailoring. The idea that God "allowed" Ivan's young girl to be unspeakably abused by her parents for months before her death is precisely the basis for Ivan's conviction—embraced with infinite pathos as that on which he stakes his whole self—that such a God would not be worthy of worship. His extreme thesis that it would be better for the world never to have been created than for this to be done to the innocent girl seems to be a distinct further claim, to which I will return below.

Ivan's girl illustrates what Marilyn Adams has taught us to call the problem of particular "horrendous evils" that make it *prima facie* doubtful whether the life of one undergoing or participating in them could be "a great good to him/her on the whole." Such evils can destroy a person's framework for understanding life as meaningful, ruining its entire earthly potential for worthwhileness in one fell swoop. I will spare us Adams' own Dostoevskian examples because we already participate sufficiently in the special second-order psychic harm of knowing that horrendous evils occur, and we probably have at least a dim inchoate sense that we could not even conceive "plausible candidate reasons" why God would select for these specific evils.[70]

This second-order sense that divine reasons-why are absent, or even offensive to imagine, can flower into the existential problem of evil when people are encouraged to believe that according to their religion, God must have sufficient reasons *particular* to each enormous evil. The message that God tailors all sufferings medicinally to each individual becomes a pit: at its bottom, the would-be pilgrim suffers the great new evil of temptation to despair in part because no theodicy she has heard or can envision seems plausible anymore, even while the need for ontologically ultimate meaning is

[70] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 25–28.

sharpened by the horrors that she has witnessed or undergone. This is a special existential suffering that might—if it leads to willing despair rather than merely invincible ignorance—even prevent otherwise generally good individuals from attaining infinite final communion with God (on non-universalist conceptions like Kierkegaard's).

As a result, Alvin Plantinga was wise to direct his initial defense of theism (devised in response to Mackie's argument from evil) only at showing that God might be unable to avoid moral and natural evil *in general*, given the great value of free will that God aims to realize. This generic reason-why implies a divine permissive will to allow human-made sufferings in general, but without the complete particular tailoring of sufferings that has lured so many would-be believers into existential doubt or despair.[71] A similar point emerges in Hasker's critique of William Rowe's condition that any harms arising from immoral choices be offset by other simple and complex goods *somewhere* "that God could not have obtained without permitting the evil in question." While this is less demanding than Stump's condition, it can still motivate "passivity and fatalism," because it implies that God would not permit us to ignore others' suffering unless that suffering would later be offset by net gains that would not occur without it.[72]

Hasker is concerned with this point because the evidential (or probabilistic) problem of evil is usually formulated with Rowe's requirement, or something similar to it. Hasker instead suggests that the possibility of evils that are gratuitous for their individual sufferers might, *as a class*, be an unavoidable side-effect of God's efforts to secure the goods that come from limited free will among created persons. As Tracy puts it, some evils are individually "dysteleological" in the sense that "the good [which] God intends could be achieved without the occurrence of these moral evils, but not without permitting the choices that generate them"—or, better, choices of *this kind*.[73] More precisely, God does not select each responsible human choice that foreseeably causes

[71] However, Plantinga's defense turned out to depend on Molinism, and the Molinist idea that God chooses the best combination of possible persons may imply a partial tailoring, as Hasker recognizes.
[72] Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, pp. 192–195.
[73] Tracy, "Victimization and the Problem of Evil," p. 305. For clarity, we should then distinguish between evils that are *individually gratuitous* in that those suffering them did not need to undergo them to reach their highest good or fulfill God's plan for them, and evils that are *collectively gratuitous* in that this entire class of evils or their causes did not need to exist for a morally perfect God's plans to be fulfilled. It is the latter kind of gratuity that Tracy and Hasker seek to avoid.

gratuitous evils, but God permits the entire category of free choices that includes some massively immoral choices as unintended side-effects of God's permissive will.

Hasker's open theist approach thus implies that God must take great risks in creating beings with morally responsible free agency. It rejects divine "meticulous control" over every event in time, including the narrow tailoring of sufferings.[74] This open theist account stays at the level of overall reasons for the phenomena of gratuitous and horrendous evils *in general*—reasons that do not purport to justify the widely varying distribution of suffering among people of apparently similar moral worth or need for spiritual maturation.

But Plantinga's and Hasker's different arguments that God's goodness is compatible with the existence of individually gratuitous evils as a category may still not provide plausible reasons why God would allow such evils in the degrees we see, including horrendous evils, which appear at first to be worse than the generic goods of free will would require.[75] Would it not have been enough to make morally responsible freedom significant if created persons could cause gratuitous sufferings only up to (say) a threshold of around one percent of everything that Stalin's or Mao's or Putin's horrendous choices triggered? Nor will Plantinga's or Hasker's global defenses show that the lives of those who are involved in horrendous evils are worth living on the whole; such persons may simply look like casualties of God's efforts to secure global goods through creating finite free wills.[76]

Soul-making approaches bite back here: they at least insist that God's reasons for creation as a whole, including free will, must respect the importance of *each* suffering person (and some would extend this to animals too). As Tracy puts the main deontological restriction, God morally would not bring it about that some persons "are so profoundly and permanently victimized" by moral or natural evils that "it would be

[74] Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, pp. 203–204. Compare William Hasker, "Why is There So Much Evil?" *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 3 (2014): pp. 238–242 (responding to Michael Peterson).
[75] Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, p. 196. So even if Hasker's quietism objection defeats a premise needed for Rowe's Evidential Argument against theism, that is not by itself enough to show that the levels or distribution of apparently gratuitous evils we find in the world are sufficiently explained by the need to allow morally free wills to develop. As Rowe implies in his response, we seem to be well above the threshold of potential-for-evil needed for free will to have robust moral significance. The needed *intermediate* reasons-why lie between generic reasons for allowing whole categories of evils, and specific reasons for allowing particular sufferings of individual persons.
[76] Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 29–30.

better for them never to have existed at all."[77] Consider just the latest of those who we may call Ivan's children: a three-year old boy trapped under the rubble of a bombed-out building in Gaza, dying slowly over a period of three days, all alone next to the unresponsive body of his dead mother.

5. What Would an Existentially Adequate Answer Involve? Building on Adams

These problems with prior accounts when measured against the threat of existential despair may indicate what a more existentially adequate answer to Ivan Karamazov's challenge would require. After such an answer is outlined in this section, we can consider whether Kierkegaard could move us towards such a view.

In agreement with Stump and Tracy, Adams begins by considering ways of restoring overall agent-relative worth to human lives afflicted by horrendous evils. One is C.E. Rolt's suggestion that the highest goodness is found in suffering love that moves us "from self-assertion to cooperation" and self-sacrifice. Through imitation of Christ's suffering, we participate in a good that redeems even the most afflicted lives. This comports with Hartshorne's view that God suffers *with us* as well as for us, and we commune with God in our suffering (in medieval terminology, God incarnate is passible). A more extreme position is Simone Weil's view that we see into God's essence most truly through suffering that transcends human limits.[78]

Notably these responses all connect with Dostoevsky's own indirect response by way of portraying Father Zosima's devotion to the deepest and most expansive agapic ideal imaginable. In Zosima's view, we should feel a kinship with all human persons (and other animals) because of our shared capacities to suffer. Similarly Matuštík emphasizes God's suffering *with us* as a model for redeeming evils by accepting our "coresponsibility" for them.[79] But if taken to Weil's extreme, this idea is prone to the Nietzschean objection that it is just a total value-inversion. On the contrary, the objector will say, Jerome Gellman's phenomenology of horrendous evils rightly describes them as experiences in which the absence of God's will appears manifest.[80]

[77] Tracy, "Victimization and the Problem of Evil," p. 310.
[78] Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 159–162.
[79] Matuštík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, pp. 30–32 and 261–262.
[80] Jerome I. Gellman, "A New Look at the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1992): pp. 210–216. As he argues, the "felt need for a theodicy" arises not from intellectual puzzlement but instead from

Instead, in a more Kierkegaardian way, Adams argues that only eschatological hope can render lives touched by horrendous evils ultimately worth living for those individuals (such as the boy buried alive in Gaza). The compensating good of "postmortem beatific intimacy with God is an incommensurate good for human persons" (as Stump also affirms): retrospectively from the beatific state, we will see that in experiences of horror within our mortal life, we were sharing something with "the crucified God" that could be fully shared in no other way. The suggestion is not that such horrors are necessary for soul-making; on the contrary, a very fortunate horror-free life could in principle still lead to beatitude (although Kierkegaard would insist that at least some difficulties are needed to awaken us to ethical concerns).[81] Rather Adams' suggestion is that even when a horror facilitates no complex goods in this life, persons touched by it would not "retrospectively wish it away" because in heaven, they see that in these traumatic events, God was with them in a unique mode different than within our more positive experiences.[82]

The resonances with Kierkegaard's concept of imitating Christ are evident here, but does this proposal address the existential problem on its own terms? In my view, there are three ingredients in Adams' approach that are necessary for meeting the existential problem. (1) First, Adams rightly shares with Stump the sense that collective goods realized in human groups or larger cosmic structures are not enough: it must be possible for existence on the whole to be worth it for *each* created person. (2) Second, like Hasker, Adams appears to deny that God tailors particular sufferings; at least her God would not omit to prevent specific horrendous evils when God could have done so, consistent with God's much larger cosmic goals. So no horrendous evil is perfectly willed by God for soul-making; at most, God tolerates their general possibility as a horrendous side-effect of the only means that can secure other great individual and cosmic goods, as long as condition (1) is also met. And (3), like Kierkegaard, Adams emphasizes that only eschatological goods can counterbalance horrendous evils for individual persons.

experience of horrifying evils in which the absence of God is manifest, i.e. experiences that are *prima facie* evidence for God's nonexistence (p. 215). This is the existential problem.

[81]See SKS 22, 76–77, NB11:127; KJN 6, 73.

[82] Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 166–167.

I am not sure that this needs to involve a postmortem transformation of experiences of horrendous evils into more complex goods within communion. For that suggestion is still looking for a good that is directly connected with horrendous evils and achievable in no other way—despite affirming that God would have strongly preferred a history without this specific good and the horror on which it supervened. Fealty with the victims of horrendous evils, which Ivan and Gellman rightly demand of us, is most unequivocal if God utterly rejects those evils as not worth what they add to communion with the divine reality that may nevertheless be attained in them. The key idea is rather that eschatological goods "defeat" those evils.[83] Likewise, even when terrible sufferings produce moral growth of character in this life, they were not God's specifically chosen means to such spiritual development.

For some Dostoevskians, this may still seem inadequate. Ivan will doubt that any goods made feasible by creation of free wills are worth the range and depth of horrendous evils that we see. Gellman will hazard that our world contains "irredeemable evil" which is so terrible that "there is no possible world in which its existence should be allowed," no matter what goods flow from its conditions of possibility.[84] Thomas Hardy will protest on behalf of his heroine, Tess, that no heaven could justify allowing her or the suffering animals he describes to be mistreated so badly. Yet, much as I empathize with their sentiment, perhaps at this point Ivan et al. have gone beyond what their evidence entitles them to say. Perhaps here, the skeptical theist response implied at the end of the Book of Job is in order. Kierkegaard would surely insist, with Adams, that human minds cannot begin to imagine the goods that will flow from the coexistence of created free wills in a shared physical order, when we enter eternity.

Still, for faith that horrendous evils are redeemable, the promise of eschatological compensation in a generic sense might not be sufficient by itself. We need plausible reasons-why related to conceivable purposes for creation. Adams doubts this, or worries

[83] Even postmortem Ivan might not be satisfied by seeing that the girl he described is now redeemed in heaven and now recognizes her abandonment as something that God suffered with her. Still, there is something to the idea of a unique kind of I-Thou encounter within suffering. Matuštík thinks this answer is enough: see Matuštík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, p. 263. Tilley critiques the co-suffering answer as it is offered in the initial version of David Griffin's theodicy. Yet what Matuštík adds, following Hans Jonas and his example of Etty Hillesum, is that we can reintroduce a fragment of divinity into horrendous evils by willingly suffering them with others (ibid., pp. 29–30).

[84] Jerome Gellman, "A Surviving Version of the Commonsense Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2017): p. 84.

that tentative "partial reasons why" will get inflated into "total explanations" or justifications, which can worsen the existential crisis by "attributing perverse motives to God."[85] Yet among free will defenses, she only considers soul-making and "free fall" varieties, with the latter including Augustinian just punishment models that indeed make God sound disproportionately cruel and comparatively unjust.[86]

Open Theism instead offers plausible global reasons why God could not simply have created us all *directly in heaven* and skipped the agonizing steps involved in this life. Even though our development does not conform to tailored soul-making, a process involving difficult free choices must still precede the heavenly state, because only that which shapes itself via a (situated and partial) independence from its creator has the requisite kind of *alterity* needed for the beatific relationship.[87] We are inherently interpersonal beings, grounded in our creaturely relations to God; but, as James Collins put it, each person is also "aware of himself as an inalienable center of existence and freedom" that is responsible for its identity and not subsumable without remainder into any collective. Development of these creaturely selves requires interaction with other persons whom we are called to love in time, and thus a matrix for our coexistence.[88] Why this matrix needs to be concretely physical-spatial remains a mystery, but one that invites the hypothesis that the heavenly state may somehow take up this physical matrix into its transformation of everything—like a *synthesis* of the eternity "before" this universe with its spatiotemporal manifold. In fact, as I have argued, Kierkegaard's conception of the religious stage suggests exactly this synthesis.[89]

This picture still faces two hard questions. First, can it reduce existential doubts arising from natural evils, of which animal suffering makes up the greatest share? For

[85] Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 155–156. She expresses a modest version of the Karamazov-Gellman doubt that a good God would accept horrendous evils as the price of a "very good world with as favorable a balance of moral good over moral evil" as choices of created persons will allow (p. 30). Tracy, like Adams, insists that a "loving relationship with God" in the hereafter is "so great a good" that it defeats even horrendous evils and makes creation worth its risks.

[86] Ibid., ch. 3, pp. 32–55.

[87] SKS 11, 131–132 / SUD, 16.

[88] James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* [1958] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 259.

[89] John J. Davenport, "Kierkegaard's *Postscript* in Light of *Fear and Trembling*," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 64, nos. 2–4 (2008): pp. 879–908; and John J. Davenport, "Eschatological Faith and *Repetition*: Kierkegaard's Abraham and Job," in *Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling*: A Critical Guide*, ed. Dan Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 79–105.

example, Hasker offers credible arguments that it is good for the natural world to exhibit partial autonomy via inherent powers; that it is good for sentient and rational creatures to exist; that for all we know, it may be metaphysically impossible for God to generate sentient and rational creatures within a natural order including autonomous secondary causation except through an evolutionary process; and that for all we know, it may be metaphysically impossible to achieve this with laws of nature and fundamental constants that produce far less natural suffering than we see, while still sustaining the evolution of sentience and symbolic thought.[90] Moreover, if quantum-mechanical indeterminism is essential for libertarian freedom to interact with a relatively independent physical order, as might well be the case, then this indispensable condition might make it logically impossible even for God to predict all the macroscopic results of such laws together with the universe's initial constants.

However, while these components of a "natural order theodicy"[91] seem plausible, they drive up the risk-costs of the wholistic goods that provide divine reasons for a system of natural order including free being. The cosmic goods realized in a natural order capable of generating life, consciousness, reason, and free will have high costs that are distributed somewhat randomly among sentient creatures. As a result, these reasons will be inadequate to the existential problem of evil when they are disconnected from the first and third features of Adams' response, including eschatological meaning that makes suffering involved in natural evils worth it (for all sentient beings).

Second, Hasker's open theism faces the objection already mentioned that horrendous evils go beyond anything conceivably necessary to give significance to our free will, as Rowe says, which leads Gellman to his irredeemability thesis. Perhaps it is true that, if God interrupted most of our evil choices, we would be too overawed to act freely—so the risk of some horrendous evils is inherent in free will. Nevertheless, at some point, more metaphysical room for us to cause horrors might add little to the practical significance of our freedom.

[90] Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, ch. 5, pp. 101–146; also note his reference to "the kabbalist doctrine of *Tzimzum*" (contraction, or hiding) that "God 'steps back' to allow the creation room for an existence of its own," i.e., for a kind of alterity (pp. 202 and 141–143). Also see William Hasker, "The Need for a Bigger God," in *God in an Open Universe*, ed. William Hasker, Thomas Oord, and Dean Zimmerman (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp. 15–29.

[91] Ibid., pp. 99 and 138. I have defended the need for libertarian freedom as a condition of responsibility in other work, and assume this for the sake of simplicity here.

This basis for existential doubt implicitly assumes, I think, that God can still directly intervene on occasion or make small adjustments, as long as the natural order is not too disturbed. Kierkegaard obviously takes for granted that God can intervene in this way, as had Leibniz. Hasker and other open theists also tend to assume this kind of "latitude" in the natural order—presumably because they believe that some miracles are necessary for Christianity or biblical theism in general to make any sense. "Frequent and routine intervention by God" is ruled out, but occasional intervention is not. So, even though his natural law theodicy denies any particular tailoring of natural evils for divine purposes more specific than general cosmic goods, Hasker still suggests that God can prevent "any specific evil"—although doing so regularly enough to make a big difference would "seriously undermine the regular operation of nature" and human responsibility.[92] But this belief brings back a sense in which each horrendous evil is "allowed" by a specific divine act of omission. Then God's reasons for not (say) making the lightning hit a rock rather than a tree that triggers a wildfire, or not nudging a young Hitler's thoughts away from Jewish conspiracy theories, or not distracting one particular Nazi from noticing Sophie and her two children, would come down to a consideration of comparative fairness: because God cannot *always* do that without voiding the natural order, God judges that it would be wrong to arbitrarily pick these few cases in which to intervene.[93] Ivan will reject such a God.

To avoid this residual tailoring, we need a fourth and probably most controversial component (sketched here with fear and trembling). (4) I believe a natural order theodicy will be adequate only if it is strengthened to say that *God cannot intervene directly to alter events within this natural order without destroying the natural laws that bind it together*. Only such a robust Natural Law defense, which builds on Thomistic ideas of "hypothetical necessity," explains why God may not be able to prevent horrendous evils if God

[92] Ibid., pp. 163, 140–141, and 205. Hasker rejects divine tailoring of natural evils at p. 140 and p. 176.
[93] See ibid., pp. 44–46, for Hasker's poignant discussion of these transcendent evils. Or perhaps on the occasional intervention view, we imagine that God has already calculated the number and depth of feasible interventions and has already done some (and planned others) to prevent even greater horrors than the ones we have witnessed and will see in the future. But in that case, God would be faced with an endless series of Sophie's choices. For similar reasons, I have to reject Tracy's suggestion that, as a superogatory act, a perfect God would not allow a person to suffer any great evil when its "elimination" by God would bring about a better overall balance of goods over evils (Tracy, "Victimization and the Problem of Evil," pp. 312–313). For this condition suggests that God is selectively reducing horrendous evils—maybe sometimes by blocking choices that would cause them—on a case-by-case basis.

pursues the cosmic goods enabled by natural order, including the development of individual minds and personalities that can experience eschatological meaning. I will not pause here to consider whether this constitutes a retreat to a sort of deism that Kierkegaard would call Religiousness A (in fact, I think it remains compatible with the Resurrection).[94] But we know a lot of things that were not available to Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century which make such a strong Natural Law thesis independently plausible. For example, directly causing an event contrary to the laws of physics on a macroscopic level could constitute a tear in the spacetime continuum that would spread at the speed of light from its point of origin, eventually engulfing everything.[95]

If this Natural Law thesis (4) is added to the first three components, at last I believe we have a defense or partial theodicy that is adequate to Ivan's challenge. On this defense, God does not perfectly will any horrendous evils, or even foreknow them on the basis of Molinist subjunctive conditionals of free choice; rather, horrendous evils are simply made possible in general by preconditions of natural order, mind, and free will in ways that may be metaphysically unavoidable if life, sentience, and moral agency in general are worth the price. As Hans Jonas also suggests, drawing on Kabbalah traditions, God has to withdraw divine power in order to allow room for a universe like ours to develop. But individual persons are not thereby sacrificed for the collective goods of such a created order, because it is a temporal pathway to eschatological consolation. The horrors in which creatures partake cannot be undone in the hereafter; their traces remain etched forever in the firmament of reality as part of What Was. But much of the damage they did to creaturely minds and wills will then be overcome.

In the face of this combined hypothesis, if Ivan still condemned God on the grounds that such a creation was not worth its incalculably high prices, the skeptical theist could cogently reply that even Ivan is not in a position to judge *this much*. In isolation, this last component of epistemic modesty (5) would be ad hoc, a trite dismissal of the existential problem. But it is not arbitrary when combined with hypotheses (1)–(4) in our existential defense: these accommodate the judgments that Ivan is well-positioned to

[94] See John J. Davenport, "A New Existential Model of God: Open Theism, Agapic Personalism, and Alterogenesis," in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), pp. 567–586.

[95] See Leonard Susskind, *The Cosmic Landscape* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 2008), p. 89. This claim does not depend on a naïve scientific realism that is incompatible with undetermined consciousness; it only requires belief that the laws of nature constitute real limits with a kind of objective necessity.

make, namely that there is no morally possible justification for specifically selecting particular horrendous evils as parts of a divine plan.

This, however, is all a philosophical-theological story. The real test is whether the defense here cobbled together from Adams, Hasker, and strong laws of nature is *existentially* adequate. For I have suggested, following Sager, that the existential problem of despair in the face of gratuitous and horrendous evils—both in their collective enormity and in their transcendent concreteness as particulars—involves a deeply personal need for a plausible ontological explanation of why a morally perfect God would create a world with such harrowing features. This existential problem lives at the intersection between the reflective enterprise of theodicy and the practical problem of acting responsibly and finding meaning in the face of natural and moral evils. As we saw, this interaction generates the false impression that we can conquer by dividing these two "problems" of evil, addressing the first with speculative tinkering and the second with therapy, prayer, and wisdom gleaned from arts, literature, and scripture. Not so: the person in despair before horrendous evils cannot *personally appropriate* inadequate speculative defenses or theodicies.

