In a journal entry from 1842-3 Kierkegaard asks rhetorically, "Can there be a transition from quantitative qualification to a qualitative one without a leap? And does not the whole of life rest in that" [JP I 110]? He thus strikingly and unambiguously sets the leap in perspective – the leap, the form of qualitative transformation, lies at the heart of all life. Later in his journals this master of polemic against the theoretical makes two intriguing references to what he calls “my theory of the leap” [JP III 20]. Whether or not he has a theory as such, the concept of a leap is appropriately associated with the name of Kierkegaard, since the leap is a structural element that winds its way throughout his whole authorship: it informs his various accounts of the peculiar character of transitions between radically different ways of life as well as his challenge to the philosophical and romantic accounts of such transitions that were influential in his day.

The popular association of the leap with Kierkegaard is often couched in terms of the leap of faith. It is worthwhile to be reminded, however, and interesting to note, that Kierkegaard never uses any Danish equivalent of the English phrase “leap of faith,” a phrase that involves a circularity insofar as it seems to imply that the leap is made by faith.' He does, however, clearly and often refer to the concept of a leap (Spring) and to the concept of a transition (Overgang) that is qualitative (qualitativ) or, alternatively, a meta-basis eis allo genos (transition from one genus to another); moreover, he clearly and often refers to such a qualitative transition to religiousness and to faith in an eminent sense, namely, Christian religiousness. Thus, even if the concept of a leap of (made by) faith is foreign to the terminology of Kierkegaard, the concept of a leap to faith remains cen-
tral to his writings. Since the popular understanding of the leap usually derives from the works Kierkegaard wrote under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, I want to explore what is at stake in Climacus's affirmation of the leap required for faith. Although Kierkegaard's references to the leap are not limited to his Climacus writings, such an exploration will illuminate a significant part of Kierkegaard's contribution to the study of religious transformations.

I. THE LEAP: GENERIC AND RELIGIOUS

Climacus introduces the leap in *Philosophical Fragments*, the “pamphlet” intended to present an alternative to the Socratic model of recollection as the way to attaining truth; this alternative, drawing out the radical implications of the unknown, illuminates the notion of the genuinely other or absolutely different (*PF* 5, 44–7). Any attempt to learn about the leap must, of course, take account of Climacus's self-assessment of *Fragments*: the “most mistaken impression one can have of it” is that it is “didactic.” On the contrary, it is, he notes, riddled with irony, parody, and satire (*CUP* 275n). It is indirect communication; we will not, therefore, obtain a theory of the leap as a piece of information or what Climacus and Kierkegaard derisively call a “result” (65, 73, 78, 242). But the imaginative strategy and textual crafting of an indirect communication can communicate; insofar as indirect communication can impart or call forth or communicate an ability (*JP* 1281–2, 284, 303–8), it can communicate a concept. Still, any attempt to identify Climacus's leap with Kierkegaard's understanding must take into account the fact that Climacus confesses himself not to be a Christian (*CUP* 451, 466, 501, 511, 557, 597, 617, 619).

Although the notion of a leap is implicit throughout *Fragments*, it only receives explicit treatment in the third version of the non-Socratic story. The first three chapters of *Fragments* can be seen as an example of repetition, of spiraling action in which we circle back to what seems to be the same place, yet with at least one different coordinate. The presentation of a genuine alternative to the Socratic model of the way things are is offered first in the speculative abstractness of a “Thought-Project” (Chapter I), with the focus on teachers, conditions, and truth, and is then taken up in a “Poetical Venture” (Chapter II), which explores the concreteness of lovers,
suffering, and lilies. Climacus then begins a third version (in Chapter III) of the non-Socratic alternative, elaborating the theme of the unknown through metaphysical musings on paradox, from Socratic to absolute; the emphasis on the passion of thought and the analogy with erotic love echo both of the earlier dimensions of the story (as does the subtitle, "Metaphysical Caprice"). It is here that Climacus brings in the leap as part of the discussion of how the limits of the theoretical require and exemplify the notion of a qualitative transition.

Before examining this in detail, it is worth noting that despite its relatively underplayed role in Fragments, the importance of the discussion of the leap is made clear by Climacus's further treatment of it in Concluding Unscientific Postscript. In this work, which he says is a "renewed attempt," a "new approach to the issue of Fragments," he focuses at greater length and with much more explicitness on the category of leap (CUP 17). Of this postscript to Fragments, which is the heart of Climacus's attempt to address "the qualitative transition of the leap from unbeliever to believer" [Springets qvalitative Overgang fra Ikke-Troende til Troende], he says that "what has been intimated here [in the introduction] has been emphasized in Fragments frequently enough, namely, that there is no direct and immediate transition to Christianity" (12, 49).

While the impossibility of a direct and immediate transition may have been emphasized in Fragments, the character of the transition that occurs receives very little explicit attention there. We first learn about the leap in the context of Climacus's assessment of the all-too-common attempt to "demonstrate the existence of God," and there it is tied to the concept of letting go. Climacus highlights the limits of demonstration when he remarks that what passes for demonstration is usually only a case of developing "the definition of a concept" (PF 40). But he includes under demonstration inductive as well as deductive reasoning, teleological as well as ontological arguments, calling attention to the way in which the premises we accept in order to begin (as Socrates knew) must already be infused with the ideas with which we conclude (44). Climacus stresses not only the conditional nature of such reasoning, but also its tentativeness: real dependence implies real vulnerability, living "in suspenso lest something so terrible happen that my fragment of demonstration would be ruined" (42). He goes on to
ask "how does the existence of the god emerge from the demonstration?" – in the same breath he answers: "I have to let go of it" (42). That is, demonstration falls loose at both ends – at its beginning, where premises must be assumed, and at its conclusion, where letting go must occur, accepting the whole of premises and process as good enough. "So long as I am holding on to the demonstration (that is, continue to be the one who is demonstrating), the existence does not emerge, if for no other reason than that I am in the process of demonstrating it, but when I let go of the demonstration, the existence is there." Insofar as I reach existence at all, I leap: "Yet this letting go, even that is surely something, it is, after all, meine Zuthat [my contribution]. Does it not have to be taken into account, this diminutive moment, however, brief it is – it does not have to be long, because it is a leap" (43).

Climacus reinforces his claim that the moment of the leap is, however diminutive, a crucial or decisive moment with an anecdote about Carneades's desire to "grasp the point at which the quality [in the syllogistic chain of a sorites] actually made its appearance"; Chrysippus's teasing response to Carneades foreshadows Climacus's later caricature of the attempt to disguise the discontinuity of a qualitative transition. What becomes clear is that the direct and immediate transition he rejects is precisely not the qualitative transition at issue. Rather, "direct and immediate" refers to the cumulative, automatic, Hegelian type of transition in which something passively "flops over" by "immanental necessity" (IP III 21); the immediacy that is rejected is that involved in the Hegelian view that "the one standpoint on its own necessarily determine[s] its transition over to another" (CUP 295).

Aligning the leap, as Climacus does, with letting go already hints at the leap as something curiously active yet passive. Climacus's references to the activity of letting go emphasize the active dimension of the leap that can easily be forgotten in our tendency to see demonstration as compelling us to assent, but in the context of evidence and judgments of adequacy, they belie the notion of leap as a one-sidedly volitional activity.

Reference to the reservatio finalis, "that the existence itself emerges from the demonstration by a leap," ends Climacus's brief explicit treatment of the leap. Later on, in the interlude's discussion of "belief," we are given two relevant pieces of information: (a) the
reference to the "metabasis eis allo genos [transition from one genus to another]" that occurs "if that which comes into existence does not in itself remain unchanged in the change of coming into existence" (PF 73), and (b) the claims that "belief is not a knowledge but an act of freedom, an expression of will" (83) and that neither belief nor doubt is a "cognitive act," for "they are opposite passions" (84). All this information is sandwiched in between two chapters that indirectly refer to a leap in terms of the incommensurability between the historical and the faith response; Climacus later reminds us that this was Fragments' presentation of the "impossibility of becoming contemporary (in an immediate sense) with a paradox" (CUP 96n).

The quasi-sequel to Fragments found in Concluding Unscientific Postscript takes up the substance of the leap in its rejection of cumulative, quantitative transitions to the religious, insisting that "there is no approximation, that wanting to quantify oneself into faith" is a "misunderstanding, a delusion (CUP 11). The claim made early on that the one in faith has "made the qualitative transition of the leap from unbeliever to believer" is carried through to the uncompromising conclusion that "there is no direct transition to becoming a Christian, but, on the contrary, this is the qualitative leap" (12, 381). An early footnote reference to the leap from essence to existence (39n) echoes Fragments' discussion of the relation between concept (or thought) and existence, but Climacus's most elaborate treatment of the leap is found in Section 1 of Part 2, entitled "Something about Lessing" (CUP 63–125). Here Climacus develops his view of subjectivity by reference to G. E. Lessing, the eighteenth-century German dramatist and critic whose claims about the incommensurability (the "broad ugly ditch") between truths of history and truths of reason would have been familiar to his readers.

Despite the fact that Lessing is clearly singled out for attention, it has been suggested that perhaps Kierkegaard's understanding of the leap owes more to Kant than to Lessing. However surprising this might at first appear, there is a prima facie plausibility about it. The leap is central to Kierkegaard's general reaction against Hegelian system and method: he writes that "Hegel has never done justice to the category of transition" ([P I 110] and Climacus insists that "the leap is the most decisive protest against the in-
verse operation of the [Hegelian] method" (CUP 105). Since Kierkegaard was reacting against Hegel and Hegel was himself reacting against Kant, it should not surprise us that there would be a kinship between Kierkegaard and Kant. It is true that both Kant and Kierkegaard affirm the limits of theoretical reason, distinguish between faith and knowledge, and claim that religious faith does not issue from the sphere of objectivity; such congeniality in making "room for faith" is indeed significant and deserves to be explored further.\(^4\) Still, it is Lessing, rather than Kant, to whom Kierkegaard through Climacus makes detailed and explicit reference in developing the notion of the leap, and that discussion should provide the most direct source of information on what is at stake in Climacus's leap.\(^5\)

The "something about Lessing" to which our attention is called by Climacus begins with an expression of gratitude. Despite the fact that irony is piled on irony in these chapters, with Climacus commenting ironically on the ironic Lessing, jesting with the jester Lessing,\(^6\) the acknowledgment of gratitude is sincere: Lessing did not allow himself to be tricked into becoming world-historical or systematic with regard to the religious, but he understood, and knew how to maintain that the religious pertained to Lessing and Lessing alone, just as it pertains to every human being in the same way, understood that he had infinitely to do with God, but nothing, nothing to do directly with any human being. (CUP 65)

Climacus concedes the difficulty in determining Lessing's position, but it is obviously with tongue in cheek that he complains that it is "disturbing not to be able to abandon oneself to Lessing with the same confidence as to the presentation of those who with genuine speculative earnestness make everything out of one thing and thus have everything finished" (CUP 91). Lessing's methodological or pedagogical commitments are inconsistent with direct communication (65, 67, 69). Lessing's preferred status as an enigma is a function of his wanting "to make everyone free in relation to him" (72) and of his reluctance to be "world-historically butchered, salted, and packed in a paragraph" (107) – the communication of subjectivity can neither be appealed to or made determinate (66–8). The difficulty in pinning Lessing down seems to stem from his appreciation
of the isolation of the God-relationship and the consequent relevance of indirect communication and double-reflection – thus, Climacus affirms a significant agreement between his own position and the one he attributes [albeit hesitantly] to Lessing (72).

Climacus alludes to Lessing's style somewhat haughtily as a "mixture of jest and earnestness that makes it impossible for a third person to know definitely which is which – unless the third person knows it by himself" (CUP 69). Nonetheless, Climacus himself admittedly speaks in earnestness and jest, and allows that even if (or perhaps when) a jest is "explicit," "the remark itself need not therefore be merely jest" (104). Referring to Socrates, he hints that jesting "may also be the highest earnestness, and the speaker, while jesting with someone, may be in the presence of the god" (88); extending this to the preeminently religious, he intriguingly suggests that the "unity of jest and earnestness" is the point at which "all Christian categories are situated" (104).

Climacus explores the depth of his debt of gratitude to Lessing in relation to two "possible theses" by Lessing – theses that affirm subjective existence, indirect communication, and striving or becoming. He then turns to two "actual theses" by Lessing, the subject of the first of which (the "broad ugly ditch") can be "traced more definitely to Lessing" (CUP 93). Here the agreement is more explicit: "Lessing opposes what I would call quantifying oneself into a qualitative decision" (95); the heart of their agreement lies in their common appreciation of the qualitativeness of the shift necessary, for Lessing understands "the incommensurability between a historical truth and an eternal decision" (98). Indeed, for both thinkers "the transition whereby something historical and the relation to this becomes decisive for an eternal happiness is a *metabasis eis allo genos* [shifting from one genus to another]"; clarifying the latter point, Climacus immediately adds that "Lessing even says that if it is not that, then I do not know what Aristotle has understood by it" (98). Attending to the very word Lessing uses (*der Sprung*) and appreciating the very expression Lessing borrows from Aristotle (*metabasis eis allo genos*), Climacus examines what Lessing rightly understood about the leap – that it is an act of isolation and that there is no possible mitigation. He explores Lessing's references to the broadness of the ditch and the earnestness of the leap to make us aware, as per-
haps Lessing himself was, of the all-or-nothing character of the leap. Lessing, Climacus concludes, "perceives very well that the leap, as decisive, is qualitatively dialectical and permits no approximating transition" (103).

Thus, although Lessing obscured his understanding of the leap by employing it within the "illusory distinction between contemporaneity and non-contemporaneity" (CUP 98), and although his relation to the leap is not clear and must always be affirmed with a parenthetical "perhaps," Lessing was (to his credit) aware of it (105). Climacus's initial expression of gratitude to Lessing, who gave hope and joy to the "poor private thinker" in his little garret room (63) is maintained to the end—despite their differences as to the possibility of such a transition, Lessing has been important and encouraging to Climacus (105) in highlighting its radical qualitativeness.

The qualitativeness of the transition, which is seen by Kierkegaard in contrast to the Hegelian category of transition, is also elaborated by him in relation to the orthodox Lutheran tradition: "Here as everywhere we must pay attention to the qualitative leap, that there is no direct transition (for example, as from reading and studying in the bible as an ordinary human book—to taking it as God's word, as Holy Scripture), but everywhere a metabasis eis allo genos, a leap, whereby I burst the whole progression of reason and define a qualitative newness, but a newness allo genos" (JP III 22). Because Climacus, too, emphasizes so strongly his rejection of the quantitative transition that comes cumulatively or automatically, the leap has come to be treated all too often by commentators as if it were an intentional, purposeful, deliberate, self-conscious, or reflective act of will or volition, through which the agent selects from a variety of alternative options. The leap is seen as something we still have to do (to bridge a gap) after we have appreciated the options. The result is a volitionalist reading that interprets the claim that the "the leap is the category of decision" (CUP 99) along the lines of radical discontinuity and even arbitrariness, on the model of a decision to do something when all the alternatives are able to be formulated independently of our attraction to them. In this way, attention to the leap as decision has diverted attention from other ways in which the leap could be seen as decisive. But Climacus's discussion of Lessing tells us something that should qualify such a
volitionalist view. Climacus reveals something more about how "the leap is the category of decision" when he goes on to contrast his view of the qualitative achievement with the brute willpower character of a "Münchausen" type of leap, where "one closes one's eyes, grabs oneself by the neck... and then one stands on the other side" [99]. I suggest that Climacus is here taking pains to preclude a misunderstanding of the leap as serious as that of supposing it to be a cumulative achievement: he is opposing himself to such a caricature of the leap (regardless of where one ends up) as a deliberate act of willpower as much as to the caricature of the leap that becomes easier because one inches oneself up to it gradually.

That willpower caricature is also later corrected when Climacus notes that "The inwardness and the unutterable sighs of prayer are incommensurate with the muscular" [CUP 91]. This is perhaps why Climacus admits there is something "rather well said" in Jacobi's claim that "If you will just step on the elastic spot that catapults me, it will come by itself" [102]: although obviously Jacobi fails to realize that the hard part is to "just step," there is a sense in which "it will come by itself." And this also perhaps explains Climacus's otherwise curious comment that Mendelssohn "has indicated quite correctly the lyrical culmination of thought in the leap" [95].

What then is the character of the leap, if it is not either the Jacobean quantitative (and social) leap or the Münchausen muscular willpower leap? Some suggestions about what is really at stake in the qualitative decision that constitutes the leap can be found in Kierkegaard's two journal references to his "theory of the leap."

The first reference makes clear that the qualitativeness of a leap is correlated with freedom: "Regrettably one finds almost no examination of the ethical in logic, which arouses in my thought a suspicion about logic and serves to support my theory of the leap, which is essentially at home in the realm of freedom" [JP III 20]. In addition to this sine qua non limiting condition of the leap, the second reference suggests something about its positive content; he writes: "This will be an investigation of importance for my theory of the leap and of the difference between a dialectical transition and a transition of pathos. In the final analysis, what I call a transition of pathos Aristotle called an enthymeme" [20]. In what follows I will explore both the requirement of freedom and the suggestion of pathos-filled motivation.
Climacus unambiguously sees the leap to Christian faith as a transition that is "qualitative" and a "break in immanence (CUP 12, 95, 103, 381). What is at stake is that the transition not be an experience of simple continuity, whether as a necessary unfolding or otherwise merely cumulative result. This rejection of continuity is the rejection of rational necessity or compulsion—what is at stake is that the transition be a free act. Indeed, Climacus often uses the phrases freedom and act of will (or expression of will) as appositives, and he contrasts what is done by will with what is done by way of necessity (JC 265; PF 82). But neither qualitative nor free change need be brought about by a brute act of willpower.

To appreciate the range of the activity that might constitute a leap, we need to recall that for Climacus what is constitutive of "subjective acceptance" is that the conclusion not follow "directly of its own accord" (CUP 130). But conclusions that do not follow as a matter of course are seen by Kierkegaard as leaps. He repeatedly refers to the "leap of inference in induction and analogy," claiming that in such cases "the conclusion can be reached only by a LEAP" and "all other conclusions are essentially tautological (IP III 19, 16). An inductive inference is, in a sense, a decision that p is true, but it is as different from a deliberate, self-conscious, act of willpower as it is from an immanental determination or necessary "flopping over." The reorienting shift in perspective which occurs in such leaps of inference can be both qualitative and free, and the fact that all nontautological conclusions can be seen as leaps certainly broadens the notion of decision and willing involved in a leap.

But is this a strong enough notion of change and freedom to illuminate the category of Christian faith? Although Kierkegaard concedes that the change from possibility to actuality is a leap (CUP 342; IP I 109-10), he notes that the leap to Christian categories is like the change from nonbeing to being: "Christianity holds that the central issue is a qualitative transformation, a total character transformation in time (just as qualitative as the change from not being to being which is birth). Anything which is merely a development of what man is originally is not essentially Christian" (IP III 416). The "quality of the divine," which Christianity introduces, goes
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beyond "the idea that the divine is the superlative of the most superlative superlative of the human" (417). Consider what is arguably a more perspicuous example of a qualitative change – namely, a Gestalt shift. Such a model of transition is found at its simplest in the duck/rabbit picture, but it can assume far more complex and subtle forms. Acquaintance with such a model reminds us that qualitative and free transitions can be accounted for without invoking a deliberate, self-reflective act of willpower.

In a situation in which a Gestalt shift occurs, we initially see only one possibility; at some point, after concentrated attention or perhaps coaching, a different figure comes into focus for us. Seeing the latter figure is not the direct or immediate result of any decision or volition, nor is it a choice in any standard sense since at the outset we recognize no other equally real possibilities from which to choose. We can decide to look for the figure we are told is there and cannot yet see, but we cannot decide to see (recognize) it. Recognizing the new and qualitatively different figure is not the direct result of willing or the necessary result of the effort to look for it.

In a Gestalt shift a new quality emerges at a critical threshold; the broader model of critical threshold change, however, can illustrate the directionality and decisiveness of the transition in religious conversion better than the simple Gestalt-shift model (which involves an in-principle symmetry and hence a reversible conclusion, and also lacks any real relation between the two pictures – the duck and the rabbit). A threshold concept refers to a state or condition that is not expressed gradually or by degrees – for example, water gets hotter and hotter by degrees, but it doesn’t boil gradually; it doesn’t boil at all until it reaches a critical threshold. Explosive material gets hotter and hotter, but it doesn’t explode gradually; it doesn’t explode at all until it reaches a critical threshold. The latter example shows the extreme of asymmetry and directionality. The qualitative change at a critical threshold is decisive since any increases after that threshold are superfluous, but such a change is a function of what precedes it; although the change is not just cumulative, it is integrally related to what goes before. Something is registered during the process leading to the shift; in the case of the boiling water or the explosive, heat is registered all the while. Although the transition is a qualitative one – that is, it is an all-or-nothing kind of
movement, rather than a quantitative accumulation by degrees – it is nevertheless anchored in what precedes it. Evidence, like heat, can be registered during a process, even though the qualitative transition occurs only when the critical threshold is reached.

The category of critical threshold thus illustrates not only the directionality of change but also how continuity can be incorporated and accommodated in a model of qualitative shift. The transition is a function of what precedes it, without, however, coming by degrees with increases of evidence or attentive effort. The transition leads to a qualitatively different conclusion (in this sense it might be considered discontinuous with what preceded it), but it cannot occur unless much preliminary material is registered and so depends on what precedes (in this sense it might be considered continuous with it). In this connection it is intriguing to note Kierkegaard’s explicit appreciation of continuity; he writes that “This, precisely, is the irregularity in the paradox, continuity is lacking, or at any rate it has continuity only in reverse, that is, at the beginning it does not manifest itself as continuity” (JP III 399–400). Such continuity, assessable retrospectively, is compatible with qualitative change.

Kierkegaard himself connects the concept of the leap with the idea of such critical thresholds when he speaks of “the leap by which water turns to ice, the leap by which I understand an author, and the leap which is the transition from good to evil” (JP III 17). These examples are cited in reference to the question “Is this leap then entirely homogeneous,” and are admittedly presented in a context of examples that illustrate a “qualitative difference between leaps.” But interestingly the example of a qualitatively different kind of leap is “The paradox. Christ’s entry into the world.” That is, the qualitatively different (nonhomogeneous) leap is the one made by God coming into Time, not by us. On our side a transition may be a leap (that is, a qualitative transition) even if homogeneous in contrast to the leap made by God into the world. Since a critical threshold and a qualitative shift occur even in these homogeneous leaps, I suggest that the category of critical threshold sheds light on the kind of activity Kierkegaard thinks we engage in, the kind of free and qualitative change that occurs, when, for example, “The thought of God emerges with a leap” or when there is “the leap of sin-consciousness” (JP III 19).
The emergence of a qualitatively different awareness at a critical threshold is an example of a qualitative transition that is distinguishable from a quantitative, cumulative process as well as from a momentary, separable, act of will or decision that fills a gap. It is, so to speak, a creative culmination rather than a mechanical accumulation—and it can be an exercise of freedom.

Moreover, the qualitative change that occurs in a Gestalt shift can be free in the sense that it is not compelled (either physically or rationally), yet it is not self-consciously intentional nor does it involve an explicit acknowledgment of a variety of options. Qualitative changes can be free without being arbitrary, since freedom does not require a total absence of constraint, though of course it is incompatible with compulsion. An uncompelled activity might nevertheless be subject to some constraint—a response can be free even while it is a response to something. Climacus's emphatic rejection of the category of necessity can, in principle, be maintained without turning either to intentional or arbitrary decision, and the qualitative and free transition that is at stake for Climacus can, in principle, be achieved in ways that have little to do with the emasculated model of decision as a discrete, direct ("muscular") act of will in contrast to other activities. Thus, where freedom is understood by contrast with a necessary or compelled reaction, the idiom of will can well be used to emphasize the freedom of the acceptance.

It might be thought that Kierkegaard's (and Climacus's) Biblical commitment to faith as obedience (for which blame and reward are appropriate) assumes and/or requires a stronger sense of freedom, involving more discontinuity and effectively more arbitrariness. But freedom, for Kierkegaard, never requires liberum arbitrium (freedom of indifference) [JP II 61–2; see also 74, 68]. We learn from his journals that human freedom is compatible with absolute divine governance and omnipotence and that constraint is compatible with freedom [62–3, 70–2]; we learn that the choice he means to guarantee is not "abstract freedom of choice," "bare and naked," "contentless," achieved through a "perfectly disinterested will" (73, 67, 59). Freedom is always an interested, contextualized freedom. Moreover, he distinguishes between "freedom of choice" and "true freedom" and the latter is compatible with there being, in some meaningful sense, "no choice" (74, 68). This complex understanding of freedom and choice illuminates (and qualifies) any Biblical commitment to faith.
as obedience, and opens the way to a more subtle understanding of
the necessary conditions for a free qualitative transition.

Even if one rejects such a compatibilist view of "true freedom," it
is still possible to guarantee a significant notion of responsibility in
the larger picture of faith by allowing that there are important and
sufficient loci for deliberate (by fiat) choices or straightforward de-
cisions surrounding the transition. There are decisions for which we
can be held responsible, which prepare the way for the transition to
faith or confirm it, which cultivate it or stifle it, even if the actual
transition is not achieved directly by such a choice; there are deci-
sions (recalling the Gestalt-shift model) by which we look patiently
and attentively or close our eyes stubbornly and rebelliously, even
though we cannot decide by fiat to see a new vision.

This discussion of freedom in relation to obedience and responsi-
bility reveals the need to address another kind of question: namely,
whether such a model can do justice to Climacus's insistence on
the risk involved in leaps to faith. We are all familiar with Clima-
cus's repeated refrain, "Without risk, no faith," and his graphic il-
lustrations of such risk in terms of being out over seventy thousand
fathoms of water or in a leaking boat refusing to seek harbor (CUP
204, 210; 140, 204, 225n). Can one "take a risk" other than through
the sort of deliberate volition I have been arguing against; how is
risk involved in the kind of transition or shift I have been suggest-
ing? At the very least, risk remains relevant in that the "picture"
one comes to see in ethico-religious cases is neither objectively cer-
tain nor demonstrable; risk is not eliminated by the Gestalt-shift
model. Admittedly, the simple Gestalt model does not highlight
the way in which one can put oneself at risk by engaging in, or
being engaged by, a process or activity that can lead one to lose
one's bearings entirely; it can obscure the ways in which risk is
taken in the experience of the shift. It is possible, nevertheless, to
imagine more subtle and complex shifts in perspective, and to
imagine that the pictures at issue could be far more engaging and
consequential than the simple model suggests. Climacus writes
that "To be infinitely interested and to ask about an actuality that
is not one's own is to will to believe" (CUP 323). To ask in an infi-
nitely interested way is to dare to be radically changed, to face a
demand, our response to which (whatever it is) will necessarily
change us radically — this is to take a real risk, to put oneself out over seventy thousand fathoms.

One can take a risk, be threatened with loss, even if one does not know exactly what will be lost (or gained). Although one cannot beforehand see precisely what one might come to see, one can know beforehand that there is the chance that all one’s former certainties can be undone. The threat is the absolute demand one might face. To choose to look may be an act of will (though not unconditioned will) requiring courage, even if the seeing — the transition — itself is not achievable by choice. Risk attends the looking as much as the seeing.

III. PATHOS-FILLED QUALITATIVE TRANSITIONS

The notion of a conceptual shift in perspective and the category of critical threshold broaden the possibilities for understanding leaps as qualitative and free yet nonvolitional transitions, but this does not yet tell us what generates the letting-go — it does not yet reveal what Kierkegaard will call the “substance” of the leap. To determine this we need to reconsider Kierkegaard’s appeal to the distinctive category of a “transition of pathos,” found in his second reference to his theory of the leap:

This will be an investigation of importance for my theory of the leap and of the difference between a dialectical transition and a transition of pathos. In the final analysis, what I call a transition of pathos Aristotle called an enthymeme. [JP III 20]

This same contrast between kinds of transition is found elsewhere in the journals, when he contrasts a “dialectical” transition with a “pathos-filled” one and explains that “dialectically nothing can be derived.” We can then infer that a dialectical transition is one that merely unfolds what is already there, with no substantive derivation; by contrast, a “transition of pathos” would be a transition that constitutes genuine derivation. But what this means is illuminated by Kierkegaard’s intriguing and unexpected reference to the Aristotelian category of “enthymeme.”

What do we learn from the claim that a “transition of pathos” is what Aristotle called an “enthymeme”? An Aristotelian “enthym-
meme" is a rhetorical syllogism — what distinguishes such a syllogism from a "dialectical" one is that the premises are derived from the popular (nonexpert) opinion of those in its audience. Working with their pathos in this way such a syllogism is intended to create a practical, concrete, nonnecessary, transition in the audience. Insofar as a "transition of pathos" is like an Aristotelian enthymeme, it would intend a rhetorical transition — that is, concrete and practical change, generated by pathos. Lest the appeal to pathos be misleading, however, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard would have been well aware that Aristotle's enthymeme was technically a syllogism. This is significant insofar as it invokes the idea of structure, however implicit. This suggests that a pathos-filled transition is not an arbitrary or ungrounded transition, that there may be an implicit structure that could be reconstructed. It suggests, too, that his rejection of the Hegelian "System" is not a rejection of structured transitions as such, but rather of transitions that were necessary and premised on abstractions. A passage in Postscript is revealing in this respect:

There are examples enough of a mistaken effort to assert the pathos-filled and earnestness in a ludicrous, superstitious sense as a beatifying universal balm, as if earnestness in itself were a good or something to be taken without prescription; then everything would be good just as long as one is earnest, even if it so happened that one was never earnest in the right place. No, everything has its dialectic — not, please note, a dialectic by which it is made sophisticatedly relative (this is mediation), but by which the absolute becomes distinguishable as the absolute by means of the dialectical. Therefore, it is just as questionable, precisely as questionable, to be pathos-filled and earnest in the wrong place as it is to laugh in the wrong place. (CUP 525)

This passage, too, like the reference to "enthymeme," suggests that the pathos-filled is capable of being critically assessed; it is not simply lovely feeling, totally formless or arbitrary — indeed, "everything has its dialectic." It allows enthymematic structure in the sense of a tension-filled reflective interplay — what is at stake is the rejection of the relativizing synthesis and mediated resolution with which Hegel ends the dialectical interplay.

Kierkegaard connects this "pathos-filled transition" or "transition of pathos" directly with a leap when he writes that "pathos" is "the substance of the leap"; he connects it with a leap indirectly when he refers to the "transition to the infinite, which consists in
pathos.” These journal references suggest that it would be fruitful to reconsider Fragments and Postscript in order to determine the Climacus’s view of the relevance of pathos to the leap.

In Postscript Climacus ties “pathos” (Pathos) together, not unexpectedly, with the category of “passion” (Lidenskab): “Inwardness is subjectivity; subjectivity is essentially passion” (CUP 33) and “pathos is . . . inwardness” (242). This is consistent with Kierkegaard’s tendency to equate pathos and passion: “Let no one misinterpret all my talk about pathos and passion to mean that I intend to sanction every uncircumcised immediacy, every unshaved passion.”

His explicit and lengthy discussions of various expressions of “existential pathos” later in the work explore the role of passion, developing earlier suggestions about both the “how” of subjective appropriation (203, 419, 427, 495, 509, 540, 574, 610–12) and the role of passion as “existence at its highest” (197) and the culmination of subjectivity (230).

Climacus’s claim that the “requirement of existence [is]: to join together” (CUP 531, 535) recalls his earlier discussion of the “difficult” task of maintaining oneself in the “prodigious contradiction” of existence: namely, “to understand extreme opposites together and, existing, to understand oneself in them” (350, 354). That task involves passion because “passion is the very tension in the contradiction” (385). While aesthetic pathos is the “pathos of possibility” in the sense of “disinterestedness,” “ethically the highest pathos is the pathos of interestedness (namely, that I acting, transform my whole existence in relation to the object of interest)” (389–90). When this “interestedness” is expressed in a “pathos-filled relation to an eternal happiness” (443), or more precisely, in relating absolutely to an “absolute telos,” we have a “truly pathos-filled existing person” (409). When a “person’s passion culminates in the pathos-filled relation to an eternal happiness,” we have “plain and simple pathos” (385) – thus, “the religious is the purest pathos” (462).

The pure pathos of the religious consists in the way that “the individual, existing, venture[s] everything” in relation to an eternal happiness as absolute telos (CUP 429). But this is not a plain and simple relation – there is a tension in an individual’s relation to an eternal happiness, to an absolute telos. To repeat, “everything has its dialectic.” Even within immanence, then, there is an element that “creates a resistance that intensifies pathos” (535). That pathos
is "sharpened" in Christianity [581] because Christianity requires, in addition, that one "venture to believe against the understanding [the dialectical]" (429). Presumably, the need for this "risk" of one's "thought" is what constitutes the "additional qualifications" that "work as an incitement that brings passion to its extreme" (385). In Christianity the dialectical distancing is raised to a second order, to the paradoxically dialectical – the incomprehensible yields the ultimate "pathos of separation" (557, 561, 582).

The "pathos-filled" is thus, for Climacus as for Kierkegaard, different from the "dialectical" (the believing against the understanding [CUP 429], the distance within relation [535], and the repulsion from the incomprehensible [611]), but whereas the journal passage presents them as alternatives, Climacus highlights in Postscript the way both should be part of any qualitative transitional movement (385). The pathos of religiousness is sharpened, thus qualitatively changing the character of the religiousness, by the "dialectical" dimensions of the "consciousness of sin" – that is, "both because it cannot be thought and because it is isolating" (585). Thus, Climacus presents a dialectical relation between pathos and dialectic (535, 555); indeed, the dialectical works dialectically to intensify passion (607, 611) – passion plus distance and repulsion generates deeper passion. The category of the pathos-filled as it is revealed in Postscript clearly emphasizes the interestedness of passion as intense appropriation, but what is at stake in a "pathos-filled transition" is further clarified by a backward look at Fragments.

Passion is introduced in Fragments in a rather different way. Climacus there makes the striking claim that faith is a "passion," indeed, a "happy passion" (PF 54, 59, 61). Faith is more than an act done with passion, more than an activity experienced with passion – it is itself a passion, a passion (presumably) analogous in some significant ways to passions like love, hate, or fear. Indeed, Climacus introduces the happy passion that is faith in terms of happy (vs. unhappy) love and in both Fragments and Postscript he repeatedly draws analogies between faith and love.16

The category of passion substantively qualifies what leap or decision means in the case of faith. Climacus writes that "the something in which this [transition] occurs" is the happy passion of faith (PF 59): that is, the transition that is called a leap is said to achieve a passion or, conversely, the onset of the passion is coextensive with
the leap. The attributions of "leap" and "passion" are not directed to discrete or successive moments of the phenomenon of faith – they both refer to the transition.17

At the very least this shared attribution undermines any one-dimensional voluntarist reading of the leap. Popular English usage associates passion or emotion with both feeling and passivity, emphasizing the original sense of the term: namely, "the condition of being acted upon or affected by external agency." The Danish "passion" (Lidenskab) likewise shares a root with the verb "to suffer" (lide). Kierkegaard's appreciation of Aristotle, however, lends more nuance to his use of the term "passion." The leap is not qualified by simple passivity – passion is itself a more complex phenomenon, as is suggested in other dictionary definitions that follow Aristotle's lead in treating passions under the rubric of "the things men do of themselves, the acts of which they themselves are authors"; these definitions posit passion as "an eager outreaching of the mind toward something; an overmastering zeal or enthusiasm for a special object."18 This more active dimension has increasingly come to be emphasized in recent literature on passions and emotions.19 What is distinctive about a passion, like fear or love, is that it is a kind of engagement or interestedness that is not simple feeling, but is constituted in part by interpretation – for example, whatever my physiological reaction (feeling), if I do not take there to be an object of danger, I am not experiencing the passion or emotion of fear. For these reasons, the category of passion does not fit neatly under either the rubric of simple passivity or of simple willpower.20

On the one hand, the mutual correction of leap and passion belies a purely voluntarist account of the transition to faith; on the other hand, both Climacus and Kierkegaard emphasize the freedom and responsibility of faith in ways that belie a purely passive account of the transition. Neither Kierkegaard nor Climacus falls prey to the common mistake of seeing a "divine gift" and human activity as mutually exclusive categories. Although the transition to faith is clearly a gift, it is also something we do – we let go, we embrace the Absolute Paradox, we leap. Climacus tries to locate and characterize that activity by excluding two descriptions: He insists that faith is neither an act of knowledge nor an act of unconditioned willing (PF 62). That leaves the possibility that it is some kind of believing short of knowledge or some kind of conditioned willing, but what-
ever kind of transformation it is, the transition to faith needs to be read in the light of Climacus's explicit claim that it is "a passion," an "infinite interestedness" (CUP 324, 326).

Climacus's appreciation of a tension – rather than dichotomy – between active and passive is illustrated in his bi-polar account of "offense" in the face of the Absolute Paradox: offense is both active and passive (PF 50). This suggests that such a tension, transcending dualisms between active and passive, would be a feature congenial to his account in general. On such a reading, the concept of leap would be in tension with the concept of passion, and the concept of passion itself would embody tension between active and passive.

To paraphrase Kierkegaard, then, we could say that, for Climacus, passion is the substance of the leap, the transition to the infinite consists in passion. The idea that the substance of the leap has more to do with passion or pathos (that is, with decisive interestedness or attraction, with the surrender constituted by captivating yet free engagement) than with discrete volitions or acts of willpower may strike some as counterintuitive. I suggest, however, that the mutual correction implied in the correlative attributions of leap and passion is best understood as an attempt to do justice to an activity that, even at the level of human agency, is more complex than a unilateral choice among alternatives that can be formulated independently of our engagement with them. The surrender of interestedness, of being grasped by something or decisively engaged by it, can account for both the letting-go that constitutes the leap and the passion that also constitutes it. Such interestedness seems precisely what is highlighted in Climacus's claim, noted earlier, that "To be infinitely interested and to ask about an actuality that is not one's own is to will to believe and expresses the paradoxical relation to the paradox." Climacus's understanding of the role of passion or pathos thus supports the earlier conclusion that the qualitative transition of the leap need not be seen as the result of a direct and deliberate volition.

Climacus's discussion of the difference between misfortune and suffering also reveals something about the kind of transition at work in overcoming the "qualitative dialectic [which] separates the spheres" (CUP 388). The "pathos-filled actuality of suffering," he insists, is not present as long as the person "understands the suffering as accidental" (as "misfortune") – that is, the "pathos-filled actuality of suffering" consists in understanding suffering as "essential" (445).
As long as the suffering is seen as accidental and therefore "alien," it is expected to end, and Climacus explains that when it does not end, one "despairs and the transition to another understanding of misfortune is made possible, that is, to comprehending suffering, an understanding that does not merely comprehend this or that misfortune but essentially comprehends suffering" (434). The transition thus consists in a new understanding. Indeed, Climacus's later contrast between "feeling" misfortune and "comprehending" it (443) makes it clear that the comprehension or understanding at issue is a case of seeing-as (seeing misfortune as-alien or as-essential). The qualitative transition is a shift in perspective, a new way of seeing, and such shifts, as I suggested earlier in relation to Gestalt shifts, need not be the result of direct and deliberate volition.

As one would expect, Climacus's understanding of decision is nuanced by its relation to passion or pathos — "essential" decisions are made differently from decisions to buy quarts of milk rather than pints. "All decision," he writes, and then specifies it more precisely, "all essential decision, is rooted in subjectivity" (CUP 33). Conversely, wanting "to evade some of the pain and crisis of decision" is wanting "to make the issue somewhat objective" (129). What is at stake is pathos — namely, that the reorientation be an engaged one. Moreover, "decision is designed specifically to put an end to that perpetual prattle about 'to a certain degree'" — that is, decision is equated with "what is decisive" (221). What is at stake is pathos — namely, that the reorientation be a decisive one.

Kierkegaard and Climacus distance the category of decision from that of deliberate volition in a variety of other ways as well. For example, Kierkegaard does so when he suggests that the majority of people, who "live without any real consciousness penetrating their lives" (who live "in unclarity") possibly "never come in passionate concentration to the decision whether they should cling expectantly to this possibility or give it up" (JP III 428). "Coming in passionate concentration to a decision" sounds like a crystallizing activity of attending in which we come to see that we have been decisively reoriented — passionate attention reveals that we are decided, that we already clinging. This same suggestion of decision as a crystallizing gathering together is found in the equation implied in Climacus's reference to "the moment of resignation, of collecting oneself, of choice" (CUP 400). Likewise, when Kierkegaard writes...
that "A pathos-filled transition can be achieved by every one if he wills it, because the transition to the infinite, which consists in pathos, takes only courage," he highlights the possibility of a richer sense of willing than that normally thought to be involved in paradigmatic selections among options. A transition that "consists in pathos" or whose "substance" is pathos can take courage, in the way that a surrender or letting-go can take courage – without having to be thought of as a discrete act of brute willpower.

IV. PARADOX AND NONVOLITIONAL QUALITATIVE TRANSITIONS

An additional way in which passion or pathos enriches the notion of transition is found in Climacus's description of passion as "the highest pitch of subjectivity," which occurs when one is "closest to being in two places at the same time" (CUP 199). In this way, he allows the category of a pathos-filled transition to point to a transition in which a paradoxical tension is appreciated and maintained.

Paradox may not seem to be what is at issue when Kierkegaard talks about analogy and induction as paradigmatic leaps (because they are nontautological), or when he recognizes the Aristotelian enthymeme as a leap (which is not only nontautological, but also has the added dimension of persuasive argument). These generic "inferences," however, are a kind of revisioning for which involvement is a condition and in which the conclusion constitutes a qualitative shift. One could argue that a paradoxical tension is involved in any inference, or revisioning, that is not logically necessary. Indeed, Kierkegaard suggests that this is what is at stake in calling the object of our embrace a paradox: "Faith therefore cannot be proved, demonstrated, comprehended, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox."21

When Climacus claims that "paradox and passion fit each other perfectly" (CUP 230) and that "passion is the very tension in the contradiction" (385) he implies that the engagement and interestedness that constitute passion can also do justice to the role of paradox in religious faith. The question remains whether such an account of the leap can do justice to the obviously different category of what Climacus calls the "Absolute Paradox." Paradox as such is
present even in the Socratic model of faith, but paradox "becomes even more terrible" and "manifests itself as the absolute" in the double paradox in which the message of "absolute difference" is revealed in the form of likeness [i.e., takes human form] (PF 47, chap. III passim). In other words, the question remains whether such an account of the leap can do justice to the radicalness of the difference between Socratic immanent religiousness (which Climacus later calls "Religiousness A") and the religion of revelation, faith in an "eminent sense," specifically Christian religiousness (which Climacus calls "Religiousness B") (CUP 555–6).

To answer this question we need first to consider the relation between paradox and volitionalism. The notion that we can respond appreciatively to paradox only by an act of brute and heroic willpower is based in the misunderstanding that strips the relevant paradox of all content. Given such an empty notion of mere paradoxicalness, there is little alternative to a view of acceptance through simple brute force. But it is not paradoxicalness as such that we embrace—it is a paradoxical self-understanding. In the specifically Christian realm, accepting the Paradox is not equivalent to accepting a set of teachings or propositions; nevertheless, the Teacher, who is embraced, embodies a paradoxical message. It is the message of absolute likeness and absolute unlikeness; this paradoxical self-understanding constitutes the "leap of sin-consciousness" (JP III 19). Granted, it is an understanding initiated from outside the self, not an immanent intellectualism, but embracing the Paradox is, nevertheless, embracing a new self-understanding and a concomitant new understanding of the world. The uniting of contradictories in the Teacher is echoed back in a new and paradoxical self-understanding, new and paradoxical because informed by the qualitatively different category of "sin." That Paradox has at least the content embodied in "the consciousness of sin" (CUP 583–5).

Embracing paradox, then, even the Absolute Paradox, need not entail a muscular "willpower" model of willing; willing can be understood more along the lines of approving affirmation than of brute creation ex nihilo.

The question remains whether there is any difference between the transition to Religiousness A and Religiousness B that precludes understanding the pathos-filled mechanism of transition as formally similar, or whether anything about the dialectical nature of
Religiousness B requires the operation of a different kind of (in William James's term) "superadded will force." Climacus claims that "People have forgotten the qualitative dialectic and have wanted to form comparatively and quantitatively a direct transition from culture to Christianity" (CUP 606). It is important to note, however, that this is the culmination of a series of references to the notion of qualitative dialectic. The qualitative dialectic does not only refer to the "abyss" preceding Christianity – there is a qualitative dialectic even within immanence (572). Early in the discussion of existential pathos he refers to "the qualitative dialectic that separates the spheres" (388), and the reference is repeated often (399, 436, 517, 562). This suggests that there are qualitative shifts from each sphere to the next, whether they take place within immanence or are from immanence to an understanding decisively initiated from outside. And this is what one would expect, given Climacus's appreciative agreement with Lessing that there is no more or less to a leap. All leaps are qualitative shifts, and formally all qualitative transitions are similar.

This is congruent with a distinction between two notions of dialectic that have been operating in Climacus's account: (a) "dialectic" as referring to reflection and hence to what in Christianity is against the understanding, and (b) "dialectic" as referring to the tension-filled interplay between two contrasting kinds of categories. A "qualitative dialectic" between spheres can exist before the occurrence of the "dialectical" dimension peculiar to Religiousness B. Kierkegaard makes this clear in a journal entry from 1842-3 in which he writes: "The relation between esthetics and ethics – the transition – pathos-filled, not dialectical – there a qualitatively different dialectic begins" (IP I 371). The transition from the aesthetic to the ethical and from the ethical to Religiousness A are qualitative shifts of perspective, qualitatively new and transforming realizations, and so appropriately seen as leaps.

Climacus speaks of the "break," the "irruption of inwardness," through which religiousness is achieved in terms of attention and vision: "only in the inwardness of self-activity does he become aware and capable of seeing God"; "within the individual human being there is a possibility . . . that in inwardness is awakened to a God-relationship, and then it is possible to see God everywhere" (CUP 243, 246). But he also describes the Christian thought-project...
Faith and the Kierkegaardian leap

in terms of vision: He speaks of the “condition” in terms of the ability to “envision God,” and describes how “the god gave the follower the condition to see it and opened for him the eyes of faith,” for “without the condition he would have seen nothing” (PF 63, 65). Climacus could plausibly see both transitions as formally similar—the transition to Christian faith could be viewed as a formally similar shift in perspective, though admittedly what is seen (the God in Time and concomitantly, the sinful self) might be different.

It is crucial to stress that this formal similarity among leaps does not assimilate Religiousness B to Religiousness A. What never gets forgotten is that the condition for Religiousness B needs to be given—it is not (no longer?) immanent. Repeatedly stressing that crucial proviso, Climacus nonetheless reminds us that “once the condition is given, that which was valid for the Socratic is again valid” (PF 63). I take this to mean that once the condition is given, it is possible to view the transition as formally similar. This is all that is necessary to support the case against a volitionalist reading of the leap to faith.

A final word about the mechanism of the pathos-filled leap should be added, although it cannot be developed here at any length. Any understanding of what it is to leap requires attention to Climacus’s understanding of the relation between imagination and pathos. He writes in Postscript that “Existence itself, existing, is a striving and is just as pathos-filled as it is comic: pathos-filled because the striving is infinite, that is, directed toward the infinite, is a process of infinitizing, which is the highest pathos” (CUP 92). Infinitizing is the prerogative of the imagination—only the imagination can extend something infinitely. Moreover, his description of existence involves holding elements in tension, maintaining the tension without resolving it (350); the same is true of his descriptions of passion (199, 311) and paradox. It has been claimed that this is the distinctive function of imagination, as well as that imagination transcends the dichotomy between active and passive. Climacus himself gives imagination a role in passion when he explains that “In passion, the existing subject is infinitized in the eternity of imagination and yet is also most definitely himself” (197). The centrality of both the categories of passion and paradox to Climacus’s account supports the concomitant centrality of imagination, and there is much that Climacus affirms that expresses a significant ap-
preciation of the centrality of imagination to subjectivity. Although, admittedly, we find severe denunciations of its subversive and dissipating power, the centrality of imagination is expressed explicitly in Climacus’s description of “all elements” of existence, where imagination ranks with thinking and feeling as equal and indispensable (and where, incidentally, “all elements” are accounted for without bringing in the category of “will”) (346-8).

The preceding considerations and reminders open the way to a reconceptualization of the Climacan leap in which it can be understood by way of an alternative to volitionalism—an alternative that appreciates the idiom of will as rational appetitus and highlights the possibility that decisive imaginative attraction and captivation can constitute, rather than merely prepare the way for or accompany, qualitative transitions. My hope is that this will make it easier for commentators to explore more than a one-dimensional account of the leap, as well as support and further the contribution of those who have recognized in Climacus’s texts a more nuanced account.

NOTES


2 Its status is peculiar: On the one hand, the introduction to Postscript sees the promise of a sequel already fulfilled in Fragments (10), and thus fulfillable in a “postscript” (11), yet on the other hand, it claims both that “In essence there is no sequel” and that “in another sense, the sequel could become endless” (11).

3 The most plausible case for this has been made by Ronald M. Green, most fully in his recent Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

4 It is arguable that Kant provides the proximate antecedents of the notion of the leap—for example, in works with which Kierkegaard was familiar, Kant claims that it is a “voluntary decision of our judgment to assume the existence” of God, and he uses such terms as der Sprung, saltus, salto mortale, and metabasis eis allo genos. What Kant meant by the former claim, however, is far from clear, and Kant’s own possible debt to Lessing concerning the latter point must be acknowledged. Moreover, an appreciation of Kant’s radical divergence from Climacus with respect to the relation between historical knowledge and faith (especially as we find it in Kant’s Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone) must significantly qualify the importance of Kant as a source.
Green documents Kierkegaard's familiarity (*Kierkegaard and Kant*, pp. 390–408 passim; esp. pp. 400–2, 403–5); he does not, however, note Climacus's footnote reference to the "postulate of God" (*CUP* 200n), which supports his case.

Michelle Stott argues that Kierkegaard used an idealized version of the historical Lessing (who was in fact less self-conscious or intentional in his lack of followers) as a pseudonym for expressing a position which focused on "the actual embodiment of the style itself" (*Behind the Mask: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymic Treatment of Lessing in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1993], pp. 93–4, 97, and 69). She concludes that Lessing was chosen by Kierkegaard "precisely because he did wear a mask — because the already existing ambiguity surrounding the historical Lessing was exactly suited to the Kierkegaardian needs" (96).

"Lessing's irony is superbly apparent" (*CUP* 102); Climacus himself admits to jest (64) while calling attention to the inexhaustibleness of Lessing's jesting (103–4).

Even in these cases there is ambiguity; see *CUP* 65.

An alternative interpretation found in commentary on Kierkegaard is that the transition is a gift of grace, a miracle that happens to us, with no describable human activity at issue (e.g., David Wisdo, "Kierkegaard on Belief, Faith and Explanation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21 [1987]: 95–114).


In *Transforming Vision*, pp. 76–81, I suggest that the model of metaphorical reconceptualization complements and corrects the Gestalt-shift model.

"This transition is manifestly a pathos-filled transition, not dialectical, for dialectically nothing can be derived. To me this is important" (*JP* III 15).

In contrast to a "dialectical" or "apodictic" syllogism.

The importance of implicit structure lies in the fact that retrospective justification might then account for the "continuity in reverse" mentioned earlier; indeed, Climacus seems to allow some retrospective justification of religious conclusions (*PF* 40–2).

This passage trades on the double use of "dialectic" to which I refer on p. 230: namely, (1) as the dynamic interplay between categories and (2) as referring simply to reflection or understanding.

*JP* III 427. The category of "passion, is, however, broader than that of
“pathos” — e.g., Climacus refers to “earthly passion” that inhibits subjectivity (CUP 312n); see also the editor’s note in JP III 851.

16 Although Climacus says in Postscript that “To love is plain and simple pathos” (385), the emphasis there is on passion or pathos as the mode of appropriation (427).

17 In another sense they could also refer to the sustained struggle through time.


19 For example, work by Robert C. Roberts and by Robert Solomon.

20 More detail on this is found in my Transforming Vision.

IP III 399. Note, too, that what it means to say it is not “comprehended” is suggested in Kierkegaard’s claim that “Christianity entered the world not to be understood but to be existed in. This cannot be expressed more strongly than by the fact that Christianity itself proclaims itself to be a paradox” (III 404).

21 There is every indication that Climacus agrees with Kierkegaard’s claim about both content and condition: namely, that “the formal condition of being able to receive the content of Christianity” is “unconditioned passion, the passion of the unconditioned” (IP III 430); this notion of “content” does not, however, mean that we can explain or understand the paradox.


23 The implication on pp. 295 and 342 of Postscript is that the transition to the ethical as well as to the religious is a “leap,” formally similar in being a “transition from possibility to actuality,” which in concrete existence is “a halt, a leap,” and a “break.”

24 Kierkegaard writes in Journals and Papers that “The transition from eu-daemonism to the concept of duty is a leap” (III 19); §2345 (p. 17) shows an apparent parallel between the transition from aesthetics to ethics and that between ethics and religiousness. In I §819 (p. 374) he suggests that “It would probably be one of the most interesting tasks to present a poet who was developed to such a degree and had come along so far that he himself really began to understand that he should make a metabasis eis allo genos, that is, go over into the ethical, the heroic.”

9 Arminian edification: Kierkegaard on grace and free will

Some questions are perennial, forever reemerging in textbooks when the debate is highly abstract but occasionally changing history when someone acts dramatically on conviction. Think of Socrates asking "What can we know?" and being willing to drink the hemlock, or of Jesus asking "Who should we love?" and being willing to stretch his body on a cross. A third enduring question—"Are we meaningfully free?"—is the chief focus of this essay. I do not expect to settle the ancient debate about freedom of the will, but I do hope to situate it theologically by critically examining Søren Kierkegaard's views in light of some significant precursors. Kierkegaard worries about how to balance the contingency and fallibility of human deliberation and choice with the indispensability and reliability of divine providence, but he does not treat these matters abstractly or in isolation. He is too Socratic for mere abstraction about human freedom; indeed, his fully Christian understanding is highly dramatic (even paradoxical) at times, in an effort to be true to lived complexity.

Kierkegaard often insists on radical individual responsibility before God, by suggesting, for example, that there can be little or no spiritual help or harm between human beings (WL 308). Yet his pseudonym Johannes Climacus tells us that God "gives the learner not only the Truth, but also the condition for understanding it," and that God is thus "Teacher, Saviour, and Redeemer" (PF 18, 21). The question is old and familiar: How can one be personally accountable for faith if God does it all? How, in particular, can it be that "[t]he error of the one doubting [Tvivlende] and of the one despairing [Fortvivlende] does not lie in cognition . . . [but] in the will?" (EUD
Does not the Teacher/Saviour/Redeemer heal, or even directly move, the will of the believer?

The tension here is not just between pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous works. In “The Expectancy of Eternal Salvation,” Kierkegaard writes under his own name:

. . . we are all unprofitable servants, and even our good deeds are nothing but human fabrications, fragile and very ambiguous, but every person has heaven's salvation only by the grace and mercy of God, and this is equally close to every human being in the sense that it is a matter between God and him. \[EUD 271\]

In his Journals and Papers, however, Kierkegaard allows famously:

In order to constrain subjectivity, we are quite properly taught that no one is saved by works, but by grace - and corresponding to that - by faith. Fine.

But am I therefore unable to do something myself with regard to becoming a believer? Either we must answer this with an unconditional "no," and then we have fatalistic election by grace, or we must make a little concession. The point is this - subjectivity is always under suspicion, and when it is established that we are saved by faith, there is immediately the suspicion that too much has been conceded here. So an addition is made: But no one can give himself faith; it is a gift of God I must pray for.

Fine, but then I myself can pray, or must we go farther and say: No, praying (consequently praying for faith) is a gift of God which no man can give to himself; it must be given to him. And what then? Then to pray aright must again be given to me so that I may rightly pray for faith, etc.

There are many, many envelopes - but there must still be one point or another where there is a halt at subjectivity. Making the scale so large, so difficult, can be commendable as a majestic expression for God's infinity, but subjectivity cannot be excluded, unless we want to have fatalism. \[JP IV 352\]

It would seem that human beings are absolutely dependent upon and yet also equally accountable to God. Does Kierkegaard simply contradict himself here?

Some definitions are in order before answering this question. Call “Pelagianism” the doctrine that we can have faith and earn salvation by means of our own intrinsic resources; human nature is perfectible, and no special grace is required. Call “semi-Pelagianism,” in contrast, the doctrine that we need God's grace to be fully saved but must (and can) take the first step in God's direction; we freely make the leap, so to speak, but God must then catch us and carry us aloft. “Arminianism,” in opposition to both Pelagianism and
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semi-Pelagianism, holds that, on our own, we can make no move whatsoever toward God. God must turn us and draw us. The Arminian addendum, however, is that we can say “Yes” or “No.” We cannot independently reach for the gift of salvation, much less grasp it as a right, but we can either accept or refuse it. There is no merit in the acceptance, for we are merely letting God heal our abject sinfulness; but there is enough human freedom to say “Yes” or “No” to the physician.

Despite the apparent contradiction, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms offer a consistent, and consistently Arminian, account of grace and freedom. Kierkegaard does flirt with the language of semi-Pelagianism, as when he writes:

The matter is quite simple. In order to have faith, there must first be existence, an existential qualification.

This is what I am never sufficiently able to emphasize – that to have faith, before there can be any question about having faith, there must be the situation. And this situation must be brought about by an existential step on the part of the individual. \(\text{JP II 20}\)

But the “existential step” in question is actually a patient running in place, a “dying to the world” that surrenders all hope of earthly happiness. Such a death might be called a “precondition” for the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, but only in the limited sense that self-surrender opens one to receive divine gifts.3 “From the God himself everyone receives the condition who by virtue of the condition becomes the disciple,” as Climacus puts it, and one can only greet this condition, the Incarnation, with “offense” or “happy passion” \(\text{PF 126, 67}\). The human role with respect to God is thus voluntary but exclusively receptive: “Man’s highest achievement is to let God be able to help him” \(\text{JP I 22}\). We are fated neither to salvation nor damnation, but neither do we take an active step toward God on our own. (Accepting temporal death is not synonymous with finding, or even wanting, eternal life.) It is quite clear that self-righteousness and self-sufficiency are ruled out. Grace as unmerited favor is indispensable for justification before God, and only an undialectical reading can make Kierkegaard seem an advocate of the solitary “autonomy” defended by Kant and radicalized by Sartre.4

In calling Kierkegaard “Arminian,” I do not mean to imply that
he read or was directly influenced by Jacob (also known as James) Arminius, though he could hardly have been altogether ignorant of him. My point is a logical one about the content of their work and a psychological one about their habits of heart and mind, not a historical one about causal connections.

Born at Oudewater, Holland, in 1560 and ordained a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in Amsterdam in 1588, Arminius challenged strict Calvinist conceptions of predestination. He preached (and later lectured) that God's offer of salvation was universal and that human beings were free to accept or reject that offer. If God necessitates all human action, he argued, then God is the author of moral evil. An impious conclusion to say the least. The key point of similarity between Arminius and Kierkegaard is the kenotic nature of divine grace, its self-emptying quality: True omnipotence and omnibenevolence generate freedom in creatures, not necessity or servile dependency.

A number of themes characterize Arminianism, but I want to focus on three related ones that are central to Kierkegaard's corpus: (1) a commitment to universal access to the highest things, over against belief in double predestination or Christ's limited atonement for the elect; (2) a commitment to equal responsibility before the highest things, over against strong versions of sacerdotalism or spiritual collaboration; and (3) a commitment to human freedom, freedom of choice, and what might be called "true" freedom, over against fatalistic doctrines of irresistible grace or an overly rationalized account of moral and religious commitment. I will treat each of these themes in turn. With respect to the third theme in particular, Saint Augustine's views on reason, will, and liberty (liberum arbitrium and libertas) will provide a useful contrast to Kierkegaard's own.

To anticipate, it is clear that Kierkegaard rejects all narrow doctrines of election and any metaphysical account that would claim compatibility between determinism and freedom of the will. Such a rejection is implicit throughout Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses. What is not so clear is whether this consistent position is plausible, so I will include a critical look at his views on human freedom and vulnerability, especially the limits on help and harm. Kierkegaard is too sanguine, I think, about human invulnerability to communal harm. When amended, however, his defense of freedom can ac-
knowledge profound human vulnerability without undermining individual accountability.

I. UNIVERSALITY OF ACCESS

Kierkegaard’s position on the universality of access is unambiguous. “I cannot abandon the thought that every man, however simple he is, however much he may suffer, can nevertheless grasp the highest, namely religion. I cannot forget that. If that is not so, then Christianity is really nonsense.” I will not dwell on this claim but simply note that the Bible itself seems to be of two minds on who and how many may be saved. Undeniably, there are Scriptural passages that speak of “the elect,” “vessels of wrath,” and so forth, so as to imply that Christ did not die for all and hence does not offer salvation to all. But there are also passages that imply universal salvation (see, for example, John 3:16; Rom. 5:18; I Tim. 2:1–6; Col. 1:14–20 and 27:28; and Ps. 145:8–9). Although this vetust dispute cannot be settled here, it is not implausible to see the authors of the latter passages struggling to rise above archaic tribal notions of a “chosen people,” laboring to see chosenness as a special vocation, a calling to be an instrument of God’s gracious offer of salvation to “all nations,” rather than drawing invidious contrasts between “Us the Elect” and “Them the Eternally Lost or Reprobate.”

It is of paramount import, in any event, to distinguish between the extent of God’s offer of salvation and the extent of humanity’s acceptance of it. One might judge the empowering offer to be global but the actual acceptance to be limited. Perhaps some creatures will freely but perversely reject God’s love for all eternity; to be demonic is precisely “to pray to be free from being saved” (JP II 77). Kierkegaard takes the human potential for faith to be general: “the only thing and the greatest – something the greatest and the lowliest of men are capable of doing for God – is to give oneself completely” (EUD 369). And again: “The eternal in speaking about the highest assumes calmly that every man can do it, and merely asks, therefore, whether or not he has done it” (WL 89).

A key question remains, however, even for universalists like Kierkegaard. Does a commitment to equal access to the highest imply that each person, no matter his or her circumstance, will find it equally difficult to have faith, hope, and love? The fact that faith is
a "gift of God" does not settle the issue, since one’s acceptance of the gift may be harder or easier depending on one’s personal history. Johannes Climacus asks “is it not . . . worthy of the God to make his covenant with men equally difficult for every human being in every time and place . . . equally difficult but also equally easy, since the God grants the condition?” (PF 134). But if Kierkegaard pushes his spiritual egalitarianism so far as to deny any personal variability in the task of accepting the covenant, that egalitarianism ceases to be credible.

Surely how one is treated, especially in the formative years, influences how readily one can, for instance, give and receive love. Having been neglected or abused as a child may leave one scarred for life, unable to trust others (including God) or able to do so only with great difficulty; whereas having a caring family that nurtures and supports one can lay a foundation for future moral and religious thriving. A loving household does not guarantee a loving child, to be sure, but it helps; even as a vicious family does not guarantee a sociopathic child, but it hurts. Peter Geach has maintained that, with God’s grace, all finite persons have a genuine chance at Glory, though not an identical chance.\(^\text{10}\) It is harder for some than for others to accept the offer of salvation but human nature as such carries with it the potential for saying “Yes” to grace. Geach’s position is a happy alternative to Climacus’s literal equality of access: It preserves universality without implausibly insisting on identity. Out of the hand of God, all creatures made in the image of God possess the wherewithal for growing into faith, hope, and love, even if lived history subsequently thwarts this “genuine chance.” This brings us to our second theme.

II. EQUALITY OF RESPONSIBILITY

In “One Who Prays Aright,” Kierkegaard avers that “no human being can give an eternal resolution to another or take it from him; one human being cannot be indebted to another” (EUD 382); in Philosophical Fragments, Climacus concludes that “one human being, in so far as he is a believer, owes nothing to another but everything to the God” (PF 127). It is tempting to think that, in matters of faith, we are free and independent (even invulnerable) with respect to other humans, yet utterly bound and dependent (even predestined)
with respect to Almighty God. This picture is powerful, but, according to Kierkegaard, it must not devolve into a doctrine of irresistible grace, for "we must make a little concession. . . . [Human] subjectivity cannot be excluded, unless we want to have fatalism" and thus God be responsible for evil. As Kierkegaard puts it elsewhere, the idea of predestination is "a thoroughgoing abortion" that explains nothing (JP II 56).

Faith, hope, and love, for Kierkegaard, are akin to passive potentials in finite individuals. They may not be intrinsic to human nature as such, but they are obtainable by human nature aided by grace; and after the Fall they are certainly warped by sin. Yet even as divine gifts, they must be accepted and built up; faith, hope, and love cannot be necessitated — not even by God. Humans are to assume that the potential for love of God and neighbor is present in all human beings; "true greatness is equally accessible to all," as Johannes de silentio says in Fear and Trembling (FT 81). Moreover, God is owed "everything" in that God freely offers the prospective lover a necessary condition for healing his now-warped potential and coming into relation with God. The prospective lover/believer has done nothing to merit this salvation — all are equally undeserving before God's redemptive Word — but the individual remains free to accept or reject the divine invitation. One is accountable for saying either "Yes" or "No" to the grace extended to all. If this is not so, as Jacob Arminius so clearly saw, then God is responsible for evil. God does evil that "good" might come; indeed, God is the sole author of sin because He is the sole agent in history. As Kierkegaard notes in his journals, better to say "I will not" in discussing one's disobedience to God than "I cannot" (JP II 74–5).

For Kierkegaard, then, God's grace is indispensable but not irresistible, a necessary but not a sufficient condition, for human faith, hope, and love. Kierkegaard grants, of course, that others can slay the body, yet in Works of Love he insists that spiritual death is always "suicide," a rushing of one's own defenses (WL 308). Are we, in fact, as invulnerable to human harm and as inaccessible to human help as Kierkegaard claims? There are four possible permutations; others can give us:

1. both spiritual help and spiritual harm
2. spiritual help but not spiritual harm
Kierkegaard often seems to opt for (4), such that in ethico-religious matters we owe no human being anything at all, positively or negatively (see, e.g., EUD 382). We are vulnerable to others physically, but spiritually we are radically independent. Before God, it seems, the spirit can be kept intact even in the worst of physical or psychological conditions:

Consider, for example, the woman with hemorrhages (Mt. 9:20 ff). . . . The secret she kept to herself; it was the secret of faith which saved her both for time and for eternity. This secret you can have for yourself also when you forthrightly profess the faith, and when you lie weak on your sick-bed and cannot move a limb, and when you cannot even move your tongue, you can still have this secret within you. (WL 44)

This is an exceptionally strong view. It makes no explicit mention of external help or harm, but it suggests an amazing durability for “the secret of faith.” A view in which all forms of spiritual help and harm are ruled out, however, would undermine the point of Kierkegaard’s authorship itself, both the direct and indirect communication. From the Point of View of My Work as an Author makes it clear that Kierkegaard thought others can help us remove illusions. His own edifying discourses manifestly aim at upbuilding others and thereby “helping” them in some sense, even if only to convince them of their sinfulness and to throw them back on the mercy of God. Indeed, Kierkegaard writes in Works of Love that “to help another human being to love God is to love another man; to be helped by another human being to love God is to be loved” (WL 113; emphasis original). But the point is to give credit where credit is due, that is, to God. As he puts it in “Every Good Gift,” “the only good and perfect gift a human being can give is love, and all human beings in all ages have confessed that love has its home in heaven and comes down from above” (EUD 157).

To sustain and elaborate Kierkegaard’s stance, we must draw at least three distinctions. First, we must distinguish what obtains once one has achieved the threshold of ethico-religious agency from what obtains in one’s spiritual nonage. The question of whether human beings can be classed according to spiritual maturity (e.g., strong/weak, agent/nonagent) is key to an analysis of options (1)
through (4) above. Abuses of freedom, including the perversion or loss of freedom, may always be by one's own hand, but the failure ever to acquire freedom (where the spirit is "dreaming," to borrow a phrase from *The Concept of Anxiety* [CA 41]) may be due to outside interference. Free agents, as selves properly so-called, have equal access to the "highest," according to Kierkegaard ([JP I 37]; and, in a spiritual sense, selves are relatively invulnerable. But some, perhaps those who have never heard of the Teacher or the Word, are deprived of the occasion for faith and thus fail to achieve true self-consciousness. In some, the threshold of responsible spirit is not reached, an all or nothing affair, and freedom may indeed be permanently thwarted. Can't we make "the weak" stumble, as Saint Paul says? Consider again a child who is so sexually abused by her parents that she can never trust another human being, that she even becomes psychotic and sociopathic. Or think of Genie, the so-called wild child, who was chained to a potty-seat for months at a time by her parents and so seldom spoken to that she never learned to speak? Aren't these examples of profound, even irremediable, spiritual harm? I fear so.

Second, we must distinguish between spiritual help or harm *simpliciter* and what might be called *decisive* spiritual help or harm. Decisive spiritual help would be virtue given to another even unto eternal salvation. Not just some minor character flaw is mitigated; the highest good is facilitated in, if not bequeathed to, someone. In "The Expectancy of Faith," however, Kierkegaard rules out such momentous assistance between human beings: "One person can do much for another, but he cannot give him faith" (*EUD* 12). Decisive spiritual harm, in turn, would be injury even unto permanent damnation. This too Kierkegaard denies.

Third, we must distinguish between helping and harming *partially or merely complicitously*, and helping and harming *decisively*. The accent here is on the adverb "decisively," *how* help is given, rather than the adjective "decisive," *what* help is given. To help another spirit decisively is to necessitate his virtue or some other moral excellence without his effort or acquiescence. In the extreme, this would amount to necessitating the salvation of another with or without her free will or consent. Call this decisive spiritual help decisively given. To harm another spirit decisively would be to necessitate vice or some other moral corruption in another with or
without her free will or consent. At the abominable extreme – decisive spiritual harm decisively given – this would entail ineluctably damning someone without antecedent fault of his or her own. Kierkegaard clearly holds that, between human beings, there can be neither decisive help nor decisive harm, in the spiritual sense, and no form of help or harm can be decisively given. There are no demonic persons or dilemmatic circumstances that can compel vice, for example, from without; faith, hope, and love are always viable options, however difficult. Good Arminian that he is, however, Kierkegaard holds a similar position with respect to divine-human relations. Freedom is internal to all virtue and vice, and cannot be short-circuited, even by God, if responsible ethico-religious agency is to be retained. "The self is freedom" (SUD 29).

Saint Augustine and Kierkegaard are discussed at some length in the next section, but an anticipatory summary of their positions on grace and free will is helpful here. Augustine developed his over time, as he combatted different heresies. But the mature anti-Pelagian Augustine apparently embraced both decisive spiritual help decisively given by God to human beings and decisive spiritual harm decisively given by Adam (and Eve) to their descendants. Augustine endorsed, that is, (a) irresistible grace moving the wills of the elect, leaving them, in heaven, non posse peccare and (b) original sin bequeathed biologically by Adam to all future generations, leaving them, in themselves, non posse non peccare.14 Kierkegaard will have none of this. God can awaken dread in innocents – as when Adam and Eve, naked in the Garden, are thrown into anxiety by God’s prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge – but neither God nor humanity can necessitate vice, or virtue (CA 44). As the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis says: “sin presupposes itself, obviously not before it is posited [which is predestination], but in that it is posited” (CA 62). All fall freely, as did Adam; we are radically individually responsible.

What are we to make of Kierkegaard’s position, normatively? What are we to think of the scenario described above where another’s agency is deeply wounded, if not forever blocked, through no fault of his own? Child abuse cases do come to mind, as does the “unmaking of humanity” that Elaine Scarry associates with the torture of adults.15 Even this would not be the necessitation of vice in another, since vice presupposes moral responsibility, but it may be
the ineluctable deprivation of virtue. "Freedom presupposes itself" (*CA* II:112), so no one can necessitate the first free act or any subsequent free act—though freedom may be nurtured somewhat or even prompted, as by God’s dreadful commandment in the Garden. But this does not preclude someone’s necessitating the absence of the first free act. We can suspend others in an impersonal limbo, if you will, by victimizing them into moral oblivion. Do we call this decisive harm and/or harm decisively given? It is not technically decisive harm since nonagents are presumably not punished or condemned to hell; it may not even be moral harm decisively given since, again, what is compelled is not vice but the absence of virtue. But it is certainly profound harm, more profound than Kierkegaard usually admits. Another’s personhood has been deeply frustrated, and the failure to address this possibility is a notable limitation of Kierkegaard’s authorship.

Still, nothing Kierkegaard says need prevent him from endorsing the following four summary points:

1. Someone may provide the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for profound (but not decisive) spiritual harm to pre-moral, emergent selves (*vide* child abuse, etc.).
2. No one, other than the agents themselves, may provide necessary and/or sufficient conditions for spiritual harm to mature selves (i.e., no harm, decisive or otherwise, can be decisively given; spiritual death is always suicide).
3. Someone may provide the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for profound (but not decisive) spiritual help to pre-moral, emergent selves (e.g., our parents give us birth, crucial nurture, ethical education, etc.).
4. No one, other than the agents themselves, may provide sufficient conditions for spiritual help, decisive or otherwise, to mature selves (i.e., freedom is internal to virtue and not even divine grace is irresistible).

From these points, we can see how Kierkegaard might generate a plausible doctrine of social responsibility, even while preserving the strong egalitarian and individualistic theses mentioned earlier. The duty of love to our neighbor can be translated in the first instance into a duty to protect her inchoate ethico-religious freedom. Vulnerable human beings must be called into realized spirit, into per-
sonhood, by the care of others, even if we rightly assume that all are potential persons and that all actual persons are individually accountable. (Think of the Arminian free church tradition, coupled with the conviction that preventing the frustration of selfhood is the principle function of the civil law.) But this reference to freedom brings us to our third theme.

III. TWO ACCOUNTS OF CHOICE AND TWO KINDS OF FREEDOM

Let me clarify Kierkegaard’s position by comparing it with Saint Augustine’s—in particular, by contrasting their respective positions first on the nature of moral deliberation and choice, and then on the kinds of human freedom. In describing human faculties, Augustine largely accepts, via Plato and neo-Platonism, the classical hegemony of reason. Reason governs the soul even as the soul governs the body; reason discloses empirical, moral, and theological truths, ultimately revealing God as the final object of our fullest love: the immutable Summum Bonum. Unlike Plato, Augustine centers virtue and vice in the will rather than the intellect. For Augustine, wickedness, for instance, is not merely ignorance about the nature of the Good or weakness of will in pursuing it, as it was for Plato, but a defiant rejection of the True and the Good, a wrong turning of the self away from what may be known to be genuinely valuable. Sin is such a “perversion of will.” Even so, it remains the case for Augustine that ideally the will moves the individual to choose or model what reason discloses as the truly excellent. “Whatever we know, we grasp and hold to by reason.” Even so, it remains the case for Augustine that ideally the will moves the individual to choose or model what reason discloses as the truly excellent. “Whatever we know, we grasp and hold to by reason.” Reason proposes, the will disposes. Your love defines you as your weight (pondus), love itself being a matter of the whole person (body and soul); but those external realities to which you ought to gravitate in love are determined by the governing part of the soul, reason. Mind discovers the ordo amoris, even if the other human faculties then conform to it. In short, passion and appetite serve little or no epistemic function for Augustine: They are not valuable disclosers of moral and religious truth but (at least after the Fall) unruly faculties to blind reason and corrupt the will. If we are sinful, it is because God permits passion and desire (cupiditas) to have their perverse heads. When reason “rules the irrational emotions,” on the other hand, “then there ex-
ists in man the very mastery which the law that we know to be eternal prescribes."

Kierkegaard, in contrast, denies the hegemony of reason. He radicalizes Augustine’s emphasis on inwardness by accenting the epistemic significance of passion and volition, as well as the epistemic impoverishment of reason, in ethical and religious contexts. Essential truths, Kierkegaard assures us, must be apprehended via passionate choice, free choice, rather than abstract reflection. Indeed, he turns the classical intellectualist picture of the self on its head, giving priority to passion and will (as well as imagination, when properly regulated) over objective reflection and detached control. This is the hallmark of his religious romanticism. Emotion is not vilified; it is considered an indispensable means for arriving at “existential” truths about God and oneself not available to reason alone. Although Kierkegaard admires Augustine, his verdict on him is rather harsh:

Augustine has nevertheless done incalculable harm. . . . Quite simply, Augustine has reinstated the Platonic-Aristotelian definition, the whole Greek philosophical pagan definition of faith. . . . In the Greek view, faith is a concept which belongs in the sphere of the intellectual. . . . Thus faith is related to probability, and we get the progression: faith – knowledge. Christianly, faith is at home in the existential. [IP I 71]

The frontispiece quotation to Either/Or, from the English Romantic Edward Young, raises the salient question “Is reason then alone baptized, are the passions pagans?” [EO I i]. Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms reply with a definitive “No.”