I believe that the new existential defense outlined here will meet this need (or come close to it), because it rejects specific tailorings, offers a plausible cosmic picture that squares with hard evidence, and finally rests on the eschatological promise, with all its seeming absurdity. But the real test concerns whether it is personally appropriable in ways that alleviate despair. Such an existential defense cannot by itself reduce PTSD or help people articulate worthwhile new goals and pursue them effectively after participation in horrors. Therapy and pastoral care will remain vitally important. But the existential defense may be able to abate the sense of abandonment by God that can lead either to hatred of a God who seems cruel, or to a nihilistically appropriated atheism resting in bone-deep anger.

6. Back to Hough and, finally, to Kierkegaard

This detour through theoretical responses to the problem of evil has wandered far from Kierkegaard's form of Christianity. As noted earlier, while different strands in Lutheran and Arminian thought in his time addressed intricate ontological considerations about grace and freedom, Kierkegaard was militantly skeptical that they had much spiritually edifying value. Nevertheless, my thesis is that the existential defense just sketched may be upbuilding for believers (or would-be believers) who are moved by central themes in

Kierkegaard's multilayered portrayals of the human-divine relation. Thus Hough is right to measure Kierkegaard's theme of good and perfect gifts against the existential problem of evil.

She faces this spiritual sickness squarely in her Postlude, recognizing the depth of the abyss. We descend into it with her description of Aleksander Hemon and his wife Teri losing their baby daughter Isabel.[96] Hough affirms with Kierkegaard that this is truly a horror, not to be magically reconstrued as some kind of blessing in disguise.[97] In other words, she rejects the superficial idea that it is tailored for the Hemons' soul-making. The good and perfect gift that Kierkegaard affirms, even in such situations, cannot be on the same level as our human ethical evaluation of Isabel's dying, or any growth of character that comes from experiencing it (directly or indirectly).

I read Hough as saying that the "gift" James refers to has no clear propositional *content*,[98] i.e. as a specific value or good with practical import subject to rational assessment or interpretation in light of evidence.[99] "Subjective dwelling" in the faith that we are receiving good and perfect gifts does not, for example, suggest that Isabel will return in this life. About *what* will heal our existential wounds or overcome our deepest sorrow, it is silent, or gives only the enigmatic answer that it is "God's love" and that God will fulfill God's promises.[100]

This accords with the third component of the existential defense sketched above. As Hough argues, dwelling subjectively in faith does not necessarily require "suffering" in all the ordinary senses (including first- and second-order pains[101]): although the ethical demands and religious promises of faith will often prompt scorn and hostility from

[96] Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 119.
[97] Ibid., p. 120.
[98] Ibid., p. 143.
[99] The Spirit's gift is, then, far more elusive even than the gift of Christmas that everyone in Whoville received during that one special December when they received no gifts at all in the ordinary sense—although this event illustrates surprisingly well a part of what Kierkegaard had in mind.
[100] Ibid., pp. 126–128. This will be so even if we think we have some inkling of it, or have some partially concrete vision of heaven or the highest good. For example, I have three or four images that tend to prevail whenever my thought wanders towards heaven; but as profound as they are for me, these images must be infinitely inadequate next to a reality that infinitely transcends them, and is barely even imagined through a glass darkly.
[101] By a second-order pain, I mean suffering experiences that arise from people's reactions to first-order pains.

others, it is the suffering of resignation that is the essential antecedent to faith;[102] and this is outwardly invisible.[103] What follows resignation is not any kind of direct answer to the theoretical quandaries about God and evil. Hough portrays the second movement of faith as making every small thing that happens into part of an ongoing miracle, and she illustrates this with a stunning story from Corrie ten Boom concerning her sister Betsie, who construed even the fleas in a concentration camp as a gift from above. Crucially, this is *not a denial* of the horror of the prisoners' situation in these camps; it concerns something else that transcends horror, in which the horror is *aufgehoben*. Such a faith in perfect giftedness is a love of life, the earth, and all persons—which is outwardly absurd because it is so unmerited by the actual states of the world as seen in aesthetic and ethical terms,[104] as Ivan views them. Kierkegaard's three early discourses on Good and Perfect Gifts clearly imply that the gift involves an ability to love all as equals, and to do this joyfully, forgiving people's offences against us (and forgiving ourselves), and not even demanding gratitude in return—because we cannot in the deepest sense really "own" what we give to others.[105]

To do this in the face of moral horrors, even while testifying to their horrendousness, does indeed seem miraculous. Yet it happens, as Hough illustrates. But two questions still remain for such a Kierkegaardian response. The first concerns how the distinct levels—the ethical and religious—are connected. By itself, the commitment to love and belief that love will never be deceived or proven wrong in the deepest sense look simply like deeper aspects of an ethically committed will. As Hough avows, even as we accept that everything is a good and perfect gift,[106] all our ethical efforts must continue—including our efforts to heal sick infants and ensure that no child is ever placed in a concentration camp, or bombed for being Palestinian.

Of course, as emotional temperaments vary among persons, many of us may not muster the same joy that Betsie did while continuing to strive and patiently endure our outward material failures. At least we may not manage joy in its ordinary emotional sense. But there is something more to the religious stance of the "joyful" tax collector.

[102] Ibid., pp. 130–133.
[103] Ibid., p. 140.
[104] Ibid., pp. 143–145.
[105] SKS 5, 51–56 / EUD, 43–48; SKS 5, 140–141 / EUD, 138; SKS 5, 146–150 / EUD, 144–149; SKS 5, 156–158 / EUD, 156–158.
[106] Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 142.

His faith is a kind of trust;[107] as we see in the discourse on Job, it affirms the importance of earthly sorrows while transcending them.[108] This is a way of being, an adverbial "how" that cannot really be captured in any propositional "what." Yet it includes the idea that this love we receive and try to emulate *will conquer*—will ultimately be proven "true" (in a sense that is not ordinary correspondence, and thus hard to render into words). It is because the ideally faithful knight already lives and participates to some extent in this miracle-to-come that she can persist in love against all odds, no matter what comes, experiencing the giftedness of her varying contingent states unto the end. It is not Ivan's fault that he does not manage this movement beyond resignation; who among us can?

Second, while Hough's approach gently shifts to the side both the logical and evidential problems of evil, is this enough to meet the theological problem's existential underside? Should we simply affirm the epistemic limits of human reason as a basis for saying that we cannot begin to understand why this personal God would shape the universe in a way that makes possible the natural and moral evils we see? Perhaps. The pastor's sermon at the end of *Either/Or*, as Hough's thoughts on it helpfully clarify, is focused on meeting moral evils with a forgiving attitude that is willing to hide a multitude of sins.[109] There is a connection between the levels in this: even if we are striving for justice, clearly the pastor's faith will alter how justice is interpreted and applied in a restorative and reconciliatory direction.[110] Perhaps Kierkegaard sometimes understates how big a finite/worldly difference in the content of ethical prescriptions an agapic ethics makes. It is not *only* an inward change, and signs of this slip out here and there in his writings on neighbor-love. Again, Dostoevsky's Zosima exemplifies this same oblique response to the awful doubt or despair voiced by Ivan: there is a love that transcends and transforms all horrors.

Yet this response that Hough develops from James' dictum *is* oblique. Because it moves indirectly towards the sufferer from the religious sphere, it may not be enough by itself to meet the existential need that the Hemon parents and Ivan reveal. They require some basis for believing in the promise that divine love will conquer all, when

[107] SKS 5, 49–50 / EUD, 41.
[108] SKS 5, 126–127 / EUD, 122.
[109] Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, pp. 84–87.
[110] Compare SKS 9, 328–329 / WL, 333–341 on reframing one's success in winning a wrongdoer's remorse as only God's victory, God's gift to all involved.

the face of horrendous evil has opened its maw to deny this. Matuštík suggests that "taking radical responsibility for others" and suffering with them can fill this need,[111] and surely Kierkegaard would agree that this is a necessary *part* of the answer—especially when strengthened by the testimony of religious experiences. But those sharing Ivan's despair also need a way to connect the paradoxical possibility of infinite love with at least partial "reasons-why" God's world includes horrendous evils. To my mind, Kierkegaard did not quite manage this kind of aid to the wounded soul, and that is why the problem of evil has remained an issue on the margins of thinking faithfully with Kierkegaard. To remedy this, I have only outlined how one kind of open theist existential defense could be integrated with several of his religious themes.

Hough's earnest efforts also point in this valuable direction. They show that Kierkegaard's motif from James and the joyful tax collector do meet this most wrenching of all spiritual trials on its own terms: obliquely at least, they acknowledge the existential problem of evil and affirm the worth of the person suffering from it. What they offer in return is not merely skeptical theism or the cruel words of Jobs Comforters that make the trial so much worse, but rather the paradoxical possibility that, even when we cannot imagine reasons-why, we can experience *there being an Answer* that is hidden but will ultimately be revealed—which is the most elusive religious sense of "giftedness." Kierkegaard, on Hough's interpretation, says that if we persist in trying to love even before we can believe in everything being good and perfect in the paradoxical religious sense, we will eventually find that there *is* something more than the infinite sorrow and outrage that we rightly feel with Ivan. Those feelings are authentic responses to the faces of evil that so mar this "blighted star" (Hardy's description); they should never be rejected, minimized, or finessed away by cheap or handwaving theodicies. But in or through this sorrow, one who persists in loving every other person and the natural world like Zosima—as good and perfect gifts—will come to feel a support from above, even when they descend into the abyss and perhaps lose themselves there for some time. This paradoxical communion with the source of giftedness comes from elsewhere, or what has been called the Hereafter, even when we feel utterly abandoned by God.

Some may say this is false—they have tried to follow such counsel, and it will not work. Contrary to what Everyman says, there is no guide who will, in our worst need, be at our side. Kierkegaard and the apostles affirm the opposite. Recent literature on

[111] Matuštík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, p. 265.

the "hiddenness of God" is full of this debate. But either way, it is important to emphasize that Kierkegaard gives no assurance that we will directly sense a divine presence in answer to prayers; nor does he try to explain why God created the universe, as if we could really comprehend God's full intentions. Instead, even more incredibly, Kierkegaard promises that we may experience even now the Fact that there is a reason which, when revealed, will utterly vindicate infinite love—and so there is "collateral beauty" even in the horror, although we have not yet seen it. It is as if you asked someone to prove that they love you, or explain why they made you doubt them, and they responded only with a look or a touch that made you perceive their love. This "answer" to the existential problem is an existential condition—agapic love—which provides the condition for experiencing that a positive final Answer awaits us at the end of time.

DEATH AS A TEACHER OF LOVE

BY SOPHIE HÖFER

Abstract: In this paper, I will argue that Kierkegaard considers death an instructor that can teach us valuable lessons about existence and make us love each other in a more genuine way. This idea appears in three different claims made by Kierkegaard: First, reflecting on death can help us love the neighbor by showing us our essential equality before God. Second, love towards the dead teaches us how to love the living correctly and becomes a kind of test we can apply to ourselves in order to ensure the purity of our love. Finally, an analysis of Kierkegaard's concepts of earnestness and regret demonstrates that death can impel us to love each other by showing us what is essential in life. Among other things, this discussion aims to illustrate that there is very much a loving and humanizing aspect in Kierkegaard's views on death, unlike what some commentators have suggested.

Keywords: death, earnestness, equality, neighborly love, regret

1. Introduction

To most of us, love and death might seem like opposed aspects of existence. While the one gives meaning to our lives, the other takes it away; while the one unifies, the other separates; while the one is a source of profound bliss and comfort, the other causes torment, grief, and anxiety. There is no compromise or overlap between these forces, says W.H. Auden; it is an either-or: "We must love another or die."[1] Especially when we consider the vulnerability of those we care about, the nihilistic side of our mortality becomes obvious. As Laura Llevadot puts it: "How can we believe, in this life, when death takes away what we love most?"[2]

In Kierkegaard's thought, no such stark contrast between death and love is to be found. Instead, his various discussions of the two themes throughout his oeuvre promote the idea that death can actually have a transforming, ennobling effect on our love. This paper aims to highlight some of the ways in which our mortality, and that of those around us, can impact the way we love. According to Kierkegaard, ethical

[1] W.H. Auden, "September 1, 1939," Poets.org, accessed April 22, 2024, https://poets.org/poem/september-1-1939.
[2] Laura Llevadot, "Kierkegaard, Levinas, Derrida: The Death of the Other," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 213.

action, including love, is always "a doing that is related to a knowing," and I will suggest that death can provide us with the "knowing" that we can then express in our works of love.[3] I will thus argue that Kierkegaard considers death an instructor that can teach us valuable lessons about existence and make us love each other in a more genuine way. In doing so, I hope to articulate a connection that has not been talked about much in the general literature.[4] Before taking a closer look at death's function as a teacher, it will be necessary to give some context regarding Kierkegaard's views on love and death respectively.

2. Kierkegaard's Views on Love

That love constitutes the center of Kierkegaard's ethics is hardly in question. In *Works of Love*, the duty to love is the most divine task assigned to human beings: "Only by loving the neighbour can a person achieve the highest, because the highest is to be able to be an instrument in the hand of Governance."[5] Those who truly love are saved from all deception, since they are the only ones who have grasped that "the highest good and the greatest blessedness . . . is to love, and next, truly to be loved."[6] Kierkegaard's account of love revolves around the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor. He repeatedly contrasts neighborly love with what he calls preferential love, meaning friendship and romantic love. According to Kierkegaard, only love for the neighbor can be considered true love, as it is founded on the eternal, godly duty rather than a transient inclination or whim, as is the case with preferential love.

Kierkegaard's main problem with preferential love is that it is selfishness in disguise and as such is opposed to the self-sacrificial character of Christianity. The task of a Christian is to place oneself at the service of God, dedicate oneself to neighborly

[3] SKS 7, 149 / CUP1, 160.
[4] Whereas death's role of a teacher has been discussed before (see, for instance, Michael Strawser, "Between Mood and Spirit: Kierkegaard's Conception of Death as the Teacher of Earnestness," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 143–160), the intimate tie with Kierkegaard's ethics as expressed in *Works of Love* has, in my opinion, not received the attention it deserves. Mélissa Fox-Muraton does note that "Kierkegaard's understanding of death can only be fully appreciated when understood in its relationship to love," but her paper takes a different turn by emphasizing "that we must abandon the idea that we are singular, non-interchangeable, irreplaceable individuals, that our loves are singular non-replaceable events," which will not be part of my discussion here. See Mélissa Fox-Muraton, "Love, Death, and the Limits of Singularity," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 270, 284.
[5] SKS 9, 91 / WL, 86.
[6] SKS 9, 240 / WL, 239.

love, and "exist equally for unconditionally every human being."[7] Christian love is founded on the realization of an essential equality among all human beings: "In being king, beggar, rich man, poor man, male, female, etc., we are not like each other—therein we are different. But in being the neighbour we are all unconditionally like each other."[8] Kierkegaard sharply criticizes our tendency to get wrapped up in the multifariousness of earthly life and compare ourselves to each other on the basis of superficial criteria, noting that "we seem to have forgotten that the dissimilarity of earthly life is just like an actor's costume."[9] Such a view distracts us from recognizing the neighbor in every person and leads us to love a few selected individuals preferentially instead of seeking kinship with all human beings. With his claim that we are to love everyone equally, Kierkegaard does not, however, refer to some abstract love for humanity as a whole. Rather, we are to love the very concrete people we encounter for their uniqueness.[10]

The emphasis of *Works of Love* lies on the *works*, as Kierkegaard's main purpose is to get us to practice and express love in actuality. Love is an ethical action rather than a mere feeling of connection and intimacy. However, he also repeatedly draws our attention to the incredible difficulties that come with dedicating oneself to the love commandment. Loving everyone equally is a radical doctrine that demands painful sacrifices, including the renunciation of all worldly happiness that comes with erotic love and friendship. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard holds that neighborly love is the highest ideal we can commit ourselves to. The participation in God's project will give one's love eternal significance and lift it outside the realm of temporality and finitude, and in the end, he declares: "To love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living."[11]

3. Kierkegaard's Views on Death

I will now proceed to outline, in somewhat more depth, several aspects of Kierkegaard's views on death which will be relevant for the present discussion. I will concentrate on the discourse "At a Graveside," which has been described by Michael Theunissen as "one of the high points of European thinking about death" and offers the most concise and thorough treatment on the subject, even though many of

[7] SKS 9, 89 / WL, 84.
[8] SKS 9, 94 / WL, 89.
[9] SKS 9, 92 / WL, 87.
[10] SKS 9, 268 / WL, 269.
[11] SKS 9, 368 / WL, 375.

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous as well as signed writings touch on death in one way or another.[12]

A characteristic element of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the absence of a strict differentiation between life and death. Death is not so much a distant event lying in a faraway future rather than a fundamental aspect of human existence intersecting with our present life in a profound and meaningful manner. This raises the question of how to appropriately relate to one's own finitude. The readers of "At a Graveside" are encouraged to adopt what Kierkegaard calls an earnest attitude towards death. According to Kierkegaard, facing death earnestly means "that you think death, and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death is indeed unable to do—namely, that you are and death also is."[13] Contrary to our usual tendency to avoid thinking about death and to continuously postpone an engagement with it to the future, earnestness requires an individual to confront their own particular mortality at this very moment. Kierkegaard observes that even those of us who do grapple with their death employ various strategies to conceptualize it in a consoling or generalizing manner, such as a restful sleep.[14] However, in order for death to transform our lives in a meaningful way, it is crucial that we disrupt our comfortable indifference and instead face the reality of our mortality head-on.

According to Kierkegaard, relating to death earnestly should evoke a profound transformation of how we live our lives. In order for this to be possible, death's specific characteristics must be grasped, and expressed, in the right manner. One of the necessary insights for an earnest approach to death is the simultaneous certainty and uncertainty of death: it will come, but when and how remains unknowable. Death's uncertainty should disturb and alert us and demonstrate to us the urgency to act *right now*, since we can never know how much time we have left. In combination with the certainty of death, it serves as an insightful guide for the earnest thinker: "No teacher is able to teach the pupil to pay attention to what is said the way the uncertainty of death does when it points to the certainty of death."[15] Since death could terminally interrupt our projects at any point in time, we should dedicate our time to activities whose value does not depend on completion, and focus on how we relate to our

[12] Michael Theunissen, "The Upbuilding in the Thought of Death: Traditional Elements, Innovative Ideas, and Unexhausted Possibilities in Kierkegaard's 'At a Graveside,'" trans. George Pattison, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), p. 321.
[13] SKS 5, 446 / TD, 75.
[14] SKS 5, 450–452 / TD, 80–82.
[15] SKS 5, 463 / TD, 95.

pursuits rather than on what exactly it is that we do.[16] Additionally, death's uncertainty adds urgency to our lives: we realize that time is scarce, and thus, every moment gains infinite significance. As there is "no time to waste," we are impelled towards immediate action rather than procrastination and postponement.[17] Kierkegaard's claim that the earnest contemplation of death both compels us to act and simultaneously illuminates the proper course of action is significant in this context: "The thought of death gives the earnest person the right momentum in life *and the right goal* toward which he directs his momentum."[18] There is thus a twofold power in death: at the same time that it instructs us on what priorities to set, it urges us to act along the lines of these priorities. The earnest thinker therefore understands death's uncertainty as an ethical claim upon them in this very moment.

As is the case with many thinkers labeled as existentialists, Kierkegaard's writings have been widely accused of individualism and selfishness—a criticism that, somewhat unsurprisingly, also extends to his treatment of death. Theunissen, for example, dismisses elements of "At a Graveside" as a "denigration of the dying of others," and further critics have pointed out striking omissions when it comes to the more interpersonal and social features that accompany the phenomenon of death, such as grief and loss.[19] In "A Critical Perspective on 'At a Graveside,'" Gordon Marino disagrees with Kierkegaard's suggestion that the death of other people cannot teach us any meaningful lesson about ourselves and our existence. What Kierkegaard fails to see, according to Marino, is the fact that "moods, the grief and terror, can also be revelatory—can also be teachers."[20] Referring favorably to Lev Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which makes a point of connecting death with the ethical responsibilities we have towards each other, Marino argues that death awareness should "humanise" us and "ought to have a positive impact on our relationship with other humans, making us better neighbours and more responsive to others."[21] In contrast, Kierkegaard's account of death contains "scarcely a word about the relationship between our death awareness and the ties that bind us," leading Marino to conclude that "for all of its brilliance, the discourse seems inhuman."[22]

[16] SKS 5, 464 / TD, 96.
[17] SKS 5, 448 / TD, 78.
[18] SKS 5, 453 / TD, 83 (emphasis added).
[19] Theunissen, "The Upbuilding in the Thought of Death," p. 336.
[20] Gordon D. Marino, "A Critical Perspective on Kierkegaard's 'At a Graveside,'" in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 152.
[21] Ibid., p. 156.
[22] Ibid., p. 158.

As I aim to show in the following, for Kierkegaard, the thought of death was very much a humanizing one. It is precisely the ethical tone of the graveside discourse that I already tried to hint at, and which, in my opinion, has been neglected in criticisms such as Marino's. Reading "At a Graveside" alongside *Works of Love* will make it evident that the idea that death can bring us closer together was very much on Kierkegaard's mind, and that death and neighborly love are deeply intertwined in his thought. I will now discuss three different ways in which death, for Kierkegaard, can be considered a teacher of love.