For all Kierkegaard’s differences with Augustine on reason and passion, it is crucial to recognize that both men speak of two senses of freedom. “Freedom of choice” (defined as the impersonal ability to do otherwise) is the formal condition of what Kierkegaard calls “true freedom” (defined as a positive capacity, a personal identity, with real material content) [EO II 174]. Freedom of choice, what Augustine calls “liberum arbitrium,” is a bare nonnecessitation prior to choosing: the neutral ability to do X or not to do X. True freedom, what Augustine refers to as “libertas,” is the moral concreteness one acquires in and through choosing a specific alternative and subsequently binding oneself to it. True freedom is a potency, “to be able” (CA 49): a dynamic commitment to a virtuous end, rather than formal indifference as an initial means to that end.
Prior to the original sin, according to Augustine, Adam and Eve possessed both *liberum arbitrium* and *libertas*. The choice to be disobedient in the Garden, however, led to the loss of *libertas*. It destroyed that hierarchical unity of God–soul–body that makes for true human flourishing, and now all of humanity is in need of God’s grace to restore right loving, to combat lust, and so on. The key question for Augustine is the extent to which *liberum arbitrium* was also lost. In some of his early writings, such as various books of *On Free Choice of the Will*, he seems to assume that individuals even now are in possession of *liberum arbitrium*. He suggests that since punishment and reward for actions are just, we have free will in this sense, even if weakened or diminished. There is still some autonomy left to the will and some power left to the mind; and one can at least choose a disordered love, something that God in no way causes directly. God seems a co-causer of good choices only, as though in evil actions one merely says “No” to God’s will.

In later works directed against the Pelagians and their belief in human perfectibility, however, Augustine begins to let go of even *liberum arbitrium* for postlapsarian humanity. At times, as in “On the Spirit and the Letter,” there seems to be a synergistic scenario where grace and free will work together in bringing about salvation. But given that divine grace moves the will, it is unclear even here whether and how such grace can be refused. For Augustine, to call an action “voluntary” is to imply that it flows from an inner principle with some knowledge of its end or purpose. Yet God sets the conditions for faith and then awakens desire by acting through the individual’s own internal agency. In “On Grace and Free Will,” moreover, even though “[t]here is always . . . within us a free will,” it is God who empowers one to obey what God Himself commands. Thus Augustine seems to let go of any doctrine of the cooperation of grace and free will. The elect are “made to will” by God such that they cannot but persevere, while the “mass of perdition” could not possibly persevere even if they wanted to.

Ultimately, then, Augustine ends up with quite a strong view of predestination: Some people are moved by grace ineluctably to love God and others are not, hence there is an elect who cannot be lost and a reprobate who cannot be saved. There is no human explanation for this dichotomy. God’s grace is not like external coercion; it leaves human action “voluntary,” in the literal sense that grace op-
erates through one's will (voluntas). But one could not do otherwise than what God ordains. Augustine speaks of "the reasonable soul" giving "consent" to God's "summons," but there is, in fact, no moment of genuinely free acceptance on humanity's part, no liberum arbitrium, since the soul itself is fully orchestrated by God to believe and to will and to do.  

Kierkegaard repeatedly refers to liberum arbitrium as a "chimera," something "never found" in real life, a "phantasy" (JP II 67, 59, 73), a "nuisance for thought" (CA 49); but we must be careful to understand his point. If liberum arbitrium is defined as an utter unconditionedness that "can equally well choose the good or the evil," then it is, according to Kierkegaard, "an abrogation of the concept of freedom and a despair of any explanation of it" (JP II 61-2). For "[good and evil exist nowhere outside freedom, since this very distinction comes into existence through freedom" (62). Nevertheless, formal freedom of choice is presupposed by true freedom. "True freedom" quickly takes on a normative connotation in Kierkegaard, such that it would seem odd to call a vicious disposition "true freedom," even if it were self-consciously cultivated.) The mistake is in looking for, or insisting permanently upon, abstract freedom of choice in place of true freedom; the error, that is, is in focusing on ideal liberum arbitrium altogether independently of existential libertas. Kierkegaard does not reject liberum arbitrium as such, any more than he rejects truth as "identity of thought and being"; rather, he notes its abstractness when taken in isolation or out of context.

Whereas Augustine eventually denies both senses of freedom for the fallen as such, Kierkegaard consistently affirms both, if taken together. Augustine saw the prelapsarian Adam and Eve as posse peccare and posse non peccare, able to sin and able not to sin, and postlapsarian humanity, all of [ungraced] humanity, as non posse non peccare, unable not to sin. All generations after the Fall have inherited Adam's guilt and are justly condemned by God as having "sinned with him." On Kierkegaard's view, however, this draws too complete a contrast between us and the original, pre-Fall parents; it makes Adam "essentially different from the race" (CA 29). According to the pseudonymous Vigilius Haufniensis, sin always enters the world in qualitatively the same way, by guilty free choice; thus, every person is his or her own Adam or Eve (35-7). An
Augustinian conception of original sin is attractive to some Christian ethicists as an expression of the power of corporate sin: We are born into social structures and institutions that already embody evil, Lutherans often suggest, and our complicity in these realities means that there is no escaping dirty hands even in principle. Although raised a Lutheran, Kierkegaard thought the idea of inherited guilt explains nothing, and that a predestinating grace (or fall) that would necessitate agents and deny freedom of choice altogether is "a thoroughgoing abortion" \( (\text{JP II 56}) \). Predestination (and the related notion of irresistible grace) is the complementary vice of dwelling solely on libertarian freedom of choice.

The challenge of existence is to realize true freedom, historically, by moving beyond mere freedom of choice – by, as it were, binding oneself voluntarily to an integrated identity \( (\text{libertas}) \) such that there is no longer a question of raw choice (mere \text{liberum arbitrium}). Formal freedom of choice is thereby transcended or transformed in time. Kierkegaard, however, is not a compatibilist, much less a determinist.\(^\text{28}\) \textit{Pace} Augustine, he suggests that it is always possible for an erstwhile faithful person to fall away from virtue, to make the "leap" of sin in opposition to God's grace.\(^\text{29}\) It is human sin that is inexplicable by reason, not merely divine grace; and a necessitated perseverance is a contradiction in terms, a denial of human historicity. The possibility of offense at God is a permanent feature of temporal life. As Anti-Climacus puts it: "The greatest possible human misery, greater even than sin, is to be offended at Christ and to continue in the offense; and Christ cannot, 'love' cannot, make this impossible" \( (\text{SUD 126}) \).

It is tempting to say that \text{liberum arbitrium} is "included in" \text{libertas}, just as despair is included in faith, that is, as dialectically excluded.\(^\text{30}\) This reading is evocative, but it risks overstatement; freedom of choice has an ineliminable place in the stages on life's way even if it is basically "transubstantiated" by faith.

The most tremendous thing conceded to man is – choice, freedom. If you want to rescue and keep it, there is only one way – in the very same second unconditionally in full attachment give it back to God and yourself along with it. If the sight of what is conceded to you tempts you, if you surrender to the temptation and look with selfish craving at freedom of choice, then you lose your [true] freedom. And your punishment then is to go around in a kind of confusion and brag about having – freedom of choice. \( (\text{JP II 69}) \)
As Anti-Climacus says, "freedom is the dialectical aspect of the categories of possibility and necessity" (SUD 29). Liberum arbitrium correlates with possibility, I would suggest, and libertas with necessity. But the two are inseparable.

Why is being bound to God in libertas a source of potency? The answer is that only in this way does one participate in the life of Love that grounds and sustains one's finite being. To try to remain within pure possibility, utterly neutral and uncommitted about temporal life, is despair, a form of sin; the will always "has a history." Contra Augustinian and Calvinist ideas of fatalistic election, however, even those espoused in the name of God's sovereignty, we must insist on both freedom of choice and true freedom — both liberum arbitrium and libertas — as essential to finite moral agency, for freedom of choice is the ontological precondition for true freedom and, properly understood, a genuine good.

Usually the freedom of being able to choose is presented as an extraordinary good. This it is, but it nevertheless depends also upon how long it is going to last. Usually one makes the mistake of thinking that this itself is the good and that this freedom of choice lasts one's entire life.

What Augustine says of true freedom (distinguished from freedom of choice) is very true and very much a part of experience — namely, that the person has a most lively sense when with completely decisive determination he impresses upon his action the inner necessity which excludes the thought of another possibility. Then freedom of choice or the "agony" of choice comes to an end. (JPII 74)

Note the allusion to Augustine, but note also that, on Kierkegaard's view, it is the person him- or herself who impresses the necessity on action. "[T]he opposite of [true] freedom is guilt" rather than necessity, but to think that someone must sin is "foolishness" (CA 108, 112).

We are left, then, with two major departures from Saint Augustine: (1) No external power (neither Adam's sin nor God's grace) can compel a moral choice, decisively harm or help a human being, for both senses of freedom are irreducibly present in finite moral agency; and (2) moral and religious choices are characterized chiefly by passionate commitment rather than rational assent. As Kierkegaard contends, "it is left to the individual himself whether he will or will not, whether he will or will not expose himself to sufferings and troubles and tribulations" (JPII 76–7). Coming to faith is not a matter of
Promethean self-creation (since grace is required), but neither is it mainly a matter of accurate cognition or preordained experience. True freedom is, for Kierkegaard, a highly individualized libertas in which voluntary consent to grace takes the form of a passionate leap, a "Yes" to a Gifted Reality that, seen objectively, looks paradoxical. This is not a crude subjectivism where "truth" is whatever feels good; Kierkegaard clearly holds that emotional allegiances can be misplaced, pathos-filled choices mistaken (see, e.g., EO II 167). And neither is it an irrationalism where what is known to be self-contradictory is nonetheless believed; Kierkegaard says explicitly that faith is above reason [supra rationem] rather than against reason [contra rationem].

But it is a consistent, if romantic, Arminianism.

Jacob Arminius asked the perennial question of freedom and came close to sparking civil war in the Netherlands; at the end of his life, Kierkegaard, too, hoped to stir individuals and shake institutions. Given Kierkegaard's disdain for most academics, Arminius's 1603 appointment as professor of theology would not have endeared him to Kierkegaard. But the fact that Arminius was hounded, and eventually condemned, by the state church made him a forerunner of the Kierkegaard who wrote "Attack on Christendom." Both Arminius and Kierkegaard had towering theological and ecclesial nemeses. As the latter railed against Hegel and Bishop Mynster, so the former wrestled with Gomar and the States General, not to mention the ghost of Calvin. (Arminius did not have to grapple, however, with tabloid journalism like The Corsair, which pilloried Kierkegaard.) In the end, nonetheless, Kierkegaard's legacy is more literary and theological than political and ecclesiological.

With respect to grace and freedom, Kierkegaard leaves us with three related dialectical conundrums to be appreciated as such; he is a fan of neither Kantian–Sartrean subjectivity nor Augustinian–Calvinist objectivity. Kierkegaard wants to affirm: (1) both universal access to the highest things and the rarity of individual faith before God, (2) both equal accountability to the God who is Love and gracious upbuilding by that same God, and (3) both freedom of choice [liberum arbitrium] and true personal freedom [libertas]. An undialectical reading of universal access leads us to think that Christianity comes to all as a brute fact of birth, while an undialectical take on the rarity of faith tempts us to believe in "choseness" and to draw an invidious contrast between "the elect" and "the
reprobate." Similarly, a too simple view of equal accountability speaks of "sheer invulnerability" and "radical autonomy," whereas a pietistic account of the graciousness of Love embraces categories like "decisive help decisively given." Finally, an un-Kierkegaardian celebration of liberum arbitrium translates into aesthetic arbitrariness, the pure subjectivity of some postmodernists, even as an un-Kierkegaardian perspective on libertas valorizes irresistible grace, the pure objectivity of some premodernists.

Kierkegaard's existential dialectic is not a rejection of God's omnipotence but an appreciation of its kenotic form. God voluntarily lets human beings act voluntarily, even in relation to the Trinity, by ceasing to be all in all. Only a truly omnipotent being could create beings with a real freedom and otherness over against God, out of which they consent to being loved and to being empowered to love others in kind. "The greatest good . . . which can be done for a being, greater than anything else that one can do for it, is to make it free. In order to do just that, omnipotence is required" ([P II 62]). It is this insistence that we not separate divine omnipotence from divine goodness, lest we end up worshipping mere power, that marks Kierkegaard as a splendid Arminian. His authorship can still edify personal conscience, if not dramatically change human history.

NOTES

4 "Kant held that man was his own law [autonomy], that is, bound himself under the law which he gave himself. In a deeper sense that means to say: lawlessness or experimentation. It is no harder than the thwacks which Sancho Panza applied to his own bottom. . . . If I am not bound by anything higher than myself, and if I am to bind myself, where am I to acquire the severity . . . ?" See The Journals of Kierkegaard, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru [New York: Harper and Row, 1959], p. 181.
5 Shortly after his death, in 1609, Arminius's followers composed a summary of their position entitled the Remonstrance and called for a synod to adjudicate the central doctrinal disputes. Although it was judged heretical by the Synod of Dort in 1618, the theology of Arminius and
the Remonstrants was highly influential on a host of Christian traditions, especially Anglicanism and Methodism. For additional biographical information and a collection of primary sources, see *The Works of James Arminius*, ed. and trans. James Nichols, 3 vols. [London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825].


8 This Judaic drama of self-overcoming is already evident in the prophet Amos; it becomes critical in Saint Paul.

9 This passage is also cited by Outka in "Equality and the Fate of Theism," p. 275.


12 Here I attempt to go beyond Outka's work cited in note 6 above.

13 As reported by Nova in an episode entitled "Secret of the Wild Child" [WGBH/Boston, 1994].

16 Augustine, Confessions, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1978), bk. 7, chap. 16, p. 150; see also On Free Choice of the Will, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979), bk. 2, chap. 14, p. 69. In The Enchiridion, Augustine does list “ignorance” and “weakness” as the “two causes that lead to sin” (chap. 81, p. 97), but here “weakness” does not refer to Platonic akrasia but to something more like disobedience: “we leave undone what we know we ought to do, and we do what we know we ought not to do” (chap. 81, p. 98). Augustine’s equation of sin with perversity is perhaps most vivid in the famous account of his youthful theft of some pears, “not compelled by any lack” but out of “my own love of mischief” and of “my own perdition” (Confessions, bk. 2, chap. 4, p. 47). As much as he differs from Augustine on the stature of reason, Kierkegaard agrees that sin is not merely ignorance but rather a “polemic” attitude toward the Truth. See Climacus’s Philosophical Fragments, p. 19.
17 Augustine, On Free Choice of the Will, bk. 2, chap. 3, p. 42. Reason’s excellence is summarized in bk. 2, chaps. 5 and 6, pp. 46–9. Reason alone can even demonstrate God’s existence; see bk. 2, chap. 15, pp. 71–2.
18 See Augustine, Confessions, bk. 13, chap. 9, p. 317.
19 Augustine, On Free Choice of the Will, bk. 1, chap. 8, pp. 18–19.
20 Augustine, On Free Choice of the Will, bk. 2, chap. 1, p. 36.
24 In “On Rebuke and Grace,” chap. 20, p. 480, Augustine writes: “... they who are truly children [of God] are foreknown and predestinated as conformed to the image of His Son, and are called according to His purpose, so as to be elected. For the son of promise does not perish, but the son of perdition.” The children of God “absolutely cannot perish” (chap. 23, p. 481), to perish being to fall permanently away from the good.

... the notion of the truth as identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction, in its truth only an expectation of the creature; not because the truth is not such an identity, but because the knower is an existing individual for whom the truth cannot be such an identity as long as he lives in time. (p. 176; emphasis added)
This point is exactly parallel to that made about *liberum arbitrium*. Both truth-as-correspondence and liberty-of-indifference must be understood existentially: They are not illusions but transcendental limits that can only be approached or presumed by finite persons. Objective truth and libertarian freedom are more like premises of pure and practical reason, respectively, than like conclusions of argument or ends of action. But it is no more accurate to call Kierkegaard a nihilist or relativist with respect to truth than it is to call him a determinist or compatibilist with respect to freedom. These "isms" cut the nerve of meaningful existence by denying the dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity, necessity and freedom, eternity and temporality that characterizes human nature. As Anti-Climacus argues (*SUD* 13–21), the two poles of human personality must be constantly "synthesized"; to deny one entirely in favor of the other or to see no tension between them is "despair."


28 Jamie Ferreira sometimes talks as though Kierkegaard were a kind of compatibilist, simply hostile to freedom of choice as *liberum arbitrium*, but she is sensitive to the complexities here. See Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*, pp. 36–40. For a recent defense of the compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility, see Harry G. Frankfurt's essays in *Moral Responsibility*, ed. John Martin Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). For criticisms of Frankfurt's position, see ibid., especially the contributions by Fischer and Peter Van Inwagan. Several of Frankfurt's seminal articles are collected in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

29 On sin being a "qualitative leap" of the individual, see *CA* 32, 47.


31 *SUD* 73. Cf. *CA* 29, where "the individual has a history."


33 In spite of his commitment to equal access, Kierkegaard writes: "the majority of men never experience the spiritual life; they never experience [the] qualitative encounter with the divine." See Dru's *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, p. 172.
10 "Developing" Fear and Trembling

Once I am dead, Fear and Trembling alone will be enough for an imperishable name as an author. Then it will be read, translated into foreign languages as well.

— Søren Kierkegaards Papirer

Kierkegaard was prophetic in his estimate of the place Fear and Trembling was to have in his authorship. Although several of his pseudonymous works have also become philosophical classics, Fear and Trembling continues to haunt us like no other of his writings. Its defense of individual existence still resonates at the end of a century marked by horrifying mass movements, while its depiction of radical religious obedience stirs new fears as we enter a period when older political ideologies are being replaced by renewed expressions of religious absolutism.

Fear and Trembling remains so evocative partly because of its enigmatic nature. From the outset, by means of the famous epigraph drawn from Hamann, Kierkegaard signals that not everything that follows is as it seems. Beyond this, there is evidence that Kierkegaard designed Fear and Trembling as a text with hidden layers of meaning. In The Point of View for My Work as an Author, Kierkegaard tells us that the most important ethical and religious truths cannot be communicated directly, as though one were writing on a blank sheet of paper. They demand instead creative endeavor by the author and a corresponding effort by the reader that involves “bringing to light by the application of a caustic fluid a text which is hidden under another text” [PV 40].
Kierkegaard appears to have in mind the process by which a message written in secret ink is deciphered.¹ Although he wrote before the advent of modern photography, we can also think of his interpretative advice in terms of the process by which film is developed. Beginning with a surface material of a certain texture and color, we undertake to expose different latent images and ideas. In what follows, I want to take Kierkegaard's advice and "develop" the text of *Fear and Trembling* in this photographic sense. What we will see, I think, is that this text contains not just two, but multiple levels of meaning. Each level has its own significance. As we expose each deeper level, the messages grow more subtle. Finally, when development is complete, we have in our hands a transparent image through which we can see all the levels of meaning and which, when held to the light, reveals a religious-ethical communication of surprising richness and complexity.

I. LEVEL I: THE CALL TO CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

At the first and most apparent level of meaning, *Fear and Trembling* is a stinging critique of both the popular and cultured Christianity of his day and a reminder of the primitive challenge of Christian faith. This critique is signaled by the choice of Abraham and the Genesis 22 episode as paradigms of faith and by the repeated use of commercial metaphors to portray the spirit of the age.

Kierkegaard believed that the cultural triumph of Christian civilization had effaced the primitive meaning of Christianity. A religious identity whose acquisition once entailed great risk had become a matter of merely being born to Christian parents in a Christian nation. Time had also transmuted the stories of the early heroes and saints of faith. Looked at with the benefit of eighteen centuries of hindsight, a false picture of historical success and well-earned veneration had replaced vivid experiences of individual risk, suffering, abandonment, or martyrdom. What Kierkegaard calls "the results" had come to overshadow the anguished choices by early Christian disciples.

As an antidote to this spiritual lethargy, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes de silentio, devises what amounts to a theological shock treatment.² He portrays Abraham, the "knight of faith" in the full terror of his encounter with the divine command. By following
the patriarch step for step on his difficult journey to Mt. Moriah, Johannes seeks to recover aspects of faith that years of saintly veneration and familiarity with the happy ending had effaced. "What is omitted from Abraham's story is the anxiety," Johannes tells us (FT 28). "We are curious about the results, just as we are curious about the way a book turns out. We do not want to know anything about the anxiety, the distress, the paradox" (63).

To illustrate how far the Christianity of his day had erred from the primitive experience of faith, "The Preliminary Expectoration," portrays an imaginary churchgoer who is led by a preacher's sermon to want to imitate Abraham. Learning of this, the pastor visits the parishioner and, rising to unprecedented heights of rhetorical fervor, thunders, "You despicable man, what devil has so possessed you that you want to murder your own son?" (FT 28). In Johannes's view, it does this hapless fellow little good to reply, "But, after all, that was what you yourself preached about on Sunday," since the established church and its functionaries were ignorant of how thoroughly they had replaced primitive Christianity with a cliché-ridden, worldly piety.

The use of Abraham also conveys a new emphasis on faith as a way of life. This emphasis is meant to replace the centuries-old understanding of faith as merely an acceptance of dogmatic truths. Abraham is a fitting choice to communicate this lesson because his hallmark is not intellectual achievement but a prodigious ability to live trustingly and obediently. In the margin of a draft of the "Eulogy on Abraham," Kierkegaard makes this point even clearer by ending the section with a definition of faith "not as the content of a concept but as a form of the will" (Pap. IV B 87 p. 2). The emphasis on willing and acting rather than thinking or reasoning is also highlighted by the sheer irrationality of Abraham's faith, his belief "by virtue of the absurd" that he will get Isaac back. As Jerry Gill points out, to present a "dialectical corrective," Kierkegaard offers the story of Abraham as a reductio ad absurdum of all traditions that see faith as involving mental assent.3

These ways of evading religious-ethical commitment represent pervasive and abiding problems in Christianity, but, in Kierkegaard's day, evasion had taken a new and virulent form. Among the intellectual leadership and scholarly teachers of Christianity, a pseudo-Christianity permeated by Hegelian philosophy held full
sway. Under the motto "One must go further," the Hegelians presented "faith" as a rudimentary phase of intellectual development to be transcended by their own rational philosophy. This philosophy radically subordinated matters of personal ethical and religious decision, the crucial events of individual history, to scholars' comprehension of the meaning of world history. For the Hegelians, Abraham was at best a figure of historical interest whose personal trial and response were unimportant compared to whatever historical significance he might have in the development of monotheism. It is to question this approach that Johannes takes us step by step on Abraham's arduous journey.

Jibes at the Hegelians also virtually bracket the text. The book begins, for example, with Johannes remarking that "Not only in the world of business but also in the world of ideas, our age stages ein wirklicher Ausverkauf [a real sale]," in which everything can be had at "a bargain price" (FT 5). Once, faith was a task for a whole lifetime. But now, "every speculative monitor who conscientiously signals the important trends in modern philosophy, every assistant professor, tutor, and student," is unwilling to stop even with doubting but "goes further."

Near the book's end, the epilogue returns to business matters. Johannes mentions the practice of merchants in Holland of sinking cargoes of spices in the sea to jack up declining prices. This use of the language of commerce highlights the era's (and the Hegelians') bourgeois preoccupations and mocks the age's enthusiasm for mass produced, bargain-priced faith. Translated to the realm of spirit, the Dutch merchants' practice proves instructive to Johannes. Just as they sacrificed their cargoes to raise the value of their goods, so he employs the dramatic story of Abraham's sacrifice to raise the price—and cost—of faith. Understood at this level, it is precisely the outrageousness of Abraham's conduct that makes it the fitting counterweight to cultural Christianity and Hegelian philosophy.

II. LEVEL 2: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FAITH

Once we have assimilated Fear and Trembling's deliberately shocking indictment of cultural Christianity, our encounter with the text exposes a less dramatic and more subtle level of meaning. At this level Fear and Trembling involves an exploration of the psychology
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of faith. This inquiry starts with the first level's assumption that faith is a lived commitment but seeks to understand its precise mental content for the believer. In the "Exordium," "Eulogy on Abraham," and "Preliminary Expectoration," Johannes largely sets polemic aside to focus on the psychology of various exemplars of faith, some of whom prove to be quite ordinary persons. Here, Johannes lets us know that what is important in faith is not outer deeds like Abraham's dramatic obedience, but quiet and difficult inner movements of the spirit.

The central idea here is the "double movement" of faith. The first movement, "infinite resignation," is accomplished by relinquishing one's heart's desire. For the young swain depicted by Johannes, who accepts the fact that the great love of his life lies forever beyond his reach, infinite resignation leads to the discovery of his "eternal consciousness." Like the shirt whose thread is spun in tears, infinite resignation provides "peace and rest and comfort in the pain" (FT 45).

The "knight of faith" embodies the second movement. He starts where the "knight of infinite resignation" ends:

He does exactly the same as the other knight did: he infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life, he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens; he makes one more movement even more wonderful than all the others, for he says: Nevertheless, I have faith that I will get her — that is, by the virtue of absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible. (FT 46)

Abraham makes these two movements. He obeys God's command and willingly relinquishes Isaac. Simultaneously, he continues to believe that God will not demand Isaac of him, and that he will again enjoy his son's presence in this life. Unlike the despairing versions of Abraham presented in the "Exordium" who manage to fulfill God's will but lose the resilience of their souls, the real Abraham retains the ability "once again to be happy in Isaac" (FT 35).

Johannes lets us know that the capacity for such knighthood is not confined to the older heroes and saints of faith but remains available to every human being. He imagines a knight of faith residing in the Copenhagen of his day. No outward signs reveal this person's spiritual depth. In every way he resembles a bourgeois philistine, a tax collector even. Inwardly, however, at every moment he is making "the movement of infinity." He feels the pain of re-
nouncing everything, "yet the finite tastes just as good to him as one who never knew anything higher" \textit{(FT 40)}.

Edward Mooney argues that at this level of psychological development, \textit{Fear and Trembling} aims at describing and commending a stance of selfless care. The knight of faith can both renounce and enjoy the finite because he sees, or knows in his bones, that renouncing all claim to the finite is not renouncing all care for it. He is at home and takes delight in the finite (witness the tax-collector) because he cares; yet this is a selfless care, for he has given up all proprietary claim.\textsuperscript{4}

If Mooney is right, this level of meaning of \textit{Fear and Trembling} begins to suggest to us that the text as a whole is not quite the terrifying defense of religiously commanded homicide it seems to be. Rather, it begins to appear as a more traditional defense of selfless love as a central feature of the religious life.

III. LEVEL 3: THE NORMATIVE SHAPE OF CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

If a first level of meaning contains a call to strenuous, lived commitment to Christian faith and a second develops the psychology of faith and love, a third level of \textit{Fear and Trembling} explores the question of the norms that should guide the conduct of a committed Christian. At this level, \textit{Fear and Trembling} appears to be at least the beginnings of a study in ethics.

This normative inquiry comes to the fore in the three "Problemata," especially in the ideas of a "teleological suspension of the ethical" and an "absolute duty to God." These difficult conceptions have been interpreted in various ways, not all of which are consistent with one another, nor with some of Johannes de silentio's own claims and statements. Part of the problem may be due to faulty readings of the text. Others seem to reflect Johannes's complex and confusing position. As we will see, these difficulties ultimately drive us beyond ethics to a still deeper level of meaning of the book.

The first "Problema" presents Genesis 22 as involving "a teleological suspension of the ethical" in which Abraham, the knight of faith, subordinates his responsibilities as a father to the needs of his own personal relationship with God. The ethical, Johannes tells us,
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is the "universal" and it is one's ethical responsibility to annul one's singularity to "become the universal" (*FT* 54). Although the Kantian and Hegelian philosophies Johannes presumes develop this thought in complex ways, the idea expressed here amounts to the simple requirement that the needs of the common good take precedence over merely individual wishes. But as it is exemplified in Abraham, faith reverses this priority. Faith is "the paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal" (*FT* 55).

Johannes insists that we cannot comprehend Abraham's behavior in ethical terms. From the point of view of ethics, Abraham is nothing more than the murderer of his son. At no time is he a "tragic hero" who sets aside one expression of the ethical for a still higher expression. Agamemnon, Jephtha, and Brutus are tragic heroes. They also willingly undertake to kill their children; but as responsible leaders, they do so to protect the welfare of their community and the common good. Not Abraham. "By his act he transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher τέλος outside it in relation to which he suspended it. . . . Why, then, does Abraham do it? For God's sake and - the two are wholly identical - for his own sake" (*FT* 59).

Johannes's description of Abraham poses a sharp challenge to those who would make sense of *Fear and Trembling* as a study in ethics. On the one hand, Johannes does not shrink from depicting Abraham as fully outside the ethical - as truly the murderer of his son. Not only does his conduct violate one of our most important ethical norms, it cannot be rationally justified in any way. His conduct remains "for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought" (*FT* 56). On the other hand, Johannes also frequently lauds the patriarch and holds him up as a model for the Christian life. "I cannot understand Abraham," he tells us, "I can only admire him" (*112; cf. 57, 114). Reading *Fear and Trembling* as a work intending to offer at least a preliminary vision of the Christian moral life produces a jarring inconsistency. *Fear and Trembling* seems to hold up as exemplary and somehow worthy of imitation a kind of conduct that we cannot possibly encourage, defend, or understand in terms of general moral values.

Various interpreters have tried to reduce or eliminate this seeming contradiction. Elmer Duncan, for example, argues that the primary target of Johannes's ethical critique is a kind of Kantian ethical absolutism that makes no room for permissible exceptions. Kant, in
his essay "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," had argued that one is not permitted to tell even a small lie to a criminal aggressor in order to save the life of an innocent person. Duncan believes that Kierkegaard, like many other readers of Kant, found this position to be preposterous. Since he was unable to justify exceptions within the rigid theoretical framework established by Kant, he was compelled to locate their possibility in the religious domain and to argue for the superiority of the religious over the ethical sphere of life. Duncan concludes by dismissing what he takes to be the argument of Fear and Trembling by pointing to other, less radical ethical approaches to the problem of exceptions.

This line of interpretation is interesting but it poses at least two problems. First, it is not clear that it is Kantian absolutism that Kierkegaard has in mind in framing the "teleological suspension of the ethical." The tragic hero as portrayed by Johannes is no absolutist. To fulfill a "higher" obligation to the state, Agamemnon, Jephtha, and Brutus are willing to break the moral rule against murder. Yet, according to Johannes, each is a tragic hero, not a knight of faith, and their behavior does not involve a teleological suspension of the ethical. Second, this interpretation ignores Johannes's repeated affirmations that in suspending the ethical, Abraham moved entirely outside its sphere. There is no "higher expression for the ethical that can ethically explain his behavior" (FT 57). In view of this, it becomes difficult to construe Abraham as seeking to break away from rigid ethical confines to express a more nuanced understanding of moral obligation.

Similar problems trouble a second interpretation of the ethical position sketched out in Fear and Trembling. On this view the book is a critique of ethical philistinism. As Gene Outka notes, those who hold this view understand Abraham as acting contrary to established public opinion. "He violates the canons of respectability and offends those who take as authoritative the moral opinions of their class and circumstance. The levels of dread and conflict he knows are out of reach of prosaic temperaments who are content to abide by conventional rules of their historical epoch." Outka points out that there is clearly something to this interpretation. In an impressionistic sense, it fits the general timbre of the book. It also connects well with Fear and Trembling's undeniable emphasis on active, lived commitment to one's ethical or religious
values. Nevertheless, by presenting Abraham as a sincere defender of genuine ethical values as opposed to mere conventionalism, this interpretation runs up against Johannes's repeated statements that Abraham's conduct is totally beyond ethical justification. This interpretation also does not fit with Johannes's important distinction between Abraham and the tragic hero. The tragic hero, Outka observes, "also requires courage and may violate conventional moral opinions." Yet the tragic hero's behavior does not exemplify faith or involve a teleological suspension of the ethical.

A third interpretation sees Johannes's argument as sharpening the book's broad critique of Hegelian philosophy. Now the focus is on Hegel's ethics, especially the primacy he places on the public morality and social roles embodied in his idea of Sittlichkeit. For Hegel, as for Kant, ethics involves subordinating individual inclinations to the demands of the universal. Hegel further insists that the universal in ethics must take form in the concrete public life of a people, institutionalized in family, civil society, and the state. The state itself, he proclaims, is an earthly deity (irdisch-Göttliches) that commands our highest loyalties.

It is easy to read Fear and Trembling as a critique of this Hegelian ethical position. At the opening of the first Problema, Johannes refers to Hegel and asks whether "social morality" in the Hegelian sense really is the highest (FT 55). As presented by Johannes, Abraham clearly violates his two principal social role responsibilities: as a father and leader of his people. Indeed, since Isaac's life represents the promised continuance of the people, both these roles are simultaneously violated by Abraham's conduct. As Johannes tells us, "Insofar as the universal was present," for Abraham, "it was cryptically in Isaac, hidden so to speak, in Isaac's loins" (59). By subordinating these compelling communal responsibilities to his own spiritual salvation, Abraham takes a step beyond any social definition of the self.

Taken as a critique of Hegel's ethics, Fear and Trembling can be read in two different ways that reduce the apparent inconsistency between Johannes's moral condemnation and praise of Abraham. On one hand, we can see Fear and Trembling as an ethical statement rejecting Hegel's nearly total subordination of the individual to the nation state and as a prophetic defense of the rights of the individual in the face of oppressive social collectivities. Those
who read the book in this way see it as an incipient protest against the horrendous totalitarian movements that nineteenth-century mass philosophies were to produce, some of which, like Marxism, were based on Hegel’s thought. By affirming the priority of the individual, *Fear and Trembling* is seen as offering an important corrective to this dangerous loss of self. Unfortunately, this very common reading of *Fear and Trembling* draws its force from the implicit idea that Abraham’s conduct somehow represents a higher ethical possibility than Hegel’s nationalism. As such, it runs directly up against Johannes’s repeated statements that Abraham cannot be ethically “mediated” or understood. The importance of the individual and prophetic resistance to the mass are major themes certainly present in abundance elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s writings. But unless we assume, as some interpreters have done, that Johannes has merely resorted to hyperbole in denying the moral justifiability of Abraham’s conduct,\(^{10}\) it violates the spirit of *Fear and Trembling* to read Johannes’s defense of Abraham primarily in these terms.

Some who read the book as a rejection of Hegel’s ethics take it not so much as a thesis on moral rules and appropriate forms of conduct as a call for personal individuation. Jerome Gellman puts this well when he states that the “voice of God,” for Kierkegaard, is not literally a command to do a specific act. Rather, it is a “call” out of the “infinity” of the self, for self-definition as an individual, as opposed to self-definition from within the institutions of society, specifically the family. . . . The story is not about Abraham’s daring to kill his son, but is about Abraham’s having the courage to be willing to see himself not as a father, but as an individual.\(^{11}\)

This interpretation has the advantage of squaring well with the text’s obvious critique of bourgeois complacency and with the Hegelians’ own repeated tendencies to smooth down the hard edges of faith and ethics. It has the disadvantage of leaving the normative ethical import of *Fear and Trembling* in doubt and of leaving us wondering why, apart from its shock value, Genesis 22, of all Biblical texts, was chosen to make this point.

A final major interpretation of the normative level of *Fear and Trembling* sees Johannes (and perhaps Kierkegaard) as unabashedly defending a “divine command” view of ethics. Those who read the book in this way maintain that the lesson of Abraham’s conduct is
that every committed religious person must remain open to the possibility of a direct command from God that takes precedence over any rational ethical duties. Supporting this interpretation is Johan-nes’s clear repudiation at the outset of the second Problema of the Kantian ethical position that denies there are any direct duties to God and that sees all relationship to God as contained within obedience to the rational moral law (FT 68). Also supporting it are several explicit statements in Fear and Trembling that for Abraham "duty is simply the expression for God’s will" (60; cf. 70).

Some who defend this view of the book’s ethical message see it as solving the puzzle of how Johannes can both paint Abraham in the starkest ethical terms and laud him as a model of religious behavior. The solution lies in Kierkegaard’s/Johannes’s assumptions about God’s nature. Johannes tells us early on, for example, that he is convinced that “God is love” (FT 34). Within the context of such a belief, unstinting obedience to God makes sense even when he appears to require horrific deeds or sacrifices, as in the case of Genesis 22.

C. Stephen Evans develops an interpretation of this sort when he argues that it is Abraham’s “special relationship with God” that explains his inability to offer reasons for his conduct while still maintaining his ethical integrity and moral resolve. Because of this special relationship, says Evans,

Abraham knows God as an individual; he knows God is good, and he loves and trusts God. Although he does not understand God’s command in the sense that he understands why God has asked him to do this or what purpose it will serve, he does understand that it is indeed God who has asked him to do this. As a result of his special relationship, Abraham’s trust in God is supreme. This trust expresses itself cognitively in an interpretive framework by which he concludes, all appearances to the contrary, that this act really is the right thing to do in this particular case. God would not in fact require Isaac of him. . . or even if God did do this thing, he would nonetheless receive Isaac back. . . . Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac might be compared with the confidence of a knife-thrower’s assistant in the accuracy of a knife-thrower’s aim.13

This type of divine command position – one combining what Outka calls “general trust with specific perplexity”13 – has a venerable place in the traditions of commentary on Genesis 22.14 It certainly corresponds well with Kierkegaard’s own personal religious position. In various writings, he unites a firm insistence on God’s
unwavering goodness with an aversion to autonomous Kantian ethics and a preference for a divine command position. At several points, Kierkegaard tells us that to view moral requirements as self-imposed can only lead to moral laxity. For our moral obligations to elicit our full respect, we must regard them as emanating from an authoritative lawgiver who issues and upholds his commands (Pap. X² A 396; JP §188).

It may be that this is the ethical position Kierkegaard wished to present in Fear and Trembling and for which he has Johannes employ the example of Abraham's conduct in Genesis 22. But if so, Fear and Trembling is strangely lacking in the development of such a view. Johannes places great emphasis throughout on the horrifying nature of Abraham's conduct and the willingness of a knight of faith to go beyond ethics. But there is very little mention of the theological beliefs needed to render this view ethically comprehensible or compelling. Apart from the one fleeting remark about God's love in the "Preliminary Expectoration" (FT 34), there is no discussion of the divine nature, nor even of the special qualities of Abraham's relationship to God that would render his obedience more intelligible morally. Instead, all attention is given to the horrific command itself and to the definitive way in which it leads Abraham outside any conceivable realm of ethical justifiability. If Fear and Trembling defends a divine command ethic, therefore, it is a forbidding and frightening ethic, indeed. Johannes's use of Genesis 22 suggests that the god of Fear and Trembling and his loyal devotee, Abraham, are more "beyond good and evil" than most commentators have wanted to admit.

Read as an ethical treatise, Fear and Trembling leaves us strangely disturbed. Once we put aside the compulsion to ethicalize Abraham's conduct in the ways that violate the clear sense of the text, we are left with a book whose exemplar borders on the psychopathic. Of course, this may be part of Kierkegaard's purpose in troubling his contemporaries' religious complacency. In that case, without really intending to offer Abraham in Genesis 22 as a model of behavior, Kierkegaard/Johannes would deliberately use this provocative and troubling episode to reinforce the book's call to personal religious engagement and commitment.

Before we conclude that Fear and Trembling's treatment of ethics exists only for its shock value, it is worth considering whether it may point to another, and still deeper, level of meaning in the text.
This would be in keeping with Kierkegaard's program of writing a book in such a way that it forces the reader to probe beneath its surface utterances. The presence of this still deeper level will have to be shown on the basis of textual evidence despite the author's attempt to conceal it. This further level might help solve the puzzle of why Johannes repeatedly commends a figure so dramatically "beyond ethics" as Abraham.

IV. LEVEL 4: SIN AND FORGIVENESS

I believe this further level of meaning exists. At this level, we can read *Fear and Trembling* as addressing an abiding question of Christian faith: How can the individual believer be saved from sin? At this level, *Fear and Trembling* involves an exploration of each individual's inevitable encounter with the problems of moral self-condemnation and sin, and the possibility of God's overcoming these through an act of divine grace. From the perspective of this level, all the other levels of *Fear and Trembling* -- the focus on Abraham, the investigation of the psychology of faith, and the lengthy discussion of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" -- have as their latent meaning the themes of sin and forgiveness.17

Questions related to soteriology are obviously important ones for Kierkegaard. The religious discourses that bracket *Fear and Trembling* in his authorship address them, and they are central themes in adjacent pseudonymous works like *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Philosophical Fragments*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Ordinarily, however, issues of sin and salvation are not seen to be a major preoccupation of *Fear and Trembling* itself. Its central figure, after all, is Abraham; and Abraham, as Johannes repeatedly tells us, "is not a sinner."

To perceive the importance of the themes of sin and grace in this book, we must invoke three different areas relevant to the text: (1) the tradition of interpretative commentary on Genesis 22; (2) the text of *Fear and Trembling* itself; and (3) aspects of Kierkegaard's biography.

*The interpretative tradition*

As David Lerch has shown, a long tradition of commentary existed that had already appropriated Genesis 22 for Christological pur-
This tradition has its start in Galatians (3:13–14) with Paul's identification of Isaac with Christ as the "child of promise." It is picked up in Hebrews (11:17–19), whose author, presumably drawing on Jewish sources that held Isaac actually to have been sacrificed, alludes to the Genesis episode as proof of the resurrection of the dead. Among the early Church fathers, these scriptural beginnings led to a standard view of Abraham as a type or figure of God whose willing sacrifice of his son symbolizes God's involvement in the crucifixion.

We know that Kierkegaard was familiar with this tradition well before writing Fear and Trembling since he refers to it in a journal entry for 1839 (Pap. A 569; JP §298). Equally important, this tradition was also familiar to Kant, whose treatment of Abraham in his Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone and The Conflict of the Faculties may have provided the stimulus for Fear and Trembling. Among other things, Kant's aim in these treatises is to deny the value of relying on historically mediated salvation as a solution to the problem of sin. Any such reliance, Kant maintains, threatens to usurp the place of rational conscience and moral striving in our redemption and to degenerate into immoral "superstition." In keeping with this theme, Kant offers Abraham as the negative example of someone who placed alleged divine commands above the clear dictates of rational conscience. Lest the reader miss the link between this criticism of Abraham and orthodox Christian ideas of salvation, Kant refers in a footnote of the Conflict to the tradition of viewing Abraham's willingness to offer his son as "a symbol of the world-savior's own sacrifice."

There is considerable evidence that Kierkegaard's specific defense of the importance of a historical savior in Fragments and Postscript was a response to Kant's position in both these writings. If so, we can regard Fear and Trembling as an opening salvo in this intense battle with Kant — and by extension with any rationalist philosophy (including Hegel's) that underestimates the seriousness of sin and the radical measures needed to overcome it. To introduce these issues, Kierkegaard employs the figure of Abraham in a limited and purely symbolic way. Abraham is not a sinner. Fear and Trembling offers none of the analysis of sin and its psychology found in works like The Concept of Anxiety or The Sickness unto Death. Instead, the text uses Genesis 22 to establish the possibility of a realm of
faith above the realm of rational morality. Through Abraham’s experience on Mt. Moriah, we learn that God can transcend the ethical and enter directly into the lives of those who themselves have transcended the ethical (for whatever reason). Without God, we are told, Abraham is “lost” (FT 81). With God, Abraham the murderer becomes Abraham the father of faith. What Kierkegaard has done, in other words, is to establish an analogy between Abraham and God, on the one hand, and the rest of us and God, on the other. Some features of this analogy (the possibility of an absolute relationship to God that suspends the ethical) are relevant to both sides of the analogy, while others (the precise way in which Abraham and we suspend the ethical) are not.

This use of a biblical figure in a purely symbolic and typological way is not unique to Fear and Trembling. It occurs also in Repetition, with which Fear and Trembling was simultaneously published. Here it is Job who is used to explore the possibility of loss beyond “every thinkable human certainty and probability” of recovery (R 212). Like Abraham, Job gets everything back, including the family he had lost. Both men are undeniably innocent – Abraham because his deed results from a divine command, and Job by virtue of information given us in the prologue to the book. Yet Kierkegaard provides clues suggesting that each figure is a “type” for the loss and recovery represented by sin and forgiveness. In comments in his papers and in a draft for the manuscript of Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard considers presenting Abraham’s previous life “as not devoid of guilt,” with the result that the patriarch is led to “perceive the divine command as God’s punishment” (Pap. IV A 77; JP §5641; cf. Pap. IV B 66). In Repetition, Job’s righteousness is said to include “being proved to be in the wrong before God.” This important theme is familiar from the “Ultimatum” of Either/Or, where it introduces the idea of sin. Thus, in both Fear and Trembling and Repetition the suffering and redemption of innocent Biblical prototypes is used to hint at the experience of ordinary mortals. If God’s commands can imperil such paragons of virtue, what must these commands do to people like you and me caught up in frailty and sin? And if a personal relationship with God can redeem these men – returning to each the descendants he appeared to have lost – what wonders can God’s grace do in our lives? Shortly we will see that the familial aspect of
the Abraham and Job narratives adds yet another dimension to the complex analogy Kierkegaard is constructing.

Themes of sin and grace

It is common to deny that sin forms much of a theme in Fear and Trembling. Certainly, psychological and ethical issues capture most of the attention. Nevertheless, once we entertain the possibility that sin and forgiveness form an important deeper level of meaning in the text, these themes become far more apparent. The book’s title, for example, hearkens back to Paul’s discussion of sin, grace, and redemption in Philippians 2:12 with its reminder that “God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” The “Exordium” obliquely refers to God’s creation of free beings and their painful separation from him, and there are numerous smaller references to sin throughout the text [FT 13].

Although sin and forgiveness are only touched on early in the book, they suddenly spring up before us in the story of Agnes and the merman that dominates the third Problema. Examining the painful choices facing the merman who has seduced and then fallen in love with an innocent young woman, Johannes now embarks on an extended discussion of the problems of sin and repentance. “When the single individual by his guilt has come outside the universal,” Johannes tells us, “he can return only by virtue of having come as the single individual into an absolute relation to the absolute” [FT 98].

The discussion continues in the text and a footnote with a critique of Hegel’s concept of sin, with an observation on how sin takes the individual demonically higher than the universal, and with a statement that an ethics that ignores sin is a futile discipline while one that acknowledges it has exceeded itself. These observations are all prefaced by the remark, “Now here I would like to make a comment that says more than has been said at any point previously” [FT 98], and they close abruptly with the reminder that “nothing of what has been said here explains Abraham, for Abraham did not become the single individual by way of sin” [99].

It is no accident that Kierkegaard’s choice of words in this discussion, especially his remarks about the repentant individual having to come “as the single individual into an absolute relation to
"Developing" Fear and Trembling

the absolute" are identical with those Johannes uses earlier to describe Abraham's movement of faith. What Kierkegaard is here letting us know is that Abraham and the merman are counterparts, positive and negative expressions of the same problem. Both have suspended the ethical, one by obedience and one by sin, and both are saved only by a direct, supraethical relationship to God. Once we understand that Abraham functions as a figure for the problem of sin and atonement, I think we also can see that this discussion of sin is not a chance aside but a window into Fear and Trembling's deepest concerns.

Repetition provides confirming insight into Kierkegaard's authorial strategy in both these works. Like Fear and Trembling, most of Repetition ignores the problem of sin as it develops its special concern, the possibility of repetition in life. The focus is on the psychology of repetition and the experience of the young man who wishes to recover his alienated love. Job is introduced to expand the idea of loss and recovery, and near the end of this discussion, we find brief mention of Job as sinner (R 212). Yet in his papers, Kierkegaard repeatedly informs us that the true repetition involves a return to the integrity lost by sin. In a lengthy unpublished reply to Heiberg's review of Repetition, he dismisses Heiberg's vague appeal to repetition as involving "spiritual development of a self-conscious free will." Remarking that repetition "cannot be left in this nebulous way," he tells us that "it is a question of nullifying the repetition in which evil recurs and of bringing forth the repetition in which good recurs" (Pap. IV B 111 p. 267). In its highest sense, he states, repetition is atonement.27 In a long entry signed by the pseudonym Constantin Constantius, we are offered insight into the deeper intention of the book.

Repetition was insignificant, without any philosophical pretension, a droll little book, dashed off as an oddity, and curiously enough, written in such a way that, if possible, the heretics would not be able to understand it. . . . [T]he true repetition is eternity; however, that repetition [by being psychologically pursued so far that it vanishes for psychology as transcendent, as a religious movement by virtue of the absurd, which commences when a person has come to the border of the wondrous], as soon as the issue is posed dogmatically will come to mean atonement.28

The themes in this comment should by now be familiar to us from Fear and Trembling: a text with a deliberately hidden message; the
movement from psychology to dogmatics; and the intensification of religious consciousness "by virtue of the absurd." The considerable parallelism between these two works provides confirming evidence that themes of sin and grace are far more salient at this point in Kierkegaard's authorship than they are commonly assumed to be.

**Biographical correspondences**

The ordinary cautions against using the facts of an author's life to interpret his writings have special relevance to a writer like Kierkegaard. As the Hongs observe, "no writer has so painstakingly tried to preclude his readers' collapsing writer and works together and thereby transmogrifying the works into autobiography or memoir." Despite this, there can be no doubt that *Fear and Trembling* is among the most personal of Kierkegaard's writings. The events of his broken engagement to Regine Olsen provided an immediate stimulus for the book, and tales of frustrated love and marriages blocked by fate abound. In his papers Kierkegaard states boldly, "He who has explained this riddle has explained my life" (Pap. IV A 76; JP §5640).

Most commonly, the biographical correspondences here are linked to the ethical themes of the text. In his selection of Genesis 22, Kierkegaard is seen as providing Regine – his secret reader – an explanation of their broken relationship. Just as Abraham received a divine command to sacrifice what was dearest in his life, so Kierkegaard was compelled to obey the divine "governance" and set aside his worldly hopes of happiness in order to undertake his solitary vocation as a religious author. Regine herself contributed to this reading in later statements that cast the breach in these terms. This focus on conflicting ethical responsibilities and priorities also fits nicely with the view that the Problemata are primarily a rejection of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* with its preference for social role responsibilities over the individual existence.

In all his discussions of the biographical events that underlay the book, however, Kierkegaard offers a very different explanation. God, he tells us, had issued a "no" to the marriage. The reasons for this lay not in any call to a religious vocation but in Kierkegaard's own melancholy and sense of perdition – what he called "the eternal night brooding within me" (Pap. IV A 107 p. 43; JP §5664). This mel-
ancholy was itself the fruit of a familial tradition of sin begun by his father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard. The elder Kierkegaard's youthful curse of God from a hillock on Jutland heath and his sexual sins, including his extramarital relationship with Kierkegaard's mother, the handmaid Ane Lund, following his first wife's death, had led him to see himself as fated to lose his children as a punishment. Indeed, he did live to bury five of the seven Kierkegaard children. If there is a link between the Abraham story and Kierkegaard's life, therefore, it is the peril to which the elder Kierkegaard's acts had exposed the family. In this context, it is not Regine who plays the role of Isaac but Søren himself.

Abundant textual evidence supports the claim that the father's conduct forms a major biographical substratum to the book. Father-child themes abound, from the epigraph's opening mention of Tarquinius Superbus's secret message to his son, through the numerous tragic heroes whose conduct imperils their offspring, to the choice of Abraham. (In Repetition it is again a father, Job, whose relationship to God threatens his family.) The book's several tales of frustrated marriages—including Aristotle's story of the young man whose marriage threatens to "destroy a whole family"; and the stories of Sarah and Tobias and Agnes and the merman (Pap. IV B 111 p. 267)—all either assume family lines bearing a curse or unions blocked by a sinful past. Fear and Trembling may be a message to Regine, but it is not simply about Kierkegaard's call to a religious vocation. Rather, it is an explanation of why Søren, himself both sacrificer and sacrificial victim, Abraham and Isaac, had acted to spare her involvement in his family's melancholy fate.

Not that Fear and Trembling is wholly negative in this regard. Read as an examination of faith and grace, its larger message, whether directed to Kierkegaard's deceased father, to Regine, or to Kierkegaard himself, is one of hope. God's command imposes on Abraham a grueling ordeal. But in the end, God's sovereignty over ethics triumphs. Not only can he command murder, but he can make a murderer the father of faith. As Abraham discovered, God's last word is not death and condemnation. God can effect a teleological suspension of his justice to renew his relationship with an individual. With this anguished religious hope in mind, we can also perhaps better understand Johannes's repeated expressions of doubt that he could exhibit the kind of faith shown by Abraham. A sense
of inescapable sin and familial disaster had blocked Kierkegaard's marriage. Perhaps, in faith, one could make the absurd leap that Abraham did, believing that God could snatch life from the jaws of death and somehow continue a family line otherwise doomed to extinction. However, neither Kierkegaard nor his pseudonym is sure he possesses Abraham's faith. Against the background of these difficult beliefs we can better understand Kierkegaard's remark in his journal: "If I had had faith, I would have stayed with Regine" (Pap. IV A 107; JP §5664).34

V. TOWARD A TRANSPARENT TEXT

I have argued that as we proceed through Fear and Trembling we come across new themes and ever deeper levels of meaning. Beginning as an impassioned call to lived Christianity, the text leads through discussions of the psychology of faith and the ethical outlines of the Christian life and finally to themes of salvation, grace, and forgiveness.

Kierkegaard proposes a metaphor of the text as progressively disclosed by a caustic fluid. I want to close with the suggestion that a comprehensive reading of Fear and Trembling aims at a text that is a fully developed and transparent image. Although each level of meaning preserves its independent significance, the cumulative meaning grows with each new level of disclosure until we arrive at a penetrating view where each level of meaning is superimposed on and enhances the others.

The meaning of the call to lived commitment, for example, deepens as we encounter the demanding psychology of faith. Here the text not only challenges bourgeois complacency but uses a consummately bourgeois knight of faith to hint at the depths of suffering and interiority that mark true Christian faith. As we turn to the Problemata, both the call to commitment and the psychology of faith receive new significance from an outline of the normative demands of Christian life. With the suggestion that Christians may be required to go beyond the confines of family or nation to establish their own relation to the absolute, the themes of commitment, loss, infinite resignation, and faith are amplified and made concrete. Christian love emerges as selfless care rooted in the psychic renunciation of all proprietary claims.
Finally, we reach the level where themes of sin and grace predominate. Looked back on from here, the call to commitment is now seen to involve repentance: the awareness that one's life, however accomplished and successful by outward measures, stands under judgment. Applied to culture, this also becomes a critique of Hegelianized Christian civilization for its superficiality, pride, and obliviousness to sin. At the level of psychology, the two movements of faith also take on new meaning. Infinite resignation is now seen to require an abandonment of one's sense of moral integrity and an acknowledgment of the reality of sin (a movement the merman can make), whereas faith, the second movement, becomes an absurd hope of redemption and renewal beyond all one's reasoned claims or expectations (a movement beyond the merman's powers).

The awareness of sin and grace also permeates the specifically ethical level of the text with new significance. The radicalness of the Christian ethic—the possibility that one may be called to individual existence beyond family or state—sharpens obligations to the breaking point and eliminates any false sense of one's ability to comply with God's commands. Acceptance of Jesus's life as the pattern for one's own— including the command to "hate" one's father and mother (Luke 14:26)—establishes an ethic requiring virtually inhuman commitment. One who is aware of these ethical demands must conclude that "Before God, we are always in the wrong." At the same time, an appreciation of the depth of even our mundane human sins, our greed, lusts, and anger, renders naive any merely social definition of the self. Hegelian Sittlichkeit runs aground on its own spiritual shallowness. Here Fear and Trembling tells us that relationship to God, as judge and redeemer, takes primacy—and must precede—any social integration of the self. Seen in this way, as the acknowledgment of sin and acceptance of grace, the teleological suspension of the ethical becomes just that: a suspension of ethics rather than its annulment. Grace aims at one's full moral renovation. An awareness of God's gracious forgiveness ends self-obsession and pride, and elicits the selfless care that is morality's highest telos.

Earlier, we noted a deep tension at the ethical level of Fear and Trembling between the admiration repeatedly voiced for Abraham and the equally clear assertions that, ethically speaking, what he does amounts to murder. We saw that some commentators have
tried to overcome this tension by inappropriately ethicalizing Abraham's conduct. Viewed in relation to the themes of sin and grace, however, these seemingly opposed aspects of *Fear and Trembling* can be seen to reside comfortably beside one another. Like Paul and Luther before him, Kierkegaard can celebrate Abraham's transcendence of the moral law—in the sense that nothing whatsoever in his ethical conduct warrants his election or renown—while simultaneously holding him up as a model for all to emulate. Precisely because he is justified by grace alone, Abraham is deservedly the "father of faith." He is also a beacon to all those who knowingly "suspend the ethical" in a frank admission of sin and look to God alone for their salvation.

VI. CONCLUSION

*Fear and Trembling* has earned renown as a provocative statement of challenge. But it is far more than that. *Fear and Trembling* is an introduction or propaedeutic to Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole. Read at all the levels of its meaning, *Fear and Trembling* contains the major themes of Christian faith and ethics that will emerge in the ensuing pseudonymous works and many of the religious discourses. *Fear and Trembling* deserves the fame that Kierkegaard predicted for it, but that very fame may have obscured the fact that this is no eccentric statement by a youthful poet. It is a profound theological treatise firmly rooted in the Pauline and Lutheran tradition to which Kierkegaard belonged.

NOTES

1 For an analysis of *Fear and Trembling* in terms of this image, see my "Deciphering *Fear and Trembling's* Secret Message," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 95–111. The choice here of the metaphor of photographic development signals my more recent view that *Fear and Trembling* contains not one but a series of interrelated manifest and latent meanings.


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6 A similar reading is offered by Geoffrey Clive, who argues that the ethical that is transcended or suspended here is the morality of general rules. “The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical in Nineteenth-Century Literature,” The Journal of Religion 34 (April 1954): 75–87.


8 Ibid., p. 212.


15 Witness the importance of James 1:17–22, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,” in his religious discourses.


18 Isaaks Opferung christlich gedeutet (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1950).

21 The Conflict of the Faculties, p. 119n.
22 Ibid., p. 121n.
24 In the Supplement to Repetition, the Hongs' footnote at this point adds: "In a copy of Enten/Eller. II [SV II 306], Kierkegaard wrote: 'If a person is most fully in the right, before God he ought always have an even higher expression: that he is in the wrong, for no human being can penetrate his consciousness absolutely' [Papirer IV A 256]."
26 Edward F. Mooney describes these sections of Fear and Trembling as presenting ordeals of love and separation, and he notes that in Postscript Kierkegaard relates these same ideas to God, whose creation of free beings involves an act of resignation in granting such beings independence over against himself. Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 30.
27 This remark is in a preliminary draft of Pap. IV B 117 that appears in Pap. IV B 118 p. 300. This passage is translated in the Supplement to Repetition, p. 320.
28 Pap. IV B 120 p. 306. This passage is translated in the Supplement to Repetition, p. 324.
29 "Historical Introduction," in Fear and Trembling and Repetition, p. xi.
30 These include mention of the young swain and princess {FT 41-5}; a young girl forced by her parents to marry someone other than the one she loves {85}; a young swain blocked from possessing his beloved because doing so will "destroy a whole family" {85}; a bridegroom "to whom the augurs prophesied a calamity that would have its origin in his marriage" {89-92}; Queen Elizabeth's sacrifice of her love, Essex, for the state {93-4}; the tale of Agnes and the merman {94-9}; and the story of Sarah and Tobias {102-6}.
32 Sylviane Agacinski argues that the unmentioned sin that underlay the elder Kierkegaard's sense of perdition was the rape of the handmaid, Ane Lund. See her Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierke-
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33 Malantschuk, Kierkegaard's Thought, p. 238.


35 This conforms to the text’s insistence that only a suspension of ethics is being implied; FT 54.
Kierkegaard's slim book *Repetition* was published in 1843 on the same day as *Fear and Trembling*. Six weeks later he published a discourse on *The Book of Job*. The theme of sudden loss and wondrous restoration recurs: Abraham must release Isaac and then he gets him back; Job is stripped of his world and then he gets it back. The book *Repetition* alludes to Job's yearning for his world's return and also depicts the suffering of a young man who has lost his love and yearns for her return. These motifs provide a clue to the concept of repetition. The question posed by *Repetition* is whether repetition is possible, whether a world or loved one, now lost, can be restored. But unraveling either the text or the concept is not a straightforward task.

I. PRELIMINARIES

*Repetition* is written under the pseudonym Constantin Constantius. It gives ample grist for dialectical mills: repetition is paired with *kinesis*, the Aristotelian "motion" of becoming, and it is marked as "the task of freedom." We learn that repetition is (paradoxically) both "the interest of metaphysics and the interest on which all metaphysics comes to grief" (*R* 149). But these remarks are largely undeveloped, and to complicate matters, they are inserted casually, perhaps even ironically, within a book that reads as a puzzling romantic roman à cléf or novella. Theoretical insights float precariously on a complex literary surface. However serious the idea of repetition is for Kierkegaard, in this book it often seems to flicker merely as an artifice or entertainment. Walter Lowrie confesses that
Repetition: Getting the world back

of all the Kierkegaardian terms of art, none “is more important and none so baffling” as repetition. And the same might be said of the novella. In his journals, Kierkegaard calls it “insignificant, without any philosophical pretension, a droll little book, dashed off as an oddity.” But this jest itself is meant to throw us off the scent.

Why are Kierkegaard’s intentions so concealed? At least three factors motivate his indirections and disguises. First, there is the autobiographical factor. Kierkegaard was immersed in the stories of Job and Abraham, writing the “Job Discourse,” Fear and Trembling, and Repetition, precisely as he was breaking off his engagement to Regine Olsen, and then, belatedly, wishing for a reconciliation. Both Job and Abraham were beneficiaries of a wondrous repetition or return. If they were candidates for divine restorations, then Kierkegaard too might be eligible for repetition—if only he could attain exemplary faith. But it would be embarrassing, to say the least, for his regret that he had abandoned Regine to become public knowledge.

A second and more philosophical factor bringing Kierkegaard to strategies of irony and indirection springs from his awareness that his “enlightened” Copenhagen was in fact deceived about its spiritual condition. He aimed for a social critique of bourgeois Christendom, yet realized that a direct attack would not do—at least not as a beginning. Repetition might work its renewals at this more inclusive, social level, but if so, what discursive resources could Kierkegaard rely on? He adopts a familiar literary form, the novella or roman à cléf, to capture the interest of his readers while evading or disarming their defenses. An otherwise disquieting critique thus becomes less threatening. But there is more at work here than a matter of convenience or diplomacy, the advantage of soft pedaling an otherwise brutal social or personal judgment. The conceptual resources available for Kierkegaard’s critique are embedded in the very languages and traditions he finds corrupt. He wants to push the revisionary—or revolutionary—potential of the idea he calls repetition through the various ethical, aesthetic, political, and religious strata of the world he inherits. Yet if he is to be heard, he must speak in the flawed language, evoking the flawed perceptions and understandings, of the very world he wishes to undo. In this light, irony and disguise are unavoidable strategic devices, devices that
necessarily mimic the defenses Kierkegaard wishes to penetrate. At first glance, what do we have in Repetition? It seems we're handed a casual novella that recounts the yearnings of a love-sick youth and delivers offhand asides about Greek philosophy and the sufferings of Job. But beneath this facade, Repetition becomes a Trojan horse from which a critique of its apparently casual aesthetic musing can enter the cultural stronghold undercover.

Third, Kierkegaard's concepts are fluid and elusive because they develop through the course of his authorship. Indirection and disguise allow him the authorial distance to alter, complicate, or revise his views without having to go on record spelling out the exact nature of the change. Often he may himself be uncertain of the precise extent of a concept's development or complication, an overview becoming available only in considerable retrospect. For example, the faith of Judge William in Either/Or is not Abraham's faith, and neither William's nor Abraham's faith is Socratic or strictly Christian. Similarly, repetition may have one meaning in the context of an aesthetic or ethical way of life and quite another even contrary meaning as one approaches a Christian life. Concepts change as the context of their elucidation changes, and as Kierkegaard's literary, moral, and philosophical intentions change. An obviously perverse "repetition" appears in the discussion of Mozart's Don Giovanni in Either/Or, Part I. A respectable but still inadequate repetition-like movement is proposed by Judge William, who warns the aesthete to "choose himself," to choose the ethical. The anticipated "metamorphosis" of self is a retaking or restoration of the detail of one's life, reviving and thus repeating it under an ethical frame. But these early descriptions of a need of repetition, or even of its ethical necessity, in the long run are false leads. The judge's view of self-choice as repetition fails because it assumes that self-consolidation can be achieved as a matter of effort or willpower. It becomes corrected (or reversed) in Kierkegaard's later discussions of Job and Abraham. True repetition, what Kierkegaard calls "repetition in the pregnant sense," is something received, a grant of life and world, not an outcome that can be cornered. It is the restoration Johannes de silentio, in Fear and Trembling, calls faith's "second movement," the return of Isaac, the beloved, or worldly life. We will consider the details of this religious repetition and its seductive counterfeits in sections III and IV.
Kierkegaard dubs the author of *Repetition* "Constantin Constantius." The name, take note, is itself a repetition. It recreates eponymously the tension between something *constant* [an element to be repeated] and *motion* [something repeated]. And if we probe further, there are several more clues to repetition contained in Kierkegaard's choice of pseudonym.

The name can call to mind, second, someone who is steadfast, a pillar of strength on whom a friend might rely. In fact, as the novella unfolds, Constantin does appear as a steady object - at least to a young man shaken by an unhappy love who turns to him in a series of confidential letters collected in the second part of *Repetition*. Contrasted with his more volatile young counterpart, Constantin appears constant. But there is a third possibility. The name might also call to mind one who seeks constancy, has this as his goal - not one who has in fact achieved it. And indeed Constantin finds himself on a "psychological experiment" seeking constancy through repetition (or constantly seeking repetition). He would corner repetition, intellectually and theoretically; he sets about the task of reproducing it experientially. If the notion of repetition has substance, he ought to be able to relive the experience of a fondly recalled trip to Berlin. Hence portions of *Repetition*'s first half concern Constantin's comical attempt to get things back the way they were on an earlier outing.

Fourth, the constancy of Constantin may be in fact an existential complacency. Although his young friend may lean on him, to a disinterested observer he seems a rather hollow figure, a questionable friend with all too glib advice. Furthermore, Constantin's "interest" in repetition is at most halfhearted. His complacency is unmistakable if we compare his idle play with repetition to the terrifying, gripping need of repetition overwhelming Abraham or Job. Constantin's facile counsel for his friend, his philosophical flourishes, and his side trip to Berlin are little more than aesthetic diversions. In a novella of many fits and starts, Kierkegaard's invention of Constantin Constantius as his pseudonym is just the beginning of a complex and sometimes nearly indecipherable string of ambiguities.

*Repetition* opens with Constantin's lectures on pagan versus Christian views, and his confident announcement that repetition is...
"the new category that will be discovered" (R 148). He predicts it will supplant or defeat the fashionable Hegelian reliance on "mediation" and will be found superior to Greek "recollection" - these being repetition's two metaphysical competitors.

Repetition, mediation, and recollection are offered as alternative solutions to the problem of transition or motion, especially the transitions of self-development. How does one move, for example, from an aesthetic to an ethical way of life? If Hegelian mediation were the key to motion or development, we would expect a pattern of "immanent negations." A quite simplified sequence of such negations could be described as follows. Begin with an initial state where an infant and its surroundings are largely undifferentiated. In the course of time, this initial state gets "negated": an individual emerges through opposition to its context. (We might picture here the rebellions of an adolescent against family and society.) In this hypothetical scenario, differentiation could lead to an increasing sense of alienation and isolation. But with increasing maturity, this lonely rootlessness itself may be negated as the social matrix of civic morality supervenes. Notice that this pattern of development is general or universal; its goal is "moral," construed in this case as the assimilation of modes of cultural and civic decency or propriety; it is exclusively natural or immanent; and it proceeds entirely by negations.

Constantin mocks this progression as the "1, 2, 3," dance step of Hegelian dialectic (R 226). Perfectly general or universal schemes of moral advance bury the crucial factor of individual choice, of personal decision in moral progress; the goal of assimilation is a tawdry substitute for the proper goal of continuing individuation; a purely immanent natural process excludes the "transcendent" interventions and bestowals familiar even in secular experience (say, in moments of falling in love, in awe or insight, in encountering the sublime); such transcendent interventions are obviously essential to any Christian perspective where revelation plays a role; and finally, to characterize personal "motion" or advance as powered exclusively through "negation" is distorting.

Consider the contrasting model of transitions in development provided by Judge William in Either/Or. A self, an individual self, will choose or receive itself. This occurs one by one, not as a collective or general movement. As the judge describes the develop-
ment of personality, the place of such decision and responsibility becomes preeminent. Furthermore, the self choosing itself does not advance exclusively through negations. Choice is positive. And the self receiving itself (Judge William's second picture of the self in motion) explicitly draws on powers higher than itself, powers that can confer a self. Here transcendence (nonimmanence) is explicit. Development is not just a natural historical process, but one intertwined with transcendent spirit.

If we go along with Kierkegaard in assuming that this disposes of the Hegelian account of movement in terms of a series of mediations, alternatives to this account nevertheless remain. Constantin avers that "If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty meaningless noise" \(R 149\). If mediation fails, why not consider Platonic recollection? To avoid the disintegration of life into a meaningless hubbub, do we need a "new category" of repetition?

For Plato, we move toward the Good by "recollection," by contact with a Form, a meaning source that already exists in some static "past eternity," a good that becomes accessible to us in memory through Socratic questioning. This escape from a meaningless life of noise would be "backward" into a timeless past. In contrast, Kierkegaard offers a forward future-oriented move toward a God or Good of open possibilities, not fixed finalities. Repetition is not just a grant of one's familiar life as it was previously possessed—now devoid of noise and chatter (although it is partially this). It is also, paradoxically, the delivery of new and surprising meaning. God will appear to Job in an extraordinary Whirlwind, in violation of all natural expectations; and in the context of Abraham's crisis, what could be less anticipated than God's demand for Isaac or Isaac's subsequent return?

Still courting paradox, Constantin claims that repetition and recollection are the same movement, but in opposite directions; and he characterizes repetition as "recollection forward." This formulation is not exactly transparent, but neither is it a piece of diversionary nonsense. If it is an oxymoron, it can be unpacked.

Take the movement at issue to be a movement toward meaning or value, a gathering of meaning, say, into the present. If this gathering is faced backward we have a Platonic collection (or recollection) of meaning; if this gathering is faced forward toward the
future, then we have a repetition, a reception of meaning that is radiating not from one's past but from one's future—toward one's present, offering to receptive agents open fields of possibility.

Constantin waxes professorial on recollection, mediation, and repetition. He declares that "repetition is the interest of all metaphysics and the interest on which it founders" (R 149). But this theoretical vein soon runs dry. His attention wanders. He shifts from unveiling his "new category" to wondering if the whole business of repetition might be illusory. The question What is repetition? is replaced by the question Is repetition possible?

Ironically, Constantin is quite inconstant in his aims. Furthermore, having changed his question, he also changes his approach entirely. On a whim, he sets off to find his answer not by continuing his philosophical and poetic reflections but by embarking on a journey. His task will be to replicate, to try to repeat, the experiences of an earlier journey.

His return to Berlin in search of repetition is rendered in fine-grained detail. There is a jolting coach ride to the city, a visit to the theater and a fondly remembered café. We meet the now-married German hotel manager, his previous host. As Constantin shows off his literary talent, the project of an experimental test of repetition recedes in importance, overshadowed by his story-telling magic. Perhaps we should have expected this inconstancy, for just as he shifts gear from his professorial exegesis to his mesmerizing travelogue, Constantin warns us that his whole interest in repetition may be a trick, a farce. Quoting Hamann with approval, he says

[I] express myself in various tongues and speak the language of sophists, of puns, of Cretans and Arabians, of whites and Moors and Creoles, and babble a confusion of criticism, mythology, rebus, and axioms, and argue now in a human way and now in an extraordinary way. (R 149)

(Yet he also asks us to assume that what he says "is not a mere lie" [R 149]. Reader beware!)

Perhaps Constantin is like a soldier returning nostalgically to a scene of battle, or like a lover returning to old haunts, hoping for a glimpse of the beloved. If so, we would expect his trip to show a yearning, a wish for roots and the familiar where one could be the self one once was, and thus relieve the ache of exile or aimless wandering. But for Constantin there is no ache, no longing. There is no
drama or suffering in his search for the familiar. Nothing deeper than curiosity moves him to try the coffee across town at a favorite shop ($R_{170}$).

In *Fear and Trembling* repetition is much more sharply pitched. Abraham's belief that Isaac will be restored, his expectation of repetition, is more than curiosity about whether Isaac can be restored. Abraham's ordeal is not a casual "experiment" to validate an hypothesis. Even to say that Abraham *needs* Isaac returned, though true, is massive understatement. Or consider Job's grief, his need for repetition. Constantin neither needs Berlin nor grieves its loss. The Berlin experiment is childish whimsy.

In the opening pages of *Repetition*, Constantin seemed serious about his "new category" of repetition that would replace recollection or mediation, and that had potential for restoring passion, life, to a dull and dampened world. But now the scene has changed. His talk of repetition may be only puns, babble, sophism. He embarks on a misguided and trivial experiment, and comes up with negative results: he declares that everything in Berlin has changed, which proves that repetition is impossible. But as ever, we should be cautious drawing conclusions. The Berlin experiment is only a partial test, and empirical tests, however complete, are inappropriate for proof or disproof of a metaphysical theory. Kierkegaard is surely aware that his concept can't be so easily dismissed. In the same tenor as his experimental side-trip, Constantin's withdrawal of belief in repetition is mainly theater. *Fear and Trembling* and the "Job Discourse" take the category seriously, providing *Repetition*'s required counterpoint.

Apart from illustrating Constantin's literary-dialectical prowess, and the inconstancy, complacency and indifference of his character, the zig-zag course of *Repetition*'s opening narrative raises two larger questions. The first is whether repetition is the master-element in a metaphysical theory, or is instead a critical, antimetaphysical device. The second is whether repetition is something humans can achieve by work or effort. Let me consider the second here, reserving the question of metaphysics and antimetaphysics for later.

Constantin decides that repetition is impossible, but behind the curtain of his conclusion lies a more serious point. Seeking repetition may be like shoving on a door that opens only inward or pushing one that only someone else can open. If Job or Abraham provide
our pattern for a successful repetition, their success is surely not the outcome of a specific effort to get repetition. Job does not labor furiously to repossess his world; Abraham does not labor to retrieve his son. In fact, attempts to regain what they had lost would backfire.

Sometimes value lost is reacquired precisely when we stop trying to regain it. We may need a stance of receptivity, willingness, rather than the narrow focus of willed achievement. We are told in Kierkegaard's papers that at its highest, repetition gives up the idea of self-sufficiency. Realizing that the outcome of our search for roots or love or world is not under our control may be a necessary condition of openness toward emerging roots or love or world, and hence the satisfaction of the need. Giving up on repetition as an explicit task is preparation for repetition as world-bestowal. Whatever one's need of repetition, one cannot be bent on forcing its appearance.

III. REPETITION: THE LETTERS

We should not neglect the young man who suffers unrequited love. The second part of Repetition includes a collection of letters written to Constantin from this nameless youth who has come to Constantin for counsel. This story of unrequited love provides the third angle in Repetition's triangulation of the concept "repetition." There is the lab experiment, repetition as the attempt to duplicate results experientially; there is a metaphysical or antimetaphysical task, the attempt to unravel dialectically the concept; and there is an existential challenge, the hope for repetition as support or faith in weathering an ordeal where life itself may be at risk. Repetition, however, does not complete this third angle of approach. If we want a figure who actually meets repetition's existential challenge, who undergoes the ebb and flow of a higher ethico-religious repetition, we must turn to Job or Abraham: neither Constantin nor his companion will do.

This nameless young man's suffering reminds us of the young man in Fear and Trembling, not quite a "knight of faith," but one who advances above the "slaves of misery, the frogs in life's swamp." Johannes de silentio describes a lad who resigns his love and all his hope for worldly happiness, but as a "knight of infinite resignation" steadfastly cherishes her eternal image (FT 41–6; FT 70–5). To be a knight of faith, he would have to sustain a hope of repetition, of her
return, even as he acknowledges her loss. But this, we are told, is a "movement" the lad cannot perform. He has given up all hope for her return.

*Repetition*’s young man is neither a knight of faith nor a knight of resignation, as we will see, though his stance is a charming mimic of a knight of faith. In his favor, he craves repetition, a return of his beloved, which shows that his relationship to repetition is deeper than Constantin’s idle curiosity. Like Job, to whom he woefully appeals as a companion in suffering, he hopes his world, his love, will be returned. But he is not prepared, morally or religiously, for the sort of repetition granted to Job or Abraham.