4. Neighborly Love as the Expression of Death's Equality

First, Kierkegaard suggests that death can help us love the neighbor by showing us our equality before God. The major obstacle to loving every person unconditionally is that we remain caught up in our supposed differences, for "the neighbour is one who is equal," and "one sees the neighbour only . . . by looking *away from* the dissimilarities."[23] While during our lifetime our essential equality can hardly be seen because we grow so attached to our uniqueness, death shows us that our dissimilarities are only superficial:

> This [essence] you do not get to see here in life; here you see only what the individual represents and how he does it. It is just as in the play. . . . When at death the curtain falls on the stage of actuality . . . then they, too, are all one, they are human beings. All of them are what they essentially were, what you did not see because of the dissimilarity that you saw—they are human beings.[24]

According to Kierkegaard, when we are dead, our dissimilarities do not matter anymore and it gets revealed that they were insignificant in the first place. Death reduces complex relationships to their essence by abolishing the differences that separate us from each other in life. In the grave, all distinctions are replaced by a shared identity as 'the dead': "That all human beings are blood relatives, that is, of one blood, this kinship of life is so often disavowed in life; but that they are of one clay, this kinship of death, this cannot be disavowed."[25] It is not the equality of death per se that Kierkegaard is drawing our attention to, which he calls "terrifying," but rather the "blessed" equality before God of which death can remind us.[26] Thus, Kierkegaard argues that the graveyard is the best place to help us remember our essential equality:

[23] SKS 9, 66, 75 / WL, 60, 68.
[24] SKS 9, 92 / WL, 86–87.
[25] SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.
[26] SKS 5, 459 / TD, 90.

"If, then, you are bewildered as you consider the multiple paths of life, then go out to the dead, 'where all parts meet'—then a full view is easy."[27] The tiny differences in terms of plot sizes and decorations at a graveyard teasingly demonstrate how insignificant our differences in life really were:

> That is how loving death is! It is simply love on the part of death that by means of this little difference it calls to mind, in an inspiring jest, the great difference. Death does not say, "There is no difference whatever"; it says, "There you can see what the difference was: half a foot."[28]

Thus, the thought of death relativizes our differences not by pretending as though we were all the same—which would be an inaccurate understanding of life—but by reminding us of the deeper insignificance of the distinctions we draw among each other. While it seems plausible that an understanding of our equality could also be reached in a different manner, death seems to be the most radical reminder of the vainness that lies in comparing ourselves to each other on the basis of transient criteria. This is because, in Louise Carroll Keeley's words, "death [gives] a vividness to the eternal which the details of life tend to obfuscate."[29]

While Kierkegaard suggests that death has the power to show us our equality, his point seems to be that it is not necessary to literally die in order to recognize our essential similarity. Ideally, we should arrive at this realization *before* our death, so we actually have the chance to express the thought of equality as neighborly love while we are still able to act:

> In actuality, alas, the individual grows together with his dissimilarity in such a way that in the end death must use force to tear it from him. Yet if someone is truly to love his neighbour, it must be kept in mind at all times that his dissimilarity is a disguise.[30]

This is why Kierkegaard encourages us to go to the graveyard and contemplate death "in order *there* to take an aim at life."[31] An earnest reflection can thus anticipate the actual confrontation with death and transform our lives in the spirit of equality. As described in "At a Graveside," the earnest thought of death can remind us of our equality and in this way become a guide for neighborly love:

[27] SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.
[28] SKS 9, 340 / WL, 346.
[29] Louise Carroll Keeley, "Loving 'No One,' Loving Everyone: The Work of Love in Recollecting One Dead in Kierkegaard's Works of Love," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), p. 225.
[30] SKS 9, 93 / WL, 88.
[31] SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.

> Every time earthly dissimilarity wants to tempt, wants to delay, the earnest thought about the equality intervenes and again impels. . . . The earnest thought of death . . . has helped the earnest person to subordinate the most advantageous dissimilarity to the humble equality before God and has helped him to raise himself above the most oppressive dissimilarity into the humble equality before God.[32]

Here again, Kierkegaard emphasizes the *active* character of the earnest thought of death: earnestness "helped you surmount the dissimilarity, to find equality before God and to want to express this equality."[33] Similarly, in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard stresses that you should not only understand human equality theoretically, but "express [it] in your life."[34] Since in death all distinctions are removed, we should disregard all distinctions in life by loving the neighbor in a non-preferential manner. Neighborly love thus becomes the expression of the thought of equality, which is derived from an earnest reflection on death.

In a somewhat cryptic remark, Kierkegaard discusses a dialectical relationship between love and death founded on the idea of equality:

> Death, you see, abolishes all dissimilarities, but preference is always related to dissimilarities; yet the way to life and to the eternal goes through death and through the abolition of dissimilarities—therefore only love for the neighbour truly leads to life.[35]

For Kierkegaard, love for the neighbor is the only kind of love that leads to life in a Christian sense. He grounds this in the idea that eternal life is reached through the process of dying, during which, as previously discussed, all dissimilarities are removed. Thus, it is specifically *because of* death that love for the neighbor leads to immortality. Only the dead can be resurrected. At the same time, death teaches us to remove all dissimilarities in life according to its model by loving the neighbor non-preferentially, and such love is itself eternal life in the here and now. The loving expression of equality is thus the highest point we can reach in our temporal, finite existence.

It is precisely neighborly love's commitment to equality that gives the doctrine its radicality. In defining everyone as equal before God, social hierarchies can be broken down and modes of oppression transcended; unhappy individuals can find comfort in the happiness of fortunate ones rather than envying them, and fortunate ones become

[32] SKS 5, 458 / TD, 89–90.
[33] SKS 5, 459 / TD, 90.
[34] SKS 9, 94 / WL, 89.
[35] SKS 9, 69 / WL, 62.

compassionate with those worse off than themselves.[36] Only here, in the spirit of equality founded on the earnest thought of death, does genuine love become possible.

5. Loving the Living like the Dead

I will now move on to consider a second way in which death for Kierkegaard can be a teacher of love. Just like death as a phenomenon can teach us valuable lessons about love, the dead themselves can show us how to love the living correctly. The chapter "The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who is Dead" from *Works of Love* makes a clear point that we not only have the duty to love the living beings around us, but also those who have passed away: "If we are to love the persons we see, then also those we have seen but see no more because death took them away."[37] That we should keep loving those who have passed away may seem an obvious and unnecessary remark for those of us who have recently lost a loved one and are painfully reminded of their absence every day. However, Kierkegaard notes that "to recollect [one who is dead] is something different from not being able to forget him at first."[38] While we might grieve over someone intensely for a while, life draws us back in eventually, and we tend to move on after an initial period of mourning.[39] Unlike the living, the dead cannot demand our attention any more, and new excitements and sorrows will gradually wash away our memory of the one who passed away. Given the unreliable nature of our feelings, love towards the dead has to become a duty rather than remain a temporary mood.[40] Since it is so difficult to love the dead in light of worldly distractions and temptations, love for them is virtuous and exemplary, and Kierkegaard suggests that it should constitute the model by which we relate to the living people around us. Thus, if we want to evaluate the quality of our love, we should watch how we relate ourselves to the dead.[41]

Kierkegaard argues that recollecting the dead is one of the most unselfish, freest, and most faithful works of love. First, such love is *unselfish* because we can never expect any repayment from the dead for our love. In our relationships with the living,

[36] SKS 5, 459 / TD, 90–91.
[37] SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347–348. This discourse has turned out to be one of the most polarizing sections of *Works of Love*. For a concise overview of the various criticisms and defenses of Kierkegaard's claims here, see Patrick Stokes, "Duties to the Dead? Earnest Imagination and Remembrance," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 253–255.
[38] SKS 9, 348 / WL, 355.
[39] SKS 9, 342 / WL, 348.
[40] Ibid.
[41] SKS 9, 340–341 / WL, 346–347.

there is always the possibility of receiving a reward or compensation for our love, which makes it very hard to tell whether we are actually loving them selflessly or not (for Kierkegaard, even reciprocity is a form of repayment). With the dead, however, "there is no prospect whatsoever" that they could return our favor or give something back to us.[42] As disheartening as it may be that the ones we lost have become silent forever and will not respond to our expressions of love in any way, it has the advantage that we can use our relationship towards them as a test to see how unselfish our love is. If we notice that our love towards the dead fades away after an initial period of grief, it is being exposed as essentially selfish. Only if it abides throughout a permanent experience of lack of reciprocity we can call our love selfless.

Next, Kierkegaard suggests that love towards the dead is *free* because the dead cannot ask us to love them.[43] Most of us agree with the statement that true love should be unrestrained and voluntary, but in reality, we are often compelled or nudged to love another person in various ways. "What can extort from one a work of love can be extremely varied," Kierkegaard comments, and goes on to classify even the crying of children as a compelling force that makes our love towards them less free.[44] The dead, however, cannot place any such demand on us.[45] They are unable to make themselves noticeable or motivate us to keep caring about them after their passing. Following the principle "out of sight, out of mind," most people will eventually become absorbed in life again and quickly forget those helpless ones who cannot draw attention to themselves any more. [46] However, if our love is truly free, we will continue to recollect the dead even when they cannot ask us to do so in any way.

Finally, loving the dead is one of the most *faithful* works of love.[47] Often in our relationships to the living, we blame a break in the relationship on the fact that the other person has changed—for instance, that they have become older, colder, less attractive, or disinterested in us—and thus think that we are justified in moving on from them.[48] The dead person, however, "has the strength of changelessness"—they cannot

[42] SKS 9, 343–344 / WL, 349–350.
[43] SKS 9, 345 / WL, 351.
[44] Ibid.
[45] It seems obvious that Kierkegaard is somewhat one-sided in these remarks. In the sense that I could still imagine a deceased person watching over my actions or hear their voice in my head telling me what to do, the dead can very well exercise a compelling power over the living. I take it that he brackets these kinds of situations because in this case, it is *me* compelling *myself* through recalling another person, rather than the actual person themselves.
[46] SKS 9, 348 / WL, 354.
[47] SKS 9, 348 / WL, 355.
[48] SKS 9, 350 / WL, 356–357.

become different from how they used to be in any way.[49] Thus, any alterations to the relationship between a living and a dead person are to blame on the lack of faithfulness on the side of the one who is alive, since the dead one is unable to change.[50] Kierkegaard recognizes that "it is truly a difficult task to maintain oneself unchanged in time," but if the relationship remains the same, it indicates faithfulness on the lover's part.[51]

Thus, besides the actual duty of loving recollection we have towards the dead—which in fact has been neglected by much Kierkegaard scholarship—the love we feel for the dead should also constitute the model by which we love the living.[52] Hence, the love for the dead becomes a kind of test we can apply to ourselves in order to make sure we are not following the path of preferential love, but instead learn to love the neighbor in a selfless manner:

> The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is thus a work of the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love. Therefore go out and practice it; recollect the one who is dead and just in this way learn to love the living unselfishly, freely, faithfully. In the relationship to one who is dead, you have the criterion by which you can test yourself. . . . Recollect the one who is dead; then in addition to the blessing that is inseparable from this work of love you will also have the best guidance for rightly understanding life: that it is our duty to love the people we do not see but also those we see.[53]

In this way, again, relating to death and the dead in the right manner can help us lead a loving existence. The loss of a loved person should not be something we quickly move on from or get over after a while, but at the same time it should not paralyze us or plunge us into despair.[54] Instead, we should focus on performing the duties we have towards the dead and understand them as an instruction in love for the ones still alive. As George Pattison comments, "the aim of such a graveyard promenade, then,

[49] SKS 9, 350 / WL, 357.
[50] This applies even if we find out something new and unpleasant about the dead person, since the true lover looks away from others' sins rather than towards them: "The one who loves discovers nothing; therefore he hides the multitude of sins that could be found through discovery" (SKS 9, 283 / WL, 285). Thus, if new knowledge about the deceased modifies one's love, it was never love in the highest sense.
[51] SKS 9, 349 / WL, 355.
[52] The fact that Kierkegaard claims that loving the dead is a duty in itself which cannot merely be reduced to a test for how to love the living has been emphasized and developed, for instance, in Jeremy J. Allen, "The Soft Weeping of Desire's Loss: Recognition, Phenomenality, and the One Who Is Dead in Kierkegaard's Works of Love," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. by Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 236, and in Stokes, "Earnest Imagination and Remembrance," p. 255.
[53] SKS 9, 351 /WL, 358.
[54] SKS 9, 49–50 / WL, 42–43.

is not to lose ourselves in debilitating melancholic thoughts, but to learn or re-learn what is essential in life and what is being demanded of us in life, in our relationships with the living."[55]

6. Mortality, Essential Work, Urgency, and Regret

Finally, Kierkegaard suggests that our mortality can impel us to put our lives in the service of love. Reading "At a Graveside" and *Works of Love* alongside each other indicates that the prospect of our own death, if appropriated earnestly, can lead us to love our neighbor. A main feature of what Kierkegaard considers an earnest relationship between a person and their mortality is that it compels them to action and serves as a wake-up call to lead a meaningful life. As already explained earlier in the discussion of Kierkegaard's views on death, thinking about our death can both help us find the right priorities in life and also provide the urgency to act upon those.[56] Awareness of our finitude will help us evaluate and judge which tasks are worth pursuing during our lifetime: "No surveillance is so ennobling as the uncertainty of death when it examines the use of time and the nature of the work . . . of the one acting."[57] The earnest thought of death disrupts a person in their everyday activities,

> so that he was halted and halted again in order to renounce vain pursuits, was prompted and prompted again to hasten on the road of the good, now was weaned of being talkative and busy in life in order to learn wisdom in silence, now learned not to shudder at phantoms and human inventions but at the responsibility of death, now learned not to fear those who kill the body but to fear for himself and fear having his life in vanity, in the moment, in imagination.[58]

Thus, death is something that can show us the way of the good, help us re-evaluate what really matters, and make us center our lives around "essential" (*væsentlig*) as opposed to "incidental" (*tilfældig*) work.[59] In Michael Strawser's words, "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."[60] Patrick Stokes similarly emphasizes the ethical nature of earnestness, suggesting it "involves an apprehension of my death . . .

[55] George Pattison, "Kierkegaard, Metaphysics, and Love," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), p. 193.
[56] SKS 5, 452–453 / TD, 83.
[57] SKS 5, 463 / TD, 95–96.
[58] SKS 5, 448 / TD, 77.
[59] SKS 5, 464 / TD, 96.
[60] Strawser, "Death as the Teacher of Earnestness," p. 158.

as conferring moral demands."[61] Since earnestness is always related to a task to be carried out, the relation to death is an ethical call to act *for the good* rather than an aesthetic category. However, as Strawser also observes, "At a Graveside" does not give us a clear picture of what precisely the good is that earnestness supposedly pushes us towards.[62] This is why I will turn to the ethics found in *Works of Love* and look at earnestness in connection with the love commandment. In fact, it seems that for Kierkegaard, death will only gain its upbuilding effect in connection with the thought of the eternal and of God. Thinking about death without love becomes mere nihilism:

> To the earnestness of death belongs that remarkable capacity for awakening, this resonance of a profound mockery that, detached from the thought of the eternal, is an empty, often brazen, jest, but together with the thought of the eternal is just what it should be and is utterly different from the insipid earnestness that least of all captures and holds a thought that has the tension the thought of death has.[63]

Given Kierkegaard's view of love as the highest good of ethical existence, I think we are justified in considering it as at least one of the priorities in life—if not the main one—that the earnest thought of death should convey to us. This can be shown by looking at Kierkegaard's notion of "essential work," which is the only clear indication we have for what he has in mind when he is talking about the kinds of action sparked by earnestness:

> With regard to the essential work in relation to the interruption of death, it is not essential whether the work was finished or only begun. . . . With incidental work, which is in the external, it is essential that the work be finished. But the essential work is not defined essentially by time and the external, insofar as death is the interruption.[64]

According to this description, love seems to be the essential action *par excellence*. Love is not something one can ever be finished with; it is a duty for one's whole life, and the recipients of our love have a constant claim on our expression of it.[65] Further, death and temporality cannot in any meaningful way affect or interrupt works of love. Neighborly love is essentially related to God's law, and participating in it gives our love an eternal significance that lies outside the realm of mere temporality and finitude.[66]

[61] Stokes, "Earnest Imagination and Remembrance," p. 262.
[62] Strawser, "Death as the Teacher of Earnestness," p. 151.
[63] SKS 9, 347 / WL, 353.
[64] SKS 5, 464 / TD, 96.
[65] SKS 9, 20 / WL, 12.
[66] SKS 9, 308 / WL, 311.

A helpful way to understand love as essential work is by considering its opposite: busyness. In busyness, a person becomes "divided and scattered" by losing themselves in worldly, temporal pursuits.[67] Here, time becomes everything that matters: the busy person begins thinking along the lines of efficiency and productivity, constantly "hurries ahead to something new," and calculates how much can possibly be achieved in the least amount of time.[68] The focus lies on the completion of projects rather than the manner in which the result is brought about: "To the temporal and earthly passion the end is unconditionally more important than the means, and therefore this is the passionate person's torment, . . . that he does not have time under his control, that he always can come too late."[69] To the person dedicated to love, on the other hand, such a calculative mentality is unknown: "One who loves cannot calculate . . . because to calculate is to make finite."[70] The person working towards the good does not primarily focus on the end that is achieved, but first and foremost on the means of the good. As their work could be interrupted by things beyond their control, such as death, the end cannot be the focus: "Thus, he is not eternally responsible for achieving his end in temporality, but he is unconditionally eternally responsible for which means he uses."[71] Essential work means to put oneself in the service of one thing, namely the good, and time matters only insofar as the eternal must gain presence in every moment of one's life.[72] As love abides throughout time, the true lover "does not relate himself to temporality, is not dependent upon temporality," and therefore focuses on expressing love in every moment of life, rather than moving on from one worldly project to the next.[73]

Thus, the earnest thought of death becomes the driving force that impels us to love every person unconditionally and equally. By directing our efforts towards works of an essential rather than incidental nature, love becomes the focus of an earnest life. Further, death adds the necessary urgency to our works of love by creating a scarcity of time. Kierkegaard recognizes that we have the dangerous tendency to put off things we want to do because we assume that we will always have more time in the future: "There is a consolation in life, a false flatterer; there is a safeguard in life, a hypocritical deceiver—it is called postponement."[74] However, the earnest thought of death alerts

[67] SKS 9, 103 / WL, 98.
[68] SKS 8, 129 / UD, 14.
[69] SKS 8, 239–240 / UD, 142.
[70] SKS 9, 178 / WL, 178.
[71] SKS 8, 239 / UD, 141.
[72] SKS 8, 131 / UD, 16.
[73] SKS 9, 308 / WL, 311.
[74] SKS 5, 450 / TD, 79.

us to the self-deception in protraction as well as to the importance of taking action immediately. Since death could come at any moment, we need to dedicate our scarce time to what is essential, and thus we become compelled to love now, today.[75] Love is the kind of work that must not be put off to some indefinite point in the future. The love commandment does not allow any excuses or evasions, but "immediately points the direction and gives the impetus to act accordingly."[76] Since love is best understood as an infinite debt that has to be paid off for as long as one is alive, it needs to express itself in action at any moment.[77] Contrary to a procrastinator, therefore, the true lover does not waste time with strategizing, contemplating, or calculating, but *acts*:

> The one who actually loves continually has a head start, and an infinite head start, because every time the other has come up with, figured out, invented a new expression of devotion, the one who loves has already carried it out, because the one who loves . . . does not waste a moment.[78]

To conclude the discussion of how the right relationship to one's mortality can compel one towards a more loving existence, I would like to introduce the topic of regret, as I think Kierkegaard's views on the powers of regret and earnestness complement each other in an illuminating way. Kierkegaard's discussion of regret in the *Upbuilding Discourses* is particularly helpful to the purpose of this paper since it gives a concrete phenomenology of the confrontation with finitude and thus adds to our understanding of earnestness as expounded in the graveside discourse. Drawing attention to some of the many striking parallels in Kierkegaard's discussions of regret and an earnest relationship to death will help underline how he connects our mortality with the ethical commandment to love.

In "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing," Kierkegaard suggests that regret and repentance can serve as guides that direct us towards the good. Regret in this sense does not denote what would commonly be understood as such, namely the "painful, tormenting worldly grief" felt, for instance, when we realize we should have taken that trip we backed out on or should have bought that house we ultimately decided against.[79] Such "momentary repentance" is "selfish, sensuous, . . . and for this very reason is not repentance."[80] Instead, regret is essentially a religious-ethical category

[75] SKS 5, 448 / TD, 78.
[76] SKS 9, 100 / WL, 96.
[77] SKS 9, 176 / WL, 176.
[78] SKS 9, 181 / WL, 181.
[79] SKS 8, 132 / UD, 17.
[80] Ibid.

and "must be an action with a collected mind, so it can be spoken about for upbuilding, so it may of itself give birth to new life."[81] In repentance, one faces the guilt of not having been a good enough Christian, having been unable to make oneself into the instrument of Governance, and having failed to live up to the demands of the love commandment. In doing so, regret, just like the earnest thought of death, draws attention to what is essential in life and adds urgency to our actions. This is because, according to Kierkegaard, it always comes at the eleventh hour:

> When regret calls to a person it is always late. The call to find the road again by seeking God in the confession of sins is always at the eleventh hour. Whether you are young or old, whether you have offended much or little . . . the guilt makes this an eleventh-hour call; the concern of inwardness, which regret sharpens, grasps that this is at the eleventh hour.[82]

Kierkegaard observes that most of us delude ourselves by thinking we have enough time ahead of us to do the right thing, which "is why so much time is wasted and why the whole thing so easily ends in error."[83] This is also what is characteristic of a non-earnest engagement with one's mortality that neglects the dialectics of death's certainty and uncertainty. Regret, on the other hand, "does not have much time at its disposal; . . . it does not deceive with a false notion of a long life, because it is indeed the eleventh hour."[84] On one hand, the eleventh hour indicates a late point in time—one realizes that one has wasted essential time going astray instead of following the way of the good. On the other hand, it demonstrates that it is not too late—the twelfth hour has not yet struck, and there is still time to change our ways. This is the same idea Kierkegaard is getting at in "At a Graveside" when he says that while earnestness teaches us that with death "all is over," it simultaneously shows us that as long as we are able to think about death, we are still alive, and thus "all is not over."[85] By projecting us to the eleventh hour, regret has a similar power to the earnest reflection of death: "How earnest everything is [in the eleventh hour], as if it were the hour of death!"[86] In the eleventh hour, we can experience an immediate confrontation with death as an evaluation of the life we leave behind—without actually dying. The same occurs in the earnest thinker's reflection on their mortality:

[81] SKS 8, 131 / UD, 16.
[82] SKS 8, 129–130 / UD, 14.
[83] SKS 8, 130 / UD, 15.
[84] Ibid.
[85] SKS 5, 454 / TD, 85.
[86] SKS 8, 130 / UD, 15.