Consider the young friend’s cry for help. He calls out to Job for comfort. This resembles Johannes de silentio in *Fear and Trembling* calling out to “Father Abraham” for help in understanding the painful enigma that Abraham represents (*FT* 23; *FT* 56). But in both cases, the lyrical invocation of a biblical figure may seem contrived and sentimental. Could Abraham or Job really aid these wayward poets? *Repetition*’s young man, like the poet Johannes de silentio, values the effect the biblical allusion will create and the importance cast on his own plight through this grandiose association. Imitating Job, he “awaits his thunderstorm,” a storm he hopes will restore his world (*R* 214). But is it really credible that he suffers as Job does, or that appealing to Job might help, or that a world-restoring Whirlwind might appear again, in particular to him?

There are other grounds to suspect these calls for help. Why would the youth expect that Constantin could give him solace in his pain? Are we to believe Constantin is capable, through word, deed, or silent presence, of compassionate response to another’s concrete suffering? Finally, there is a hint that Constantin has staged this existential crisis, that the young man does not exist apart from Constantin’s literary contrivance. He boasts to have “brought the poet into existence” (*R* 228). After all, is it beneath Constantin’s power of invention to produce letters (apparently from a young man) as a foil, as part of a purely narrative exercise?

Constantin sets himself lower than his creation, averring that his friend is now a “poet whose soul has taken on a religious resonance” (*R* 228). But why take this characterization at face value? On reading the young man’s letters, do we find that his voice conveys a religious sheen – as opposed, say, to a shallow sentimental one?
Without Constantin’s aside, I think we’d see that neither he nor his friend are qualified to be recipients of truly deep repetition—what Kierkegaard elsewhere calls “repetition in the pregnant sense.” For each of them, theatricality seems a stronger element of personality than responsibility.

Both Constantin and his friend lack the moral-religious seriousness requisite for the sort of religious repetition we find in Job or Abraham. As Constantin avers, the youth may be “born to himself” as a poet (R 221). And it’s true that both can experience momentary aesthetic bliss. But neither seems prepared for the repetitions of self-choice that Judge William counsels, let alone a more strenuously religious repetition. As Constantin frankly puts it, “the delights of conception” are to be valued over “the pains of childbirth” (I.4.1). Being entertained by seductive ideas is preferred to the labor of bringing oneself to birth, or to the further steps of resigning the world, preparing for what Johannes de silentio would call faith’s second movement.

IV. THEORY AND ANTITHEORY

Stepping back from the narrative texture of Repetition, I’d like to test the more abstract characterizations of the “new category” that Constantin provides. Is repetition the keystone of a metaphysical arch?

Kierkegaard was pleased that his idea of repetition could be expressed in simple Danish (R 149). His master-concept travels almost anonymously without philosophical pretensions. It is the linguistic equivalent of Fear and Trembling’s unassuming shopkeeper knight of faith. Repetition is explicitly connected with a host of other metaphysical concepts (freedom, consciousness, kinesis, and so forth); and Constantin characterizes repetition as the interest of metaphysics, as if it were theory’s crowning goal. But the case is not straightforward. He also says that repetition will bring metaphysics to grief. So its main work might be deflationary, a tool to counter recollection or mediation. Or given Constantin’s whimsical detachment from theory, it might be projected as a literary or academic toy.

Given these possibilities, I suggest that we proceed by granting Kierkegaard (and Constantin) an intermediate “parametaphysical” or “critical” Kantian position. That is, we’ll assume that the field of
metaphysical concepts surrounding repetition is intended seriously by Kierkegaard, but also that the theory we pursue is explicitly self-critical, metaphysics in battle with its own limits. Thus it is less than settled positive doctrine but more than Constantin’s bluff, bluster, and deflationary feints.35

It may come as a surprise that Kierkegaard’s critical approach can be characterized as broadly Kantian – Kantian, insofar as we enter metaphysics largely to press toward and define its limits.26 Kant is simultaneously the champion of enlightenment reason and the critic of “pure” metaphysical reason. Without hesitation or reserve Kierkegaard adopts Kant’s critique of speculative reason. It is more surprising, however, that the general thrust of Kierkegaard’s category of repetition itself can be sketched by a Kantian analogy (and contrast). Alastair Hannay puts the matter this way:

It is as though the structuring of the world of experience were to be seen in a Kantian way as taking shape in the form of inner intuition, and the psycho-temporal pair of recollection and repetition give you two ways of understanding the temporal constitution in consciousness of the only kind of reality that can save you from boredom and nihilism. But there is a sharp opposition to Kant, too, for in order to achieve that kind of reality your relation to a transcendent God plays an essential part. There is no way of “returning” to the universal [a shared reality that matters] within the limits of reason alone.27

Kierkegaard holds that our initial, premoral and prereligious connection with the world and others is insufficient, a first or aesthetic immediacy, bound to end in “boredom and nihilism.” With the world-conferral of repetition, we are granted a “second immediacy,” a vital connection through which things and persons matter, a connection more adequate to our human and spiritual needs. Setting aside this intriguing parallel (and contrast) with Kant, let us turn to Kierkegaard’s own sketch of “the constitution in consciousness” of a reality worth having.

There are numerous metaphysical remarks about repetition scattered throughout Repetition.28 In a page from Kierkegaard’s journals, written just after the text’s publication, we find these gathered in a single compact passage, part of a letter addressed to “My dear Reader.” The intent is precisely to address a reader needing some assistance in deciphering the metaphysical import of “repetition.” This unpublished (and undelivered) letter, unlike the published novella, nests repetition in its theoretical context.
Let us consider these drastically abbreviated claims in sequence. First, how is repetition a task for freedom?

Approached from the side of a self becoming itself, a task for freedom is a task for self. A self's task is increasing its freedom, increasing its openness toward the possibility of repetition. Being closed off from the world of existential possibilities (where one could find oneself) is to be cast into aesthetic indifference and despair:

\[\ldots \text{get me possibility, get me possibility, the only thing that can save me is possibility! A possibility and the despaired breathes again, he revives; for without possibility it is as though a person cannot draw a breath.}\]

*The Sickness unto Death* defines the self as freedom (*SUD* 29; *SUDh* 59). As we have seen from the examples of Job and Abraham, repetition is not attained by willpower alone, by making plans and taking steps to secure its possession. Nevertheless, there is labor involved in remaining open, in the midst of a devastating loss, to the possibility of repetition. In that sense, repetition is a task, a job for freedom.31

To picture the contrast between repetition as a task and repetition as a reception, consider the difference between musicians taking a repeat (playing a section again with appropriate variation) and the attentive hearing, the “reception,” of that repeat by an awakened audience. Individuals assume, or are placed in, both roles: they are both “performers” and “audience” in the music of creation and self development. But as one moves toward the religious or wondrous, one becomes less an actor than an alert receptor. Here the job of freedom is sustaining receptivity. A nondespairing self is ready at every instant both to resign the world (as target of one's interventions) and get it back again (as gift).32 The world one gets is in part a function of the self one is: a self tempered, alert, and open; and the self one gets is in part a function of the world one has: a world stocked with worth that calls on and stills the business of mobile selves. Self and world become reciprocally articulate.
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Approached from the side of world-conferral, repetition is a transcendental task performed in the bestowal of a world to Job, an Isaac to Abraham, or a beloved to a lover. It is a task performed in the name of freedom. If, as Johannes de silentio has it in *Fear and Trembling*, God is that all things are possible, then we might say that insofar as God has tasks, these are also the tasks of opening possibilities "at the border of the wondrous."33 A task in the name of freedom is accomplished as world and self become revived in toto – as in the wonder of Job's encounter with the Whirlwind, or as Abraham receives a new Isaac. Repetition signifies freedom's possibilities bequeathed to otherwise despairing individuals. A nondespairing self depends on the resources of repetition to sustain its freedom; and the freedom of a self is expressed in terms of its receptivity to the bestowal of such resources.34

Repetition is also "consciousness raised to the second power."35 Consciousness can turn on itself, and this process can be repeated. We can have worries, and worries about our worries – and that's worth worrying about! For any given datum of consciousness, we are free to reflect on it and free to take up a stance toward it. This dual capacity, to reflect and to "take up," might be called the core of human freedom.

I may be bound in some respects, but I am free both to reflect on this fact from various perspectives (some strongly evaluative, some relatively indifferent) and also to take up one of those perspectives as the one that is mine. Humans who have moved beyond brute response to the given or beyond a sophisticated aesthetic indifference will have the capacity to respond in their worlds with the intensity of second-order reflection, second-order care, or as Kierkegaard has it, "consciousness raised to the second power (R 149).36

Constantin calls repetition a modern view in contrast to an "ethical" view (R 149).37 In this tribal or traditionalist view, self-identity is secured by successful assimilation into prevailing cultural currents. In contrast, repetition requires for identity that we step back from these common currents to a stance ready for individual evaluations and individual self-choice. This flows naturally from the idea that "repetition is a task for freedom."

Moving through the items in Kierkegaard's letter, we are told next that "repetition is the interest of metaphysics" (R 149). What could this mean? We might think of metaphysics as whatever scheme
confers meaning on the largest range of things. In that case, we certainly have an interest in achieving such an integrated global picture. And repetition may be the keystone in such a scheme. Humans seek wholeness and completion as well as difference, and in the largest scheme of things. This pursuit is a matter of individual initiative and, when vigorous, laden with subjective passion. Seeking repetition can be construed as a quasi-metaphysical quest. But we must beware, for Constantin goes on to claim that repetition is what brings metaphysics to grief.

Perhaps repetition is the sort of limiting or totalizing concept we can aspire to possess, to aim at, but which we nevertheless can never hope to fully grasp. If so our efforts come to grief in the way that Kant suggests all our metaphysical endeavors must ultimately founder. In a famous passage from the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant confesses that we are fated to pursue metaphysical inquiries “that [we] can never abandon and yet [are] unable to carry to completion.” And there may be a more specific, existential reason why “repetition” will defy a satisfactory intellectual completion or explication.

Presumably, we are seekers, not as some abstract general mind but as singular, interested individuals. Yet metaphysics is a perfectly general theory of the meaning of things, geared to satisfy any and all interested parties, and so does not provide a special purchase for the needs of anyone in particular. Thus its structure must itself frustrate our understanding of the personal or existential nature of its quest. We seek to get out of the world to get a better view of it; but then we find we’re not part of the world we’ve escaped. In fact, we’re to be found nowhere in particular and hence nowhere period. Constantin’s friend turns to Job, not to metaphysics, for comfort in his pain. So our metaphysics comes to grief. It cannot give me meaning if it remains bound to a universality that excludes my particularity and to an objectivity that excludes my passions.

Why should repetition be “the watchword (or password) in every ethical view”? Why does “every ethical view” need a password – the sort of sign sentries exchange in the dark? From the standpoint of Fear and Trembling, ethics as a conventional code of requirements and prohibitions is insufficient. The crisis-ridden world of Abraham is a not-so-subtle critique of the complacent world of Judge William, just as the “Job Discourse” is a critique of Constan-
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tin Constantius's superficial interest in repetition. We need a password to escape the temptations of Constantin's aesthetic playground or Judge William's world of civic propriety. The municipal and family ethics of the judge needs a supplement. Repetition is the password that provides relief when the radical insufficiency of bourgeois ethics becomes inescapably apparent.

An ethics of Judge William's variety founders on its own requirements. It requires a responsibility for self and others that outstrips what moral agents can deliver on their own. As the burden of moral suffering caused by awareness of this inability inevitably grows, ethics will reach an impasse. It would be a shameful capitulation to relieve the accumulated moral debt by slackening moral demands. And relief through forgiveness is also outside the provenance of ethics. The forgiveness we need cannot be required of any friend or acquaintance or moral judge; hence ethics cannot secure it for us.\(^{42}\) In Kierkegaard's view, if forgiveness arrives it must come from a more-than-moral or transcendental source. Repetition becomes atonement or forgiveness "from above," a transcendental gift of world-renewal in which our moral tasks can be resumed. Repetition is the "password," providing escape from an otherwise intolerable moral burden, in every ethical view. Our watch is relieved. In addition, repetition is the *sine qua non* of all dogmatics (forgiveness of sin cannot be other than a matter of faith).\(^{43}\) As the "dogma" of forgiveness, repetition grants relief from otherwise unbearable moral pain.

Next is the enigmatic claim that "eternity is the true repetition" (\textit{R} 221). Perhaps the idea is this, that the source of world-bestowal will hover "outside of time," arching over those worldly, temporal things on which repetition bestows meaning, sense, and worth. Eternity would be the domain from which true repetition flows - or so we might suppose. Pursuit of repetition, then, is pursuit of eternity, the answer to a metaphysical, personal, and existential interest.\(^{44}\) One gets the world, the finite and familiar, back again, repeated, but now under the aegis of infinite value, limitless importance.

Finally, as we have seen, "repetition will come to mean atonement." But in the letter to "My dear Reader" this claim is interrupted by a long parenthetical remark that I excised in my original quotation. Here is the passage with parentheses restored:
repetition (by being pursued so far that it vanishes for psychology as transcendent, as a religious movement by virtue of the absurd, which commences when a person has come to the border of the wondrous) will come to mean atonement. 45

Let us work through this parenthesis.

Repetition can be an object of psychological reflection or it can ascend to a status far too grand or uncanny for psychology to encompass. When we desire the return of something loved and lost, we desire repetition. Both this desire and its hoped-for fulfillment are comprehensible in terms of our ordinary psychology. Perhaps the person we loved is only temporarily removed, and there are clear reasons to believe that she or he may be returned. If we, however, desire the return of someone for all intents and purposes unavailable, then comprehension in terms of natural expectations starts to falter.

If like Abraham we both desire to obey God in his demand that Isaac be sacrificed and equally desire that Isaac be restored, the subject "vanishes for psychology." It vanishes in the sense that we can give no intelligible account of how two incompatible beliefs can be held with equal fervor. It is impossible, we might say, to believe a contradiction - at least from the standpoint of commonsense psychology. And if Isaac is returned, that event also shatters or transcends psychological comprehension. Witnessing the return of Isaac or the return of Job's world, we stand in awe, beyond the urge - or capacity - to offer explanation. So both the religious desire for Isaac's return (or for the return of Job's world) and the religious fulfillment of those desires will be "movement[s] by virtue [or on the strength] of the absurd." 46 They defy psychology. Job and Abraham receive religious repetition at "the border of the wondrous," or "the marvelous" - at the threshold of the sublime (R 185). 47

The story of Job is a story that the young man in Repetition knows by heart and repeats every night during his affliction. Several of his letters attempt an interpretation that parallels the pattern of discussion in the "Job Discourse." Job exemplifies a "boundary situation." To be, as Job is, at the limit of human (or perhaps ethical) understanding amounts to Job's discovery that he can be denied the sort of justice or account that he demands yet nevertheless be granted a value-laden world through the Whirlwind despite the reality of his suffering. 48
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Job works at "the border of the marvelous" because in his straits any bestowal will seem wondrous, given his deprivation, bleak prospects, and nearness to despair. And secondly, this bestowal is wondrous because he's not granted just any ordinary world. The world delivered through the Whirlwind's voice is filled with magnificence and power, the wonder of the heavens, the stars, the sea and all its creatures—things the same yet born anew. Third, Job is at "the border of the marvelous" because this world-conferral or repetition successfully outstrips or bypasses his ethical demands—without thereby defeating him: as his world is renewed, so is he.

Repetition is characterized here as a movement "by virtue of the absurd." Isaac was in his father's care, was lost, then restored; this second grant is itself a repetition of his initial marvelous delivery to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Repetition signals the wondrous conferral of Isaac, against all worldly expectation and independently of Abraham's efforts to achieve his end directly. He does not set out to get Isaac back, but to sacrifice him. Isaac's return marks a religious repetition "on the strength of the absurd," not a psychologically comprehensible outcome of Abraham's work for repetition. And ultimately, repetition is linked with Christian doctrine in which saving value is first wondrously embodied, then lost or stripped away, and finally faithfully expected to return: not on the strength of a rational prediction, and not on the basis of a metaphysical axiom known to be true, but on the strength of faith that baffles reason. Hence, once more, repetition becomes a sine qua non of dogmatics.

These last parenthetical remarks from the passage to "My dear Reader" reinforce the view that faith occurs on the other side of theory, where "the wondrous" marks the edge of viable metaphysics or moral psychology. Whether as a task for freedom, as consciousness raised to the second power, or as a password for ethics, repetition gives us a cluster of navigational points in a theoretical or metaphysical field; simultaneously, Constantin (and Kierkegaard) charts the limits of this field, catching the spots where metaphysics comes to grief.

V. IS REPETITION POSSIBLE?

In keeping with our theme, we can conclude by starting over, reviewing the pivots on which repetition turns. We can pitch these
lessons midway between Constantin's dense and abbreviated parametaphysical feints and parries and the enigmatic self-deconstructing indirections of his novella.

1. Repetition is not a self-initiated project but an other-initiated grant. Experience cannot be brought back to life simply by willing it to happen and taking steps. Concepts cannot animate the soul simply by dint of our dialectical finesse – defeating the opponents, writing up a plausible alternative. My existential crisis cannot be wiped away by simple rote advice or coaching. Nevertheless experience, meaning, or value can be restored to those for whom it has become lost.

If we take our cue from Job or Abraham, repetition is possible. Job has his world restored; Abraham gets Isaac back. Their wounds are healed. But it is not by their own power or by their setting out to achieve the goal that they win repetition. Paradoxically, they gain repetition while their hearts are set on something else. Job does not demand or work to get his world restored: he asks why it has been taken, he demands reasons. Abraham does not demand or set out to get Isaac back: he sets out to give Isaac up. Both are beneficiaries of repetition, but neither makes the attainment of repetition his explicit project.

Repetition can be desired, and when attained, shore up an otherwise demoralized self. But just as a resignation or despair of the search for some sorts of worldly satisfaction may be a necessary condition for their subsequent attainment, so getting the world back may require first that we give up all attempts to get it back. This means that conceived as a human task or as an outcome anticipated on the basis of reasonable expectations, repetition is impossible. Its essence is the shock of knowing its impossibility, resigning its possibility – as a strategic human goal.

2. Repetition is not to be confused with recollection. Platonic recollection in Kierkegaard's view should provide such continuity and content as could save a soul. The self would become true, good, beautiful through contemplation or recollection of enduring forms of truth or good or beauty. It would gain eternity. Despite the attractions of this view, which include Christian overtones of a soul's ascent toward the Good, Kierkegaard still holds that "recollection" is a pagan view. Meaning or value is not in the "past-eternity" of finished knowledge – as if we were looking for a mislaid set of keys.
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that will be where we left them, once we remember where that is. It's to be found or received through the faith that the future will provide keys, perhaps not exactly the same keys, but welcome nevertheless. The divine may confer a value-laden world appropriate to our needs in ways hitherto unforeseen – in ways that have not always existed. Repetition returns what was lost on new and unexpected terms. A self or world renewed streams forth as new day's light from an open future.

3. Repetition is based on a need for world, for global value, and completes itself as world or value is transcendentally provided. Insofar as one confronts the "meaningless" repetition of "merely natural" cycles, one falls short. Here is a lament from Fear and Trembling:

if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim... how empty and devoid of comfort would life be! \(FT 15; FTh 49\)

But Kierkegaardian repetition is not "merely natural" senseless flux. For the knight of faith, the cycles of loss and attainment are not just fixed in nature or poetically repeated in speech, but are lived through, celebrated in the concrete tenor of his life, embraced by his receptive soul. To see through natural or aesthetic recurrences, to know in one's bones, as Abraham does, the giving up and getting back that is faith is to acknowledge transcendental world-bestowal. To hold a faith that value will surely dawn, that there are worlds to be conferred is to hold out for full-fledged repetition.

4. Finally, we have the contrast between doctrine or theory and lived experience. For Kierkegaard, human fulfillment does not rest on a comprehensive grasp of intellectual contrasts, say, between objectivity and subjectivity or between recollection and repetition or between pagan and Christian lives. Nor is it sufficient to ardently endorse the (putatively) superior term in each of these contrasts. Fulfillment rests on receiving repetition. This is not grasping a theory, not even grasping it in utmost passion. It is having a concrete encounter appropriate to one's specific need. Abraham gets Isaac back – he needn't care about Johannes de silentio's "double movements." Job gets back his world transformed – he needn't care about the philosopher's "problem of evil." What is "repeated," restored, is
a world infused with objects of sustaining value, an enigmatic, value-saturated world whose power, allure, and potential for support far exceeds whatever muffled thoughts or passing theory might arise about the ground or source of that world bequeathed. Too much theory is a threat. Gemma Corradi Fuimara puts the danger this way:

at the very moment in which we “arm” ourselves with a cognitive model we are, paradoxically, justified in losing interest in the object. We no longer consider it as enigmatic since it is our turn to speak... It is almost as though a dense cloud of theory, interpretation, and explanation formed around the object, blunting its prospective eloquence.54

Horizons, worlds, and things embraced therein can be lost or put at risk—as we find in Job’s case. Thus, the stage is set for their restoration being wondrous. Repetition becomes enablement, allowing life whatever significance it may have, despite our failure to ground that significance in terms of some explicit all-inclusive theory.55 Kierkegaard brings us back to sustaining values that are concrete, particular, and pretheoretical. He portrays the importance of repetition for life while batting away our attempts to box up an all-purpose theory of the “mechanism” or “structure” or “metaphysics” of repetition that we presume will allow us to acquire and manipulate meaning and value at will. If Kierkegaard could revive an alertness to the unmasterable particulars of action, reception, situation, and understanding whose strands can crystallize to form a habitable world, he would have prepared us for a grant of life.

NOTES

1 What I call the “Discourse on Job” (or “Job Discourse”) is the first of Kierkegaard’s Four Upbuilding Discourses, originally published 6 December 1843; the given title is the biblical heading from Job, “The Lord Gave and The Lord Took Away.” This discourse is collected in EUD 109–24.
2 Pap. IV B 108. Portions are collected in “Selected Entries from Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers Pertaining to Repetition,” in R 324. (Hereafter, Supplement).
3 See Walter Lowrie, Kierkegaard (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 630. David Cain provides a revealing list of the ways “repetition” (Gjentagelse) has been characterized by Kierkegaard schol-
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While page-proofs for Repetition were being set, Kierkegaard learned that Regine had become engaged to someone else. Realizing that there was now no way for him to undo his “sacrifice” or to regain her, he ripped out the final pages of Repetition and rewrote them.


EO I 75ff, 302ff; see also EO II 60–135, 247–376. The discussion of Don Giovanni is found in the section titled “The Musical Erotic.”

“The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality,” EO II 155ff. See also “Equilibrium between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality,” EO II 247ff.


In his papers, Kierkegaard distinguishes different stages in the development of the concept of repetition, corresponding roughly to aesthetic, ethical, and religious versions; he admits that the earlier versions distract us from the authentic religious sense, introduced later. See Pap. IV B 117, Supplement, pp. 30ff. Roger Poole correctly challenges Thulstrup’s oversimplified contrast between a “merely poetic” and a “religious” repetition, but he goes too far in his claim that the text of Repetition does not itself give us internal grounds for distinguishing quasi-religious from trivially nonreligious versions of the concept. For
example, we are surely justified in ranking Constantin's frivolous trip to Berlin as a "lower" interest in repetition than the young man's "higher" tormented interest in the return of his beloved. Furthermore, the text of *Repetition* may not give us all we need to understand the concept "repetition": "The Job Discourse" and *Fear and Trembling* are surely central here, as well as Kierkegaard's papers. (See, e.g., *Pap. IV A 178*, Supplement, p. 336, where Constantin's Berlin journey is characterized as a farce.) For his critique of attempts to make sense of "repetition," see Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 72ff. Also, see my "Kierkegaard's Job Discourse: Getting Back the World," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 34 (1993): 151-69.

12 See *Pap. IV B 111*, Supplement, p. 294.

13 Of course, the concept of repetition, although not named as such, is central to *Fear and Trembling* as well as to the "Job Discourse." A connection, and contrast, between *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* could be put schematically in this way. By challenging both conventional and rational accounts of ethical value, *Fear and Trembling* raises an ontology of value, launching it above and beyond conventional, Hegelian, Kantian, or utilitarian accounts. *Repetition* raises the question of human access to that realm of special, saving value.


15 See my "Self Choice or Self-Reception."


17 Hence Roger Poole's dismissal of "recollection forward" is premature. See *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 63.


19 See, e.g., *Pap. IV A 178*, Supplement, p. 336, where Constantin's Berlin journey is characterized as a farce (see note 11 above).

20 *Pap. IV B 111*, Supplement, p. 294. Also, see note 12 above.

21 Constantin is here quoting Lessing with approval.

23 *Gjentagelse* can mean “taking again” or “retake,” as well as “repetition” or “a repeat.”

24 Johannes de silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, introduces a knight of faith so ordinary that he might be mistaken for a shopkeeper. *FT* 39; *FTb* 68.

25 Constantin claims he has “given up theory,” *R* 216. Roger Poole concludes his discussion of *Repetition* with the claim that there is “no Kierkegaardian doctrine of repetition.” ([*Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 82.]) That Constantin Constantius makes a bewildering variety of claims about repetition is indisputable. It does not follow, however, that there is no pattern to the discussion of “repetition” other than a perverse intention to undermine all pattern to the concept. Whether or not a stable doctrine emerges, clearly much can be – and is – said about repetition that is illuminating and instructive. A dialectical concept may be subversive of doctrine without being self-subversive.


28 In discussing repetition, John D. Caputo equates metaphysics quite narrowly with *stasis*. On this basis, he believes that repetition, which concerns flux, motion, or personal becoming, must undermine all metaphysics. But Hegel’s mediation, Aristotle’s *kinesis*, and Spinoza’s *conatus* are familiar metaphysical concepts that grapple with “motion.” Caputo’s construal of metaphysics is unnecessarily narrow. See John D. Caputo, “Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the Foundering of Metaphysics,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Perkins, pp. 201–24.

29 Supplement, p. 324.

30 *SUD* 38–9; *SUDb* 69. I thank Steve Webb for reminding me of this passage.

31 See my *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, chap. 8.

32 In *Fear and Trembling* the knight of faith will have a dancer’s leap, a movement made over and over, every moment. *FT* 40f; *FTb* 70.

33 For God, “all things are possible.” *FT* 46; *FTb* 75. The concept of the divine appearing “at the borders of the wondrous” is discussed on pp. 298–9.

34 The connections between freedom and stages of repetition are spelled out in detail in *Pap*. IV B 117, Supplement, pp. 301f.
35 R 229; Supplement, pp. 274f.


38 In *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard points out that reflection is not a disinterested pursuit but a passionate or "subjective" one – intending a contrast with Kant, who characterizes the aesthetic stance as "disinterested"; see *CA* 18n. But Kierkegaard has oversimplified the question. In fact, Kant does not neglect the factor of "interest." In *The Critique of Judgment* his phrase for the aesthetic stance is "disinterested interest."


41 In personal correspondence, Alastair Hannay has suggested "password" or "countersign" (as between sentries) as an alternative to the Hongs' "watchword."

42 Even to permit forgiveness as a general virtue may be problematic ethically, for there may be faults so vicious that forgiving them would itself be ethically mistaken.

43 See my *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, pp. 120–3.

44 Again, see Crites, "The Blissful Security of the Moment."

45 *Pap.* IV B 120, Supplement, p. 324.

46 Hannay's version of this term of art from *Fear and Trembling* is "on the strength of the absurd," while the Hongs offer "by virtue of the absurd."

47 The paradoxical blend of pleasure and pain, of dread and attraction in encounter with the wondrous or sublime is discussed in the context of Kant's *Third Critique* in J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), esp. chap. 1.

48 See my "Kierkegaard's Job Discourse."

49 As the young man puts it, Job "avoids all cunning ethical evasions and wily devices" (R 214). That is, he knows that his suffering is ethically undeserved and will not give in to the "wily devices" his "friends" advance for twisting his suffering into punishment that is justly deserved.

50 See *Pap.* IV B 118, Supplement, p. 321: "repetition is . . . transcendent, religious, a movement by virtue of the absurd."
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51 Repetition as transcendental bestowal and its relation to sectors of imagination and bending of the will are discussed in my “Kierkegaard’s Job Discourse”; see also note 55 below.

52 See Kierkegaard’s letter to Heiberg, Supplement, p. 306.

53 See also my discussion in Knights of Faith and Resignation, pp. 32f. The contrast between Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence and Kierkegaard’s repetition is developed in Giles Deleuze, Repetition and Difference, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). For Nietzsche, the test is whether one can face the possibility that the past will be repeated. For Kierkegaard, the test is whether one can face the possibility that a world now lost will be restored.


55 World-conferral establishes what Charles Taylor calls “horizons of significance,” background frames that set parameters of meaning and value independent of our desire or choice, which let our desires or choices be meaningful because they are thereby addressed to issues already significant. Choice and desire operate within a frame that already differentiates between options that can carry a given weight of meaning and other options that cannot. Frames that determine ethical options and salience, for example, set a scale of significance incommensurable with aesthetic options, differently framed – say those one confronts at a hairdresser’s. In the normal course of things, matters of hairstyle cannot fall under the same horizon of significance as ethics, and my will cannot alter this fact. See Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), chaps. 4 and 6, and Philosophical Arguments (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), chaps. 2 and 3.
I. PRELIMINARIES

The Concept of Anxiety is a maddeningly difficult book. In one of the most lucid commentaries on this short tract, Arne Grøn has suggested that the book is too difficult; in other words, it could have profited from another rewrite. In one of the central images of The Concept of Anxiety, anxiety is likened to dizziness. One reader of Kierkegaard has commented that the book attempts to evoke the very dizziness that it describes. Another prominent Kierkegaard scholar insists that the book is simply a spoof, devoid of any serious psychological insight. While I disagree with this scholar’s assessment, I sympathize with his judgment that The Concept of Anxiety has elements of farce.

If someone were to articulate a Kierkegaardian ethic, one of the dictums would certainly be – be honest about what you know and do not know. In all honesty, I must confess that there are many passages in The Concept of Anxiety the meaning of which completely escapes me. Worse yet, Kierkegaard scholars are silent on most of these passages. Nevertheless, exasperating as it is, The Concept of Anxiety is a wise book. It is also a book that has exercised an enormous influence on philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre and theologians such as Tillich, Barth, and Niebuhr. Moreover, if a single text needed to be chosen as the source book of existential psychology and psychoanalysis, it would most certainly be The Concept of Anxiety. But never minding Kierkegaard’s influence on intellectual luminaries and the history of twentieth-century thought, The Concept of Anxiety and a number of Kierkegaard’s other pseudonymous writings have attracted a multitude of readers by sheer force of the fact that

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the titles of his books suggest he is a kindred soul to that household of millions who find themselves troubled by feelings that answer to the names “anxiety” and “despair.”

One of Kierkegaard’s central insights, an insight inscribed in various forms throughout this text and, I believe, the entire authorship is that the struggle to lead a good and true life is a struggle against, or if not against then with, anxiety. Even in our own psychological age, an age in which the god-terms, “comfortable and uncomfortable” have superseded good and evil, we, psychologized men and women, have learned to appreciate to the point of obsession the power of the mysterious force that is anxiety. It was, I think, part of Kierkegaard’s psychological genius to recognize the connection between anxiety and sin, or, if you would prefer, between anxiety and evil. Less than fifty years later, Freud would learn to acknowledge the same connection.

In the essay that follows, I will summarize some of the major themes of The Concept of Anxiety. Subsequently, I will double back and more closely examine Kierkegaard’s, or as it were, Haufniensis’s definition of anxiety and the promise that he tenders at the end of the book, namely, that anxiety is a primary resource for our spiritual education, as opposed to something that should be taken to the physician and if necessary suppressed with medication.

Before proceeding there is, so far as Kierkegaard studies go, the perennial question of how to approach Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works. Should we follow Walter Lowrie’s hermeneutical counsel and regard the entire authorship as the work of Søren Kierkegaard? Or should we follow the poststructuralists and treat the entire authorship, signed works and journals included, as though it were all the work of pseudonyms? In his “First and Last Declaration,” appended to Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard wrote:

My wish, my prayer, is that, if it might occur to anyone to quote a particular saying from the books, he would do me the favor to cite the name of the respective pseudonymous author. . . . From the beginning I perceived very clearly and do still perceive that my personal reality is an embarrassment which the pseudonyms with pathetic self-assertion might wish to be rid of, the sooner the better, or to have reduced to the least possible significance, and yet again with ironic courtesy might wish to have in their company as a repellent contrast. {CUP S51}
For reasons that I will not go into, which is by no means to pretend that they are definitive, I am inclined to respect Kierkegaard's wishes and refer the views expressed in his pseudonymous works to the corresponding pseudonyms. However, where the position stated by a pseudonymous author such as Vigilius Haufniensis is nearly the same as one expressed in the journals, I will assume that the position is Kierkegaard's.

Under the nom de plume Vigilius Haufniensis, Kierkegaard published *The Concept of Anxiety* on 17 June 1844. Four days earlier, Johannes Climacus's lapidary *Philosophical Fragments* had gone on sale at Copenhagen's Reitzel's bookstore. At the time, Kierkegaard was thirty-one years old. His pseudonymous authorship was already in full stride. Behind him were the masterworks *Either/Or*, *Repetition*, and *Fear and Trembling*. By 1831, Kierkegaard was in the habit of publishing an "upbuilding discourse" in his own name for every book he published pseudonymously. The books to which he signed his name were to represent the religious point of view, whereas those to which he did not were to be expressions of an aesthetic or ethical orientation. To put it another way, with every indirect communique, Kierkegaard produced a direct communication—up until *The Concept of Anxiety*. This book must have seemed direct and religious enough since he did not proffer an accompanying set of upbuilding discourses. Just the opposite. Along with the somber and sometimes ponderous *Concept of Anxiety*, he published the relatively airy *Prefaces*, the official author of which is none other than Nicolaus Notabene.

Unlike Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus, Vigilius Haufniensis writes only one book and then disappears from the literary scene. However, as Reidar Thomte has noted (*CA* xiii–xiv), the psychological concerns that earmark Haufniensis's perspective run back to *Either/Or* and *Repetition* and forward to *Stages on Life's Way*, and most especially to *The Sickness unto Death*, a book, which like *The Concept of Anxiety* is deeply engaged in the psychology of sin and the psycho-spiritual vicissitudes of sinfulness.

**II. HAUFNIENSIS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN CONCEPT AND MOOD**

In the rich introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis complains about the sloppiness of contemporary thinking. With
Hegel and his epigones clearly in mind, Haufniensis charges that the thinkers of his time are forever committing acts of intellectual hubris, stepping outside the boundaries of their particular disciplines:

Thus when an author entitles the last section of the Logic “Actuality,” he thereby gains the advantage of making it appear that in logic the highest has already been achieved, or if one prefers, the lowest. In the meantime, the loss is obvious, for neither logic nor actuality is served by placing actuality in the Logic. Actuality is not served thereby, for contingency, which is an essential part of the actual, cannot be admitted within the realm of logic. Logic is not served, for if logic has thought actuality, it has included something that it cannot assimilate. (CA xiii–xiv)

Unlike the Hegelians, Haufniensis thought that contingent or actual existence falls outside the science of logic. Logic is the province of necessity. In Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus argues that the actual is that which has come to be. What comes to be, changes, and whatever changes does not exist of necessity (PF 71f). Therefore, it is a mistake of category to treat actuality as though it were a subject matter for logic.

According to Haufniensis, there is a science appropriate to every object of thought, and it is of the utmost importance that the sciences remain within their boundaries. To take a much more pertinent example than actuality and logic, Haufniensis observes that thinkers have approached the idea of sin from metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetical points of view. In every case the result is a confusion of the most dangerous kind, namely, the kind that “gives birth to its own enemy” (CA 14n), that is, a confusion one never becomes aware of being enmeshed in.

Psychologist that he professes to be, Haufniensis footnotes the following remark:

That science, just as much as poetry and art, presupposes a mood in the creator as well as in the observer, and that an error in modulation is just as disturbing as an error in the development of thought, have been entirely forgotten in our time. (CA 14n)

For every object of thought there is an appropriate mood, and where the mood is wrong the concept of it is falsified (CA 14–15). When this reasoning is universalized it seems problematic. In what sense might I falsify a concept in, for example, metaphysics by thinking about it in the earnest mood that is the subjective signature of the ethical point of view? Nevertheless, when applied to certain subject
matter, Haufniensis’s observation is a light. It could, for instance, be argued that when someone thinks about the Holocaust with curiosity, he fails to grasp the significance of the ovens. Or, again, when someone “does ethics” in a crossword-puzzling mood, as though ethics were a hobby or a way of advancing his career, we might surmise that he has not really understood his subject matter. It is as though Haufniensis were saying that one cannot understand certain subject matter without feeling a certain way. Throughout the authorship, Kierkegaard places enormous emphasis on the importance of appropriating what we think. Indeed, he often gives the impression that you cannot understand what you think unless you try to live according to what you think. The underscoring of appropriation takes different forms in different works. For instance, in Postscript it is expressed rather straightforwardly in Climacus’s long and wide-ranging discourse on subjectivity. In The Concept of Anxiety the significance of appropriation is mirrored in the importance that Haufniensis attributes to moods.

As applied to sin, Haufniensis comes right out and declares, “Whenever the issue of sin is dealt with, one can observe by the very mood whether the concept is the correct one” (CA 15). According to Haufniensis, when we think about sin in any mood other than that of earnestness, we are not so much grappling with the idea of sin as we are expressing and ultimately intensifying our own sinfulness.

III. ON SIN-CONSCIOUSNESS AS A RECURRENT THEME IN KIERKEGAARD’S WORKS

Anti-Climacus offers the profound observation that what we really need a revelation for is not to understand that we are saved but rather to understand that we are sinners. If you cannot begin to understand that you are a sinner, then what motivation could there be for thinking that you need to be saved? None of Kierkegaard’s writings leave the impression that contemplating theories of sin could be of any spiritual use. In The Point of View of My Work as an Author, Kierkegaard reveals that right from the start the whole of his authorship was driven by a religious purpose. Whether or not Kierkegaard was kidding himself or perhaps trying to kid his readers, it is a fact that in many of his writings he seems devoted to the
task of enhancing our receptiveness to the idea that we are sinners. Kierkegaard maintained that his age was engaged in producing fire sale standards of faith. Inasmuch as he strove to retrieve some sense of what it really means to believe in God, Kierkegaard can be understood as trying to make faith possible again.\(^5\) Judging from the text, the author of *The Concept of Anxiety* believed that at the time of his writing there were circulating a number of self-serving ideas of sin, ideas that could easily serve as vehicles for the repression of sin-consciousness. In *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus offers a brief review of *The Concept of Anxiety*:

*The Concept of Anxiety* differs essentially from the other pseudonymous writings in having a direct form, and in being even a little bit objectively dogmatic. Perhaps the author has thought that on this point a communication of knowledge might be needful, before going on to engender inwardness; which latter task is relative to one who may be presumed essentially to have knowledge, and hence not in need of having this conveyed to him, but rather needing to be personally affected. \(\textit{CUP 269–70}\)

As Climacus understands him, Vigilius Haufniensis is engaged in the task of trying to disarm some rather inviting forms of confusion about sinfulness and, most especially, about original sin or, as it is expressed in the Danish, *arvesynd* (inherited sin). According to Haufniensis, some accounts of original sin suggest that unlike the first human we, the descendants of Adam, are innately corrupt and hence cannot resist sinning. And so, why try? Others, such as Hegel, read Genesis as a mythical account of the necessary evolution of self-consciousness.