> The earnest person looks at himself; so he knows the nature of the one who would become death's booty here if it were to come today; he looks at his own work and so he knows what work it is that would be interrupted here if death were to come today.[87]

In this moment, we experience what it feels like to already have run out of time, which allows us to fully appropriate the urgency conferred by death's simultaneous certainty and uncertainty into our lives.[88] Earnestness, like regret, is a confrontation with death prior to its occurrence. Thus, in relating to one's own death, one can evaluate one's current existence in the light of one's finitude. This encounter with death that can be achieved both through earnestness and regret in the form of the eleventh hour, then, marks a transition into a new kind of life. It forcefully pulls us out of our habitual ways of going about our lives. As such, regret gives us the opportunity to re-evaluate our priorities and align our lives with God's commandment.

Kierkegaard argues that as long as we have committed ourselves to love, there will be nothing to regret, since "the eternal, if one grasps it in truth, is the only, unconditionally the only thing of which one may unconditionally say: It is never regretted."[89] This explicitly lays out the connection Kierkegaard seems to envision between regret, love, and death: what we regret are (or at least should be) those moments in which we failed to live up to the love commandment. In our regret, we are being transported to the eleventh hour, which marks a confrontation with our own finitude whereby our temporal existence is transformed by awareness of the eternal. Recognizing the urgency and severity of the matter, we become compelled to embark upon the path of the good; that is to say, love. We are able to appropriate the scarce time that lies ahead more profoundly than before and come to see it as the chance to transform our lives in such a way that we will not feel remorse at the moment of our actual death, when it is in fact too late. Regret is thus something helpful when sought out during one's life, and something harmful when occurring in the moment of death. As novelists Sibylle Lewitscharoff and Heiko Michael Hartmann put it: "Repentance belongs in life, because it can improve a person. Guilt is but a dead piece of lead in the trembling hands of the dying ones."[90]

[87] SKS 5, 462 / TD, 94.

[88] For a more elaborate discussion of this, see John J. Davenport, "Life-Narrative and Death as the End of Freedom: Kierkegaard on Anticipatory Resoluteness," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam J. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 174–178; and Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 205–212. For Davenport, this encounter with death is a mere metaphorical one, whereas for Stokes it is phenomenal.

[89] SKS 8, 216 / UD, 114.

[90] "Reue gehört ins Leben, weil sie einen Menschen bessern kann. Schuld ist bloß ein totes Stück Blei in den zitternden Händen der Sterbenden" (Sibylle Lewitscharoff and Heiko Michael Hartmann, *Warten auf: Gericht und Erlösung* [Freiburg: Herder, 2020], p. 38, (trans. mine).

Not feeling the impelling force of regret during one's life—just like refusing to relate oneself to one's finitude in a meaningful way—is, for Kierkegaard, a sign of evading moral responsibility: "If the voice of this guide is never heard, then it is precisely because the way of perdition is being followed."[91] Besides, even if we go out of our way to avoid regret, it will get to us eventually—only then it will come back when it is too late and will have lost its upbuilding capacity.[92] This is what I would like to refer to, following Stokes, as eschatological regret.[93] Eschatological regret is the shattering remorse over one's life when one has run out of time to change one's ways. According to *Works of Love*, if we fail to understand that love is the highest task and waste our lives with meaningless pursuits, we will regret it at the end of our lives:

> Let the one who achieved so very much by means of an alliance and by not existing for all people, let him see to it that death does not change his life for him when it reminds him of the responsibility.[94]

A literary example for such a case can be found in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which is often discussed in connection with Kierkegaard's views on death and is also the focal point of Marino's critique.[95] Ivan Ilyich has spent his whole life in thoughtlessness, achieved what was expected of him, and generally considered himself a happy man. It is only in his prolonged process of dying that the protagonist is forcefully confronted with the content of his life, and he despairingly assesses that "everything was wrong."[96] He feels "suffocated and crushed" when it dawns upon him that he has wasted his life by suppressing all human feelings and entering no meaningful, loving relationship with those around him, and that there is no time to fix things: "I am leaving life with the realisation that I have lost everything I was given and that it's impossible to put right."[97] Following this realization are three days of unceasing, agonizing screaming that finally culminate in Ivan's unreconciled and disturbing death. There is no hope of salvation for him, as his repentance comes too late.

[91] SKS 8, 128 / UD, 13.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Stokes, *The Naked Self*, p. 211.
[94] SKS 9, 90 / WL, 85.
[95] Elsewhere, Adam Buben and I discuss another piece of literature that exemplifies eschatological regret as the consequence of having failed to take on an earnest relationship to death, namely Hugo von Hofmannsthal's drama *Death and the Fool* (*Der Tor und der Tod*) (see Sophie Höfer and Adam Buben, "The Role of Death in Becoming Subjective and Cultivating Meaning in Kierkegaard," in *Handbook of the Science of Existential Psychology*, ed. Kenneth Vail, Daryl Van Tongeren, Becca Schlegel, Jeff Greenberg, Laura King, and Richard Ryan (New York: Guilford Press, forthcoming 2024). Here, I have decided to concentrate on Tolstoy's novella in order to make my discussion of Marino's criticism more evident.
[96] Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Peter Carson (New York: Liveright, 2014), p. 108.
[97] Ibid., pp. 106, 105.

Here, it becomes clear that the protagonist's eschatological regret refers to not having lived, and loved, properly. Upon his death, Ivan understands the ultimate meaninglessness of his life—the life of a person who did not bring anything good into the world. In the last moments before dying, he realizes that love is the highest and should have been what he lived for.[98] Knowing that this insight comes too late, he feels the overwhelming urge to perform a work of love which, although he is unable to articulate it properly, ultimately releases him from the inertia in which his terminal illness had trapped him. Had Ivan opened himself to regret and earnestness at an earlier point in his life, he would have been able to express the good in love towards those around him when he still had time. As Strawser suggests, the novella conveys more the imperative of *memento amor* rather than a mere *memento mori*.[99]

In summary, by showing us what is essential in life, regret—just like the earnest thought of death—should be the guide that continuously accompanies us and makes us attentive to ourselves and our actions. What Marino observed to be present in Tolstoy's novella but lacking in "At a Graveside,"—namely death's capacity to bring us closer to each other—can indeed be found in Kierkegaard if we consider the main arguments in *Works of Love*. The story of Ivan Ilyich then becomes an illustration of Kierkegaard's thought: on the one hand, it serves as a cautionary tale about putting earnestness off to the end of one's life; on the other hand, it shows that death is ultimately able to turn us into more loving people. For Kierkegaard, an earnest reflection on death and the openness to repentance allow a person to anticipate eschatological regret and thus call them to action in service of the good. Therefore, death gains its retroactive power over our lives by impelling us to follow the good, that is, neighborly love.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen three ways in which death can teach us about love: First, death can make us recognize our essential similarity and overcome superficial comparisons, which is a necessary prerequisite for neighborly love. Second, the love we feel for the dead is so genuine and pure that it can point us towards the right way to love the living. Finally, an earnest awareness of our mortality can teach us to love by showing us what is essential in life. Crucial for all three arguments presented in this paper is Kierkegaard's movement from a contemplative engagement with death towards action in life. Further, in all three examples discussed, it becomes clear that

[98] Ibid., p. 109.
[99] Strawser, "Death as the Teacher of Earnestness," pp. 158–159.

death is not by default a teacher. Rather, we need to take on the appropriate relationship to our own and others' deaths so it can impact the way we love. Thus, we need to grasp the specific ways in which death makes us all equal, learn to love the dead in a correct manner, and draw the right conclusions from the uncertainty of death, in order to become better lovers. A further point worth noting is that an actual encounter with death is not necessary to come to these realizations—an earnest anticipation can have the same effect. Thus, a near-death experience, for example, is neither a sufficient, nor a necessary condition for learning from death. Finally, this discussion also illuminates that there is very much a loving and humanizing aspect in Kierkegaard's views on death, unlike what some commentators have suggested—we just need to take a closer look to find it.

Works of Love emphasizes over and over again that loving the neighbor is a difficult task, but if we pay close attention, we find a somewhat surprising ally in death. An earnest engagement with death modifies the lover in such a way that they want to live out the essential truths that they have grasped while confronting their mortality. At this point, we might wonder how strong Kierkegaard's claim is: is an earnest relationship to death only a helpful guide or actually a necessary prerequisite for neighborly love? Given death's unique capacity to help us distinguish between what is essential and what is not, one could argue that only through taking on the adequate relationship to their mortality is a person transformed in such a way that genuine love becomes possible. As our mortality is a fundamental aspect of our existence, there is no proper earnest, inward, or subjective person—and therefore no true Christian—who has not in some way grappled with the thought of death. But it also seems plausible that the thought of death, in all its power, is just one of multiple things that may assist those of us struggling to live up to the love commandment. In this interpretation, death becomes just one of the guides, albeit probably the most forceful one, through which we can reach the insights necessary for neighborly love.

Whatever may be the case, it is evident that while death is often considered a source of nihilism, something that deprives our actions of meaning, Kierkegaard shows us ways in which death can actually elevate our ethical lives to a higher, more profound level. Rather than dividing us, death brings us closer to each other. Thus, in the conflict between love and death—if we want to consider them opposed forces at all—it seems like love ultimately has the upper hand.

KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL QUEST

BY RICK ANTHONY FURTAK

Abstract: Søren Kierkegaard as well as his pseudonym Johannes Climacus argue against an objective thinking that does not concern itself with the thinker, claiming instead that "subjectivity is truth." When too abstract a notion of existence is philosophically taken for granted, the existing individual will not get clear about what it means for him to be. For the existential philosopher, who is concerned with the kind of "edifying truth" that can inform a life in pursuit of wisdom, the "truth which builds up" is the only truth worthy of the name. This truth does not carry the self-contained security of a mathematical proof, for it requires the passionate, love-based interest of the person to whose life it pertains. Following in the footpath of Socrates involves realizing that our life prior to doing philosophy has largely been wasted, and hence that life becomes worth living only after a change of priorities. This article examines Kierkegaard's own existential quest in light of this personal transformation.

Keywords: Subjective truth, passion, love, Socrates, vocation

We cannot grasp his once envisioned head,
his lively eyesight lit with the divine:
yet in his body, this is always brilliant.
His look still blazes forth as in the fiery,

steady glow of gas-lamps. Otherwise,
you wouldn't be bedazzled, to the verge
of going blind, by a chest that swells above
the smiling pelvis with its yearning urges.

Or else this stone would seem defaced and short
beneath its shoulders and transparent eyes –
not glistening like a wild creature's face.

> Nor would its look from every edge burst forth
> with starlight streaming. For there is no place
> that fails to see you. You must change your life.
>
> – Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo"[1]

In Rilke's sonnet, the headless, and thus eyeless, figure of a god (or, of God) radiates a gaze that does not come from any particular direction, like the now-spireless twelfth-century Romanesque church at Sæding in Denmark, the hometown of Kierkegaard's father.[2]

1.

The author of a modern book called *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* writes, "a man cannot be said to believe in Judgement Day unless he *lives for it*." He adds that this "is the kind of confidence that a [person] cannot fully explain: it meets needs of which [they are] not wholly conscious: it is a stance which [they] can take and which [they are] lost if [they do] not take."[3] Kierkegaard comments in one of his Lily and Bird Discourses (on Matthew 6:24-34) that this is the real either/or: "either *God*—or, well, then the rest is unimportant."[4] He bids us to believe "that God cares for you,"[5] to trust, with Nietzsche's Zarathustra, that "the world is deep,"[6] i.e., that there is an underlying meaning to whatever transpires in time. (This ostensibly atheistic but religion-obsessed author wrote youthful poems to an unknown God.)[7] Socrates, during his trial and on the last day of his life (as creatively imagined by Plato), evinces the subjective belief which is the Kierkegaardian "other side of the truth."[8]

[1] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Sonnets of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Rick Anthony Furtak (South Bend, IN: Saint Augustine's Press, 2022), p. 39.
[2] See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: Existence and Identity in a Post-Secular World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 48: "Without a spire pointing to any particular part of the vast Jutland sky," one can find God looking down from any point in the "numinous skyscape."
[3] Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 208, 213.
[4] SKS 11, 26 / WA, 21 (emphasis in original).
[5] SKS 11, 46 / WA, 43.
[6] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 133, 181, 261, 264.
[7] See, e.g., William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958), pp. 186f.
[8] SKS 5, 467 / TD, 98–101.

And his most Socratic author, Johannes Climacus, in the *Postscript*, is also preoccupied with this topic.[9] In proffering their diverse accounts of reality and knowledge, most philosophers or speculative thinkers have been "wholly indifferent to subjectivity."[10] They are alike in being governed by the assumption that we must transcend our distinct standpoint in order to find the truth, so they attempt to describe being and knowing in such a way as to eliminate the human perspective. "Objective thought," in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is "unaware of the subject."[11] Anticipating Husserl's criticism of "objective-scientific ways of thinking,"[12] Søren Kierkegaard as well as his pseudonym Johannes Climacus argue against "objective thinking" that is "not the least bit concerned about the thinker."[13] These are Kierkegaard's words, yet he is echoed by Climacus, who claims repeatedly that "subjectivity is truth."[14] If too "abstract" or "pure" a notion of existence is philosophically taken for granted, then the existing individual will not get clear about "what it means for him to be there,"[15] to *be-in-the-world*. For the existential philosopher, who is concerned with the kind of "edifying truth" that can inform a life in pursuit of wisdom, the "truth which builds up" is the only "truth for you" that is worthy of the name.[16] This truth does not and cannot carry the self-contained security of a mathematical proof, for it requires the passionate, love-based interest of the person to whose life it pertains. Following in the footpath of Socrates involves realizing that our life prior to doing philosophy has largely been wasted, and hence that "a change of priorities is needed," which will "make life worth living"[17] henceforth.

In the remaining sections of this essay, we will be dealing in an explicit and sustained manner with Kierkegaard's (life and) writings, yet the example of Socrates will be continuing to haunt us, as it haunted Kierkegaard. For Socrates does not only represent the kind of "negative" freedom that amounts to "arbitrariness";[18] instead, he exemplifies "true earnestness," in which "the subject no longer arbitrarily decides . . . but feels the

[9] Paul Muench, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Pseudonym," in *Kierkegaard's "Concluding Unscientific Postscript": A Critical Guide*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 25–44.
[10] SKS 7, 76 / CUPH, 64.
[11] *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 240.
[12] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 129f.
[13] SKS 18, 253, JJ:344 / KJN 2, 233.
[14] SKS 7, 186 / CUPH, 171.
[15] SKS 7, 174 / CUPH, 159–160.
[16] SKS 7, 229 / CUPH, 215; see also SKS 3, 332 / EO2, 324.
[17] George Rudebusch, *Socrates* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 28.
[18] SKS 1, 270 / CI, 228.

task to be something that he has not assigned himself but that has been assigned to him."[19] As Kierkegaard felt. [20]

2.

In *The Book on Adler*, which was published only after Kierkegaard's death, Søren claims that "religiousness lies in subjectivity, in inwardness, in being deeply moved, in being jolted, in the qualitative pressure on the spring of subjectivity."[21] "Just as it is an excellence to be truly in love, truly *enthusiastic*, so it is also an excellence, in the religious sense, to be shaken. . . . And this emotion is in turn the true working capital and the true wealth."[22] Kierkegaard[23] spells out the idea at greater length:

> To be shaken (somewhat in the sense in which one speaks of shaking someone in order to awaken him) is the more universal basis of all religiousness; being shaken, being deeply moved, and subjectivity's coming into existence in the inwardness of emotion, are shared by the pious pagan [i.e., Socrates] and the pious Jew [e.g., Philo of Alexandria] in common with a Christian.[24]

On the same page, he continues to say that Christianity's distinct conceptual categories do, and ought to, shape any distinctly Christian experience. Yet he asserts in terms that could not be more transparent that he identifies God with Love, referring in *Works of Love* to "*love*, which is God,"[25] adding that "God is Love,"[26] and even going so far as to claim that, as *middle term* between lover and beloved, "the love is God."[27]

"God is Love, and therefore we can be like God only in loving."[28] "Love is the source of all things and, in the spiritual sense, love is the deepest ground of the spiritual life."[29] These statements make it unmistakably clear that "love" is the only substantive divine

[19] SKS 1, 276 / CI, 235.
[20] I am indebted to perceptive comments from an anonymous reviewer of this essay.
[21] SKS 15, 260 / BA, 104.
[22] SKS 15, 264 / BA, 108 (emphasis added).
[23] Since the work was not published in Kierkegaard's lifetime, it was never assigned a pseudonym, although he considered assigning it to one when he considered (and decided against) publishing it, out of respect for Adler.
[24] SKS 15, 268 / BA, 112–113.
[25] SKS 9, 264 / WL, 265 (emphasis in original).
[26] SKS 9, 190 / WL, 190.
[27] SKS 9, 124 / WL, 121.
[28] SKS 9, 69 / WL, 62–63.
[29] SKS 9, 231 / WL, 215 (translation modified).

name, as Kierkegaard sees it. "Love is a passion of the emotions," or in an equally valid translation, an "emotional passion."[30] Plainly this is the same point being made in the passages from *The Book on Adler* that I cited just above.

> Love's hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has ever seen, so also does a person's love originate even more deeply in God's love [or, in God as love]. If there were no gushing spring at the base, *if God were not Love*, then there would be neither the little lake nor a human being's love. Just as the quiet lake originates darkly in the deep spring, so a human being's love originates mysteriously in God's love.[31]

Love is the enigmatic power at the basis of the psyche, and the deepest ground of human being. We are who we are only by virtue of being *in* love, in a relation of dependency. Kierkegaard presents what may be called a transcendental argument: love is that by virtue of which we inhabit a meaningful world. In his words, "a life without loving is not worth living."[32] Even though some readers like to impose upon his thought a focus on Jesus,[33] it is the first person of the Trinity that is primary for the Kierkegaard of *Works of Love*.

Without it, everything would be confused; our experience would not be organized in terms of what stands out in our consciousness as significant. In the terms of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, love unifies the manifold of sensory impressions; in the terms of analytic philosophy of mind, it can resolve the "frame problem" of how we focus on some things and overlook others.[34] When we're talking about "the love that sustains all existence," we should realize that, "if for one moment, one single moment, if it were to be absent, [then] everything would be confused."[35] Love gives us focus and orientation, and—most crucially—provides us with insight into who we are as distinct, particular human beings. Love sets the agenda for our life and defines its meaning. Being human in the world is the "most basic" thing that we do, so "to question this is to question

[30] SKS 9, 116 / WL, 112.
[31] SKS 9, 18 / WL, 8–10 (translation modified; emphasis added).
[32] SKS 9, 45 / WL, 38; see also SKS 9, 368 / WL, 375.
[33] Robert C. Roberts, in his otherwise excellent *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 294, insists that love for a person is only religious if it is filtered through a theologically over-burdened framework which sees the beloved as personifying Christ and being "loved by him" [*sic*]. He conveniently overlooks the equation of God with love (see 1 John 4:8) and forcibly thrusts an evangelist's Jesus into the picture.
[34] Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1965), A821–822/B849–850.
[35] SKS 9, 299 / WL, 301.

existence itself, injecting uncertainty, insecurity, an inarticulate sense of incompleteness and wonder into every gesture, every act," as Clare Carlisle writes in her biography of Kierkegaard. What does it mean to be a human being? "Though the question makes no claim, propounds no thesis, it can transform everything." She continues:

> The question of existence is perennial, ready to strike at any moment, but it is also constantly changing. Each time it is asked, it concerns a particular person at a particular moment of his [or her] life, in a particular time and place. Kierkegaard does not live in the world that Socrates inhabited, although Copenhagen, like Athens, has a harbor, a marketplace, and buildings dedicated to worship.[36]

It does not make sense to speak of the divine as if it could be encountered as an object, like "a rare, enormously large green bird with a red beak, perched on a tree on the city wall, and perhaps even whistling in a hitherto unknown-of way," as Climacus puts it.[37] When C. Stephen Evans contends that "only an objectively existing being could create a world,"[38] he must be mistaken. He ought to have considered that, for instance, Schopenhauer's Will is exactly *not* an object, yet is capable of giving rise to the concrete world of subjects *as well as* the objects that we encounter in our everyday lives. Evans' point is well taken, that God is real—yet it is untrue to the spirit of Kierkegaard's writings to reduce being to objective being. To characterize love as the ground of existence is to make, in the words of Thomas Langan, "an ontological claim of the most fundamental kind, about the dynamic energy that founds all things."[39] Love *forms* the heart as it proceeds *from* the heart,[40] such that only the one who loves knows who he is and what he must do.[41] "The

[36] Clare Carlisle, *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), pp. 12–13.
[37] SKS 7, 222–223 / CUPH, 205.
[38] Evans, "Realism and Antirealism in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 154–176, 158. See also my and Shahrzad Safavi's co-authored review of *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* by Patrick Stokes and *Kierkegaard* by C. Stephen Evans, *Southwest Philosophy Review* 26, no. 2 (2010): pp. 119–123.
[39] Thomas Langan, *Being and Truth* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 311. Love is present in each person "in such a way that it demands that I recognize and affirm this same validity and dignity in every other human being" (Arnold B. Come, "Kierkegaard's Ontology of Love," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999], p. 92).
[40] SKS 9, 17 / WL, 12–13.
[41] SKS 3, 124–125 / EO2, 125.

love-relation requires threeness: the lover, the beloved, the love—but the love is God."[42] The first person of Love is God the Father; the second person is Christ ("this is my son, my beloved"); and the third, the Holy Spirit, is *love itself*.[43] Love is the sacred force that connects us to the earthly realm in which our duty is to love the person we happen to see.[44] By loving others, not *as* gods but *through* the God of love, we become subject to existential imperatives which are unique for each of us.[45] To admit one's radical dependence on a God of love is not to debase oneself but to make an ennobling concession.[46] To need Love is our highest perfection; and this is how a God of love provides us with the grounding conditions of a meaningful life.