We find in the Bible a well-known story abstractly termed the Fall. This representation is very profound and is not just a contingent history but the eternal and necessary history of humanity – though it is expressed here in an external and mythical mode. For this reason there are bound to be inconsistencies in this representation.\(^6\)

Haufniensis does not agree that Genesis is just an important myth with a number of unavoidable inconsistencies. As Niels Thulstrup observes, Haufniensis reads Hegel’s interpretation as putting the notion of individual responsibility for sin to sleep.\(^7\) Although there are a number of points on which Haufniensis seems sympathetic to Hegel, for example, in his insistence that there is a “quantitative something” that is passed along from generation to generation,
Thulstrup is, by and large, correct in his verdict that Kierkegaard and Hegel are opposed in their readings of the Fall.

IV. VIGILIUS HAUFNIENSIS’S INTERPRETATION OF THE FALL

Before offering his version of *Paradise Lost,* Haufniensis acknowledges that for most of his nominally Christian readership, the story of the Fall is a myth to be placed alongside the myths of the Greeks. Haufniensis invites us to shrug off our smug sense of superiority and take the Genesis account as though it were telling us the truth about ourselves— the truth that sin comes into being for each of us by our sinning. Sometimes Haufniensis writes as though the problem we face is not so much in treating the story as a myth as it is in a benighted understanding of myth. At other points, he seems to take the story of the Fall as history. *Contra* Hegel, he proclaims, “The Genesis story presents the only dialectically consistent view” (CA 32). And then a few pages later he calls upon his reader:

Let us now examine the narrative in Genesis more carefully as we attempt to dismiss the fixed idea that it is a myth, and as we remind ourselves that no age has been more skillful than our own in producing myths of the understanding, an age that produces myths and at the same time wants to eradicate all myths. [CA 46]

On the question as to whether Haufniensis understands the Genesis story as history, it is important to acknowledge that he goes to rather bizarre lengths to argue that though we do not inherit our sinfulness from Adam, we do inherit a quantitative something, which telegraphically speaking is none other than “objective anxiety.”

From the beginning, Haufniensis rejects accounts of the first sin that “places Adam outside the race.” As the first human being, Adam must not differ in any essential way from us, his descendants. Thus, the author dismisses any reading of the Fall in which Adam is represented as having sinned freely but we, his descendants, are understood as having been born with a nature so corrupt that we are predestined to sin. Such accounts not only transform Adam into something fantastic, they volatilize the concept of sin; for on Haufniensis’s reckoning, if we are compelled to sin, we are not sin-
ners and there is no need for Christ or the atonement. Equally telling, Haufniensis argues that contemplation of the very idea that Adam is the only one who has ever freely sinned engenders a mood that is antithetical to the development of sin-consciousness.

As Fear and Trembling, Philosophical Fragments, and other texts evince, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms try to make their accounts of religious phenomena square with the Scriptures. Scripture tells us that prior to his sin Adam was ignorant of the difference between good and evil. In the first movement of his rendition of the Fall, Haufniensis writes:

Innocence is ignorance. In innocence, man is not qualified as spirit but is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition. [CA 41]

Prior to the positing of sin and the categories of good and evil, Adam is psychically qualified as a unity of body and soul, but not as spirit.

For Haufniensis and a related pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, human beings are best understood as a synthesis of body and soul. In their respective books, both pseudonyms elaborate upon this claim by somewhat inexplicably adding one of the most important lines in the Kierkegaardian oeuvre, “a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit” [CA 43]. Plato believed that human beings are a synthesis of body and soul, as did Aristotle, Descartes, and others, yet none of these thinkers argued that there was something else that related body and soul to each other and then, as is expressed in The Sickness unto Death, related the relation to itself [SUDh 43 passim]. Whether or not the term “spirit” raises spectres of ghosts, holy and otherwise, Kierkegaard repeats, in this text and others, that human beings are spirit. Over and over, he reminds us that were it not for the fact that we are spirit, anxiety, despair, sin, and faith would be impossible. But exactly what it means to say that we are spirit, Haufniensis, unlike Anti-Climacus, never tries to make clear, perhaps for the same reason that he resists offering a definition of sin or the self.

Haufniensis’s reading of the Fall is much closer to poetry than it is to a psycho-philosophical treatise. Once again, there are a number of logical counterthrusts but very little in the way of positive arguments. The author who considered himself a kind of poet and whom we consider more a philosopher than anything writes that in innocence spirit is present “as immediate, as dreaming.” Perhaps he
means that in innocence the synthesizing activity of spirit is unreflective or unselfconscious. Haufniensis continues:

In this state there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety. This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety. Dreamily the spirit projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself. . . . Awake, the difference between myself and my other is posited, sleeping it is suspended; dreaming, it is an intimated nothing. (CA 41–2)

At the outset, I noted that there are knots in this text that some Kierkegaard scholars insist only mock the attempt to unravel them. This is one such koan. Haufniensis proclaims that before good and evil are posited, there is a peace and repose that is not entirely peace and repose but not strife either. Prior to the Fall in which spirit and freedom are posited, spirit projects itself, through, I suspect, the imagination. However, at this point, spirit is not yet anything actual and thus it projects itself as a nothing. Whether it bespeaks an affinity with Hegel or a caricature of him, this text is thick with hypostatized terms. In this case, "Innocence sees" the nothing that is projected spirit as outside itself. These shadowgraphs of spirit, which are experienced as an external something, are an intimation of a pregnant distinction between self and other, but the salient point is that while innocence may be ignorance, it is also anxiety.

Spirit dreaming, as opposed to spirit dead asleep, feels a presentiment of the powers of spirit but as something external. When God prohibits Adam to eat from the tree or else surely die, Adam cannot, in a sense, understand Him, for he knows neither good and evil nor death:

Because Adam has not understood what was spoken, there is nothing but the ambiguity of anxiety. The infinite possibility of being able that was awakened by the prohibition now draws closer, because this possibility points to a possibility as its sequence. (CA 45)

With God's dictum, Adam's anxiety as a feeling of being able is both concretized and intensified, "in this way, innocence is brought to its uttermost. In anxiety it is related to the forbidden and to the punishment. Innocence is not guilty, yet there is anxiety as though it
were lost" (CA 45). Anxiety, understood as the vague experience of being able and forbidden, is the last stop before the first sin. Haufniensis adds, “further than this psychology cannot go, but so far it can go, and above all, in its observation of human life, it can point to this again and again” (45). In other words, psychology can reflect upon and point to the state that immediately precedes sin, but it cannot and should not try to explain the fact that we sin.

Philip Quinn has convincingly argued\(^\text{11}\) that the advance in Kierkegaard’s account of the Fall over others, notably those of Kant and Schleiermacher, is in providing Adam with a motivation for his transgression. Not that Haufniensis encourages such speculation, but why the deuce would Adam disobey God? In his journals (e.g., JP I 41; Pap. X\(^2\) A 22), Kierkegaard notes that what is needed is a middle term that will explain how Adam and the rest of us get from innocence to guilt. The middle term in a syllogism is of course that through which the minor and major premises combine into something new. Anxiety has elements of both innocence and guilt:

But he who becomes guilty through anxiety is indeed innocent, for it was not he himself but anxiety, a foreign power that laid hold of him, a power that he did not love but about which he was anxious. And yet he is guilty for he sank in anxiety, which he nevertheless loved even as he feared it. (CA 43)

Repetitiously, Haufniensis reminds us that it is impossible to explain the fact that we are sinners; however, in what amounts to a transcendental argument, Haufniensis explains the possibility of sin. Anxiety makes sin possible. But what, according to Haufniensis, is anxiety?

**V. THE CONCEPT OF ANXIETY IN THE CONCEPT OF ANXIETY**

There are very few straight lines in The Concept of Anxiety, but two points are fixed, anxiety is virtually synonymous with possibility, and more specifically with the possibility of freedom. “Anxiety is the possibility of freedom” (CA 155). And again, anxiety is “defined as freedom’s disclosure to itself in possibility.” And yet very early on, Haufniensis offers this aside, “freedom is never possible, as soon as it is, it is actual” (22). And so, while anxiety is freedom’s disclo-
sure to itself in possibility, freedom, like God, is never possible—it simply is.

Throughout The Concept of Anxiety Haufniensis frequently comments, "every contradiction is a task." Is the task here to resolve the apparent contradiction: anxiety is the possibility of freedom and freedom is never possible but "arises out of nothing"? Although Haufniensis does not have the authority to dictate our reading of his work, I doubt that his "dear reader" would be the one who, after perusing this book, slams it shut and sets to work on solving the above-mentioned philosophical Rubik's Cube. The whirlwind of his own abstractions notwithstanding, there are three objects of inquiry that Haufniensis does not encourage our theorizing about, namely, self-consciousness, freedom, and sin. Obsessing about this kind of academic puzzle is against both the letter and the spirit of The Concept of Anxiety. Nevertheless, a few comments do not constitute an obsession.

It could, I think, be argued that although anxiety is the experience of the possibility of freedom, it is the disclosure of freedom actualized in a less than perfect form; that is, as freedom "entangled in itself." Haufniensis declares:

Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself. (CA 49)\[12

In anxiety, we use our freedom to make ourselves feel powerless or unfree. But in order for freedom to become entangled in itself, it must be actual. On the other hand, one could contend that though anxiety is the "possibility of freedom" or "the possibility of the possibility of freedom" (CA 44), it is only with the renunciation of anxiety (faith) that freedom is actualized. Freedom exists only inasmuch as we are freed from the bondage of sin and freed from the anxiety out of which sin leaps forth. Without turning this into a scholastic debate, one could here reply that, according to Haufniensis, we sin out of anxiety. But if freedom is only actualized after we have overcome anxiety, the un-Kierkegaardian conclusion will follow that we do not sin freely, since anxiety will, on this account, be an indication that for the sinner, freedom is not yet actual. And how can someone sin freely, if the freedom that they have or are, is not yet actual?

As Heidegger, Sartre, Tillich, and others have taken careful note,
Haufniensis held that it is in anxiety that we come to understand, feelingly, that we are free. If we abide by the cognition/affect dichotomy, so firmly entrenched in the Western tradition, then we should certainly say that for Haufniensis, anxiety is an affect with cognitive content.

Anticipating the modern psychiatric conception of anxiety, Haufniensis insists that anxiety is almost always about nothing. I say “almost” because in charting the variety of forms that anxiety can take, Haufniensis notes that with anxiety about sin “the object of anxiety is a determinate something and its nothing is an actual something . . . and anxiety therefore loses it dialectical ambiguity” (CA 110–11). Just the same, whereas other thinkers such as Kant and Hegel classified anxiety as a kind of fear, Kierkegaard was the first to note that anxiety differs from fear in that the object of anxiety is usually indeterminate.13

Gregory Beabout has observed that for Haufniensis,14 the nothing around which anxiety forms itself is usually the future. Inasmuch as the future is fraught with possibility, our relationship to the future is fraught with anxiety. Very late in the day of his authorship, the individual who gave us the Byzantine Concept of Anxiety summarized, “anxiety is about tomorrow” (CD 80) and, again, “anxiety is simply impatience (see JP I 41; Pap. V B 55 p. 10 and X2 A 384).

The link between anxiety and the future is underscored by the fact that the experience with which Kierkegaard/Haufniensis most closely connects anxiety is, strangely enough, the experience of presentiment. Some six years before he wrote The Concept of Anxiety, Kierkegaard expressed the less than intuitive idea that “A certain presentiment [anelse] seems to precede everything that is to happen, but just as it can have a strong deterring effect, it can also tempt a person to think that he is, as it were, predestined” (JP I 38; Pap. II A 18). Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms refer to the magic pictures that anxiety can conjure up, and especially for someone anxiously thinking about anxiety. Perhaps the notion of presentiments, of having an inkling of what one is to do or of what is to happen, is just one of these magic pictures, these deceptions conjured up by the sophistry of anxiety. Perhaps it was Kierkegaard’s way of compromising with the doctrine of predestination, which his father tried to impress upon him and which Haufniensis rejects. While he argues that it is a sin of sorts to pretend that you are on track to sin,
Kierkegaard did believe that we receive signs or cues from God (see *SUD*² 114). In fact, he put off the publication of *The Sickness unto Death* for a fortnight while he waited to see whether or not an apparently chance meeting with Regine’s father was a message from on High. But once again, anxiety is in part, or seen from one perspective, an inkling that, like so many aspects of the spirit, is dialectical in the sense that it can either move us toward or away from that which we have an inkling about. However, for obvious theological reasons, it is important to remember that under no circumstances can this presentiment, which is anxiety, determine sin.

In the philosophical literature on Kierkegaard, there is a great deal of emphasis legitimately placed on considering anxiety as a structure of the self. To briefly summarize, anxiety is a manifestation of the fact that we are free. Anxiety is a shining forth of our spiritual nature. It reflects our relationship to possibility and the future. Anxiety predisposes us to sin and is the consequence of sin. Although the history of modern philosophy will attest that these are important claims, I would argue, as though it needed to be argued, that Kierkegaard/Haufniensis also has something to contribute to our understanding of anxiety as a feeling, as a psychological phenomenon.¹⁵ In a famous journal entry Kierkegaard scribbles, “all existence makes me nervous” (*JP V* 131; *Pap.* II A 420). In some other well-traveled lines he all but sighs.

Deep within every human being there still lives the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the millions and millions in this enormous household. (*JP I* 40; *Pap.* VIII ¹ A 363)

These passages and others are proof positive that the thinker who cried out for a more human, more realistic psychology would not have been perplexed by our own medico-psychological understanding of anxiety as a rather inexplicable life-constricting force.

Anti-Climacus notes that “there is a certain sophistry in despair” just as there is in sin. By this he at least means that the despairing individual is prone to deceive himself about his despair. Similarly, Haufniensis refers to the “ingenious sophistry of anxiety.” Like Freud, but with a very different set of categories up his sleeve, that is, like Freud but with a different account of the origins of repression, Haufniensis recognized that we often respond to anxiety with conscious and unconscious attempts to deflect our anxiety. Deep in-
side, Everyman is afraid of being alone, unrecognized, invisible. One tries to keep this anxiety "at a distance by looking at the many round who are related to him as kin and friends, but the anxiety is still there, nevertheless, and he hardly dares to think how he would feel if all this were taken away" [JP I 40]. Haufniensis and a number of other writers who worked at Søren Kierkegaard's desk held that anxiety is often unconscious. Haufniensis recognized that some would read The Concept of Anxiety, shake their heads, and wonder who the devil the author was talking about. In a rather violent condemnation repeated throughout the canon, Haufniensis asserts that if anyone is a stranger to anxiety it is only because "he is very spiritless." Having stated this verdict, he proceeds to discuss the anxiety of spiritlessness at chapter length.

Under the chapter title, "The Concept of Anxiety," Haufniensis proclaims that psychologically understood "anxiety is a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy" [CA 42]. Anxiety is a paradoxical form of desire, or if you will, a paradoxical form of fear. In his journals, Kierkegaard explains:

Anxiety is a desire for what one fears, a sympathetic antipathy, anxiety is an alien power which grips the individual, and yet one cannot tear himself free from it and does not want to, for one fears, but what he fears he desires. Anxiety makes the individual powerless. [JP I 39; Pap. III A 233]

At the risk of seeming reductionistic, I suggest that sensuous desire combined with the belief that sensuousness is sinfulness is the Platonic form of anxiety framed as it is here, an approach/avoidance conflict. While I am reluctant to indulge in psychological intellectual history, it would be careless to ignore the fact that Kierkegaard was very familiar with this kind of internal strife. Witness the hundreds of journal entries discussing his love, break, and lifelong devotion to Regine. Kierkegaard's personal life aside, Haufniensis, no less than his twentieth-century colleagues draws the connection between anxiety and sensuousness. In a musical, almost fugue-like style, Haufniensis repeatedly reminds us, "By sin, sensuousness became sinfulness." He elaborates, "After Christianity had come into the world and redemption was posited, sensuousness was placed in a light of opposition such as was not found in paganism" [CA 74]. In a phrase that will reverberate through the final stages of Kierkegaard's life and works, Haufniensis announces, "In Christianity, the
religious has suspended the erotic” (70). For those who have not tried to close themselves off from the good, which is to say, for those who have not taken what Haufniensis considers the well-trodden path of the demonic, the consequence of sin is, among other things, anxiety about sin. Understandably, the psychic tug of war between sensuousness and the fear of sensuousness as sinfulness culminates in a feeling of powerlessness.17

Kierkegaard and Haufniensis agree that the first sin for every individual – whatever that might mean – is a product of weakness, as opposed to defiance. It could not be defiance for it is only with the first sin that the categories of good and evil are posited. This, however, is not to say that we are not responsible for the weakness. The feeling of being unable to rise above our desires is a trap door conjured up by the cunning of desire to give us leave to do what we desire. To put it in terms of The Sickness unto Death, the powerlessness that leads to sin is self-intensified weakness. Part of Kierkegaard’s psychological genius and a blindspot for Freud and his followers, conscious and otherwise, is Kierkegaard’s recognition that many of the states that we feel we are suffering from are in fact states that we have either conjured up or amplified.18 Following an inordinately crabbed line of thought, Haufniensis concludes that every generation is more sensuous than the one before. And yet in a voice that will find an echo in many of Kierkegaard’s later works, Haufniensis the psychologist declaims that Christianity teaches the individual “to lift himself above this ‘more,’ and it judges him who does not do so as being unwilling,” not unable (CA 73).

Long before Freud, Kierkegaard discovered the pit of desire in the fruit of anxiety. Haufniensis tells us that there are two kinds of sinners: those who are anxious about the good and those who are anxious about sin. Hidden in the anxiety over sin, which, Kierkegaard insists, often leads to sin, is the desire to sin. Likewise, inherent in the demonic’s anxiety about the good is a desire for the good.

Continuing with the theme of the paradoxical nature of anxiety, Haufniensis oddly, if not perversely, insists that anxiety is something that we want to flee from and yet love, “really love.” For anyone who has suffered from anxiety, the suggestion that he or she loves their anxiety will seem callous. After all, anxiety in all its variegated forms is today listed as a “mental disorder” and no one loves having a mental disorder. One could, I suppose, defend Haufniensis
by claiming that inasmuch as anxiety contains an element of desire, albeit for something we fear, it is still about something we desire; hence, we must desire our anxiety. But while anxiety itself may have an element of desire, it does not follow that we must therefore desire, much less love, our anxiety.

In one of his most compelling images, an image reworked many times over by Sartre,19 Haufniensis writes:

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. (CA 61)

The dizziness, elsewhere represented as a feeling of powerlessness, is something that we bring upon ourselves. Interestingly enough, we lay hold of the finite to steady ourselves, and this laying hold of the finite is sin for “Freedom succumbs in this dizziness . . . freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty” (CA 61). In depth psychological terms, we have the reasonable conclusion that anxiety is the last stop before transgression. But again, where is the love of anxiety that Haufniensis insists upon? Perhaps it inheres in the simple fact that we love our freedom, just as we fear it, and loving it we can scarcely take our mind’s eye off it.

There is, however, another suggestion. Here and there throughout this text and The Sickness unto Death, Kierkegaard insists that people cleave to their anxieties and other internal wounds. After all, while we may experience anxiety as a foreign power, it emanates from us. We produce it and, with God’s help, we can renounce it. In a footnote, Haufniensis makes the astute observation that melancholy or depression develops out of the culture of anxiety. By his own diagnosis, Kierkegaard and his whole family suffered melancholy, and yet Kierkegaard confessed that he loved his melancholy, truly loved it. Religiously speaking, he took this love to be a near fatal flaw. While the cure for his melancholy was there, Kierkegaard would not let himself be cured of it, so identified was he with his sorrow that he could not imagine himself without it. Or again, so invested was he in the poetry of his sorrow that he would not give it up. But to return to more normal and mortal creatures, we may be
said to love our anxiety in the sense that, pace Haufniensis, we could renounce our anxiety and yet we refuse to. Judging from the coda to *The Concept of Anxiety* ("Anxiety as Saving Through Faith"), Haufniensis believes that the seas of our lives can be calmed.

VI. BEING EDUCATED BY ANXIETY AND POSSIBILITY

In *The Sickness unto Death* Anti-Climacus offers a series of pictures of the different forms of despair, or when viewed under another set of assumptions, of the different forms of sin. These spiritual daguerreotypes are strung on a continuum from the more passive to the more active or defiant forms of despair/sin. Having insisted that anxiety is both the predisposition to sin and the consequence of sin – to say nothing of a mark of man's perfection – Haufniensis provides a psychological showcase of the different shapes that anxiety can take when considered as a consequence of sin. Once again, presaging the weakness/defiance continuum of *The Sickness unto Death*; Haufniensis proclaims that post-Fall anxiety is of two basic kinds – anxiety about sin and anxiety about the good (CA 61). After walking us through a veritable hothouse of specimens of anxiety, Haufniensis argues that there is a way of relating to anxiety that can either prompt our self-destruction or enable us to "overcome anxiety" to "renounce anxiety without anxiety."

Like one of the Stoics, Haufniensis instructs us that we must learn to be anxious in the proper way, lest "we perish by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing to anxiety" (CA 155). The first death refers to the spiritless denial of the tasks of the spirit and the latter to more active forms of sinfulness. Against the wisdom of our own brave new world, Haufniensis promises that "whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate" (155).

But what is the right way to be anxious? Or, again, what is the proper object of our anxiety? Haufniensis makes it plain that the individual who is anxious over externals is in the wrong school. Similarly, he contrasts the kind of anxiety that he is bidding us to study with, with anxiety about "finiteness and finite relations." The individual who has mettle enough to ride through life with his eyes open will soon come to understand that "he can demand absolutely nothing of life and that the terrible, perdition, and annihi-
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lation live next door to everyman” (*CA* 156). But the person who refuses to be examined by possibility, who frets over finiteness and finite relations will graduate with a degree in finite wisdom:

\[
\ldots \text{finiteness and the finite relations in which every individual is assigned a place, whether they be small, or everyday, or world historical, educate only finitely, and a person can always persuade them, always coax something else out of them, always bargain, always escape from them tolerably well, always keep himself a little on the outside, always prevent himself from learning absolutely something from them.} (*CA* 157)
\]

A page later, Haufniensis explains that with actuality, things never get so bad that we can't find some hope, some breath of possibility. Let the roof cave in and still “common sense says quite correctly that if one is cunning, one knows how to make the best of things” (*CA* 158).

The anxiety that prepares us to renounce anxiety is anxiety about “freedom's possibility.” Haufniensis announces that the more profoundly one is in anxiety, the greater the individual one is. He then explains that the individual whose greatness glows in his anxiety is anxious “in the sense that he himself produces the anxiety” (*CA* 155). In other words, the anxiety that will lead us where we do and yet do not want to go is anxiety about oneself.

Four years after the publication of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Anti-Climacus remarks that while the Christian knows that earthly life is rich in horrors, he has the courage to keep finite things in their proper perspective:

As a Christian he has acquired a courage unknown to the natural man, a courage he acquired by learning to fear something even more horrifying. That is always how a person acquires courage: when he fears a greater danger he always has the courage to face a lesser. When one fears a danger infinitely, it is as if the others weren't there at all. (*SUD* 39)

Once again, to be anxious about freedom's possibility is to be anxious about what one will do with one's freedom: it is to be anxious about being in sin. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus presses the cruel thought, What is a person to do when his worst nightmare has come true? Haufniensis replies that inasmuch as our worst nightmare refers to something external, something that does not come from us, the actualization of our personal apocalypse should not be nearly as anxiety provoking as the anxiety about being in sin.
For once, Haufniensis is straightforward enough, “in order that an individual may thus be educated absolutely and infinitely by the possibility, he must be honest toward possibility and have faith” (CA 157). Oddly enough, Haufniensis goes on to use Hegel to qualify his understanding of faith, so that faith is cast as “the inner certainty that anticipates infinity” (157). Haufniensis continues, “When the discoveries of possibility are honestly administered, possibility will discover all the finitudes, but will idealize them in the form of infinity and in anxiety overwhelm the individual until he again overcomes them in the anticipation of faith” (157).

The doctor of anxiety is honest both with himself and possibility. Haufniensis recounts the story of an Indian ascetic “who for two years lived on dew that he once came to the city, tasted wine, and became addicted to drink” (CA 158). Some will find this vignette comic, others tragic; but the true student of possibility will immediately see himself in the story, for he, better than anyone, understands that under the right conditions he is capable of anything.

Haufniensis warns us about what Kierkegaard apparently learned from experience, namely, that just as the fear of illness can produce illness, so can anxiety about sin lead to sin. And one of the sins that anxiety about sin can lead to is the sin of being dishonest with ourselves about our sinfulness. But the individual who has been educated by anxiety “does not permit himself to be deceived by its countless falsifications.” He, quite simply, “accurately remembers the past” (CA 159). Being honest about his past, he knows that he is guilty. But note well: “Whoever learns to know his guilt only by analogy to judgments of the police court and the supreme court never really understands that he is guilty, for if a man is guilty, he is infinitely guilty” (161). As Anti-Climacus describes it, our sins of action are but the puffs of smoke whereas the engine of sin is the will. The person who has learned to be anxious in the right way looks at his finite sins and grasps that he is infinitely guilty.

In the denouement of The Concept of Anxiety, Haufniensis preaches that one does not need to go to Paris or London to become a “pupil of possibility.” One need only to place the aspirant “in the middle of the Jutland heath, where no event takes place” (159) and where Kierkegaard’s father as a boy once cursed God. In an addendum to Either/Or, Judge William shares a sermon with his anxiety-ridden friend. The sermon, written by a pastor “stuck out in a little
parish on the heath in Jutland" \(EO\ II\ 337\), is entitled “The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought that We are Always in the Wrong” [always in the wrong before God].

Kierkegaard seems to work with an algorithm of the spirit. The more profound the individual, the stronger the spirit, the graver the danger is of a fall. Haufniensis notes that the individual who lets himself be searched out by anxiety, who understands that he can demand nothing of the world, and who, as a sinner, has no grounds at all for demanding anything of God is “in danger of a fall, namely, suicide” \(CA\ 159\). That is why education by anxiety and possibility requires that the student not only be honest with himself but that he also have faith. And yet it is only the person who knows that he is infinitely guilty who will look in the right direction for rest. In the penultimate sentence of The Concept of Anxiety, Haufniensis comes full circle from the Fall, writing “he who in relation to guilt is educated by anxiety will rest only in the Atonement” \(162\). And when, after having been searched out by anxiety, we rest in the atonement, anxiety can be said “to eradicate precisely what it brings forth itself” \(159\), namely, anxiety, which is the predisposition to sin: to reject the promise of the atonement.

NOTES

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1 See Arne’s Grøn, Begrebet angst hos Søren Kierkegaard [Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1993], pp. 10f.
2 See Roger Poole, Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993], pp. 107ff.
4 \(SUD^2\) 127–8; see also David Gouwens’ superb Kierkegaard as a Religious Thinker [Cambridge University Press, 1996], pp. 124–8.


10 Haufniensis develops the idea of spirit experienced as other into a very interesting interpretation of the notion of fate. See, e.g., *CA* 96–108.


12 Also see Arnold Come, *Trendelenburg’s Influence on Kierkegaard’s Modal Categories* [Montreal: Inter Editions, 1991].


16 For a very useful commentary on Kierkegaard’s personal life, see Bruce Kirmmse’s *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990], *Encounters with Kierkegaard* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], and his contribution to this volume, “Out with It!: The Modern Breakthrough, Kierkegaard and Denmark.” Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, also offers a valuable perspective on Kierkegaard.


18 Robert C. Roberts speaks to a similar point. See his “Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard,” in this volume.

19 For an evaluation of Sartre’s debt to Kierkegaard, see William McBrine’s “Sartre’s Debts to Kierkegaard: A Partial Reckoning,” in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin Matustik and Merold Westphal [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995], pp. 18–42.

20 See Alastair Hannay’s contribution to the present volume, “Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair.”
13 Kierkegaard and the variety of despair

You are always hovering above yourself, but the higher ether, the more refined sublimate into which you are vaporized, is the nothing of despair, and you see below you a multitude of areas of learning, insight, study, observation which for you, though, have no reality but which you quite randomly exploit and combine so as to adorn as tastefully as possible the palace of mental profusion in which you occasionally reside.

– Either/Or

When are we in despair? Is it when we find ourselves powerless to grasp or retain some salient good? Or when it seems nothing can be done to prevent our world collapsing? Or when the running out of possibilities has left us now paralyzed? What exactly is despair? Is it the experience itself, the sheer sense of hopelessness? Or is despair what our lives are thenceforth "in" once what we so "desperately" want proves beyond reach? Habits or rules of language give us no clear answers here, but psychology may help. It seems clear that any lingering sense of frustration and hopelessness assumes some continued but problematic interest in the salient good once hoped for, or now lost.

Despair is a central concept in several of Kierkegaard’s works and there are many passing references to it. The Danish Fortvivlelse, like the German Verzweiflung, bears “two” (tvii) on its face, so the suggestion of complexity is conveyed here even more directly than in the case of “despair” and its cognates. In Purity of Heart, a signed work, Kierkegaard asks whether despair isn’t “simply double-mindedness.” While in some works the notion occurs only en passant,
as, for example, in Concluding Unscientific Postscript, in others, such as Works of Love, it enters integrally into the discourse. But the most comprehensive treatments appear in two works that virtually span the authorship, Either/Or and The Sickness unto Death. It is to these two works that we turn in an attempt to make clear how, and with what consistency, Kierkegaard uses the term "despair."

The texts do not yield their concept, or concepts, easily. So little so that there is significant disagreement, perhaps even confusion, on how to read them. Some have gone so far as to dismiss The Sickness unto Death as a joke at the expense of Hegelians. And many of those who take it seriously are nevertheless inclined to blame the author rather than themselves for any unclarity about "despair." Still others may chide readers for their search for clarity, seeing this as merely an obstruction to the creative powers of a reader's subjective fantasy. Each of these responses offers, however, an excellent illustration of just that complexity already hinted at and about which, in referring to "the cunning and sophistry present in all despair" \(\text{SUD}^h\) 143–4, the author of The Sickness unto Death shows himself to be very clear indeed. The presumptions that there is no sense to look for, that an author must be to blame for what a reader finds obscure, or that obscurity may be a virtue can all express that premature hopelessness one finds in people whose real hope is that there is nothing of the kind in question to hope for. This idea, it will be argued, is the core of Kierkegaard's concept of despair, not just in The Sickness unto Death but in the other texts mentioned too.

Anti-Climacus, its pseudonymous author, says at one point in The Sickness unto Death that every human being is "primitively organized as a self." Everyone is "characteristically determined to become himself" \(\text{SUD}^h 63\). This sounds like an anthropological claim, to be tested by examining the structure of human being. It suggests that it would be useless to try to prevent oneself becoming a self, whatever "self" turns out to mean in this claim. One might suppose from this that the general notion of despair that Kierkegaard appeals to is one that implies the "vanity" of trying to do something. He would then be claiming that despair is trying to prevent something, namely, being or becoming oneself, when either "deep down" or quite consciously we know that this is impossible.

Anti-Climacus also makes a theological claim. From his Christian point of view he asserts that the self is established by "something
else,” a “power” (SUDh 43, 44), and that “ultimately no one can resist that power . . . despite all . . . despairing efforts, that power is the stronger.” This is not the same claim but it is not immediately clear how or whether it is related to the former. In terms of what “despair” means, however, the point would be the same. Selfhood, we seem to have to understand, is some salient good toward which, if only the difficulties involved in appropriating it were less, everyone would be on course. If a person, due to the difficulties, does not want to be this self, the power nevertheless “compels him to be the self he does not want to be” (50).

But there are footholds for other notions of despair in Anti-Climacus’s claims. Let us therefore look first at some alternatives. In one sense, despair, or doing something despairingly, is knowing or suspecting that one is powerless to achieve some cherished goal but continuing, against the odds or all reason, to attempt to achieve it. The drowning swimmer clutches “despairingly” at the rope because she knows it is too short, or that even if she could grasp it she lacks the strength to hang on. The distinctions here are not necessarily altogether sharp, but one could say that this contrasted in one direction with saying that she clutched at the rope “desperately,” where to say this implies she might still succeed. The former notion engages, one might say, the idea that all (relevant) possibilities have on the contrary run out, but instead of the paralysis referred to in our opening paragraph we have “despairing” activity. To say that it is despairing is partly to point out that it is inappropriate to the facts.

In quite another and opposite direction, to “despair” is precisely to act in accordance with the facts, to give up the attempt because the goal is impossible. Despairing of something in this sense is abandoning the project of achieving the salient good because one finds oneself powerless to achieve it. One could put this by saying that, unlike the previous example, the activity here, or rather cessation of activity, was appropriate to the facts. But we must be careful. We might be failing to take proper account of the “cunning and sophistry” that lurk behind our beliefs. Might it not be the case, for example, that one’s “finding” oneself powerless was the outcome of a strategy that conveniently absolves one from responsibility for having to make further efforts?

This idea of strategy, which is central to much of the account in
The Sickness unto Death, will be pursued later. First we must be clear what Anti-Climacus means by despair. At the very outset he makes a threefold distinction between an inauthentic or nongenuine form of despair and two genuine forms. They are:

Being unconscious in despair of having a self (inauthentic despair), not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself. (SUDh 51)

Neither of the expressions “despairingly” or “desperately” seems to fit comfortably here. How could one be unconscious in a despairing or desperate way of having something? One might, as indicated above, talk of despairingly not wanting to be oneself in this sense, that is, because one knows it is not possible to be rid of oneself. The same might be said for the third form, since being oneself might be something one cannot do either if, as indeed the text says, the “oneself” in this kind of case is something other than the self one ineluctably is but wants to be rid of, is indeed a self one tries to interpose in the vain attempt to avoid being oneself. If we read Anti-Climacus carefully, however, it becomes obvious that the idea of futility is no part of his concept of despair. The formula for all despair, says Anti-Climacus is “to want to be rid of oneself” (SUDh 50), it is a response to whatever it is about one’s “self” that makes one unhappy being it, its particular defects, its contingent historical situation, the human condition as such, or certain demands implicit in the notion of selfhood.3 Despair, for Anti-Climacus, just is wanting rid of the self. Consequently, “despair”-expressions do not qualify this project but simply refer to it. In the passage just quoted, “in despair” should be read appositively, as saying that what all three descriptions describe are despair, because they are all ways of, in some sense or other, trying [though in vain] to be rid of oneself.

There is something distinctive about this notion of despair that does not appear in other texts. In Postscript, for example, “despair” comes close to the idea of paralysis due to loss of possibility mentioned earlier. Johannes Climacus says “despair is despair because it does not know the way out” (CUP 520). What is especially interesting is that this is also Hegel’s concept. Since what is claimed here is that, at least in The Sickness unto Death, this is not Kierkegaard’s concept, it will be useful to have Hegel’s concept in mind. In outline Hegel’s idea is this: Consciousness is on course for knowledge of the
truth about itself, roughly speaking, the truth that it itself is knowledge. On the way to that destination, however, it (that is to say consciousness, for we are talking here in the typical Hegelian vein) makes a succession of progressively better stabs at what real knowledge is, and therefore, because of the assumed identification, at what it itself is. For instance, it identifies itself with "phenomenal knowledge," knowledge of the world as it appears. But this identification proves inadequate, and the recognition that it is so is experienced as "loss of its own self." Hegel actually says that the road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of doubt (Zweifel), or more precisely as the way of despair (Verzweiflung). "Despair" is here distinguished from doubt—"shilly-shallying about this or that presumed truth, followed by a return to that truth again, after the doubt has been appropriately dispelled"—as "the conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge." Despair, in other words, is the realization that one is not the self one assumed. But since no alternative has yet been envisaged, the despair, one might say, is total, the running out of all possibility leaves one paralyzed. But because despair resolves into a healthy skepticism about "all the so-called natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions" that have "hampered" progress so far, it leaves the way open to examine further "what truth is."

It isn't hard to transfer this idea to Kierkegaard, particularly since the "stages" offer a plausible parallel both to the "road" along which Hegel has consciousness travel and to the "series of configurations" which he has it go through in its "education . . . to the standpoint of Science." Take the notion of "the nothing of despair" in our epigraph above. The passage is from Part II of Either/Or, where Judge William, defending the ethical life-view he personifies, tries to persuade his young friend the aesthete, author of the papers comprising Part I, that any aesthetic life-view "is despair" (EOh 502). Of his friend's mature aesthetic life-view, William remarks that "it has to an extent admitted to itself a consciousness of the nothingness of such a life-view" (502). One might take the nothingness here to mean the futility of the aesthetic life-view on its own terms, its failure, say, through some internal inconsistency to apply in practice. Recognition of this nothingness would be a case of "loss of self" because it involves the realization that what was entered upon as the way to become, or be, oneself proves to be "untruth." But then, and to exploit further the parallel with Hegel, the recog-
nition gives way to an initially disconcerting but in principle heal-
thy skepticism about this way of conceiving life, which then allows
room for a competency to seek further. As confirmation, one can
see a parallel between Hegel's explicitly calling this skepticism a
"state of despair" and Judge William's otherwise rather enigmatic
injunction to his friend to choose "despair" as the way to choose
himself (EOh 511) — though the parallel limps a little at the idea of
the choice of a state of mind. Apart from that, however, despair
opens the way to truth by ridding one's self-conception of what was
no doubt a necessary station "on" the way but is now clearly "in"
the way. To despair is to negate, or "lose," the self that saw itself
wrongly in this way. It is a kind of solvent-cum-propellant neces-
sary for keeping the journey going.