When we view things with loving eyes, every aspect of the world is enriched. Love is not an "objective" entity, but a subjective mode of comportment that enables things to manifest themselves as meaningful. "If you yourself have never been in love," Kierkegaard writes, "you do not know whether anyone has ever been loved in this world," for only "if you yourself have loved" have you perceived reality beyond yourself as significant, just as "the blind person cannot know color differences."[47] It is not an accidental fact about us that we are loving or caring beings: rather, it is a grounding condition of the cosmos of our possibilities. Heidegger phrases it this way: "It is not the case that objects are first present as bare realities, as objects in some natural state, and that they then in the course of our experience receive the garb of a value-character, so they do not have to run around naked."[48] Instead, we are *always already* rooted and grounded in love,[49] and therefore things are not naked. Human existence would be empty and vain if nothing were loved

[42] SKS 9, 124 / WL, 121.
[43] Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, "On the Vision of God," in *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 233–289, for the most exactly articulated formulation of this Trinitarian theology of which I am aware. This suggests that the Greek Orthodox Church was right in the theological matter that gave rise to the Great Schism, and that in the catechism the Love that proceeds "from the Father" is correct, and the blasphemous innovation "and from the Son" false. See too M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 72: "God is not the 'middle term' by being the direct object of our love in such a way as to marginalize the beloved; God is the 'middle term' by being the center of the relationship." Lover, beloved, and love itself incarnate the three persons of the trinity, love as "middle term" being the incarnation of the Holy Spirit.
[44] SKS 9, 155–174 / WL, 154–174.
[45] See Jos Huls, "Love Founded in God," *HTS Theological Studies* 67, no. 3 (2011): pp. 1–10, 6.
[46] See SKS 5, 291–292 / EUD, 297–326.
[47] SKS 10, 244 / CD, 237.
[48] Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 69.
[49] See SKS 5, 65 / EUD, 55.

or cared about for its own sake, so we must love in order to avoid an absurd predicament. Love is the divinity that shapes our ends, in Hamlet's vocabulary.

3.

Whenever we love, then, we are divinely inspired, much in the way that Nietzsche has in mind when he pays tribute to Schopenhauer "as educator":

> What have you up to now truly loved, what attracted your soul, what dominated it while simultaneously making you happy? Place this series of revered objects before you, and perhaps their nature and their sequence will reveal to you a law, the fundamental law of your authentic self. . . . Your true being does not lie deeply hidden within you, but rather immeasurably high above you, or at least above what you commonly take to be your ego.[50]

It may be that Kierkegaard loved his vocation as a writer more than he loved his beloved fiancée Regine Olsen. Or perhaps what set off the trumpeters of the apocalypse was something else that he admitted to her in an October 1840 letter, written during the time of their engagement: "I have now read so much by Plato on love."[51] For, like Plato's hero and character Socrates, Kierkegaard is a supernaturalist—that is to say, a type of idealist—for whom "meaning in life is a relationship with a spiritual realm," as Thaddeus Metz describes this philosophical position.[52] The God of Love issues imperatives of the heart that pertain to the individual *as such*.[53] Just as Kierkegaard accounts for love as an emotional *urge*,[54] he cites this motivating, inspiring power as the source of his feeling of personal destiny.

Was Kierkegaard a religious mystic? Mystics take seriously what they experience, and Kierkegaard did this all the time. Bergson points out that "the impulse given by feeling can . . . resemble obligation," and that this is especially true of "the passion of love." He adds, "anyone engaged in writing has been in a position to feel the difference between an

[50] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 174.
[51] SKS 28, 219 / LD, 66.
[52] Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 79.
[53] See Richard Swinburne's discussion of how, for the Christian, mortal life has "a cosmic significance" instead of "a significance very limited in time and space" ("How God Makes Life a Lot More Meaningful," in *God and Meaning: New Essays*, ed. Joshua Seachris and Stewart Goetz [London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016], p, 154).
[54] See, e.g., Pia Søltoft, "Kierkegaard and the Sheer Phenomenon of Love," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 289–306.

intelligence left to itself and that which burns with the fire of an original and unique emotion."[55] And Kierkegaard does in an entry of May 19, 1838, report a feeling of "*indescribable joy*," not "a joy over this or that, but a full-bodied shout of the soul,"[56] which reverberated in another conversion experience ten years later on April 19, 1848,[57] which led him to write: "My entire nature is changed."[58] And he indubitably felt driven by an urgent sense of purpose, by his daimon, as we will shortly see.

> Spiritually I have been a youth, and in a good sense. Overwhelmed by God, annihilated into something less than a sparrow before him, I have nonetheless acquired a certain cheerful courage, so that in youthful fashion I dare involve myself with him . . . Call it madness, but in my final moments I will pray to God that I might be permitted to thank him yet again for having made me mad in this way. In truth, if God cannot make a person mad in this way, it is very questionable whether that person will ever have a proper understanding that he exists before God."[59]

Experiencing what he described as *terrible suffering*, he became an author. "I have struggled and suffered fearfully," trying to answer the imperative "You shall" in "an almost melancholic and foolish manner,"[60] as he writes in an entry dated June 4, 1849. Yet God has been with him during the whole process of his life, and "this is why in the midst of all my sufferings I am nonetheless so indescribably happy and glad,"[61] even though "to be known by God makes life so infinitely burdensome."[62] Meaning in life is more important than happiness in the contemporary sense of enjoying oneself; if you are capable of that, well, then: lucky you.

4.

In an 1847 journal entry, Kierkegaard writes of his literary purpose:

[55] Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 39, 46. A rare, accurate conception of the Christian idea that love itself is divine can be found in Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 42–45.
[56] SKS 17, 254–255, DD:113 / KJN 1, 245–246.
[57] Cf. Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 400–401.
[58] SKS 20, 357, NB4:152 / KJN 4, 357.
[59] SKS 22, 313, NB13:65 / KJN 6, 315–316.
[60] SKS 22, 70, NB11:123 / KJN 6, 65.
[61] SKS 22, 302, NB13:43 / KJN 6, 304.
[62] SKS 18, 264, JJ:374 / KJN 2, 243.

> Only when I am productive do I feel well. Then I forget all the unpleasant things of life, all the sufferings; then I am happy and at home with my thoughts. If I stop for a just a couple of days, I immediately become ill, overwhelmed, oppressed; my head becomes heavy and burdened. After having gone on day after day for 5 or 6 years, *this urge, so copious*, so inexhaustible, still surges just as copiously—this urge must also of course be a calling from God.[63]

One would think. For Kierkegaard, in order for there to be meaning *in* life, there needs to be a unifying meaning *of* one's life as a whole. His life was defined by his task as an author, and (to be more concrete), to write in such a way as "*to make aware* of the religious."[64] And the criterion for this was unmistakably emotional, as he says in the *Point of View for My Work as an Author*: "I feel a need and therefore regard it now as my duty."[65] "My work as an author was the prompting of an irresistible inner need."[66] What are you going to do with an irresistible inward affective imperative? Surely not resist it. As William Blake writes, "those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained."[67] One can no more resist a strong inward prompting to be an author than one can resist falling in love by virtue of one's macho will. Just as love is an urge, the imperatives of conscience—what Socrates called his *daimon*—are known through emotional feeling, or experience that announces itself in the imperative voice. In an entry dated October 13, 1853, Kierkegaard writes that "such a powerful productive impulse had awakened within me that I was unable to resist it."[68] He feels a need and therefore regards it as a duty—not at all a Kantian duty relevant to anyone and everyone, but *his* duty, as the particular existing person named Søren Kierkegaard.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, his pseudonym Anti-Climacus points out that a person can "forget" his or her "name, divinely understood."[69] What is it to forget our name, divinely understood? ("Forget one's name, divinely understood" is another line of Kierkegaard's that translates into iambic pentameter.) Sharon Krishek cogently argues that, "just as there are universal qualities that are essential to being a person [any person], there are particular qualities that are essential to being the *self* that one is," where *selfhood* is "a

[63] SKS 20, 83, NB:108 / KJN 4, 82 (my emphasis).
[64] SKS 13, 19 / PV, 12 (emphasis in original).
[65] SKS 16, 11 / PV, 23.
[66] SKS 16, 12 / PV, 24.
[67] William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, ed. David Damrosch and Kevin J.H. Dettmar, vol. 2A (New York: Longman, 2010), p. 191.
[68] SKS 25, 258, NB28:54 / KJN 9, 260.
[69] SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33–34.

quality that determines our identity but yet is primarily in a state of potential."[70] This sets the agenda for his account of how *each human being* has the potential to actualize her or his God-given potentiality in the concrete circumstances of his or her life. "God creates persons," not as impartial vehicles of reason,[71] "but as *individual* persons," as Krishek claims.[72] Kierkegaard was nothing if not an individual. As "Anti-Climacus" affirms, "every person certainly is angular,"[73] and must through his or her situation actualize his or her utterly unique potential. Kierkegaard himself introduces the category of "the single individual" (TA, 93n), that is, *hiin Enkelte*, and claims that none of us is exempt from becoming singular persons, creatures who have *Eiendommelighed*[74]—that is, unique or authentic individuality.[75] And this distinctness is based upon what we have loved, as Nietzsche might agree, at least in his essay on Schopenhauer that I cited above.

5.

There is *something* to be said for objectivity in all of this. But not as much as current philosophers such as Anthony Rudd and Susan Wolf would have us believe. The former points out that, for instance, "my experience of loving another person might enable me to see the value which resides in all persons," which is true enough according to Kierkegaard, but he adds that among "persons who have about equally praiseworthy characteristics," I find myself bizarrely being "drawn to, attracted by, some of them, rather than others, even though I don't think they are really better persons," and regards this as somewhat unfair: "we can transcend our finitude sufficiently to *recognize* that other persons have, objectively, as much value as the ones that we do love," yet it is morally important that I "love them as they deserve," no more.[76] This is akin to saying that I value

[70] Sharon Krishek, *Lovers in Essence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 17, 52.
[71] In Max Scheler's terms, a person is not "an indifferent thoroughfare for impersonal rational activity." See his *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 372. He is responding to Kant, who claims that, since we cannot love by force of will, so much the worse for love; this view could not be more emphatically anti-Kierkegaardian.
[72] Krishek, *Lovers in Essence*, p. 19.
[73] SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33.
[74] SKS 9, 268–269 / WL, 252–253.
[75] Arnold B. Come is especially articulate in teasing out this critical notion: see *Kierkegaard as Humanist* (Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 353–354.
[76] Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 133–134, 137.

a kind of music that leaves me cold emotionally, which I *feel* is valueless.[77] If emotions or passions are perceptions of significance,[78] and embodied recognitions of meaning and value,[79] then whatever seems neutrally valenced to us is something we are experiencing *as* meaningless and insignificant.

According to Kierkegaard's pseudonym "Johannes *de silentio*," the conclusions of passion "are the only dependable ones—that is, the only convincing ones."[80] For Susan Wolf, meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness,[81] and this accords with Scheler's insightful observation that "the highest thing of which a [human being] is capable is to love things as much as possible as God loves them," which we cannot do *merely* by virtue of being finite; that love enables "knowledge of personal destiny"; and that what we can come to know through love is simply our "*range* of contact with the universe."[82] All of this is incontestably agreeable. Yet Wolf is way too concerned that we undertake "projects of objective value," and not get preoccupied by the project of "collecting a big ball of string,"[83] which is a straw man position, since nobody ever does organize their life around making big balls of string. Not, that is, unless it seems like a worthy enterprise to set a world record, without growing one's fingernails out to an absurd length or something like that. Kierkegaard did not worry about such things. His books were not books that "someone" ought to write, but ones that he had a sacred imperative from Providence, or Governance, to compose. And at the basis of his passion was that supreme "passion of the emotions," namely Love. "These which present themselves to me as three, namely, the lover, the lovable, and the bond, are the absolute and most simple essence itself,"[84] and by consenting to accede to where love is leading,[85] we learn who we are and who we aspire to be.

[77] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 278. Her example is of Indian classical music, which she claims to value but which leaves her cold.
[78] See Rick Anthony Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), passim.
[79] Cf. Rick Anthony Furtak, *Knowing Emotions: Truthfulness and Recognition in Affective Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), esp. 71–99.
[80] SKS 4, 189 / FT, 100.
[81] Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
[82] Max Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. David R. Lachterman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1973), pp. 99, 106–107, 111.
[83] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, p. 104.
[84] Nicholas of Cusa, "On the Vision of God," p. 268.
[85] Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.5. This treatise is a commentary on Plato's *Symposium*.

The main problem with "the present age," for Kierkegaard, is that it is "without passion," devoid of passionate inspiration,[86] *"flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence."*[87] It stifles heroic ventures. We must *"give up all imaginary and exaggerated ideas about a dreamworld where the object of love should be sought and found,"* he says,[88] but rather find lovable the person, the calling, that present themselves to us—to submit to our finitude. He admires Socrates as depicted in the *Phaedo* for his passionate fidelity to his mission, as demonstrated in the conduct of his life.[89] The damning fact about Adolph Peter Adler is that, after claiming to have had a revelation, he did not stick to his story but recanted—just like Don Quixote, who *was* a knight errant when he lived in accordance with the belief that he was.[90] "As soon as a person is really deeply moved by something, when he is in mortal danger, when the extraordinary appears before him, when he stands impassioned with his future fate in his hands, there is immediately an either/or."[91] Magister Adler "does not understand himself in what has happened to him," for "he has not even made up his mind about what is to be understood by a revelation" and whether or not he himself had one.[92] Kierkegaard, by contrast, kept reaffirming his account of himself, even amidst its endless visions and revisions. His own loving subjectivity was fired by an intensive passion for writing, as we have seen; it is as hard to imagine what he would be like without this life-defining passion. That is one reason why it is hard to decide how to interpret his May 17, 1843, remark that, "had I faith, I would have stayed with Regine."[93] Remained with her, and still written all of his iridescent books?

v.

Becoming what we are involves an ambivalent mixture of inner enthusiasm and external accident, since in Krishek's terms we are neither more eternal than temporal nor more temporal than eternal, but a "synthesis" of these dual factors.[94] We are composed like

[86] SKS 8, 74 / TA, 74.
[87] SKS 8, 66 / TA, 68 (emphasis in the original).
[88] SKS 9, 162 / WL, 161 (emphasis in the original).
[89] See SKS 7, 184–185 / CUPH, 169–170.
[90] See SKS 7, 179 / CUPH, 164.
[91] SKS 15, 170n / BA, 48n.
[92] SKS 15, 271 / BA, 115.
[93] SKS 18, 177, JJ:115 / KJN 2, 164.
[94] SKS 11, 145 / SUD, 13.

works of art, but we are not the artist[95]—at most, we are co-authors of our biography.[96] Nietzsche, that champion of the will, acknowledges the passivity of inspiration when he states in *Beyond Good and Evil* that "a thought comes when 'it' wishes, and not when 'I' wish,"[97] or that, in being inspired, we must speak of "revelation," meaning "that something suddenly . . . becomes *visible*, audible, [and] shakes one to the depths," like "lightning."[98] He also expresses gratitude for his entire life, says that "the fortunateness of my existence, its uniqueness perhaps, lies in its fatality," and adds that "*amor fati* is my innermost nature."[99] Although any idea of a supernatural capacity would be regarded by Nietzsche as most likely "a kind of philosophical fantasy,"[100] like the fiction of transcendental freedom—when it comes to how the divine inhabits the finite, he and Kierkegaard are very much on the same page.

> That is why a conviction [*Overbeviisning*] is called a conviction, because it is *above* proof [*Beviisning*]. For a mathematical proposition there is a proof, though in such a way that no counterproof is thinkable. It is precisely for this reason that one cannot have a conviction with respect to something mathematical.[101] But with respect to every existential proposition, every proof also has something that is counterproof; there is a *pro* and a *contra* [a reference to Aristotle's logic]. This is something of which the person of conviction is not unaware; he knows very well what doubt has to say: contra. But despite this—or rather, *precisely because of it*—he is a person of conviction because, deciding and willing, he has vaulted higher than the dialectic of proofs and is convinced.[102]

[95] Cf. Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Looking Back: Memoirs*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Marlowe, 1995), p. xi.
[96] Cf. SKS 8, 295 / UDVS, 198–199.
[97] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997), § 17.
[98] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1979), p. 72.
[99] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, pp. 7–8, 94. Cf. Brian Leiter, "The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche," in *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 222.
[100] Robert B. Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 3–4.
[101] Only phenomena so poor in existential relevance can be so rich in certainty, as Kant realized. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 9: in speaking of love, "I will not be able to hide myself behind the *I* of philosophers, that *I* who is supposed to be universal, a disengaged spectator. . . . In contrast, I am going to speak of that which affects each of us as such."
[102] SKS 20, 78–80, NB:102 / KJN 4, 78 (emphasis added).

"The idea for which he was willing to live and die was in fact the production of dazzling literary work," as one biographer concludes.[103] He refers to the following passage dated August 1, 1835, written during a stay at the Gilleleje Inn on the Zealand coast north of Copenhagen:

> Just as a child takes time to learn to distinguish itself from objects, . . . what I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my own destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. And what use would it be in this respect if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, [to] construct a world which, again, I myself did not inhabit but merely held up for others to see? . . . What use would it be if truth were to stand there before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I acknowledged it or not, inducing an anxious shiver rather than trusting devotion?[104]

As he proceeds to write in this journal entry or letter draft, he needs to ground his orientation in "something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I have, as it were, grown into the divine, clinging fast to it even if the whole world were to fall apart. *This, you see, is what I need,* and *this is what I strive for*. . . . It is this inward action of the human, this God-side of man, that matters."[105] Kierkegaard clearly seeks to find his daimon—his fate, genius, calling, or destiny.[106] And, doubtless thinking of Socrates, he says on the same page that "the genuine philosopher is in the highest degree subjective"; and, further: "How near is man to madness in any case despite all his knowledge? What is truth other than living for an idea? Everything must in the final analysis be based on a postulate.[107] But the moment when it no longer stands outside him but he lives in it, only then, for him, does it cease to be a postulate."[108] And, "one must first learn to know oneself before knowing anything else (*gnothi seauton*). Only when the

[103] Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 59.
[104] SKS 17, 24, AA:12 / KJN 1, 19 (emphases in original).
[105] SKS 17, 26, AA:12 / KJN 1, 20-21 (emphases in original).
[106] Cf. James Hillman, *The Soul's Code* (New York: Warner Books, 1997), p. 10.
[107] See also, e.g., Johann Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987). It must be said, however, that Preuss himself is a dogmatic secularist who for his audience's sake impertinently proffers the assurance that what Fichte has in mind is not a "capitulation into faith," as if faith were so easy, while to be an inconsequential professor without faith in anything is of course difficult—and admirable.
[108] SKS 17, 30, AA:12.5 / KJN 1, 21.

person has inwardly understood *himself*, and then sees the way forward on his path, does his life acquire repose and meaning."[109]

To highlight some aspects of this: self-knowledge, not in the sense of *how do indexical pronouns refer*,[110] but as a kind of emotional conviction about my purpose, to which I can devote myself, an existentially pertinent truth that is not coldly indifferent to me, but a subjective conviction, is the one thing needful in order to live meaningfully and feel grounded. Moreover, the source of subjective conviction is *divine*, and its inspiration may be described as a form of divine madness.

What answer did Kierkegaard receive on his pilgrimage to Gilleleje? Maybe nothing too convincing—not yet, at least. But he must have had an inkling of the subjective truthfulness that he sought, because two and a half years later when he falls in love with Regine he asks himself whether *this* love, rather than his literary mission, ought to govern his life.

> Oh, can I really believe the poets' tales that when one sees the beloved for the first time one believes one has seen her long before; that all love, like all knowledge, is recollection; that love too has its prophecies, its types, its myths, its Old Testament in the single individual. . . . You blind god of love! You who see in secret, will you tell me openly? Shall I find what I am seeking here in this world, shall I experience the *conclusion* of all my life's eccentric premises, shall I *enclose* you in my arms—or: Does the order say: onward?[111]

As he writes in *Works of Love*, "what is the eternal foundation must also be the foundation of every expression of the particular."[112] Love as divine basis manifests itself in forming the heart as it flows *from* the heart into the concrete passions that define the meaning of our lives. Knowing oneself means wholeheartedly knowing what one loves. As it turns out, Kierkegaard's religious imperative did indeed tell him to march on, beyond his nearly consummated marriage and into his vastly productive literary career.

[109] SKS 17, 27, AA:12 / KJN 1, 22.
[110] John Perry's example of self-knowledge is how I can know that the person at the grocery store leaving a trail of sugar is I myself (John Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," in *Self-Knowledge*, ed. Quasim Cassam [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994], pp. 167–183). His paper features the amusing misprint of "trial" for "trail" in its opening sentence.
[111] SKS 18, 9, EE:7 / KJN 2, 4–5 (emphasis in original).
[112] SKS 9, 143 / WL, 141.

DESIRE AND ILLUSORY LOVE: A LACANIAN APPROACH TO "THE SEDUCER'S DIARY"

BY JEFF MATHESON

Abstract: "The Seducer's Diary" is often described as a traditional story of seduction, wherein a crafty "seducer" chooses a victim and courts her to fall in love with him. This paper challenges such a view, arguing that a relationship is not even an option for Johannes the Seducer and that the only thing he is really after is desire itself. Drawing from the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, I will show that Johannes is nothing more than an "obsessive neurotic" who merely uses Cordelia as a mirror in which to view himself and his own desire. "The Seducer's Diary" is not a story of the seduction of a young girl; rather, it is the story of how Johannes becomes intoxicated with his own desire.

Keywords: desire, love, imagination, language, symbolic, seduction

Within the Kierkegaardian canon, "The Seducer's Diary" contains arguably the most detailed and extensive account of eroticism. The protagonist of the story, Johannes the Seducer, describes his meeting and subsequent courting of the seventeen-year-old Cordelia Wahl,[1] noting details such as how "beautiful" she is and how much he loves her.[2] However, I will argue here that the love that Johannes claims to have for Cordelia is merely an illusion. Rather, what Johannes really loves is desire itself, and Cordelia simply serves as the mirror or medium whereupon Johannes can view and fantasize about his own desire.

In making this contention, I draw from the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who argues that erotic desire is a product of one's relationship to language and culture.[3] In the Lacanian sense, because of the way that language operates in the life of

[1] Rather an ironic name, perhaps meaning "heart" or "little heart" in Latin. This name takes on significance when the reader considers the eventual nature of their failed relationship as one filled with heartbreak, especially through Cordelia's point of view.
[2] SKS 2, 303, 373 / EO1, 313, 385.
[3] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 412–439.

the Seducer, Johannes is akin to an "obsessive neurotic,"[4] a diagnosis in psychoanalysis meaning that an individual becomes intoxicated with idealistic images and desires that can never be realized, but who nevertheless does not let their desires die. In other words, "The Seducer's Diary" is not the story of how the young Cordelia becomes seduced; it is the story of how Johannes, through his intoxicating desire, seduces himself.

I will begin this essay with a brief exposition of Lacan's work on psychoanalysis, including his theories of desire, language, and imagination. From there, I will move on to a Lacanian reading of "The Seducer's Diary," highlighting these psychoanalytic themes as they appear in the transcription of Johannes' diary. This will show that under the Lacanian lens, Johannes' actions do not truly constitute love for another person but only a kind of obsessive desire. Because Lacan's viewpoint heavily centers around language, I will also cite from two specific thinkers on language's operation in "The Seducer's Diary," Aaron Edwards and Begonya Tajafuerce, to strengthen my contention about the fundamental role that language plays in Johannes' seduction of both Cordelia and himself.

To further reinforce the view that the Seducer's actions do not constitute real love but merely only a type of "selfish" desire (that is, a desire focused on manipulating and controlling another person in order to satisfy his own wants), I will then draw on the work of another contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou. Badiou's view is that true love is the product of an "event," an occurrence that happens seemingly out of nowhere that disorients and fundamentally changes one's own life and desires. Because Johannes' actions do not indicate any motivation to truly love and revere Cordelia, Badiou's philosophy will be helpful in further cementing the argument that Johannes is merely concerned with desire and physical characteristics, not actual love.

1. A Brief Look at Lacanian Love and Desire

Before I introduce a Lacanian reading of "The Seducer's Diary," I will start with Lacan's view of the mind and its impact on what he calls "subjects"[5]—for the sake of ease, what we can think of as human beings or, specifically in this case, Johannes the Seducer. In Lacan's view, the content of one's mind can be broken down into three parts: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic.[6] Because Johannes' experience with desire is primarily

[4] Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 49.
[5] Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 189–196.
[6] Fink, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 33–34; Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 76, 79.

due to the influence of the latter two, I will forgo much discussion about the Real here, even though Lacanian expert Bruce Fink notes that it is also deeply related to desire.[7]

When Lacan discusses the Imaginary, he is not talking about someone's imagination or something that does not exist. Instead, Lacan is referring to the world of images, meaning, for example, what we might call pictures, reflections, or photographs. When we talk about the Imaginary, we are thinking about an image or a picture that is external to us, something that has the potential to be viewed or seen. A good example of the Imaginary is a child who sees himself in the mirror for the first time (what Lacan perhaps appropriately titles the "mirror stage").[8] As the parents point to the child's image in the mirror and explain that the child has a reflection ("Look, that is you!"), the child begins to understand that there exists a perception of himself to other people, that they can see or "view" him. The Imaginary is simply concerned with images and perceptions, and the way in which they are understood to be outside of or external to oneself.

Closely associated with the Imaginary is the Symbolic, whereby we as a culture place attributes such as power, fame, or importance *upon* these images. We do this by virtue of "symbols," and these "symbols" are created through our use of language. The words "Symbolic," "symbols," and "language" will be used throughout this essay to refer to the value and meaning that we assign to these images. Furthermore, it is important to understand that while it is the Imaginary that allows us to view and become cognizant of the world of images, it is only because of the Symbolic and the way in which our culture attributes value to these images that "desire" becomes possible in the mind. Together, the Imaginary and the Symbolic are what constitute one's own "reality," which is not to be confused with the Real.[9]

To reiterate, one's own reality (the combination of the Imaginary and the Symbolic; the way that the world of images is given value by society) is responsible for desire. In other words, desire is a kind of construction, built by the culture that we inhabit and language that we use. As such, I will use the word "desire" throughout this paper to refer to traits, features, or things that we wish to obtain. This definition of desire will later be contrasted with love, which I will refer to as being completely true, or faithful, to an

[7] Fink, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 49.

[8] Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 75–81.

[9] As a matter of fact, "reality" tries at every attempt to "stave off" the Real, refusing to accept that the world of images and their subsequent desire might not actually be "real." These two concepts are fundamentally opposed to one another.

individual, to care for them, as they are, unconditionally and completely. This theme will be explored more in the third section of this paper when I will address the philosophy of Alain Badiou, but for the time being, the main distinction is as follows: desire is concerned with traits or characteristics that society teaches us are desirable, whereas love is concerned with the whole, even if that whole is not popular in the eyes of one's culture.

To illustrate how desire is constructed by language and symbols, consider again the child who has become aware of his own image in the mirror. Imagine now that the child, while riding in the car down a street, is exposed to a billboard plastered with a famous celebrity's image. What the child understands now is not only that images of oneself can be viewed, but also that this kind of fame and value are associated with what is presented to him in this ad. This seems to be, in a Lacanian sense, the way in which desire begins to be introduced—not by the world of images alone, *but by the way that language dictates the image to us*, or in other words, by how it is framed in specific cultural contexts. I believe that Johannes' desire functions in the same way (that is, wrapped up in questions of languages and images and the relationship between the two), but I will return to this point later in the paper once Lacan's view of desire has been fully elaborated.

The problem with desire is that the model immediately gets complicated when Lacan posits the following: desire is a part of the "unconscious" part of one's mind, and the unconscious behaves, as Fink notes, "as a language . . . with signifiers."[10] In other words, the Lacanian model is that desire itself behaves just like any other kind of language that we read, write, or speak.

Take the English language, for instance. In conversation with another person, speaking and communicating both involve proper use of grammar and syntax. It would be very odd (and rather difficult) to carry out a conversation if these conventions were ignored. For Lacan to claim that one's desire functions just like a language is to claim that desire similarly follows a set of rules. To put it plainly, desire is very often sequestered within our own unconscious, but seems to emerge at various points and times as specific objects become "desirable" by virtue of one's own reality (images [Imaginary] + language [Symbolic]). Viewing an ad on television for a brand-new sports car that you believe will make you more famous or more attractive is a good example of this. Desire exists prior to seeing this commercial, but is sequestered in the "unconscious" part of the mind. Desire only truly emerges and manifests itself once it has a concrete "object" to latch onto, in

[10] Fink, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 113.

this case, the sports car. Desire in of itself is not bound up with any kind of object; rather, it emerges at various points in time when objects become desirable.

To complicate this already-complicated picture of desire, consider the following point: desire cannot be satisfied by obtaining the object that we desire. Because desire is both socially constructed by the world that we inhabit and only found outside of oneself, desire can never truly be satiated by obtaining the thing you seek. Fink puts this nicely: "*Human desire, strictly speaking, has no object*. Indeed, it does not quite know what to do with objects. When you get what you want, you cannot want it anymore because you already have it."[11] When you finally obtain the object of your desire, it does not suddenly make you immune to the world's idols and symbols of power, the desire persists.

That is to say, should you proceed to follow the television ad and buy the brand-new sports car you see, you are obviously no longer going to "want" the sports car anymore (seeing as you now own it), *but your desire has not gone anywhere*. If you returned home from the dealership after buying the new car only to see another television ad for extravagant clothing that promises to make you more popular, the clothing simply serves as a new medium whereby desire can emerge. Ultimately, desire is constantly bouncing around objects (from the sports car to the new clothing), as our world, through the use of language, dictates to us which images have power and value. When we get what we want, we no longer want it. And yet, our desire remains with us, waiting for its next object.

My view is that the Lacanian framework of desire makes for an extremely compelling reading of "The Seducer's Diary," largely because Johannes' experience with Cordelia follows this model of desire rather closely. It is not until Johannes actually meets Cordelia that his seductive desire begins to form. Johannes' desire does not truly seem to take shape until he both sees Cordelia for the first time and decides that "she will be overtaken."[12] But of course, when Johannes actually becomes engaged to Cordelia, he decides, as Lacan might predict, that he no longer wants to be with her. After he gets Cordelia, Johannes' desire just moves elsewhere. It seems that all Johannes is interested in doing is manipulating desire itself and keeping it alive at any cost. As stated above, this is what would be referred to in Lacanian psychoanalysis as neurosis, although according to A the

[11] Ibid., p. 51 (emphasis in the original).
[12] SKS 2, 307 / EO1, 317.

Aesthete, this is the Seducer's "intellectual gift . . . to attract her without caring to possess her."[13] Cordelia serves as the object of desire for Johannes in this story, and ultimately is just the image that Johannes uses to view and sustain his own desire.

2. A Lacanian Reading of "The Seducer's Diary"

Consider the description of Johannes the Seducer by A in the prologue to the diary's transcription:

> Behind the world in which we live, far in the background, lies another world, and the two have about the same relation to each other as do the stage proper and the stage one sometimes sees behind it in the theater. Through a hanging of fine gauze, one sees, as it were, a world of gauze, lighter, more ethereal, with a quality different from that of the actual world. Many people who appear physically in the actual world are not at home in it but are at home in that other world. But a person's fading away in this manner, indeed, almost vanishing from actuality, can have its basis either in health or in sickness. The latter was the case with this man, whom I had once known without knowing him. He did not belong to the world of actuality, and yet he had very much to do with it.[14]

From the outset, A provides the reader with a distinction between two kinds of worlds: what we might call our physical world (real life) and then the "other world," that is, a world made of images and ideals that is distinct from the physical world (an imaginative, aesthetic world). Given what has been said about Lacan's view of the mind, this distinction is quite useful in making sense of Johannes' motives in seducing young women. The Seducer, according to A, lives rather "vanishingly" in the actual world because his desires and intentions seem to be otherworldly, that is, caught up in images and ideals of both himself and the objects of his seduction. In other words, in the Lacanian sense, Johannes is simply concerned with his own reality, which, if we take A's claim to be accurate, is not really a "reality" in any sense of the word since it does not seem to exist, belonging to the world "behind the one in which we live."

The importance of the distinction between the actual world and the world of ideals has been initially expressed by theologian Aaron Edwards, who notes that the real dilemma within "The Seducer's Diary" is that Cordelia finds herself being seduced by a man who fundamentally cannot love her, his alleged "love" being caught between a "'real' and an

[13] SKS 2, 296 / EO1, 306–307.
[14] SKS 2, 296 / EO1, 306.

'ideal' image."[15] According to Edwards, the very nature of this story is such that Johannes is constantly obsessing over the "image" of Cordelia, not Cordelia herself. It is extremely significant, therefore, that one of the first times Johannes sees Cordelia, he is simply seeing her reflection in a mirror:

> One of Johannes' first sightings of Cordelia comes, aptly, through a mirror. This mirror soon becomes a kind of surrogate for his own perception: "That unhappy mirror, which can capture her *image* but not her." This reflects his own frustration; the dialectical problem of wanting to see her at a distance but yearning to move *beyond* her mere image.[16]

The emphasis that Edwards put on "capturing [Cordelia's] image" is particularly striking when looked at under the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Using Lacan's philosophy, as a matter of fact, we can take Edwards' reading of this story even further. If it is indeed the case that when we speak of one's "desire" we really mean their relationship to images and language, then seduction itself ought to take on an entirely new meaning: seduction is first and foremost a question of *language* more so than manipulation or coercion. This is the point made by philosopher Begonya Tajafuerce, who notes that, like Faust, "Johannesque seduction is indeed a linguistic performance, but of a strictly poetic (or literary) sort."[17] If seduction is understood in this way (that is, strictly a linguistic sense),

> Cordelia and the reader are one and the same victim of the text, which acts upon them. "The Seducer's Diary" seduces its readers much as Johannes seduces Cordelia. The reader, like Cordelia, is carried from innocence to guilt, from unconscious to anxiety, from immediacy to (self)-reflection, from poetry to reality, and once attracted thereto, he/she is repelled and abandoned.[18]

The importance that Tajafuerce places on the shifting nature of emotions here is significant. Recall from earlier the proposed definition of one's reality: the world of images as dictated by our own language. We learn to desire things because we are taught the value of that thing *through* language. In the case of Johannes, I argue that seduction looks like a combination of Edwards' and Tajafuerce's models. It is not *just* that Johannes is obsessed with the "image" of Cordelia, it is that he has the ability to sway both Cordelia's

[15] Aaron Edwards, "Thrill of the Chaste: The Pursuit of 'Love' as the Perpetual Dialectic Between the 'Real' and the 'Ideal Image' in Kierkegaard's 'The Seducer's Diary,'" *Literature and Theology* 30, no. 1 (2016): p. 16.
[16] Ibid., p. 19.
[17] Begonya Saez Tajafuerce, "Kierkegaardian Seduction, or the Aesthetic 'Actio(Nes) in Distans,'" *Diacritics* 30, no. 1 (2000): p. 84.
[18] Ibid., p. 86.

and the reader's opinions of him through language, and that is what seems to be at the core of seduction. It is for this reason that Tajafuerce is absolutely correct in the claim that the reader is just as seduced as Cordelia. Our emotions as readers are just as, if not more, malleable than Cordelia's, and it seems to be because of this combination between images and language, or, more specifically, desire. We as readers step into the shoes of the young Cordelia and experience this desire firsthand through the form of linguistic seduction; we become entrenched in the world of the Seducer as it is handed to us through extremely rich language. But of course, this seduction is rather empty, being built solely on an image of the young girl that does not actually exist.[19]

The first hint we are given that Johannes might be more obsessed with Cordelia's image than Cordelia herself comes from the moment when Johannes decides to pursue Cordelia, as recorded in the April 4th entry:

> Should I relinquish her? Should I leave her undisturbed in her delight? She wants to pay but she has lost her purse—presumably she is giving her address. I do not wish to hear it—I do not wish to deprive myself of the surprise. I certainly shall meet her again sometime; I certainly shall recognize her, and she may recognize me—my sidelong glance is not forgotten so easily. Then when I am taken by surprise upon meeting her in surroundings I did not expect, her turn will come. . . . No impatience, no greediness—everything will be relished in slow draughts; she is selected, she will be overtaken.[20]

What I wish to draw attention to in this statement is the incredible stress that Johannes puts on the element of surprise. It is indeed true that he wants to see Cordelia again, but *only when he least expects it*. The key point in this discussion is that *it is not Cordelia that drives his desire*. From the outset, what drives Johannes is the possibility of desire or the "surprise" of desire. This is not to suggest, however, that Johannes is fundamentally *un*interested in Cordelia. As a matter of fact, from this very same scene, we learn that Johannes finds this girl rather attractive (hence his describing her various physical features).[21] Attraction is, after all, a typical part of romantic desire, but as the story stands, Johannes clearly has another interest on his mind: it is not just the case that Johannes wants to *be* with an attractive young woman; Johannes wishes to *overtake* her. The appeal is the chase.

Another critical example of Johannes illustrating the idea of prioritizing pure desire over Cordelia herself is the way in which he deals with the people close to Cordelia,

[19] In the mirror stage, Lacan calls this the "Ideal-I." See Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 76.
[20] SKS 2, 306–307 / EO1, 316–317.
[21] SKS 2, 306 / EO1, 316.

specifically her aunt (who is never named in the story) and her former suitor, Edward. Both of these characters and their relationship to the Seducer demonstrate rather clearly Johannes' neurotic behavior. His interactions with both Edward and Cordelia's aunt are aimed not at fostering relationships, but at getting Cordelia to see a specific side of Johannes. Being seen by Cordelia, after all, is just a way for Johannes to keep his desire alive. He does not want to be seen so that Cordelia will want to be with him. Rather, if Cordelia learns to see him in a certain way, the game of desire can stay alive. This point can best be made manifest in the experiences that Johannes records regarding Cordelia's aunt:

> Because of my intimate relationship with the aunt, it is easy for me to treat her like a child who has no understanding of the world. . . . With my powerful assistance on this score, the aunt is outdoing herself. She has become almost fanatic—something she can thank me for. The only thing about me that she cannot stand is that I have no position. Now I have adopted the habit of saying whenever a vacancy in some office is mentioned: "There is a position for me," and thereupon discuss it very gravely with her. Cordelia always perceives the irony, which is precisely what I want.[22]

Explicitly, Johannes is interested in Cordelia's perception of irony in his conversations with her aunt. Notice, however, that it is not just that he wants Cordelia to overhear the conversation and thereby understand how interesting he is. Because of Johannes' obsession with Cordelia, he also has this desire to manipulate the aunt, apparently being able to "treat her like a child." If Johannes' desire was simply focused on Cordelia herself without regard to image, it would be odd for him to want to keep the aunt under his thumb. When Cordelia "perceives the irony," Johannes gets to see his own reflection and desire through both Cordelia's attention and the aunt's manipulated approval of him.

Recall that desire in the Lacanian sense is always a matter of the Symbolic, that is, of language. We learn about the "images" that we desire when we are presented with them, of course, but it is not until language is introduced that we learn to "desire" these things, as we learn that with these images come "symbols" of power, fame, or beauty that allow our desire to emerge out of its seemingly sequestered state. It is striking, therefore, that language plays an extremely important part in the flattery of both Edward and Cordelia's aunt. In Johannes' claim that he wants Cordelia to perceive the irony, what concerns him is not Cordelia per se, but rather the way that she responds to his use of language. What

[22] SKS 2, 343 / EO1, 353.

is at stake in Johannes' relationship to seduction is fundamentally a question of language and manipulation.

The Seducer's so-called friendship with Edward follows a very similar vein with language, albeit in the opposite direction.[23] Whereas Johannes' relationship with Cordelia's aunt is primarily motivated by what he wants Cordelia to hear, his relationship with Edward is primarily motivated by what he knows Cordelia *will not* hear. He previously pitied Edward for his inability or lack of knowledge with love,[24] which is perhaps why he never worried that Cordelia would become interested in him:

> I, however, can hear perfectly every single word that is exchanged, hear every movement. It is very important to me, because what a person may venture in his despair cannot be known. The most circumspect and most timid people at times dare to do the most extreme things. Although I do not have the slightest to do with the two isolated people, I nevertheless can readily perceive in Cordelia that I am always invisibly present between her and Edward.[25]

These two relationships are juxtaposed rather nicely: the relationship between Johannes and Cordelia's aunt being characterized by the exactness of language and irony, and the relationship between Edward and Cordelia characterized by the lack thereof. Both are, indeed, questions of language, and although they seem to be heading in different directions, they both lead to the same point: they live to serve Johannes' uncanny use of language as a personification of his own desire and skill, and not as an attempt to sway Cordelia for the sake of being with Cordelia, as one might expect to see in a love story.

I now wish to turn to what I consider the most important scene in "The Seducer's Diary," the scene that illustrates the pinnacle of the model of desire I have been advocating for: the moment that, after their engagement, Johannes decides that he no longer wants to be with Cordelia. In order to keep desire alive, he continues to toy with her even to the point of getting her to break their engagement:

> Until now I have not proposed to her, as it is called in the bourgeois sense; now I shall do it. I shall make her free; only in that way shall I love her. That she owes this to me, she must never suspect, for then she will lose her confidence in herself. Then when she feels free, so free that she is almost tempted to want to break with me, the second struggle will begin. . . . The greater

[23] "So now we are friends, Edward and I . . ." (SKS 2, 337 / EO1, 347). This is perhaps used ironically, given that nothing Johannes has done seems to be friendly.
[24] Ibid.
[25] SKS 2, 339 / EO1, 350.

> the abundance of strength she has, the more interesting for me. The first war is a war of liberation; it is a game. The second is a war of conquest; it is a life-and-death struggle.[26]

Notice in this passage the obvious use of irony: at this point in the story, Johannes *has* proposed to Cordelia.[27] However, it is clear that Johannes is never content with what is happening in the present; rather, Johannes is *only concerned with what is happening in his mind, in the potential future*. In the Seducer's words, this idea is exemplified by calling it a "war of liberation; . . . a game."[28] This is a straightforward characteristic of Lacanian neurosis, namely, that what is kept alive in desire is not one's "object" of desire—in this case, Cordelia—but rather *desire itself*. The reason that Johannes is never content with Cordelia is because the only thing that interests him is the *possibility* of Cordelia, of being able to still pursue her. Thus, when the engagement actually happens, Johannes refuses to accept it, deciding instead to keep pushing back the goal line, always keeping the future unknown. This tactic of keeping desire and, by extension, possibility, alive should not be altogether too surprising to careful readers of A the Aesthete's work,[29] especially given the fact that the outcome of this relationship was one of the elements that truly frightened A.[30]

The tactic of keeping desire alive is also noteworthy when considered under the Lacanian lens. Given what has been said about the function of the Imaginary and the Symbolic together to form one's reality, it would seem, then, that the Seducer's relationship with desire merely serves as a kind of "reflection." In Cordelia, Johannes does not see his future wife—he merely sees a reflection of himself and his own seductive abilities. Consider Lacan's words concerning the function of desire in the "mirror stage":

> This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one's (semblable) and the drama of primordial (jealousy) . . . the dialectic

[26] SKS 2, 372 / EO1, 384.
[27] This is evidenced in a couple of places prior to this. See SKS 2, 364–365 / EO1, 375, 377.
[28] SKS 2, 372 / EO1, 384.
[29] I have in mind here the "Diapsalmata" texts, many of which describe A's boredom with the world.
[30] "I can picture him as knowing how to bring a girl to the high point where he was sure that she would offer everything" (SKS 2, 296 / EO1, 307). There is some indication that the phrase "offer everything" includes even a sexual relationship. See Leo Stan, "Fertile Contradictions: A Reconsideration of 'The Seducer's Diary,'" in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 82.