The notion of despair as a solvent is certainly present in Kierke-
gaard. In Postscript there is a reference to despair as the response to
misfortune that brings one out of immediacy, so that "the transition
to another understanding of misfortune is made possible" (CUP
434). What could sound more Hegelian? And yet there is a crucial
difference in the "journeys" Hegel and Climacus describe. In Hegel
despair is the necessary preliminary to a better standpoint for gras-
ing one's oneness with the world. The sense of hopelessness here is
really just a sign that one has reached a point where the goal of one-
ness must, but also can, be reconceived in a way that offers new
hope of grasping it. In Kierkegaard, however, in the case of the per-
son who despairs due to misfortune, the new standpoint is one that
enables him to "comprehend suffering" (434), in the sense of ac-
cepting it as an essential part of life rather than as an in-principle
avoidable intrusion. On Kierkegaard's journey selfhood becomes in-
creasingly strenuous as the gap between life as it is given "immedi-
ately" and what fulfillment requires widens. Despair, because it
knows no way out, Climacus also says, "wants to withdraw" from
the "pain," and a little later he describes it as "a kind of irascibil-
ity" (en Art Arrigskab). In this respect despair contrasts with
humor (which together with irony one may think of as functional
equivalents of Hegel's skepticism) as having its apprehension of
"the infinite, the eternal, the totality in the moment of impatience"
(544; translation amended).

Impatience with the eternal is the link we need to Anti-Climacus's
"despair." What prompts despair, in The Sickness unto Death, is the
(at first only dawning) realization that there is “something eternal” in the self (see, e.g., SUD$h$ 77). One may think therefore of Anti-Climacus’s despair as impatience with the self, with oneself, with the demands selfhood imposes. Put succinctly, Anti-Climacus’s despair is not the idea of a propellant but of a retardant. It is not the loss of one “self” inadequately conceived, the losing of which then makes room constructively for another and more adequately conceived “self.” It is, on the contrary, not wanting to be a self otherwise conceived than the self one finds it more congenial to be. Or, recalling once more the sophistry and cunning of despair, it is not wanting there to be any more adequate conception, even refusing to entertain the very notion of such a conception. If we were to apply The Sickness unto Death’s account of despair, as not wanting to be oneself, to the stages – a very risky thing to do, and which has no basis in the texts – each of the successive stages would be in itself a case of despair, whether or not its project proved to be futile. The stages prior to Religiousness B would be classified in The Sickness unto Death’s terms as ways of avoiding the path to truth, not ways of improving one’s awareness of what truth is. Certainly, and this is where the Hegelian model might also be applied to The Sickness unto Death, there is a “negative” development of the kind in which the nature of what one is aiming at becomes ever clearer, but the crucial difference is that in Kierkegaard what becomes clearer is not that we are the truth but how much more is needed if we are to be it – to be the selves we are.

Either/Or and The Sickness unto Death use almost identical terms in defining “self.” And yet a crucial distinction is made in the latter that is not made, at least so explicitly, in the former. In Either/Or it sounds at first as if our selves were merely the selves we commonsensically take ourselves to be, the identities we inherit, adopt, or accept. The self is a “diversely determined concretion” (EO$h$ 543). One who “chooses oneself” (543) “concretely” is “aware of this self as this definite individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite outside world” (542). Leaving aside here what “choice” of self amounts to, we can note that The Sickness unto Death repeats this definition of the self in terms of “this quite definite thing [dette ganske Bestemte], with these aptitudes, predispositions, etc.” and “aptitudes and talent” (SUD$h$ 99, 86;
SV3 XV 122, 112). But the quotation here is from a passage in which a clear distinction is made between the self that a person "takes possession" of in a merely "outward direction" ("what he calls his self") and the self in a "deeper sense" that one can possess only by taking an "inward direction." This indicates that the "self," at least in Anti-Climacus's formula, is not the commonsensically grasped self. How far the notions of self differ in the two works is a topic for some other study, but one important difference between the works is that while selfhood in Either/Or is that of an ethically disclosed self, a self visible in its deliberately adopted social roles, The Sickness unto Death draws attention to a vast range of undeliberately adopted facade-"selves," selves of a kind the aesthete would never aspire to because he would see through them so quickly (but among which he might also with some justification claim to locate something very like the self that Judge William urges him to choose).

This need not imply, however, that the two works employ distinct concepts of despair. To examine this question let us ask what William means when he says to the aesthete, "Take note, then, my young friend, this life is despair" (EOh 509). The last of the aesthetic life-views outlined by Judge William in the second of the three letters forming Part II of Either/Or is that of a reflected and highly organized person. But in some important sense the aesthete has not "chosen himself," so his organization is not a self-organization. The control this aesthete aims to preserve is only so much as to preserve an interplay between the world and human nature that maximizes enjoyment and the avoidance of pain. William says that "every aesthetic life-view is despair" (502; cf. 521–2). He might mean by this that the aesthetic life is by its very dependence on contingencies of nature prone to feelings of what the aesthete will himself call "despair," frustrations of all kinds and feelings of hopelessness, what one might call "everyday" despair. But despair of this piecemeal and random kind is "finite" and partial, while what William seems to mean by the term is something that pervades a whole life. Certainly, to suffer a serious setback can make one despair over "oneself" in what seems an all-encompassing way. But, it does so only in the sense that the self in this respect is conceived as "a finitude as every other finite thing" (520). One simply wishes one were better able to live according to the principle upon which one currently bases one's life. This is not the despair William refers to.
Alternatively, William might mean that insofar as setbacks become more frequent, and it becomes increasingly evident that the aesthetic project is nonsustainable, the aesthete will despair in the Hegelian sense of finding himself at a dead end. There is also perhaps some foothold here for the notion of desperation: as one becomes more anxious about failure, one also becomes increasingly "desperate" for success. It is clear, however, that a "last-ditch" concern for success of this kind, typical of the life-view William attributes to *Either/Or*’s mature aesthete, cannot be what he means when he says that all aesthetic life-views are despair. For some aesthetic life-views this ditch is still out of sight. Nor, by the same token, can the despair ascribed to "every" aesthetic life-view be the sense of not knowing where to go. Not having come to the point of having to defend their life-views to destruction, "early" aesthetes may still be happy with their aesthetic lives and may not even have come to the point of thinking that an aesthetic life-view is what they are enacting.

Yet, basing one’s life explicitly on an ideal or principle, a principle that one may of course enact without as yet having made it explicit, is to suppose that doing so successfully is to bring out the inherent value of that life. But if basing one’s life on an aesthetic principle proves to be no more than the attempt to make finite goals "eternally" satisfying when reflection shows that they can have no bearing on the eternal question of the value-in-itself of one’s life as a whole, clarity about this shortcoming should prompt the admission that the aesthetic life is in a crucial sense an empty one. Further, in respect of the project of bringing out the inherent value of one’s life, persistent dedication to an aesthetic principle should be recognizable for what it is—a failure to face the challenge of realizing the inherent value of one’s life.

Significantly, *Either/Or*’s aesthete has suffered no setbacks that would cause him to despair in an everyday sense. As a “complete” aesthete, with “all the requirements of an aesthetic life-view” (*EO*\(^h\) 502; cf. 511), he has managed to keep misfortune at bay. But for that very reason everyday, piecemeal despair does not hamper his grasp of the real thing. He is not able, as most people are, to confuse what Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death* calls “despair over the earthly or over something earthly” (*SUD*\(^h\) 80) with “despair of the eternal or over oneself” (91). He is closer to the ironical vantage point (corresponding to the solvent of skepticism in Hegel’s ac-
count) that makes that grasp possible but is by the same token more openly defensive about his current life-view and is on, if not actually over, the threshold from which he can admit that his life is despair. He refuses to “admit despair” \( EO^h 501 \), but that is just what makes his despair a defense.

Addressing the aesthete directly, Judge William says, “[E]veryone who lives aesthetically is in despair whether he knows it or not. But if one does know it, and you indeed do, then a higher form of existence is an inescapable requirement” \( EO^h 501 \). This suggests that the “despair” that the aesthetic life-view itself is a reluctance to meet the demands of a higher standard of selfhood. Despair, on this reading, is relational. The despair proper to one life-view is due to its being a failure to measure up to the standards of another, higher view. If so, then Either/Or’s conception of despair conforms with Anti-Climacus’s formula: “to want to be rid of oneself.” Although this may look unpromising for the less reflected forms of the aesthetic life-view, at least we can see how exponents of what William calls the “last” aesthetic life-view can want not to be some higher self than the one they currently conceive themselves as being.

If the parallel is vindicated, then we can say quite generally that despair in Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms is unwillingness to live up to an expectation of selfhood. In *The Sickness unto Death* this notion is put forward quite explicitly. In the opening pages of Part II we read: “Everything is qualitatively what it is measured by” and, applied to the self, its “standard . . . is always that directly in the face of which it is a self” \( SUD^h 111 \). The child, who first has its parents’ standard, “becomes a self through acquiring, as an adult, the State as its standard,” but then an “infinite accent is laid upon the self when it acquires God as its standard” \( 111 \). This tells us also that the notion of self in Kierkegaard is linked with that of a goal or telos that is the “measure” of what it means to become a self. There is this sense then, again made more explicitly in this later work, that selfhood is a project: “[t]he self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude, which relates to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can only be done in the relationship to God” \( 87 \). Judge William saw the task rather differently but that is because quite soon afterwards in the authorship the standard of selfhood had been raised. For William one becomes oneself by a choice but in *The Sickness unto Death* “oneself” is no longer something
one can simply choose to be. A metaphorically abbreviated reason is given in the half-humorous rehearsal of the pseudonymous series to date in Postscript. There Johannes Climacus says that immediately subsequent to Either/Or (the first in the series) exception was already taken in the pseudonymous writings to Judge William’s too complacent assumption that one can “win oneself” by choosing despair (SV3 IX 213; cf. CUP 258). Climacus puts the objection by saying that once having used your self to despair you have no self left to come back with and therefore need divine help. “Coming back,” for William, means “repenting [one]self back into [one]self, back into [one’s] family, back into the race, until [one] finds [one]self in God” (EOh 518). For Anti-Climacus, being “before God” is not an outcome of the return but its precondition.

The crucial difference between the despairs of Either/Or and The Sickness unto Death is therefore that where the former work’s account culminates in the advanced aesthetic life-view as exemplifying the “nothing of despair,” the latter offers a typology intended to identify whole ranges of life-styles (rather than life-views) and attitudes – indeed, practically any way of life recognizable to us at all – as doing exactly the same but in a wide variety of ways. As we saw at the beginning, despair is divided into three categories: one in which the relevant notion of selfhood is not yet in place and the other two in which it is but is either resisted (“not wanting in despair to be oneself”) or shelved in favor of an alternative version adopted deliberately as not resting in the “power” that “established it.” The latter categories are called respectively “weakness” and “defiance.”

The crux in the analysis in The Sickness unto Death is the idea of a weakness that one might describe as addiction to the world. The analysis involves the strategies with which despair with “cunning and sophistry” deals with the dawning consciousness of this weakness and of the fact that it is indeed a weakness to be addicted to the world. It is a premise of the analysis that human beings are peculiar among other beings by not being exhaustively identified by finite properties. There is an irreducible particularity, an “I,” for which each “definite” collection of properties is its own collection. At the level of singularity we have to be our own selves. This does not mean that what we really are is no more than this unspecified singularity. To suppose that we were merely bare particulars would be to ignore
personality, something quite concrete and essential to selfhood. Personality, or concrete selfhood, is the specific, discernible way our collection of dispositions and abilities functions or works in society. According to Judge William the aesthete can only become himself, a self at all, by “repenting,” looking back at the collection’s past from a vantage point in the present occupied by what one is willing to accept is the same self, a self for which one is responsible for having become. Accepting this personal identity must be part of what it means to “choose” to be the definite thing one is. Choosing oneself is therefore, for William, in part the choice of this vantage point, with the self that occupies it and the pain and grief it has experienced and caused. But there is also a forward-looking dimension, having a future that is also determined by this vantage point, the possibilities of this self circumscribed by what it is able to do and able to envisage for itself.

The analysis in The Sickness unto Death, in brief outline, goes as follows. Despair as “weakness” is anything that counts as failure to adopt the position of one’s singularity. This might be because it has not yet occurred to one that one is singular in this way, but the analysis focuses on the thought that much of human behavior is an attempt to escape this position or obscure the thought that it is there to be claimed. At the level of experience, this despair is experienced as loss of earthly things or of the earthly as such. What underlies this response, however, on Anti-Climacus’s account, is the opposite: an attempt to “lose” the “eternal,” which amounts on this account to wanting to be rid of oneself, the “formula for all despair” [SUDh 50]. But in the transitional case the individual recognizes his concern for the earthly (his touchiness about despair over finite losses) as the weakness it is. In the first instance, however, there is an attempt to cancel this unwelcome recognition of weakness by repressing the very notion of what it is an unwillingness to appropriate. After all, the less salient some prospect one is too weak to face, the less topical the idea one is too weak to face it. Because this form of despair, which goes by the name of “reserve” [Indesluttethed] [SV3 XV 118; cf. SUDh 94], still expresses resistance to the appropriation of singularity, it still counts as “weakness.” Defiant despair, which comes in two forms, active and passive in that order, ensues when the idea that one is singular can no longer be held at bay. Active despair ex-
exploits the consciousness of being singular – Anti-Climacus calls it the negative form of the self – “experimentally” (SUDh 123). Despair here takes the form of making one’s own mark on the world, putting one’s talents to one’s own use, totally turning one’s back on the idea that dedication to the world can be a weakness. This is correct in a way, the world is indeed where personality belongs, but it is not how a self “transparently grounded in the power that established it” is dedicated to the world, and the latter is Anti-Climacus’s formula for the unrooting of despair (44). Here the relation to that power is put aside and the negative form of the infinite self treated as though it were an absolute beginning from which selves can be fashioned perpetually de novo.

It is crucial to understanding Kierkegaard here that any such exploitation of the negative form of the self is still a form of weakness rather than of [e.g., Nietzschean] strength. It is the weakness of a conveniently presumed inability to free oneself from the pull of the world when we know that what we really aim for cannot find its fulfillment there. But note that despair is now not the weakness itself; it is one’s trying not to see the weakness. Instead of eliminating it and going on to faith, or hope (“humbling himself before God under his weakness”), which would be the progressive development and what it means to accept or want oneself, the despairer is one who backs off from the notion that there is anything “eternal” to measure up to. The passively defiant despairer, for his part, instead of putting the weakness out of mind, makes a point of being weak. He parades weakness as a decisive reason for claiming that the project of selfhood in any nonimmanent sense is not worth the candle, at least for him, and in the extreme case as proof that there is no such project.

But Part II of The Sickness unto Death then tells us that the task of selfhood as Part I has described it is only from the human point of view, with “man” the measure. Part II presents another measure: God, and toward the end of The Sickness unto Death this measure becomes more concretely Christ, through whom God has revealed “what stupendous reality a self has” (SUDh 147). Now does this, in accordance with the principle that the self’s standard is “always: that directly in the face of which it is a self” (SUDh 111), give us at last the full account of the project of selfhood? Or does Part II’s “measure” introduce a similar but new task, to be faced even if the
first has been accomplished? And if the latter, does the distinction between “weak” and “defiant” despair apply here all over again, from this higher level of existence?

The truth seems to be somewhere in between. The second “measure” only comes into the reckoning once the first has been fully appreciated for what it is. That means that the theology does not apply in any adequate way until consciousness of self has reached the point of the negative form of the infinite self. Many have observed that theology has been more or less scrupulously expunged from Part I. The “formula” just mentioned for the state of the self “when despair is completely eradicated” does not identify the power in which the self is transparently grounded with God, nor is the “grounding” said to be something that can only be done “before God.” One might try to read Part II as a kind of template to be added to Part I in order to provide the full account. That would mean making the appropriate substitutions, for instance, “before God” for the notion of there being “something eternal in the self.” Against this one must note that the proposal would clearly destroy much of the phenomenological appeal of the account. The self’s singularity, the negative form of the infinite self, is— at least it may be argued— something structural to mankind. But being before God is not as arguably structural; it is at best a notion of which one can have no adequate conception, grasp, or existential appreciation until the latter notion is in place, which then supports the Hegelian reading suggested here. Besides that, there is a point where the template does not fit: weakness and defiance become “the converse of what they normally are,” not wanting to be oneself (at this level of expectation a sinner) is now defiance \( (SUD^b \text{ 146}) \). So there are good negative grounds for the Hegelian reading, which says, roughly, that you do not appreciate the need of a renewed specification of the task until, reaching the stage of the negative form of the infinite self, there would be nowhere to go from the point of view of the purely negative “self” except back to the world on the world’s terms. Part II does not provide a supplement to Part I, it exploits the analysis in Part I to add one further dimension. The missing specifications apply only when the self becomes conscious of having the “stupendous reality” that standing before God admits.

It is not sufficient for the unrooting of despair that you merely have some notion or other of oneself as God-grounded. On the other
hand, it is at least necessary to have some notion of yourself as par-
ticular, and of there being “something eternal” in the self. Only
then can the task acquire its additional dimension, but it does have
to acquire this dimension before despair can be unrooted. This is in-
deed anticipated in Part I, where the self is said to be “the conscious
synthesis of infinitude and finitude, which relates to itself,” and
whose task is to “become itself,” which, the passage goes on to say,
“can only be done in the relationship to God” (SUDh 59). And the
earlier formula for the eradication of despair reappears already in
Part I in an expanded context with “God” clearly in place:

Every human existence not conscious of itself as spirit, or not personally
conscious of itself before God as spirit, every human existence which is not
grounded transparently in God, but opaque-ly rests or merges in some ab-
stract universal (state, nation, etc.) or, in the dark about its self, simply
takes its capacities to be natural powers, unconscious in a deeper sense of
where it has them from, takes its self to be an inexplicable something (et
uforklarligt Noget). (SUDh 76; see SV3 XV 102).

The aesthete, it will be remembered, was content to be nothing,
even if he might resist that appellation, or at least its negative con-
notation. On the other hand, he would resist even more strongly an
identification as a “something” of this murky kind. Had he read
The Sickness unto Death it might even with some justice have oc-
curred to him to accuse Judge William of being just such a murky
self. For according to The Sickness unto Death the self we become
when preferring the worldly option, the self that develops in an out-
ward rather than inward direction and whose outward direction
does not express an inward direction, must be “broken down” in
order to become itself (SUDh 96). But of course, in William’s defense
one can say that he does not conceive the ethical self as worldly. But
in that case, not seeing the distinction between the inward and the
outward direction, and the way in which the outward direction can
deceive with the appearance of selfhood, he has simply underesti-
mated the extent of the task of selfhood.

These murky selves that see themselves in abstract universal
terms are not selves standing before God. They are not selves at all
in Kierkegaard’s sense. In the kind of despair Anti-Climacus calls
weakness, they are pseudo-”selves” who assume they adopt a rela-
tion to God by standing in certain relations to one another. On the
other hand, in the kind of despair Anti-Climacus calls defiance, they do indeed see themselves as alone, singular; but then they deny they are related to God. They “want to be themselves,” but this wanting is a form of despair precisely because it excludes the thought of being established by a “power.” True, they are not obfuscated in the above way; but until they gain an idea of what it means to stand before God, they are not yet “clarified.” They still lack the idea of standing before God.

This suggests that, as they stand, they have indeed no alternative to despair, for anything short of grounding oneself transparently in God while before God counts as despair; there can be no nondespairing alternative outside that relationship. One may even wonder how far that is possible even within the relationship. In Part I, Anti-Climacus, at the beginning of his account of the development of the consciousness of despair, pegs the development’s end with a limiting case, the devil, a “pure” spirit. There being in this case no “obscurity which might serve as a mitigating excuse,” the devil’s defiance is “absolute” \( [SUD^h \, 72] \); standing before God, and knowing exactly that this is what he is doing, the devil turns his back on God. But human beings are not pure spirit, their self-knowledge is never pure, they are exposed always to that “cunning and sophistry” \( [of \, their \, own] \) with which despair exploits the fatal gap between “understanding” what is to be done and “doing” it \( (125) \). So even when they understand that the task of becoming themselves requires that they are “conscious of themselves before God as spirit” \( [76] \) and that only when the task is conceived in that way can they free themselves from despair, they still face the prior “task” of mastering their own susceptibility to self-deceit.

There is a clear autobiographical reference. It is a remarkable feature of The Sickness unto Death that while in Part II it brings Kierkegaard’s own personal dilemma into focus, it tries in Part I to see this dilemma against a background that brings it conceptually into continuity with what Kierkegaard saw as the malaise of Danish \( \) and any other relevantly similar \( \) society. The problem facing Kierkegaard himself was that even when the “measure” is God, one still does not know whether one is in despair or not. Such knowledge is always suspect. The “calling” that requires one to be “extraordinary” may from this elevated standard simply be just one more easy way out, a way of avoiding the truth rather than witnessing to it.
One treats "the thorn in the flesh" as if it had been specially implanted by eternity to equip one for some divine purpose \((SUD^h 109)\). But if God is the standard, perhaps the thorn in the flesh should be accepted as part of the "definite thing" that is oneself? If so, one should "humble oneself under this weakness" before God, for whom, after all, everything is possible \((110)\). Maybe the only convincing proof that one did that and was not still in despair would be martyrdom, for to lose everything, even life itself, would show to the world that the "calling" was not an easy way out and therefore not despair. Perhaps from the point of view of the theological self, losing one's life in the cause of the universal might be a way of realizing it (something that according to the "human" standard would be quite unintelligible). But conceivably, even this thought might be a despairing one, still an example of "before God in despair not wanting to be oneself" \((113; \text{cf. } 111)\).

Apparently, very far from these personal dilemmas we have the claim in Part I of *The Sickness unto Death* that the most common forms of despair "in the world" are those in which people are as yet not conscious of themselves "as spirit" \((SUD^b 75)\). A person lacking "consciousness of an infinite self" \((100)\) cannot yet see the task of selfhood for what it is. But nevertheless the young girl who finds life unsupportable unless she can be "another's" \((50)\), in the sense in which she understands this, manifests, knowingly or not, some grasp of the negative form of the infinite self. For her, we might guess, an intuitive access to this negative form is barred much less effectively than in the case of people more easily satisfied with their worldly personae. Maybe Anti-Climacus's account could be glossed in a way of which Kierkegaard would have approved. We might say that the Borgia figure with "Caesar or nothing" as his motto \((49)\), just because he represses the "weakness" that is his addiction to the world, is further removed from this grasp than the young girl with the fragile self-image. The point is that flight and evasion take many forms and society itself is a rich provider of ready-made "identities" for those too weak to be "spirit," as well as of opportunities for those bent on being their own selves. One might gloss *The Sickness unto Death* further by talking of "objective" despair, as Vigilius Haufniensis does of objective anxiety, despair as a malaise embedded in society and its forms \((CA 56ff)\).

There is one further "local" reference to note in *The Sickness
unto Death. We saw that the task to be accomplished in "the relationship to God" is that of "becoming oneself." The expression used to describe the self that has the task included "synthesis." The self is "the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude," a conscious synthesis that "relates to itself" (SUDh 59). Kierkegaard's notion of a synthesis is never explicated in depth. But the reader may find it rewarding to consider two relevant senses of "synthesis." In one, and here we may again think of Kierkegaard writing under the shadow of Hegel, this "synthesis" could refer to the completed task of selfhood, or perhaps (and this is a distinction that needs working out) to the form the task of continuing to be, and in this other sense becoming oneself, takes when despair is overcome (though again, do we ever know whether it is overcome?). That is, being oneself is sustaining the synthesis of finite and infinite, bringing off the synthesis in intellectually ungroundable ethical activity. Becoming oneself would be successfully grounding oneself in God, going on doing that in one's allotted time and place, not being engaged in the struggle to be doing that. On the other hand, once put in this way, it seems more likely that the struggling and the continuing go together, that one must always be resisting the resistance of despair.

Negatively, the synthesis can be understood simply as a juxtaposition of opposites, the task being to get them together as opposites. What the reader is being expressly told is that it can only be carried out with God's help. The development toward self-consciousness that Kierkegaard has Anti-Climacus trace is one in which the opposition becomes ever clearer, assuming in the moral and practical plane a status analogous to what Hegel called an "either/or" of the understanding. The opposition is not metaphysical dualism or mind-body dualism or the like. The idea of a synthesis in this negative sense has to do with what Kierkegaard refers to in his journals as the human being's "double nature" and has to be understood in an ethical context. Kierkegaard is here criticizing his contemporaries, especially the Grundtvigians, for not admitting this double nature. They believe human fulfillment to be the fruition of a natural development. Anti-Climacus's "theological self," even more so the Christological self, though he doesn't use that expression, is in direct rebuttal of this (in more than one sense) popular conception. By making the God-man the model and the relationship to God the sense of the "eternal" in oneself, Kierkegaard pushes fulfillment be-
yond the reach of our natural capacities. Some would agree but deny that this can be the measure; “ought” implies “can,” and it is simply cheating to say that everything is possible for God. For Anti-Climacus, however, a veritable Christian, such denial is the ultimate sin. To despair is to give up the hope of this good. But then on these terms, the Grundtvigians too would be sinners.\footnote{Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), §78, pp. 49, 50.}

NOTES

1 Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession, trans. with introductory essay by Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 61; SV\textsuperscript{3} XI 35.
2 See, e.g., Philip L. Quinn, “Kierkegaard’s Christian Ethics,” in the present volume.
3 A cogent proponent of this reading is Michael Theunissen. See Der Begriff Verzweiflung. Korrekturen an Kierkegaard (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993); see also Theunissen, “Für einen rationaleren Kierkegaard: Zu Einwänden von Arne Grøn und Alastair Hannay,” in Kierkegaard Studies/Yearbook 1996, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappeløn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), pp. 61–90. The volume contains several further essays on The Sickness unto Death relevant to the present one, including the present author’s “Basic Despair in The Sickness unto Death” and “Paradigmatic Despair and the Quest for a Kierkegaardian Anthropology.”
4 See EO\textsuperscript{5h} 502, where the same distinction is made between two levels of despair. Kierkegaard also distinguishes doubt from despair as merely intellectual (see 514).
7 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, §78, pp. 49, 50.
8 Ibid.

A passion in the irascible power can . . . regard either good or evil. If it regards good, this can be a good possessed or one not possessed. Regarding a good possessed there can be no passion in the
irascible power, because once a good is possessed it causes no difficulty to the possessor. Consequently the notion of the arduous is not verified in it. But regarding a good not yet possessed, in which the notion of the arduous can be verified because of the difficulty of obtaining it, if that good is judged to exceed the capacity of the one seeking it, despair ensues; but if it is judged not to exceed that capacity, hope arises. [264]

The concept of "irascibility" stems from Plato's discussion of the "spirited" (not "spiritual") aspects of irrational nature that are superior to "mere" appetite ("concupiscence") [see Republic 4:396]. For more on the parallel with Aquinas, see my "Kierkegaardian Despair and the Irascible Soul," Kierkegaard Studies/Yearbook 1997, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997).

There are several things this essay has not done. One is to spell out the comparison with Hegel. Others have discussed it more thoroughly elsewhere [most recently Judith Butler, "Kierkegaard's Speculative Despair," in the Routledge History of Philosophy, vol. 6, The Age of German Idealism, ed. by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins [London and New York: Routledge, 1993], pp. 363–9]. Either/Or's despair might turn out to be closer to Hegel than I have suggested, although I suspect that the claim that all aesthetic life-views are despair is harder to make sense of in terms of Hegel's concept of despair. But there might well be less continuity than the reading offered here claims. Then again, the relation of Kierkegaardian despair to corresponding discussions in other philosophers ancient and modern, not to say postmodern, offers a potentially inexhaustible topic, which raises the question of what we should make of Kierkegaard's concept once we feel justified in claiming that we have grasped it. Will we decide, as many quickly assume, that it is obsolete? Or is there perhaps an existential core in the concept that must and can be rescued from the Christian framework within which Anti-Climacus writes? May the relation to religion be discussed profitably in terms of some alternative theology, one which will allow Kierkegaardian insights to throw light on and enrich our grasp of human being? Perhaps we should say not everything but quite a lot is possible.
The ethics whose teleological suspension is at issue in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is the secular ethics of his own time. This secular ethics is the ethical that is contrasted with the aesthetic in his *Either/Or*. Scholars disagree about the relative importance of the Kantian and Hegelian strands in ethics thus conceived.¹ This is also the first ethics spoken of in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*. Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of that work, tells us that "the first ethics was shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the single individual" *(CA 20)*. It is only the second ethics, he goes on to say, that can deal with the manifestation of sin *(CA 21)*. For Kierkegaard, the second ethics is a distinctively Christian ethics. His most thorough treatment of this ethics occurs in *Works of Love*. According to Bruce Kirmmse, this book is Kierkegaard's "major ethical work and one of the most important works in his entire authorship," and it contains "his clearest and starkest formulation of a Christian ethics."

Hence most of this essay will be devoted to a discussion of *Works of Love*. Kierkegaard, however, writing under the pseudonym of Anti-Climacus, also treats Christian ethics from a somewhat different perspective in *Practice in Christianity*, and this essay will have something to say about that book as well.

Before turning to Kierkegaard's Christian ethics, however, we need to understand how the first ethics came to be shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the single individual. Even the first ethics is sufficiently stringent to open up what John E. Hare characterizes as the moral gap, "the gap between the moral demand on us and our natural capacities to live by it."³ As he sees it, for those who are unwilling to invoke divine assistance in bridging the moral gap, there

³
are three strategies for dealing with it, none of which has succeeded. The first is to keep the moral demand high and to puff up our natural capacities to live by it. The second is to reduce the demand. The third is to acknowledge the gap and to look for a naturalistic substitute for divine assistance. Those who are willing to invoke divine assistance, as Kierkegaard is, will deal with the moral gap in other ways.

In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant accounts for the moral gap by arguing that there is radical evil in human nature. There is in each of us, Kant thinks, a propensity to evil that ought to be regarded as "brought by man upon himself." Since it is to be so regarded, we are accountable for it, and so it is a product of our freedom. Hence it is morally evil. It is the subjective ground of the possibility of the deviation of the maxims we use to determine our actions from the moral law. According to Kant,

this evil is radical, because it corrupts the ground of all maxims; it is, moreover, as a natural propensity, inextirpable by human powers, since extirpation could occur only through good maxims, and cannot take place when the ultimate subjective ground of all maxims is postulated as corrupt; yet at the same time it must be possible to overcome it, since it is found in man, a being whose actions are free.

In our struggles to overcome it, "we cannot start from an innocence natural to us but must begin with the assumption of a wickedness of the will in adopting its maxims contrary to the original moral predisposition," and "we must begin with the incessant counteraction against it." But, at best, this leads only to progress from bad to better. We can, at best, only narrow the moral gap; we can never close it.

How can we even begin to narrow the moral gap if the ultimate subjective ground of all our maxims is corrupt? Kant is sure that "when the moral law commands that we ought now to be better men, it follows inevitably that we must be able to be better men." He supposes that "if a man reverses, by a single unchangeable decision, that highest ground of his maxims whereby he was an evil man [and thus puts on the new man], he is, so far as his principle and cast of mind are concerned, a subject susceptible of goodness, but only in continuous labor and growth is he a good man." Such a reversal would be, Kant tells us, a moral revolution in one's dis-
position. But further questions now arise. Can anyone become even a subject susceptible of goodness if the ultimate subjective ground of all his or her maxims is corrupt? And can it be done without divine assistance?

Kant takes it to be a basic principle that "each must do as much as lies in his power to become a better man," and he thinks that only when this much has been done "can he hope that what is not within his power will be supplied through cooperation from above." On Kant's view, it is hard to reconcile the idea of such cooperation from above with the idea that "man himself must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become." Yet Kant insists that the impossibility of cooperation between freedom and grace cannot be proved "because freedom itself, though containing nothing supernatural in its conception, remains, as regards its possibility, just as incomprehensible to us as is the supernatural factor that we would like to regard as a supplement to the spontaneous but deficient determination of freedom." So we are to do whatever we can to make ourselves subjects susceptible of goodness, and we may then hope for a divine supplement to our efforts if one is needed.

Kant defines sin as "the transgressing of the moral law as a divine command." He thinks we have a sui generis duty to form an ethical commonwealth whose highest lawgiver can only be thought of as someone "with respect to whom all true duties, hence also the ethical, must be represented as at the same time his commands." He concludes that "an ethical commonwealth can be thought of only as a people under divine commands, i.e., as a people of God, and indeed under laws of virtue." Kant will therefore allow us to represent the moral law, which is a deliverance of our own practical reason, as a divine command and thus to represent transgressions of it as sins. Using this system of representation, we may say that each of us becomes sinful by bringing upon himself or herself the morally evil propensity to evil. By doing so, we create the moral gap. Having done so, we in our fallen state lack the natural capacities to live up to the demands of the moral law. Thus, on Kant's view, we ourselves are responsible for the shipwreck of first ethics, for getting ourselves, by becoming sinful, into a situation in which we cannot live up to its demands. Having become sinful, we can at best narrow the moral gap by trying to make progress from bad to better.
Whether our efforts to make moral progress succeed may depend on whether we receive divine assistance, and only when we have done our best to make such progress may we hope for a divine supplement to our efforts.

The Christian ethics set forth in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love is at least as demanding as Kantian ethics. Its demands are, he thinks, specified by genuine divine commands and not merely by a moral law that can also be thought of as a divine command. How can such an ethics avoid being shipwrecked on sinfulness? How can it be the second ethics that can deal with the manifestation of sin? In other words, how can it deal with the moral gap?

I. WORKS OF LOVE

The ethics of love set forth in the Gospels portrays love as the subject of a command. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus states the command in response to a question from a lawyer about which commandment of the law is the greatest.

You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well. [2:37–40]

Mark 12:29–31 and Luke 10:27–8 contain similar accounts of the promulgation of the Great Commandment. And in his last discourse, recorded in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells his followers that “the command I give you is this, that you love one another” (John 15:17). So the authors of those documents concur in thinking that Jesus expressed his ethics of love in the form of a demand upon his followers, a command that they love one another and their neighbors as themselves. In Works of Love, Kierkegaard follows these authors in speaking of Christian love as “commanded love” (WL 19). Can love be commanded?

Works of Love is, as its subtitle indicates, “Some Christian Deliberations in the Form of Discourses.” In the second discourse of the first series, Kierkegaard comments on Matthew 22:39, “You shall
love your neighbor as yourself.” The first section of this discourse is entitled “You Shall Love.” Kierkegaard addresses this topic because “this is the very mark of Christian love and its distinctive characteristic – that it contains this apparent contradiction: to love is a duty” ([WL 24]). As Alastair Hannay has pointed out, it is plausible to suppose that the apparent contradiction arises from the fact that Kierkegaard’s slogan that to love is a duty seems to contradict Kant’s claim that there is no such thing as a duty to love.\textsuperscript{16} The apparent contradiction will not, however, be a real contradiction if the kind of love Kierkegaard takes to be a duty differs from that Kant has in mind when he denies that love is a duty. The kind of love Kant has in mind is love that is a matter of feeling. Since Kant thinks feelings are not subject to the will, he denies that such love can be brought about at will. He then applies \textit{modus tollens} to the ought-implies-can principle to conclude to the denial that such love ought to be brought about at will. There is, therefore, no duty to have such love, and it cannot be the proper object of a moral command. But it remains to be seen whether the kind of love Kierkegaard takes to be commanded, and hence a duty, is this kind of love.

Even if it is supposed that Christian love is not a matter of feeling, a question arises about why it needs to be commanded. As I see it, to a first approximation, the answer is that the love of neighbor of which Jesus speaks is unnatural for humans in their present sinful condition. It does not spontaneously engage their affections. For most of us most of the time, love of neighbor is not an attractive goal, and, if it were supererogatory or above and beyond the call of duty, most of us simply would not pursue it. Such love must be presented to us, at least in the first instance, as an obligatory love with the feel of something that can curb or check natural desires and inclinations. In the religious tradition of Jesus and his hearers, it is taken for granted that divine commands impose obligations, and so an obligatory love would in that tradition naturally be represented as commanded by a divine lawgiver. Indeed, in the Christian development of that tradition, which Kierkegaard accepts, Jesus himself, who is also God the Son, is a divine lawgiver.

What is more, like the requirements of Kantian morality, the demands of Christian love open up the moral gap. In the first section of the third discourse in the first series, Kierkegaard speaks of Paul’s
remark that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). He concludes this section as follows:

Is there any more accurate expression for how infinitely far a person is from fulfilling the requirement than this, that the distance is so great that he cannot begin to calculate it, cannot total up the account! Not only is so much neglected every day, to say nothing of what guilt is incurred, but when some time has passed, one is not even able to state accurately the guilt as it once appeared to oneself, because time changes and mitigates one's judgment of the past — but, alas, no amount of time changes the requirement, eternity's requirement — that love is the fulfilling of the Law. [WL 134]

According to Kirmmse, when we read passages such as this about the Law's demand, "we are compelled to confront the radical absoluteness of Christian ethics and our inability to live accordingly." Or, to be more precise, we are compelled to confront our inability to live up to the Law's demand without divine assistance. Kierkegaard insists that "you shall love — this, then, is the word of the royal law" [WL 24]. But how are we to love?

Kierkegaard begins to answer this question by distinguishing three kinds of love. It is a commonplace of Christian thought that there is a distinctively Christian form of love (agape, caritas) that stands in sharp contrast to both erotic love (eros, amor) and friendship. The aim of both erotic love and friendship is to love this single human being above all others and in distinction from all others. Both kinds of love are preferential, while agapeistic love is not.

Therefore, the object of both erotic love and of friendship has preference's name, "the beloved," "the friend," who is loved in contrast to the whole world. The Christian doctrine, on the contrary, is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion. [WL 19]

The Christian doctrine, moreover, is that love of neighbor is a duty. And being a duty is, Kierkegaard thinks, a necessary condition for securing love of neighbor against the kinds of mutability that destroy erotic love and friendship. As he puts the point, "only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured against every change, eternally made free in blessed independence, eternally and happily secured against despair" [WL 29]. How does loving dutifully provide such security?
When Kierkegaard speaks of securing love against change, he is thinking of changes in the desires or feelings that are in part constitutive of erotic love and friendship, desires and feelings that sometimes spontaneously alter even when there is no change in the object of love or in the lover’s beliefs about that object. As Robert Brown has observed,

a woman’s love for her husband can change into dislike even though her appraisal of his character or personality is unaltered. She can simply become bored with him for displaying the same familiar characteristics, each of which she still values but no longer wishes to observe at such close quarters.¹³

Only if love of neighbor is a duty, Kierkegaard supposes, can it be rendered invulnerable to changes in the lover’s emotions, moods, and tastes in virtue of being motivated by a stable sense of duty. A love thus motivated, however, would not be a matter of feeling. It could exist and persist independent of feelings, though it need not do so.