> that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other's desire.[31]

According to Lacan, desire is just a kind of "reflection" whereupon the viewer sees objects in the world as reflections of themselves or, more specifically, what will make the viewer "more" of themselves or a "better version" of themselves. I contend that this is what Johannes sees in Cordelia—a reflection of himself and how much better he could be seen in the world if Cordelia stood by his side. However, given both that this self-image is not "real" in the sense of the physical world and that desire can never truly satiate that self-image, "The Seducer's Diary" is only really an account of Johannes seducing himself, not the traditional model of the seduction of a young woman.

This view of "self-reflection" gets complicated, though, when considering the fact that Johannes only seems to really express interest in Cordelia as his medium of reflection. The question must be asked: Why Cordelia? If Johannes is only interested in seeing his own reflection through the seduction of young women, why does he fixate on Cordelia in particular? The answer is rather surprising: I do not believe that he *does* fixate only on Cordelia. Following their engagement (and *only* after their engagement, when the game becomes boring and the object of his desire has seemingly been obtained), Johannes seems to be very interested in other people and other relationships. Take, for example, the encounter that the Seducer has with a young woman on Østergade sometime after his engagement:

> The profile of a woman's head appeared in the next window in such a way that it turned in a strange manner in the same direction as the venetian blind. Thereupon the owner of the head nodded in a very friendly way and again hid behind the venetian blind. I concluded first and foremost that the person she greeted was a man, for her gesture was too passionate to be prompted by the sight of a girl friend. . . . But I forgive you, for the girl pleases me the more I see her. She is beautiful, her brown eyes are full of roguishness.[32]

Johannes very obviously does not have a sense of loyalty or allegiance to Cordelia, as evidenced by his comments regarding the young woman in the window. Furthermore, despite his claims to truly love and revere Cordelia,[33] it does not seem to be the case that Cordelia means as much to Johannes as he wants his readers to think. The reason that he

[31] Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 79.
[32] SKS 2, 381–382 / EO1, 393, 395.
[33] "Do I love Cordelia? Yes! Sincerely? Yes! Faithfully? Yes—in the esthetic sense . . ." (SKS 2, 373 / EO1, 385).

wants her to break off the engagement and "belong to [him]" is just this same kind of self-interest.[34] The love that Johannes claims to have seems to be nothing more than a type of conflated desire, a fantastical image of what might be a possibility in the future, and that is all that Johannes seems to care about. It is also noteworthy that the criteria for who was desirable to Johannes was only restricted to "young girls," a group in which Cordelia was just one of many.[35]

The Lacanian lens of desire, as I have argued, makes for a compelling reading of this text: the way that Johannes sees Cordelia as a reflection of himself is practically identical to the Lacanian view of desire as a vehicle for our own "ideal" selves. Up until this point, however, I have only really dealt with the nature of desire itself. I now turn to Alain Badiou and his work on the nature of true and lasting love to further showcase that Johannes' actions fundamentally cannot represent love, despite his amorous feelings for Cordelia.

3. Badiou on Love

According to Badiou, love is best thought of as an "event"—a momentous occurrence that happens without any warning and brings with it lasting consequences or new possibilities (what he will later term "truth-procedures," "truths," or "types").[36] In other words, love happens without any indication that it is coming and has the potential to change one's life and bring it in an entirely new direction. Badiou notes that events are of four kinds: amorous,[37] scientific, artistic, and political. Per the nature of this paper, I will focus only on the first of these types of events, namely, love.

Falling in love with another person is not anything that one can expect or "look forward" to: it just happens, and when it happens, one's life has the potential to change forever and bring with it new possibilities that would not otherwise have been an option (perhaps marriage or raising children). Such life changes are conditioned upon the heed and diligence the individual gives to the event, and it is for this reason that events ought

[34] SKS 2, 364 / EO1, 376.
[35] SKS 2, 314 / EO1, 324.
[36] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (New York: Verso, 2001), p. 28.
[37] It will be worthwhile to mention that "amorous" here refers specifically to "erotic" or "romantic" love. This is separate from the kind of neighborly love that Kierkegaard himself deals with at length in *Works of Love*, which is why Kierkegaard's personal views on love are not referred to here.

to be broken down into three separate components: the encounter, the naming, and the fidelity.

Let us think of the first part of the event, the encounter, as something akin to "happenstance." The nature of the event is such that it cannot be anticipated, and this is entirely due to the encounter. Consider meeting a potential romantic partner, for example. Their sudden appearance can happen anywhere, at any time. In the context of "The Seducer's Diary," we can pinpoint this to the first entry written by the Seducer on April 4th, where he notices Cordelia for the first time stepping out of the carriage: "Take care, my beautiful stranger! Take care! To step out of a carriage is not such a simple matter; at times it is a decisive step."[38] It is clear that this is the first meeting of these two individuals, evidenced by his labeling her as a "stranger" and not yet knowing her name.[39] Furthermore, given the fact that this is the very first entry written by Johannes, it should not be altogether surprising that this encounter is what launches the rest of the diary and his subsequent desires to pursue her. The Badiouian "encounter" very clearly takes place in the story, but it is the following two components of the event that complicate the nature of their love.

The second point of the event-triad is what Badiou calls the "naming" of the event. In the context of love, this amounts to the actual statement "I love you" to the person with whom the event has taken place (or something to that effect). This labeling says of the participants in the event that an encounter really has taken place and that their lives have the potential to now be lived in a new way:

> The declaration is inscribed in the structure of the event itself. First, you have an encounter. I pointed out how love begins with the wholly contingent, random character of the encounter. . . . This is a very difficult, almost metaphysical problem: how can what is pure chance at the outset become the fulcrum for a construction of truth? . . . To make a declaration of love is to move on from the event-encounter to embark on a construction of truth.[40]

It seems that for Badiou, the "naming" of the encounter is what bridges the gap between the initial occurrence, the encounter, happening seemingly out of nowhere, to the genesis of "a construction of truth," those changes in one's life that bring new possibilities. Perhaps it goes without saying that this is a rather vital step: individuals involved in the love-

[38] SKS 2, 304 / EO1, 313.
[39] Johannes will only learn Cordelia's name several entries later, on April 19th (SKS 2, 325 / EO1, 336).
[40] Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: The New Press, 2012), pp. 40–42.

event cannot begin to build any kind of truth without the naming of what has happened. Interestingly, within "The Seducer's Diary," there is no naming of the occurrence of any kind. There are statements from Johannes which indicate that he does love Cordelia,[41] but never, not once, does the reader find the conversation about Johannes actually declaring his love to Cordelia or vice versa.[42] It is as if Johannes refuses to let his reader know the actual details of his proposal to Cordelia—in other words, the "naming" of the event effectively disappears. It is here that I contend that the event becomes interrupted, and as such, true love (what Badiou calls "a construction of truth") becomes an absolute impossibility, which is perhaps one reason why Johannes cannot ever move past his own reflective desire.

The third and final component of events is what Badiou terms the "fidelity" or the "faithfulness" that one has to the event, and this fidelity is what, in turn, produces the new "truth." Generally speaking, this kind of faithfulness is something like a recognition of the way that the encounter shaped your life and of the new possibilities that are now available to you as a result. When individuals recognize how different their life is in light of the encounter, they are presented with the choice between being faithful to the nature of the event or not. In the context of a marriage, this ought to be relatively clear. The nature of an amorous encounter is such that one is true to the rules of the marriage that would not have otherwise been a possibility. Loving and being faithful to one's spouse and children in turn is a good example of this, and has the potential to generate "eternal truths": as life continues and the two love participants grow together, their lives take on a completely different shape than if those people remained single, that is, if the event never happened.

It is important to note, however, that just because an event happens, it does not guarantee any kind of result. Oftentimes, participants who have gone through both an encounter and a subsequent naming cannot stand the test of time and therefore the truth does not fully come to pass as the "fidelity" falls short. The example that Badiou uses to illustrate the principle of this kind of faltering love is, perhaps ironically, the historical account of the relationship between Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen:

[41] SKS 2, 373 / EO1, 385.

[42] I do not mean by this claim that the word "love" doesn't appear in conversation between the characters. It most certainly does. I simply mean that the readers do not have access to the integral moment whereupon Johannes or Cordelia declare their love for each other for the very first time.

> You find philosophers who transform love into the highest levels of subjective experience. This is the case with Søren Kierkegaard, for example. For Kierkegaard there are three levels of existence. At the aesthetic level, the experience of love is one of vain seduction and repetition. The selfishness of pleasure and the very selfishness of that selfishness drive individuals on, the archetype being Mozart's Don Juan. At the ethical level, love is genuine and demonstrates its own seriousness. It is an eternal commitment, turned towards the absolute, something Kierkegaard himself experienced in his long courtship to Régine. The ethical level can lead the way to the highest level, the religious level, if the absolute value of the commitment is endorsed by marriage. . . . Love then moves beyond seduction and, through the serious meditation of marriage, becomes a way to accede to the superhuman. As you can see, philosophy struggles with huge tension. . . . And the tension is almost unbearable. Thus, when Kierkegaard was finally unable to contemplate the idea of marrying Régine, he broke with her. In the end, he represented the aesthete seducer of the first level, lived the ethical promise of the second and failed to make the transition, via the real-life seriousness of marriage, to the third level. Nonetheless, he visited the whole gamut of forms of philosophical reflection on love.[43]

The fact that both Kierkegaard and Regine were at one point in time engaged implies that at the very least, an encounter took place. The naming of that encounter seems to follow from this, as demonstrated by one of many letters written from Kierkegaard to Regine: "My Regine! Even at this very moment I am thinking of you, and if at times it seems to you that I am avoiding you, this is not because I love you less, but because it has become a necessity for me to be alone at certain moments."[44] It is rather clear that there was a definite Badiouian "event" in Kierkegaard's eyes, given that the "naming" of their love has been implied to occur.[45] However, what Badiou seems to indicate in his summary of their relationship is that the "tension was too great," that Kierkegaard had to break off his faithfulness to Regine in the name of the ethical sphere as opposed to the religious sphere. Such was the nature of their relationship: it included an encounter and a naming, but the fidelity fell short.

In my reading of "The Seducer's Diary," I argue that Johannes the Seducer's experience with Cordelia is missing the "naming" of the encounter and, as a result, real love is a

[43] Badiou, *In Praise of Love,* pp. 13–15.

[44] SKS 28, 224 / LD, 71.

[45] It may be argued that this is not altogether different from the way that Johannes talks about his love with Cordelia, and that it is not fair to claim that this implies the "naming" of an event whereas Johannes' claims of love did not. One must keep in mind, however, that Kierkegaard's own experience is historical, and Johannes' is fictional. The decision to omit the conversation wherein the declaration of his love occurred was intentional.

fundamental impossibility. Rather clearly, I think, we can point to an encounter (the carriage exit and jewelry shopping scenes), but what Johannes eliminates entirely from the diary is the naming of the encounter, the actual moment wherein he declares his love to Cordelia. My contention is that the lack of the naming fundamentally changes the nature of the third part of Badiou's theory of the event, namely, the faithfulness.

In the traditional event model of love, an individual is true to the event by being absolutely committed to what the encounter has brought him, perhaps a wife or children and loving them unconditionally. In this framework, though, it would seem that Johannes is not true to the nature of the encounter: as soon as he has Cordelia, the only thing he wants is to let her go. More directly, the missing "naming" fundamentally changes the way that the Seducer chooses to be faithful. Johannes is never faithful, not once, to Cordelia for Cordelia's sake: he is only faithful to himself and his own desires, the product of his "mirror image" and the function of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. With Badiou's model in mind, it is rather clear that the nature of Johannes' and Cordelia's relationship is not one that is constructed out of love. The way that Cordelia's seduction is structured fundamentally opposes any kind of real love, especially when love is considered as a life-altering "event." If anything, this relationship is built on flimsy and selfish desires perpetuated by Johannes himself.

This is not to imply, however, that Johannes' obsession with desire and the image of Cordelia is simply unimportant or irrelevant when it comes to the discussion of true, authentic love. As a matter of fact, Badiou is explicit about this in his description of the relationship between love and desire: "Love passes through desire like a camel through the eye of a needle. It must pass through it, but only insofar as the living body restitutes the material marking of the disjunction by which the declaration of love has realized the interior void."[46] According to Badiou, desire is a fundamental and necessary part of the process, or the event, of love. It is rather clear, in fact, that Badiou probably has Lacan in mind when he discusses the important role that desire plays in the love-process. Lacan notes that while desire focuses on parts, love focuses on the whole: "While desire focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishist manner, on particular objects, like breasts, buttocks . . . love focuses on the very being of the other, on the other as it has erupted, fully armed with its being, into my life thus disrupted and re-fashioned."[47]

[46] Alain Badiou, "What Is Love?" in *Sexuation: SIC 3,* ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 274.
[47] Badiou, *In Praise of Love,* p. 21.

Still, under both the Lacanian and Badiouian models of the relationship between love and desire, I find little room for the argument that Johannes could possibly love Cordelia in the proper sense of the word, despite his claims.[48] Recall that right from the outset, what Johannes desired were Cordelia's features and nothing more: "Your chin is rather lovely, a bit too pointed. Your mouth is small, open—that is because you are walking too fast. Your teeth, white as snow . . ."[49] Johannes is only obsessed with the "features" of Cordelia, but never really obsessed with her as a whole, as a person. As such, I believe it is evident that no "event" really occurs, that we do not get to see the actual production of a truth—that is, nothing is fractured, nothing is changed, in the Seducer's relationship to Cordelia. Nothing comes forth in the way that Badiou describes, further cementing the idea that desire is the only thing Johannes strives for.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to offer a new view of "The Seducer's Diary," namely, that it is not simply the story of the seduction of a young girl. What is at stake in this story is the obsession with oneself and with images, recollection, and idealism. This article has attempted to take this reading one step further using the Lacanian-Badiouian spheres of discussion regarding love and desire, to showcase the neurosis evident in Johannes' pursuit of Cordelia and the lack of true love and fidelity revealed by such an occurrence. Badiou and Lacan are certainly not the only applicable thinkers of love and desire within Kierkegaard's work, but I do believe they provide a solid framework for understanding what is at stake in seduction. Seduction, after all, might not be a question of another person, but perhaps primarily a question of oneself.

[48] SKS 2, 373 / EO1, 385.
[49] SKS 2, 308 / EO1, 318.

ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN RECOLLECTION AND REMEMBRANCE IN "THE WORK OF LOVE IN RECOLLECTING ONE WHO IS DEAD"

BY GORDON D. MARINO

Abstract: In the penultimate chapter of his *Works of Love* (1847) Kierkegaard addresses our duty to recollect the dead. This paper argues that in both the original Danish and the English translation, Kierkegaard's use of the term "recollection" bears a significantly different meaning from the term "remembrance." In contrast to remembrance, the act of recollection is an active process of appropriation requiring inwardness on the part of the individual relating themself to the deceased. Kierkegaard argues that what renders our relationship to the dead unique is the fact that there can be no expectation of reciprocity when we visit the graves of the departed. In these pages, I posit that the use of "recollection" in Kierkegaard's 1845 discourse "At a Graveside," supports this interpretation of the same term in *Works of Love*.

Keywords: recollection, remembrance, death, reciprocity, love, duty, emotion

Many of us have furrowed our brows over the prominent role recollection (*Erindring*) (as opposed to remembering, *at huske*) occupies in the architecture of Kierkegaard's thought.[1] Whether it be in the *Philosophical Fragments* or *Repetition*, the concept of recollection performs different functions in different Kierkegaardian texts. In this brief reflection, I aim to distinguish the meaning of recollection from remembrance in a section of *Works of Love*.

In the penultimate chapter of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard wags a minatory finger reminding us of our duty to *recollect* the dead. Here, "recollection" lacks the epistemological resonances of, say, the *Fragments*, but instead points to a duty, which today seems archaic

[1] See SKS 6, 17 / SLW 9: "to recollect [*erindre*] is by no means the same as to remember [*at huske*]." On the role of recollection in Kierkegaard's writings, including the difference between recollection and remembering, see Nathanial Kramer, "Recollection," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, Tome V, *Objectivity to Sacrifice*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources*, vol. 15 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 197–203; and Nathanial Kramer, "Kierkegaard and Heiberg: Philosophy at the Crossroads of Memory," in *The Crisis of the Danish Golden Age and Its Modern Resonance*, ed. Jon Stewart and Nathanial Kramer (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2020), p. 233.

to many Westerners, who prefer to think of death as a time to "celebrate" the deceased, or, in the ubiquitous language of the therapeutic, as an opportunity to find "closure" with the deceased. In contrast, *Works of Love* insists our relationship to the dead is primarily *a duty to recollect* the person we have buried. How might the obligation to recollect differ from the need to simply think of the dead now and again? That is, to simply remember them? In the discourse "At a Graveside," a piece that could serve as a companion to the chapter of *Works of Love* under scrutiny, Kierkegaard hails a recently deceased old man who, throughout all the changes that time brings to life, remained steadfast in his awareness of his duty to "recollect God." On the first page of this discourse, the late former shop owner, a Clark Kent-like knight of faith, is described as someone who lived in "honorable obscurity" and who never forgot that "in the grave there is no recollection, not even of God."[2]

In a spate of pages devoted to the dead in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard emphasizes that there is no greater, no more freely undertaken deed than recollecting the dead, because there is no expectation of reciprocity involved in standing at a graveside or in any other way of relating ourselves to the fallen.[3] The main task of Kierkegaard's study is to ferret out the difference between true love, i.e., love as a duty, and self-love. In other words, his observations about our relating to the dead have implications for how we relate to the living. Kierkegaard observes, "in the love-relationship between living persons there usually is still the hope and the prospect of repayment, at least the repayment of reciprocal love. . . . But this hope and this prospect . . . make one unable to see with complete clarity what is love and what is self-love."[4] He elaborates:

> When one actual person relates himself to another actual person, the result is two, the relationship is constituted, and the observation of the one person alone is made difficult. In other words, the second person covers over something of the first person; moreover, the second person can have so much influence that the first one appears different from what he is.[5]

It is a truism to say that falling in love produces a form of intoxication in which we overestimate the qualities of our beloved. Kierkegaard considered the issue from a different

[2] SKS 5, 442 / TD, 71.
[3] Kierkegaard's claim that there is no possible expectation of reciprocity in our relation to the dead could be contested by the fact that some people, some of whom I have known, would feel guilty if they did not visit the graves of their dearly departed.
[4] SKS 9, 344 / WL, 351.
[5] SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347.

angle. On his reckoning, falling in love befogs not only the way we see our beloved but also the way we see ourselves. For instance, perhaps, in the midst of a contentious relationship my beloved accuses me of being a callous individual marred by an empathy deficit. Given the enchanting powers of love I might mistakenly internalize this accusation and see myself in the distorted mirror of my beloved's depiction. Yet, there is no danger of this kind of confusion in our relation to the dead.

Kierkegaard argues that the measure of a relationship can be calibrated by how the living person relates to the dead. Here there are none of the complications inherent in the connection between two individuals still drawing breath. Kierkegaard states, "one who is dead is no actuality; no one, no one can make himself *no one* as well as one who is dead, because he is *no one*."[6] Those who we euphemistically say have "passed on" cannot send us a thank you card for the bouquet left at their grave, nor can they scold us if we plan on visiting the cemetery on Sunday, but get sidetracked and never make it there. Since, on Kierkegaard's reckoning, there is no possibility of give-and-take involved in our connection to the dead, there is no aperture for a love tinged by self-love; hence, his conclusion, "if you want to ascertain what love there is in you or another person, then pay attention to how he relates himself to one who is dead."[7]

Two other Galileos of the psyche bear witness to Kierkegaard's summation. In a personal communication, the Dostoyevsky scholar Maxwell Parlin points out that in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, forgetfulness and indifference to the dead are tools the immortal Russian author applies to signal the shallow and debauched nature of the elder Karamazov. Early in the novel, Karamazov's son, Alyosha, beseeches his father to reveal the location of Alyosha's mother's grave. The besotted old scamp can't even recall where his second wife, is buried![8] Similarly, in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy registers indifference to the dead as a symptom of the superficiality and inhumanity of bourgeois society. At Ilyich's funeral, Ilyich's ostensibly close friends are so consumed with entertaining themselves and calculating the impact of Ilyich's death on their careers that they seem to have forgotten their mate even before he has been laid in his six-foot house.[9] Since they are "nothing actual," the dead serve as a veritable projective test for what is in our hearts,

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), p. 22.
[9] See Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), pp. 88–89.

sometimes hovering as a sad reminder of an ungrateful absence of connection to those who are no more, but who once played a prominent role in our lives.

Any study of love ignoring the affective component misses the bull's-eye. *Works of Love* describes love as containing seemingly immiscible elements. First and foremost it is defined as a duty, but also as a need and a passion. Unfortunately, the feeling element, the tenderness, is hidden in the weeds but it crops up in the chapter on recollecting the dead. Consider Kierkegaard's instructions:

> We ought not to disturb the dead by wailing and crying. We ought to treat one who is dead as we treat one who is sleeping, whom we do not have the heart to awaken because we hope that he will wake up by himself. "Weep, very softly over one who is dead, for he has attained rest," says Sirach (22:11); and I know of no better way to describe true recollection than by this soft weeping that does not burst into sobs at one moment—and soon subsides. No, we are to recollect the dead, weep softly, but weep long.[10]

Behind our waterworks is the tenderness essential to authentic recollection. In a famous passage from his *Journals*, the twenty-two-year-old Kierkegaard pulls back the curtain on his emotional life. On a summer sojourn he gazes out at the sea, later to recall:

> Often, as I stood here on a quiet evening, the sea intoning its song with deep but calm solemnity, my eye catching not a single sail on the vast surface, and only the sea framed the sky and the sky the sea . . . the busy hum of life grew silent and the birds sang their vespers, then *the few dear departed ones rose from the grave before me, or rather, it seemed as though they were not dead. I felt so much at ease in their midst, I rested in their embrace, and I felt as though I were outside my body and floated about with them in a higher ether*—until the seagull's harsh screech reminded me that I stood alone and it all vanished before my eyes, and with a heavy heart I turned back to mingle with the world's throng—yet without forgetting such blessed moments.[11]

The expression "resting in their embrace" is reminiscent of the active-passivity inherent in the formula defining the cure for despair in *The Sickness Unto Death* "as resting transparently in the power that established it."[12] Recollection is a more active inward process than remembering. The Danish verb "to recollect" (*erindre*) is rooted in the German *erinnern*, and it is derived from the German *innern*, which means "to make familiar with." Etymologically speaking, *erindre* is related to the adjective *indre* ("inner" in English) and

[10] SKS 9, 341–342 / WL, 348.
[11] SKS 17, 13–14, AA:6 / KJN 1, 9 (emphasis added). My thanks to Anna L. Söderquist for reminding me of this unforgettable passage.
[12] SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14.

as such relates to the German expression *inne haben* ("to know" or "to understand") and *inne werden* ("to become aware of" or "to notice").[13] The underscoring of inwardness is absent in the Danish verb "to remember" (*huske*).

As the years passed, I wonder if Kierkegaard's ideas about the dead were influenced by a need to remind himself of his oft-stated eternal devotion to Regine. After all, no less than the rest of us, Kierkegaard was all-too-human: he made a failed attempt at a rapprochement with Regine.[14] In 1855, she sailed off to the Danish West Indies where her husband, Johan Frederik Schlegel, had been appointed governor.[15] It is pure speculation, but perhaps Kierkegaard needed to pinch himself to keep the wound open and recollect his former fiancée, around whom, along with his deceased father, his life seemed to orbit.

For many of us, memories of the dead are triggered and float to consciousness as a random series of pictures we might smile upon, chuckle over, or maybe just shake our heads at. Then, as though a wave toppled over them, the images fade, without us necessarily actively engaging with them. For example, I recently enjoyed a stroll on the beach. As the waves licked at my feet, an image of my long-deceased father surfcasting swam to the surface of consciousness. For a fleeting moment it struck me that this memory captured one of a few instances in which my dad seemed relaxed and at peace. Then, the image was drowned out by the buzz and busyness of daily life. I did not shed a tear or reconsider the narrative I used to psychologically package my dad. The memory was a delightful morsel, but lacked the active element *Works of Love* links to recollection.

Even in the title of his book, Kierkegaard reminds us that recollecting the dead is a work and as such is not a passive process but an activity. As Kierkegaard phrases it, "if we are to love the persons we see, then also those we have seen but see no more."[16] More than once, the author pokes the reader and himself: "The untrustworthiness of human feelings left to their own devices perhaps never manifests itself more than in this very relationship."[17] In the immediacy of a painful loss we may promise to hold the dearly departed forever, but in a few days or weeks the Lethe of forgetfulness overflows the banks of our resolve. When the coffin is shut, Kierkegaard prescribes that we refrain from

[13] I am grateful to Troy Wellington Smith for his guidance on the etymological distinction between these two terms.
[14] See Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 598–602.
[15] See ibid., p. 746.
[16] SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347.
[17] SKS 9, 342 / WL, 348.

the forever vow. In biting terms, he writes: "When you say to one who is dead, 'You I will never forget,' it is as if he [the departed] answered, 'Fine! Rest assured that I will never forget that you said it.'"[18] Those of us who understand our relationships in non-transactional terms and as something more than ships passing in the night occasionally need to tap ourselves on the shoulder, lest our propensity for forgetfulness and immersion in the adventures of daily life make us as cold to the lost loved one as they have grown cold in the grave. Kierkegaard frequently admonishes himself and his readers that nothing can hold back the tsunami of the passage of time; like a watercolor painting, our emotions are bound to grow fainter over the years. According to *Works of Love*, it is our duty to struggle against this change and actively reawaken the memory and feelings for the departed, who would otherwise undergo a second death as they vanish from our inner landscape.

Ultimately, the duty to recollect the dead, as opposed to just remembering them, is an advanced lesson in fulfilling the duty to love the living. The lesson being that with true love, in contrast to self-love, there is no demand for reciprocity. Once again, this lack of expectation is precisely what distinguishes our loving recollection of the dead. After all, if there were an expectation of a reward, love would not be considered a duty or a work. As noted above, Kierkegaard stressed the untrustworthiness of the human heart, the ebb and flow of feelings and the power of those feelings to frame our world. A few years ago I was "ghosted" by a longtime friend whom I considered a brother. Up until then I had not experienced a hint of friction. Nevertheless, after a year or so of making overtures, I enclosed some photos in a warm farewell note, and that was it. I was intent on moving on and emotionally letting go of my bosom pal. No one writes more insightfully than Kierkegaard about our proclivity for pulling the wool over our own eyes. Even in *Works of Love*, he underscores, "people love to deceive themselves in all kinds of delusions more than they love both the living and the dead."[19] À la Kierkegaard's warning, I dug deeply trying to discern if I might have offended my friend in a way I failed to recognize. Still I could not fathom the cause of the break. Not that Kierkegaard was himself successful in this, but the duty remains to love our neighbors even if they no longer feel like spiritual near-dwellers. Central to that duty is the note ringing throughout *Works of Love* that, regardless of our scars, the duty to love demands presupposing the love of others,

[18] SKS 9, 350 / WL, 356.
[19] SKS 9, 349 / WL, 355.

presupposing the love implanted by God *in* everyone, including those who have left us behind and with whom we have no grounds for expecting anything in return.

Arne Grøn, *Thinking With Kierkegaard: Existential Philosophy, Phenomenology, and Ethics*, ed. Bjarke Mørkøre, Stigel Hansen, and René Rosfort (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

Reviewed by D. Scott Zimmerman, University of South Florida

Arne Grøn's *Thinking With Kierkegaard* marks an achievement both for Kierkegaard studies and for scholarship in general. As part of the *Kierkegaard Studies* series of monographs from De Gruyter, this mammoth 614-page collection offers 35 essays. It is a treasure trove for anyone interested in thinking alongside Kierkegaard about the topics of existential philosophy, phenomenology, and ethics. The title is apt, as the editors explain, "Grøn's engagement with Kierkegaard is not primarily concerned with interpreting particular themes of the authorship . . . He is much more interested in thinking *with* Kierkegaard than *about* Kierkegaard" (*xi*). Although Grøn does occasionally participate in theorizing about authorship or biographical motivations, he largely sticks to the philosophical ideas found in each text and their importance for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Thinking alongside Kierkegaard then largely means that Grøn walks side-by-side with each text, seeing where it leads and what the implications are for existentialism, phenomenology, and ethics. Grøn is certainly a master of this and seems to think this outcome is inevitable for any would-be reader of Kierkegaard. As he hints at the beginning of one of his essays, "even a reading of Kierkegaard, which has no philosophical ambitions sooner or later runs into philosophical questions" (110). One would hardly describe Grøn's approach as without philosophical ambitions, but his phenomenological temperament produces a reading that explores the philosophical implications of Kierkegaard's thinking in a rather free and wonderful manner. In turn, he is not likely to get caught up in debates about pseudonymity and the meaning of each text in general or potentially unanswerable questions like "what Kierkegaard *really* means." Such is what I take to be the charm of Grøn's method and the meaning of title, *Thinking With Kierkegaard*.

For Grøn, Kierkegaard is first and foremost a thinker of existence. Thus, the editors have done an excellent job in placing the existential philosophy section first, which emphasizes its importance for understanding Grøn's work. Most of the essays found herein delve into concerns about the self, subjectivity, temporal experience, worldhood, and other existential concerns relating to what it means to exist as a finite creature. Grøn is aware of the challenge in describing such things, not only for Kierkegaard, but for himself

as well, since existence is not something that stops and waits for us to study it. He explains, "what the difficulty of 'thinking existence' brings into view is the difficulty of existence which is to be carried out in existence" (9). That is, thinking about existence doesn't allow us to stand outside our own existence, but instead brings into sharper focus the particularity of ourselves and our thinking.

Bringing thinking and existing together is essential to understanding Grøn's project, because he argues that "existential thinking concerns the human condition to which thinking itself belongs" (19). Since thinking is a part of existence, to bring thinking into an understanding of existence is part of what makes us individual selves (21). The rest of the essays in this first part are dedicated to fleshing out these ideas in relation to different aspects of existence. Thus, having existence first in order is important because these subjects and themes pervade the latter two sections of the book and color the thinking that takes place there as well. Grøn's attempt to think existence while existing also reveals his interest in phenomenology, an approach that attempts to consider phenomena as they appear to us in existence.

The second section of the book deals with phenomenology, and it is also the shortest portion of the book. Given the challenges of thinking existence, Grøn seeks the conditions under which subjectivity appears and how it is cultivated. He once again realizes the inherent challenges since phenomenology is "a search for the beginning" (217), while "existential thinking deals with existence preceding thinking" (19). Thus, phenomenologically we must begin where we stand in existence and can only move out from there. This is further complicated by the challenge in bringing subjectivity into focus, which remains somewhat opaque and aloof. Yet, it is Kierkegaard's interest in this slippage that makes his work rife for phenomenological analysis, according to Grøn. Thus, "it is important to read Kierkegaard's thought of subjectivity as a countermove, in response to the possibilities of forgetting what it means to be a subject" (222). The paradox of being clear that subjectivity often means being unclear is a theme that emerges from Kierkegaard's work. Grøn takes this as his launching point.

This paradox is a constant concern of both Climacus pseudonyms, to whom Grøn devotes much consideration in these essays. Given Grøn's phenomenological bent, the essays in this section primarily deal with the subjects of consciousness, time, despair, and subjectivity, but Grøn also considers the dialectical conditions under which existence can be communicated. To Grøn's credit, he never loses sight of the problems and concerns raised in the existential philosophy section but rather builds upon and further elucidates them. In doing so, Grøn's phenomenological work has one further concern. He seeks to

understand the ways in which Kierkegaard influenced and formed later phenomenological thought. It is no secret that Kierkegaard had a significant influence on thinkers like Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Levinas, but Grøn thinks through how various Kierkegaardian texts anticipated these thoughts and helped form the analysis which would appear in these later thinkers.

The third and final section deals with ethics. Anyone who has delved into Kierkegaard's ethics will be unsurprised to find the centrality of love of self and love of neighbor pervading this section. This section launches with Grøn's essay on *Works of Love*, where thinking with Kierkegaard about love leads Grøn—to use M. Jaimie Ferreira's phrase—to a "transforming vision." As Grøn explains concerning *Works of Love*, "the discourse aims to do something to its reader, changing his or her perspective or vision" (405). Thus, much of Grøn's ethics section considers the twofold way in which thinking through Kierkegaard's ethics can transform our vision of ourselves and of the neighbor. The transforming of our vision is meant to lead to a transformation of how we act in the world. Thus, as we learn of our duty to love the neighbor we learn to see them in a different light, which transforms how we see ourselves and how we act in relation to others.

Grøn asks in one of the early essays, "is ethics the limit of phenomenology?" (424) This shows that Grøn's considerations of phenomenology naturally led him to consider ethics. This question informs much of what is considered in the various essays, which deploy phenomenological language to consider such phenomena as visibility, vision, and self-transcendence. In trying to get ethics into his sights, Grøn is inevitably led from Kierkegaard to later phenomenological thinkers. One finds an especially fascinating consideration of dialectics and recognition which bears on Grøn's later analysis of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Levinas. Grøn dedicates much time thinking through the way transformative vision is found in Levinas and how its origin can in part be attributed to Kierkegaard. This section ends with numerous considerations of ethics in light of theological considerations of time, faith, hope, love, and anticipation.

The text that delivers Grøn's essays is excellent both in its design and layout. It is a large tome, and the binding is strong with an attractive cover bearing a contrasted image of Kierkegaard's initials in his own handwriting. The organization of the text is well-planned, placing the essays in a way that is both clear and easy to navigate. Helpfully, Grøn's writing is also remarkably consistent and systematic even in its exploratory and occasionally meandering style. At times, the tome reads like a text written by Husserl or Heidegger, whom Grøn clearly takes some influence from.

One other point should be addressed for the prospective reader. Grøn published in multiple languages throughout his career, and this text contains both English and German essays. Thus, it is worth noting to any readers who may not be able to read in languages other than English that the German essays are left untranslated. However, if one wants to find out what the German essays contain, the editors have provided a helpful summary of each essay in the chapter guide section at the beginning of the book.

Despite its many achievements, Grøn's work is not without its potential flaws. Some will be skeptical of his method and overall project. For instance, although Grøn is clear about his intentions in seeking only to think *alongside* Kierkegaard, some may suspect this is self-deception, as a reader always brings something to the text. Without rehearsing the debates in hermeneutics and literary theory about what the reader's relationship to the text is, it is simply worth noting that any attempt at pure thinking alongside Kierkegaard hardly comes without philosophical baggage. Additionally, some more historically minded thinkers may find there is not enough attention paid to pseudonymity or the historical context of golden age Denmark.

Such readers may also be sensitive to Grøn's penchant for and comfort with anachronisms. For example, Grøn habitually and perhaps too comfortably attributes twentieth and twenty-first century concepts and ideas, such as "oneself as another," "ek-sistence," and other later existential concepts, as well as terms from cognitive science, to Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms whenever he feels it explanatorily useful. This is not to say that these ideas can't be found in Kierkegaard, nor that they aren't earned or argued for by Grøn. It is simply to flag this for any potential readers. Further, Grøn is by no means the first to do this as it is quite common in existential scholarship.

Nonetheless, a reader sensitive to such anachronisms may be irked by the presence of Heideggerian, Ricoeurian, or Levinasian readings of Kierkegaard being masked as a pure thinking *alongside*. Similarly, such readers may be frustrated to find Kierkegaard's thinking dragged into debates about intentionality and situated cognition. Grøn could reply that the above examples are precisely what it means to think with Kierkegaard, but such a response may feel unsatisfactory to some.

Regardless, when it comes to the attempt to think alongside Kierkegaard, Grøn's work certainly sets the standard very high and his scholarship is worthy both of celebration and prolonged time spent with this collection of his essays. I highly recommend that anyone interested in exploring Kierkegaard in relation to existential philosophy, phenomenology, or ethics should pick up this book. Such thinking alongside Kierkegaard with Grøn will enrich one's own existence and repay abundantly for the time spent doing so.

Sharon Krishek, *Lovers in Essence: A Kierkegaardian Defense of Romantic Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Reviewed by Chase Moloney, Yale University

Sharon Krishek's *Lovers in Essence* articulates a compelling theory of romantic love that draws on Kierkegaard's thought. Though deeply indebted to Kierkegaard, Krishek is not afraid to disagree fruitfully when appropriate. Despite covering some of Kierkegaard's toughest ground and simultaneously trying to provide an account of what love is and how it shapes our lives, the arguments in *Lovers in Essence* are presented clearly and in such a way that a reader with little training in Kierkegaard or philosophy could still easily follow her lines of reasoning.

The basic thesis of *Lovers in Essence* is that each person has a divine name bestowed by God, meaning that each person has a unique potential essence that can be actualized in various ways and to greater or lesser degrees. Krishek argues that it is each person's task to actualize this self and that loving others and being loved in return is an important part of the way we do this. She argues that despite its inherent exclusionary aspects, romantic love for another self is no less suited to this task than familial or neighborly love.

Krishek's argument offers a solution to two different problems. First: Why do we love the people we do romantically? To summarize traits (she is smart, he has brown eyes, she works hard, he is kind, etc.) strikes us as reductive, as if our romantic interest could be summed up in an equation. Furthermore, even if another met this list we drew up, it doesn't seem like it can be guaranteed that romantic love would necessarily show up. On the other hand, if we see love as having *no* reason, then love feels arbitrary and entirely contingent, which also feels contrary to our experience of love as connected to our beloved in particular. Krishek's solution to this problem is to argue that we are attracted to our romantic lover's essence, which is more than just the sum of particulars that have been actualized, even if this essence is ultimately the source of those particular aspects that we appreciate in our beloved. Krishek's approach avoids attempting to explain our love for someone as just a summary of traits or even of shared history while also avoiding the risk of saying there is no reason why we love our beloved and not some other person. Krishek also offers, against both the account of love as a consumeristic preference and as an arbitrary pairing, a picture of growing with one's partner.

Second: How do we defend the impulse that romantic love is equally valuable compared to neighborly or familial love? Krishek argues that despite engaging some of the most "self-interested" aspects of ourselves, romantic love should not be dismissed, and in fact, the engaging of these self-focused aspects *toward* the other for mutual growth is just as consequential. Her defense is that romantic love, despite being susceptible to selfishness due to the strong desires involved, is nevertheless ultimately good and just as capable of meeting her definition of love as "joyful, compassionate caring" (96). Furthermore, Krishek argues that there is a spiritual component of romantic love, whereby lovers help "each other to become the selves they are intended, by God, to be" (201). While acknowledging that romantic love gone wrong can be destructive, her theory also accounts for the ways that romantic love can destroy illusions that ought to be destroyed. Lovers are not content; they want to know more about their beloved, and they are not satisfied with half-truths. The same lies and acts we put on for the world do not work when someone wants to know us more and more and wants us to want *them*. This means that when things break down, it hurts all the more. But it also means that when they see who we are, and love us not just in spite of that but *because* of who we really are, they model for us how to better love ourselves.

Readers will benefit most from the way Krishek is not constrained by the twentieth-century existentialist readings of Kierkegaard. This is a welcome development that allows us to consider how Kierkegaard's ideas might be compatible with an understanding of essences. While I remain skeptical about how identifiable an essence is, I don't think a Kierkegaardian framework precludes them, and I am curious to see whether Krishek's book might spark some further work on the value of holding to essences in spite of these challenges.

I think Krishek succeeds outright in defending romantic love as valid for the Kierkegaardian. This is an interesting outcome, especially given Kierkegaard's own rejection of lived out romantic love with Regine and of marriage. As a young undergraduate my first introduction to Kierkegaard was through *Sickness unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling*, taught alongside Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Many of the ideas found in both authors, particularly the inherent despair of the contrary aspects that constitute what it means to be a self, have remained with me since. It has remained my view since that the main difference in the pictures of selfhood found in Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky is that Dostoevsky sees a greater role for loving and being loved by others in the process of healing from despair. Such views may allow for a healthier view of our relationship to our own finitude and selfish desires, in the sense that they are redeemed and placed in service of

those we love. Krishek makes an excellent defense of how such an elevated view of love for others as part of our healing is not just healthier, but actually more compatible with Kierkegaard's own views of selfhood, despair, and healing expressed in *The Sickness unto Death*.

My primary skepticism of Krishek's account of essence is that it is not obvious how we might discern our own individual essence, much less anyone else's. I am not opposed to the idea that we might have some elements of our personality that result from a potential in our essence being actualized in different ways. In my own life, much of my desire to become a Kierkegaard scholar stems from the urge to take what meaning, provocation, and vitality to live I gained from my encounter with Kierkegaard's works and share them with others hungry for purpose or feeling the pains of doubt and grief. So while I am doing something not very common (trying to become an expert in a Danish philosopher who wrote nearly two centuries ago), my desire is motivated by the universal desire to help others (amid the less noble motivations that surely exist in me too, like the desire for attention or for people to think I'm clever).

But even the way these desires show up might be contingent. Few would argue that my essence is specifically to become a Kierkegaard scholar, but it is not clear at what level an essence would make contact with specific paths or actions. Is my essence to become just some form of scholar? That does not seem quite right, as there are many meaningful paths I could take which do not involve scholarship. One might think that the issue with this example is vocation, but this seems to hold even for more central qualities like wit, leadership, or creativity. There might still be some way to whittle closer towards an essence; arguably, vices can be ruled out as non-essential (at least, taking a standard theological reading), and virtues can also be ruled out as not part of one's individual essence but as part of our essence as people or rational agents. But beyond this, it seems difficult to properly identify what is essential in someone. If we have little knowledge of them, then much of our experience could be quite similar regardless of whether we believe Krishek or the essence-skeptical Kierkegaard scholars that she contrasts herself with.

Nonetheless, there might be good reasons to believe in individual essence even if we cannot always identify them. As Krishek demonstrates in Chapter 2, the idea that love is a meeting of essences has explanatory power even when one struggles to fully define a particular person's essence. In addition to answering the question of why we love our beloved without resorting to a list of attributes or declining to offer any reason at all, Krishek's theory also explains why we *want* our beloved to love us for us. We are not satisfied by them loving particular traits or combinations of traits; one alteration of

preference or the arrival of someone a little bit better who meets all those combinations might mean we lose our place. On the other hand, if they say they just love us, that there is no reason, it feels arbitrary, as if they could have loved anyone else had circumstances been otherwise. We want to hear our beloved say, "I love you because you're you," and when we grow in intimacy, we desire our love to know who we *are*. This experience is perhaps the best defense of why we ought to adopt this theory, even if the practice of identifying an essence definitively is murky at best. Krishek's theory offers a way to explain this phenomenon of wanting to be known for who we are in the truest sense, and, in spite of all the ways it can blow up, fall apart or wither away, trust that this kind love is ultimately real and not wishful self-deception.

I recommend *Lovers in Essence* both to those who want to see how Kierkegaard's account of selfhood can be taken up constructively, and to anyone looking for a philosophically compelling account of love. It is a clearly written book covering challenging territory that achieves much of what it sets out to and is true to its Kierkegaardian spirit.

Notes on Contributors

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