When Kierkegaard speaks of making love free in blessed independence, he has in mind independence of mutable characteristics of the loved one. The dependence of erotic love and friendship on mutable characteristics of the beloved and the friend make them vulnerable to alterations in their objects. If the beloved loses the traits that made her or him erotically attractive, then erotic love without illusion dies. If the friend who was cherished for virtue turns vicious, the friendship will not survive unless one is corrupted and turns vicious too. But Christian love of neighbor is invulnerable to alterations in its object. Kierkegaard says:

To be sure, you can also continue to love the beloved and the friend no matter how they treat you, but you cannot truly continue to call them the beloved and friend if they, sorry to say, have really changed. No change, however, can take the neighbor from you, because it is not the neighbor who holds you fast, but it is your love that holds the neighbor fast. If your love for the neighbor remains unchanged, then the neighbor also remains unchanged by existing. (WL 65)

If there is to be such a love that, in Shakespeare’s words, alters not where it alteration finds, it cannot be held fast by or depend on mutable features of the neighbor. According to Kierkegaard, it will have the requisite independence of such features only if it is a duty, for
only then can it be motivated by a sense of duty instead of by affections or preferences that change in response to alterations in the loved one. "Such a love," he tells us, "stands and does not fall with the contingency of its object but stands and falls with the Law of eternity – but then, of course, it never falls" ([WL 39]). Or at least it need never fall provided we assume that we can always obey the Law of eternity because we ought to do so.

When Kierkegaard speaks of securing love against despair, he is pointing, in the first instance, to the unhappiness the lover feels in response to misfortunes such as the loss of the beloved or the friend. However, he takes despairing unhappiness to be only a symptom of the underlying state of being in despair, which is a misrelation in a person's innermost being. Being in despair, Kierkegaard tells us, is due to "relating oneself with infinite passion to a particular something, for one can relate oneself with infinite passion – unless one is in despair – only to the eternal" ([WL 40]). In other words, one who is in despair cleaves to a particular finite and temporal good with an infinite passion only properly directed to an eternal good. The only security against being in despair is to undergo the change of eternity by investing infinite passion in the eternal and in obedience to the Law of eternity.

Despair is to lack the eternal; despair is not to have undergone the change of eternity through duty's shall. Despair is not, therefore, the loss of the beloved – that is unhappiness, pain, suffering – but despair is the lack of the eternal. ([WL 40–1])

Of course the change of eternity is by itself no cure for unhappiness. It does not remove the pain and suffering involved in the loss of a loved one. But the command to love makes it a duty to love despite unhappiness, pain, and suffering. Of course, not giving up on love in such circumstances requires great courage, and it may seem impossible for humans to muster up such courage when pain and suffering are extreme. Kierkegaard asks: "Who would have this courage except eternity; who has the right to say this shall except eternity, which at the very moment love wants to despair over its unhappiness commands it to love; where can this command have its home except in eternity?" ([WL 41]). However, if eternity does say this shall by right, humans must be able to act with the requisite courage, even if they cannot do so without assistance. Thus Kierkegaard in-
Kierkegaard's Christian ethics

Kierkegaard's Christian ethics consists that "when eternity says, 'You shall love,' it is responsible for making sure that this can be done" (41). We can be confident, I think, that eternity will have to assist many of us if we are to be kept secure from despair in the face of extraordinary unhappiness, pain, and suffering.

According to Kierkegaard, then, three things threaten to destroy our loves: changes in our inclinations and feelings, changes in the objects we love, and the unhappiness, pain, and suffering that can lead to despair. Such things often do destroy erotic loves and friendships. Love of neighbor will not be vulnerable to the first two of them only if it is a duty and so compliance is motivated by a sense of duty independent of inclinations, feelings, and mutable characteristics of the neighbor. It will not be vulnerable to the third of them, Kierkegaard suggests, only if it is a duty whose source is eternity, a duty imposed by a divine command, so that divine assistance can be relied upon if needed to make compliance a real possibility. In short, only the love that is obedient to the divine command is immutable.

We can in some cases test our love for immutability. In the ninth discourse of the second series, titled "The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who Is Dead," Kierkegaard tells us that we have duties to the dead. One of them is to "recollect the dead, weep softly, but weep long" (WL 348). If we too quickly forget the dead, our love for them lacks the requisite independence of changes in ourselves. The dead do not change. "If, then, any change takes place between one living and one dead," Kierkegaard argues, "it is indeed clear that it must be the one living who has changed" (358). When such a change occurs, our love for the dead lacks the immutability required by duty and so fails in obedience to the divine command. As Kierkegaard sees it, "in the relationship to one who is dead, you have the criterion by which you can test yourself" (358). Judged by this criterion, many of us fail the test.

Christian love of neighbor differs from erotic love and friendship in another important way. In the second section of the second discourse of the first series, entitled "You Shall Love the Neighbor," Kierkegaard contends that erotic love and friendship are both infected with partiality because they rest on exclusive preferences. The poets praise them because of their exclusivity. Kierkegaard tells us: In the poetic sense, it is a stroke of good fortune (and certainly the poet is an excellent judge of good fortune), the best of good fortune, to fall in love,
to find this one and only beloved. It is a stroke of good fortune, almost as
great, to find this one and only friend. (WL 51)

Because finding the one and only beloved or the one and only friend
is a matter of luck rather than choice, one is never obliged to find the
beloved or the friend. The one and only beloved or the one and only
friend is the object of a passionate preference that Kierkegaard con-
siders akin to self-love. "Just as self-love selfishly embraces this one
and only self that makes it self-love," he says, "so also erotic love's
passionate preference selfishly encircles this one and only beloved,
and friendship's passionate preference encircles this one and only
friend" (WL 53). Moreover, exclusive love cherishes traits that dif-
ferentiate the beloved or the friend from other people. According to
Kierkegaard, "in erotic love and friendship, the two love each other
by virtue of the dissimilarity or by virtue of the similarity that is
based on dissimilarity (as when two friends love each other by virtue
of similar customs, characters, occupations, education, etc., that is,
on the basis of the similarity by which they are different from other
people, or in which they are like each other as different from other
people]" (56). Confirmation for the view that erotic love and friend-
ship are exclusive loves comes from Aristotle. He restricts the best
kind of friendship to good people who are equal in virtue and main-
tains that we must be content with only a few friends of this kind.
"One cannot be a friend to many people in the sense of having friend-
ship of the perfect type with them," Aristotle says, "just as one can-
not be in love with many people at once." The view that erotic love
and friendship are exclusive is not a Kierkegaardian idiosyncrasy.

By contrast, Christian love of neighbor involves self-denial, does
not play favorites, and is all-inclusive. For Kierkegaard, the dis-
agreement between the poet, an aesthetic figure, and Christianity is
simple, sharp, and deep:

The issue between the poet and Christianity can be defined very precisely
as follows: Erotic love and friendship are preferential love [Forkjerlighed]
and the passion of preferential love; Christian love [Kjerlighed] is self-de-
nials's love, for which this shall vouches. To deprive these passions of their
strength is the confusion. But preferential love's most passionate bound-
lessness in excluding means to love only one single person; self-denial's
boundlessness in giving itself means not to exclude a single one. (WL 52)
But passionate preference is rooted in our natural inclinations and predilections. In order to counteract it, Christianity needs something that can win a struggle against natural inclinations. Only thus armed, can Christianity “thrust erotic love and friendship from the throne” (WL 44). On Kierkegaard's view, Christianity proposes for this role dutiful obedience to the divine command, this shall, to love God and the neighbor. Motivated by a sense of duty that goes contrary to natural inclinations, the Christian makes God rather than preference the middle term in love of neighbor. Kierkegaard holds that “in erotic love and friendship, preferential love is the middle term; in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term” (57–8).

Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being. Only by loving God above all else can one love the neighbor in the other human being. The other human being, this is the neighbor who is the other human being in the sense that the other human being is every other human being. (WL 58)

In short, only if it is mediated by the commanded love of God can the commanded love of neighbor reach out to every other human being, excluding no one on preferential grounds.

Because it is to be all-inclusive, commanded Christian love of neighbor cannot rest on differences among persons or on likenesses grounded in differences. It demands instead, Kierkegaard observes, an eternal equality in loving, which is just the opposite of exclusive love or preference.

Equality is simply not to make distinctions, and eternal equality is unconditionally not to make the slightest distinction, unqualifiedly not to make the slightest distinction. Preference on the other hand is to make distinctions; passionate preference is unqualifiedly to make distinctions. (WL 58)

The demand for eternal equality in loving is a remarkable and unnatural demand.

Up to this point, however, what Kierkegaard has said about erotic love and friendship seems plausible. They are mutable and exclusive loves. But he has more to say. He also claims that passionate preferential love is another form of self-love. He notes that “the beloved and the friend are called, remarkably and profoundly, to be sure, the other self, the other I” (WL 53) and then argues that “The one whom
self-love, in the strictest sense, loves is basically the other I, because the other I is he himself. Yet this certainly is still self-love. But in the same sense it is self-love to love the other I, who is the beloved or the friend [57]. This is, needless to say, not a persuasive argument. It is far from clear that love for the other I who is myself is self-love in the same sense as love for the other I who is the beloved or the friend. To be sure, erotic love is often selfish. In addition, the two lower forms of Aristotelian friendship are selfish because, as Aristotle says, "those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good for themselves, and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant to themselves." However, it does not follow from these considerations that erotic love is always selfish or that all forms of friendship are selfish.

Yet even here, if we make allowances for his rhetorical exaggeration, Kierkegaard has a serious point to make. As he indicates, the Christian command does not require self-hatred; it only requires that a person love her neighbor as herself, that is, as she ought to love herself. Properly understood, says Kierkegaard, the love commandment also says this: "You shall love yourself in the right way" [WL 22]. Similarly, commanded Christian love is to dethrone erotic love and friendship but is not to abolish either of them. Because love of neighbor excludes no one, the beloved or the friend is also the neighbor. Hence, Kierkegaard urges:

No, love the beloved faithfully and tenderly, but let love for the neighbor be the sanctifying element in your union's covenant with God. Love your friend honestly and devotedly, but let love for the neighbor be what you learn from each other in your friendship's confidential relationship with God! [WL 62]

What is more, when both erotic love and love of neighbor focus on a single person, priority must be given to love of neighbor. For Kierkegaard, "your wife must first and foremost be to you your neighbor; that she is your wife is then a more precise specification of your particular relationship to each other" [WL 141]. Similarly, when both friendship and love of neighbor focus on a single person, your friend must first and foremost be to you your neighbor. But subordinating erotic love and friendship to love of neighbor may carry with it a very great price. From the Christian perspective, Kierkegaard thinks, "truly to love another person is with every sac-
rifice [also the sacrifice of becoming hated oneself] to help the other person to love God or in loving God” (114). So if one can help the beloved or the friend to love God by breaking off the relationship, love of neighbor demands that one make this sacrifice, even if one becomes hated as a result. Unless one is prepared to pay this price, one’s erotic love or friendship is not wholly free of selfishness or self-love, and one has not completely subordinated these other loves to love of neighbor.

Christian love of neighbor, as Kierkegaard portrays it, gives rise to many questions. Is it even possible to love without making distinctions? And if it is possible, is such undiscriminating love desirable? Is it desirable to be willing to sacrifice erotic love or friendship for the sake of the loved one’s God-relationship? Can things that go so much against the grain of our natural inclinations and predilections really be duties? Kierkegaard knows perfectly well that such questions are bound to arise. He insists that the command to love one’s neighbor, interpreted in this way, will be, like much else in Christianity, an offense to many. As he puts it, “the Christian world is still continually offended by the actual Christian” (WL, 201). Nonetheless, he urges us to become actual Christians and to try to obey the command. “Only confess it,” he pleads, “or if it is disturbing to you to have it put this way, well, I myself will confess that many times this has thrust me back and that I am yet very far from the delusion that I fulfill this commandment, which to flesh and blood is an offense and to wisdom foolishness” (59). When we consider it in a cool hour, we too are apt to be thrust back by the command and at least tempted to find it offensive.

Throughout the second series of discourses Kierkegaard depicts works of love in ways that make the Christian who performs them seem foolish by worldly standards. In the discourse called “Love Builds Up,” he tells us that “the one who loves presupposes that love is in the other person’s heart and by this very presupposition builds up love in him – from the ground up, provided, of course, that in love he presupposes its presence in the ground” (WL 216–17). Unless we presuppose at least a seed of love in the heart of the neighbor, Kierkegaard thinks, we will not try to bring the seed to fruition by building up love in the neighbor. However, the neighbor is everyone, and so we must presuppose at least a seed of love in the heart of everyone. Yet, from a worldly point of view, it seems
foolish to presuppose that even a seed of love remains in the heart of a serial killer such as Jeffrey Dahmer. In the discourse titled "Love Hides a Multitude of Sins," to give a second example, Kierkegaard says: "Let the judge appointed by the state, let the servant of justice work at discovering guilt and crime; the rest of us are called to be neither judges nor servants of justice, but on the contrary are called by God to love, that is, with the aid of a mitigating explanation to hide a multitude of sins" (293). It seems foolish to suppose, however, that only public officials are or should be concerned about criminal justice; it is a matter of concern to all citizens. It seems equally foolish to suppose that all crimes occur in circumstances that provide the basis for a correct mitigating explanation. To be sure, we are enjoined by a Mishnaic dictum to "judge every human with a bias in his favor [lechaf zechut]." But worldly wisdom would seem to teach us that such a bias, like the legal presumption of innocence, is often overturned on the basis of good evidence.

Yet there is worse to come. Not only will the Christian who performs works of love look foolish in the eyes of the world, such a Christian can expect to be persecuted by the world. As Kierkegaard sees it, "Christianity cannot keep anything other than what it promised at the beginning: the world's ingratitude, opposition, and derision, and continually to a higher degree the more earnest a Christian one becomes" (WL 194). The reward a Christian who obeys the divine command to love the neighbor can expect to receive from the world is not praise for great virtue or gratitude for heroic sacrifice but vilification. Kierkegaard says: "the merely human idea of self-denial is this: give up your self-loving desires, cravings, and plans – then you will be esteemed and honored and loved as righteous and wise" (194). By contrast, "the Christian idea of self-denial is: give up your self-loving desires and cravings, give up your self-seeking plans and purposes so that you truly work unselfishly for the good – and then, for that very reason, put up with being abominated almost as a criminal, insulted and ridiculed" (194). Or, at least, a practitioner of Christian self-denial must be willing to put up with such treatment at the hands of the world, which makes such a practice look especially foolish from the point of view of the world.

So Christian love is, according to Kierkegaard, "an offense to
worldliness" (WL 146). Yet Christianity offers people a choice, he thinks, and "terrifyingly compels them to choose: either to be offended or to accept Christianity" (200–1). If one chooses to accept Christianity, one chooses to accept the divine command to love the neighbor and the duties it imposes, despite the apparent foolishness of performing the works of love they specify. But is it possible for humans to perform works of love? If so, how is it possible? The possibility of doing such things as giving alms is, of course, not in doubt. As Kierkegaard is well aware, however, "even giving to charity, visiting the widow, and clothing the naked do not truly demonstrate or make known a person's love, inasmuch as one can do works of love in an unloving, yes, even in a self-loving way, and if this is so the work of love is no work of love at all" (13). Whether or not such things as giving alms are genuine works of love depends on how they are done. Hence the question to be asked is whether sinful humans have the capacity to perform works of love in the right way.

The key to Kierkegaard's answer, I believe, is to be found in his claim that in Christian love of neighbor God is the middle term. One thing this means, as Kirkmss points out, is that "we owe all our love to God, but that he commands us to express this in loving our Neighbor; one loves God by loving one's Neighbor." Another, I suggest, is that God assists us in loving the neighbor in the right way. Kierkegaard provides an account of the form such assistance might take.

In the third section of the second discourse in the first series, called "You Shall Love the Neighbor," Kierkegaard connects love of one's enemies to love of neighbor by means of a polemic against making distinctions. One's enemies are, after all, among one's neighbors. Therefore the one who truly loves the neighbor loves also his enemy. The distinction friend or enemy is a difference in the object of love, but love for the neighbor has the object that is without difference. The neighbor is the utterly unrecognizable dissimilarity between persons or is the eternal equality before God – the enemy, too, has this equality. People think that it is impossible for a human being to love his enemy, because, alas, enemies are hardly able to endure the sight of one another. Well, then, shut your eyes – then the enemy looks just like the neighbor. Shut your eyes and remember the commandment that you shall love; then you love – your
enemy – no, then you love the neighbor, because you do not see that he is your enemy. [WL 68]

The enemy, however, provides only a special case of a general truth. According to Kierkegaard, "one sees the neighbor only with closed eyes, or by looking away from the dissimilarities" [WL 68]. Yet the failure to mark distinctions among persons does not render love of neighbor blind or evasive; it is not a defective form of love. On the contrary, Kierkegaard's view is that "because the neighbor has none of the perfections that the beloved, the friend, the admired one, the cultured person, the rare, the extraordinary person have to such a high degree, for that very reason love for the neighbor has all the perfections that the love for the beloved, the friend, the cultured person, the admired one, the rare, the extraordinary person does not have" [66]. So Kierkegaard takes it to be a virtue, or even a perfection, in love of neighbor that it shuts its eyes to, or averts them from, excellences in the loved one that other kinds of love cherish. This seems only to heighten the offense of commanded Christian love.

But Kierkegaard also gives us something to mitigate the offense. As he develops the apparently paradoxical metaphor of seeing with closed eyes, he suggests that something positive may become evident when and only when ordinary faculties of discernment are switched off. Closing one's eyes to dissimilarities among persons may enable one to envisage something in them hidden from ordinary sight, something discerned only with divine assistance.

When someone goes with God, he does indeed go without danger, but he is also compelled to see and to see in a unique way. When you go with God, you need to see only one single miserable person and you will be unable to escape what Christianity wants you to understand – human similarity. [WL 77]

What does this unique way of seeing reveal in the person in misery? Using scriptural language, we might describe it as the image of God in the miserable person. For Kierkegaard, it is a question of seeing every other human person as a neighbor, perceiving neighbor as eternity's mark on every human person one encounters. Such discernment calls for both special effort and the aid of special spiritual lighting conditions. Kierkegaard offers this analogy:
Take many sheets of paper, write something different on each one; then no one will be like another. But then again take each single sheet; do not let yourself be confused by the diverse inscriptions, hold it up to the light, and you will see a common watermark on all of them. In the same way the neighbor is the common watermark, but you see it only by means of eternity's light when it shines through the dissimilarity. (WL 89)

But the image of God, who is perfectly good, is presumably a mark that renders all who bear it lovable. If one can discern it in another, one will be motivated to some extent to love the other in whom it is perceived.

Kierkegaard provides an extended simile to drive his point home. Looking at the ordinary world of dissimilarities and distinctions is like looking at a play. "But when the curtain falls on the stage," he reminds us, "then the one who played the king and the one who played the beggar etc. are all alike; all are one and the same actors" (WL 87). Similarly, when at death the curtain falls on life, we are all alike; we are all just human beings. Moreover, there is an equality within life that corresponds to equality in death. Like the actors' costumes, the dissimilarities that appear on the stage of life are really disguises. Kierkegaard tells us that "if someone is truly to love his neighbor, it must be kept in mind at all times that his dissimilarity is a disguise" [88]. Christianity takes dissimilarities to be garments that hang loosely on people. "When the dissimilarity hangs loosely in this way," Kierkegaard affirms, "then in each individual there continually glimmers that essential other, which is common to all, the eternal resemblance, the likeness" [88]. Loosely hanging garments can be transparent to this glimmer, and so they are penetrable disguises. When one penetrates them, what is to be seen through both the king's magnificent raiment and the beggar's wretched rags Kierkegaard calls "the inner glory, the equality of the glory" [88]. As he sees it, then, there shines equally in each human being an inner glory that is invisible to the eye focused exclusively on dissimilarities and distinctions but visible to the eye that with divine assistance penetrates these disguises. It is this glory that makes each human being lovable quite apart from any distinguishing excellences. This is eternity's mark on the neighbor. If with divine assistance we discern it and are motivated by that discernment to perform the works specified by the divine
command, we perform them in the right way and they are works of love.

It should, however, be emphasized that, even if there is an inner glory in each of us, many will still be thrust back by the command to love the neighbor. Some will think it foolish even to look for the image of God in all those they encounter; some will look but fail to see it. Others will write off ostensible discernments of inner glory as illusions fostered by religious sentimentality. Such people will typically not perform works of love in the right way. It must also be admitted that eternity’s light shines at best dimly and fitfully in the lives of most people. All too often we can see nothing of the image of God in our enemies and in those who lack the qualities we cherish in the beloved or the friend. Frequently enough the dissimilarities that preoccupy or even obsess our ordinary affections remain opaque to any common mark of glory that lies behind them. So the moral demand of the love command is too high to be something we can expect to satisfy completely. In other words, we cannot expect to close the moral gap; we can only expect to bridge it sometimes with divine assistance. We can also anticipate continuing to sin by violating the love command and hence continuing to need forgiveness. And even when we do bridge the gap, we should not make too much of our successes. We should not think that even the works of love we do in the right way are meritorious, for, according to Kierkegaard, God “is too sublimely transcendent ever to think that to him a human being’s effort should have meritoriousness. Yet he requires it, and then one thing more, that the human being himself not dare to think that he has some meritoriousness” (WL 379). Kierkegaard’s God is the Lutheran God from whom salvation comes through faith alone (sola fide). We do not earn righteousness through the merits of our works of love.

For Kierkegaard, as for Kant, the moral life is at its best a progress from bad to better. In the presence of the command to love the neighbor, one can initially perform works of love for a particular person from a sense of duty, even when it is far from apparent that there is anything lovable about that person. Absent the command, there would be no such incentive for even trying to love those who do not appear to be lovable. Perhaps only those who are well advanced in the practice of works of love should hope to be blessed with a growth in the brightness of eternity’s light that will enable
them to see steadily what makes some of their neighbors lovable. If this is so, only those who first perform works of love because they are commanded should hope eventually to be able to perform them because they have come to be motivated and hence empowered by a perception of the neighbor’s inner glory. In other words, we may hope to perfect our love of our less attractive neighbors to the point at which we practice works of love in the right way only if we begin by practicing such works of love for duty’s sake in response to the divine command. On this view, dutiful obedience to the divine command is an essential part of practice in Christianity. Practice in Christianity is, of course, hard work. According to Kierkegaard, God requires each of us to live an “essentially strenuous life” (WL 370). How far can strenuous effort get any of us? Even with divine assistance, can anyone get to the point at which he or she is, as Kierkegaard thinks we all should be, “completely and wholly transformed into simply being an active power in the hands of God?” (279). Is it possible for sinful humans to do better, with divine assistance, than occasionally bridging the moral gap?

Kierkegaard begins the conclusion of Works of Love by introducing the Apostle John, who says, “Beloved, let us love one another” (I John 4:7). He observes that “you do not hear the rigorosity of duty in these words; the apostle does not say, ‘You shall love one another’” (WL 375). But Kierkegaard insists that the command to love is not altered in the slightest way, least of all by an apostle. So he infers that “the change then can be only that the person who loves becomes more and more intimate with the commandment, becomes as one with the commandment, which he loves” (375–6). To be sure, the apostle speaks so gently that it is almost as if it had been forgotten that Christianity commands love. “If, however, you forget that it is the apostle of love who is speaking, you misunderstand him,” Kierkegaard warns us, “because such words are not the beginning of the discourse about love but are the completion.” He concludes:

Therefore, we do not dare to speak this way. That which is truth on the lips of the veteran and perfected apostle could in the mouth of a beginner very easily be a philandering by which he would leave the school of the commandment much too soon and escape the “school-yoke.” (WL 376)

With the possible exception of the greatest saints and other holy people, all of us are, I think, to be included in the “we” who
should listen to the apostle’s words but not dare to make them our own.

The reason we would go astray if we tried to escape the school-yoke of the love command is not hard to understand. We are sinful; we cannot expect to close the moral gap even with divine assistance. In our lives eternity does not cast its light on everyone at all times. We cannot rest assured that all those for whom we are called upon to perform works of love will appear lovable to us; we may never discern the inner glory in our worst enemies or in the wretched of the earth. Nor can we have confidence that our perception of the image of God in others will be continuous rather than intermittent, and so we cannot count on this perception being present whenever it is needed to motivate works of love performed for those in whom we fitfully see the inner glory. The image of God, moreover, is all too often too faintly discerned to be motivationally sufficient for those works of love that demand great self-denial, and so we need to be able to rely on the “You shall” of the love command for strong and steady backup motivation. We will have to mobilize the motive of duty on many occasions as a substitute for or a supplement to the motive provided by perceived inner glory if we are to obey the love command to the best of our abilities. Unlike the perfected apostle, we are not as one with the love commandment; even if we respect its demands, we do not love them.

I think Kierkegaard assesses with sober realism the responses human beings in their sinful condition are apt to make to the radical demands of his agapeistic Christian ethics. He does not puff up their natural capacities or overestimate what they are likely to achieve even with divine assistance. I see cause, however, for melancholy in the fact that most of us cannot count on getting beyond the elementary grades in the love command’s school during our earthly lives.

II. PRACTICE IN CHRISTIANITY

The only place in Practice in Christianity where Kierkegaard speaks in his own name is in the editor’s preface. There he tells us that “the requirement for being a Christian is forced up by the pseudonymous author to a supreme ideality” (PC 7). Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author, ratchets up Christianity’s moral demand by spelling out what we would have to do in order to imitate Christ.
There is, of course, nothing new in the general idea that the life a Christian is called upon to lead is a life that imitates the life of Christ. As Kierkegaard was well aware, Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* presents the life of Christ as a pattern for the lives of his followers to imitate. So Anti-Climacus is speaking from within an important tradition in Christian ethical thought when he tells us that "Christ's life here on earth is the paradigm; I and every Christian are to strive to model our lives in likeness to it" (107). Likeness, however, is a matter of degree, and it would not be very difficult to lead a life that is only a little like Christ's life. The demand becomes more stringent as the degree of likeness increases. According to Anti-Climacus, the imitator of Christ leads a life that is as much like his life as possible, and so "to be an imitator means that your life has as much similarity to his as is possible for a human life to have" (106). Hence, to require that Christians be imitators of Christ is indeed to raise the requirement for being a Christian to the highest level of stringency or ideality. Forcing the requirement up to this level can only widen the gap between what is demanded of a Christian and what a Christian can achieve by the exercise of natural capacities. Yet Anti-Climacus insists that "only the imitator is the true Christian" (254).

The true Christian has become a contemporary of Christ. According to Anti-Climacus, "as long as there is a believer, this person, in order to have become that, must have been and as a believer must be just as contemporary with Christ's presence as his contemporaries were" (PC 9). He tells us that contemporaneity with Christ is the condition of faith and, more sharply defined, is faith. The Christ with whom the Christian is to become contemporaneous is not the glorious Christ of the Second Coming but the crucified Christ of history. This Christ is, Anti-Climacus claims, "the sign of offense and the object of faith, the lowly man, yet the Savior and Redeemer of the human race" (9-10). But Christ should not be judged by the results of his life in history. We know from history that Christ taught a moral doctrine that has had a great impact on Western civilization and that he founded one of the world's great religions. Even those of us who are not Christians can admire him for leading a life that had such historical results. Christ's actual contemporaries, however, had no such knowledge, and so the believer who has become his contemporary does not use such knowledge in
judging him. As Anti-Climacus puts it, “he does not want to be judged humanly by the results of his life, that is, he is and wants to be the sign of offense and the object of faith; to judge him according to the results of his life is blasphemy” (23). Becoming a contemporary of Christ is thus a way for the Christian to filter out historical knowledge that should not form the basis of one’s response to him.

Anyone who becomes a contemporary of Christ will have to come to grips with Christ in his lowliness and abasement. This is meant to teach a lesson. “Christ freely willed to be the lowly one,” Anti-Climacus says, “and although his purpose was to save mankind, yet he also wanted to express what the truth would have to suffer and what the truth must suffer in every generation” (PC 34–5). Hence imitators of Christ must be prepared and willing to suffer. If their lives are to be as similar to the life of Christ as is humanly possible, they will suffer in a way akin to his suffering. Anti-Climacus explains: “To suffer in a way akin to Christ’s suffering is not to put up patiently with the inescapable, but it is to suffer evil at the hands of people because as a Christian or in being a Christian one wills and endeavors to do the good: thus one could avoid this suffering by giving up willing the good” (173). To be sure, not every Christian who persists in endeavoring to do good will be killed for it as Christ was, but every Christian should anticipate ill treatment from the world. “If you become contemporary with him in his abasement and this sight moves you to want to suffer with him,” Anti-Climacus maintains, “there will be opportunity enough for you to be able to suffer in a way akin to his suffering – that he will guarantee you – and even if the opportunity is not given, it is in any case not so much a question of opportunity as of the willingness to want to suffer in a way akin to his suffering” (172). At the very least, then, imitators of Christ must be willing, as he was, to suffer for trying to do good, even if many of them may, as it happens, endure little or no suffering on that account.

Coming to grips with Christ in his lowliness and abasement also involves being “halted by the possibility of offense” (PC 39). Anti-Climacus describes with considerable wit how typical people of various sorts from Kierkegaard’s age might have been offended if they had actually been Christ’s contemporaries. The sagacious and sensible person might say: “What has he done about his future? Nothing. Does he have a permanent job? No. What are his prospects? None”
The clergyman might denounce him as "an impostor and demagogue" [46]. The philosopher might criticize him for lacking a system and having only "a few aphorisms, some maxims, and a couple of parables, which he goes on repeating or revising, whereby he blinds the masses" [48]. The sagacious statesman, the solid citizen, and the scoffer might revile him in other ways; but no one can arrive at mature Christian faith without first confronting the possibility of offense. "The possibility of offense is the crossroad, or it is like standing at the crossroad. From the possibility of offense, one turns either to offense or to faith, but one never comes to faith except from the possibility of offense" [81]. Thus imitators of Christ can also count on being found offensive by those who have chosen to turn to offense rather than faith.

Imitators of Christ should, therefore, anticipate suffering for trying to do good and expect to be found offensive. Nonetheless, the Christian ethical demand is that we be imitators and not mere admirers of Christ. What is the difference between an admirer and an imitator? "An imitator is or strives to be what he admires," Anti-Climacus says, "and an admirer keeps himself personally detached, consciously or unconsciously does not discover that what is admired involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired" [PC 241]. There are circumstances in which mere admiration is entirely proper. For Anti-Climacus, mere admiration is appropriate "whenever it is true that I am prevented by a condition beyond my control from being able to resemble that which is admired even if I would like to" [241]. Had Christ come into the world in the loftiness of his glory, we could have done nothing but admire him; he would in that case have had no claim on us to be or strive to be like him. However, Christ came into the world, Anti-Climacus thinks, with the purpose "of being the prototype, of leaving footprints for the person who wanted to join him, who then might become an imitator" [238]. For this reason, he came into the world in lowliness and abasement. What is more, Christ had only those conditions to offer anyone who joined him, and they are conditions on which no mere admirer would want to join him. For Anti-Climacus, the exact conditions offered are these: "to become just as poor, despised, insulted, mocked, and if possible even a little more, considering that in addition one was an adherent of such a despised individual, whom every sensible person shunned" [241]. The imitator
must be ready and willing to join Christ even on those conditions. Kirmmse takes Anti-Climacus to be committed to the claim that imitation “will certainly [or almost certainly] call forth persecution, suffering, or even martyrdom at the hands of society’s protectors of ‘reality.’” At any rate, imitators must be willing to endure such things, even if it is not certain that they will occur to all those who choose to be imitators.

Two further contrasts between mere admiration and imitation deserve some attention. One concerns the way in which admiration can undermine an adequate response to the moral demand that we imitate Christ. For Anti-Climacus, the moral demand is a matter of “the universally human or that which every human being, unconditionally every human being, is capable of, that which is not linked to any condition save that which is in everyone’s power, the universally human, that is, the ethical, that which every human being shall and therefore also presumably can do” (PC 242). Confronted with the moral demand, we are to act promptly to satisfy it; pausing for admiration is inappropriately evasive. Anti-Climacus says: “If I know a man whom I must esteem because of his unselfishness, self-sacrifice, magnanimity, etc., then I am not to admire but am supposed to be like him; I am not to deceive myself into thinking that it [admiration] is something meritorious on my part, but on the contrary I am to understand that it is merely the invention of my sloth and spinelessness; I am to resemble him and immediately begin my effort to resemble him” (242). One who stops to admire Christ in personal detachment is really hanging back from beginning the immense task of imitating Christ.

The other contrast focuses on the way in which the admirer refuses the Christian moral demand. According to Anti-Climacus, “the admirer will make no sacrifices, renounce nothing, give up nothing earthly, will not transform his life, will not be what is admired, will not let his life express it – but in words, phrases, assurances he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christianity” (PC 252). Unlike the admirer, the imitator, who also acknowledges in words the truth of Christianity, acts decisively to obey “Christian teaching about ethics and obligation, Christianity’s requirement to die to the world, to surrender the earthly, its requirement of self-denial” (252). And, Anti-Climacus adds, mere admirers are sure to become exasperated with an imitator.
Practice in Christianity certainly does not narrow the moral gap. In comparison to Works of Love, perhaps it even widens the gap. All or almost all of us will fail to imitate the life of Christ as fully as is possible in the circumstances of our own lives. Some will be content to remain mere admirers of Christ. Others will imitate Christ only when it does not cost them too much. There will be those who are unwilling to offend or exasperate their friends and acquaintances. Some will draw the line beyond which they will not go in imitating Christ at the point where they would be insulted and mocked for doing so; others will draw it at the point where they would be poor and despised; yet others will draw it at the point where they would be persecuted and martyred. Few if any of us will draw no line at all.

Like Kant's moral law, Kierkegaard's interpretation of the love commandment and Anti-Climacus's understanding of the imitation of Christ set the moral standard so high that it is almost inevitable that we will fail to live up to it. In this respect, they do what St. Paul thought the Mosaic Law did. As Kierkegaard puts this point, "the Law with its requirement became everyone's downfall because they were not what it required and through it only learned to know sin" (WL 99). It is this feature of Kant's moral theory, I think, that is being alluded to when Kirmmse claims Kierkegaard "indicates that what Moses was to St. Paul, Kant can be to us." To this astute remark, I would only add that Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus can play the same role.

When one reflects hard on the stringency of the accounts of morality proposed by Kant, Kierkegaard, and Anti-Climacus, one becomes tempted to reduce the demand. One way of doing so in response to Anti-Climacus would be to deny that the requirement to imitate Christ as fully as possible in one's own life is universally human. Maybe it would make sense to think of it as binding only on religious virtuosi with special vocations to saintliness. Another way would be to insist that the highest level of ideality is the realm of the supererogatory and lies beyond the domain of the obligatory. There is, however, another alternative open to the Kierkegaardian. As Gregor Malantschuk has pointed out, the Kierkegaardian might acknowledge that this is the requirement and then have recourse to grace. If we are required to imitate Christ as fully as possible in our own lives, recourse to grace may be needed twice. Perhaps gra-
cious divine assistance will be needed, at least sometimes, to help us bridge the moral gap when imitating Christ is particularly difficult. Certainly gracious divine forgiveness and mercy will be needed in response to our many failures to imitate Christ as we should. It seems to me that what makes Kierkegaard’s ethics of commanded love and Anti-Climacus’s ethics of required imitation of Christ forms of the second ethics that can deal with the manifestation of sin is precisely that they allow for the propriety of having recourse to grace because they are embedded in a larger Christian worldview.

Both these forms of Christian ethics are likely to look harsh and inhuman if viewed from outside a Christian worldview or if recourse to grace is disallowed. I believe this only shows that they contain within themselves the possibility of offense. Kierkegaard, I am sure, would regard this as confirmation of the view that they are authentic forms of Christian ethics. I agree with this view. My conclusion is that Kierkegaard’s ethics of commanded love and Anti-Climacus’s ethics of required imitation of Christ are two authentic forms of Christian ethics, powerfully and sometimes movingly presented either in Kierkegaard’s own voice or through the pseudonymous author whose voice was closest to his own.26

NOTES

5 Ibid., p. 32.
6 Ibid., p. 46.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 43.
9 Ibid., p. 47.
10 Ibid., p. 40.
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11 Ibid., p. 179.
12 Ibid., p. 37.
13 Ibid., p. 90–1.
14 Ibid., p. 91.
15 I use The New American Bible.
17 Kirmmse, Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark, p. 312.
19 Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1058a10–11.
20 Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1056a14–16.
22 Kirmmse, Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark, p. 308.
23 Ibid., p. 396.
24 Ibid., p. 399.
15 Religious dialectics and Christology

It is frequently said that if Christ came to the world now he would once again be crucified. This is not entirely true. The world has changed; it is now immersed in "understanding." Therefore Christ would be ridiculed, treated as a mad man, but a mad man at whom one laughs. . . . I now understand better and better the original and profound relationship I have with the comic, and this will be useful to me in illuminating Christianity.

-Journals and Papers {Pap. X¹ A 187}

I. HISTORICAL SITUATION

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, lived religiousness and piety were no longer a matter of course in the intellectual circles of Europe. Schleiermacher's early work, On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers, signals this shift, as does the religion that is at once criticized and philosophically defended in Hegel's concept of Absolute Spirit.¹ The opposition of rational enlightenment to non-conceptual (religious) revelation such as Kant and Lessing had carried out with exemplary success at the end of the eighteenth century lay like a long shadow over every effort of the subsequent period to present faith in God and religion - or even the core of Christianity, reconciliation - at all argumentatively.

Kierkegaard's own epoch, the middle of the nineteenth century, escalates the problem yet again, this time in opposition to the stamp that Romanticism and Idealism had given to apologetics. Feuerbach

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and Marx made explicit an implicit and inevitably atheistic separation from traditional, orthodox Christian dogma and applied it to the practical realm, rendering the critique of (Christian) religion politically and socially effective. But the signature of the spirit of the age that distinguishes Kierkegaard's epoch from all preceding ones is its impulse to probe assiduously in the present the post-Romantic and post-Idealist crisis, and to carry out this inquiry not only in academic fields and intellectual conceptions. This characteristic allows Kierkegaard's epoch to be a model not only for modernity but also for the postmodern situation that persists today. Consciousness of the crisis in religion was refined and dispersed by various fluctuations in the intellectual and social frameworks; it was sometimes exacerbated and sometimes inhibited by the force of epochal developments, but confrontation with it was unavoidable. In any case, these processes made the conscious motives and implications of human thought increasingly explicit in the spheres of both practical and theoretical knowledge. The incisive dilemma of the crisis, however, remained the question of how this knowledge could be harmonized with the circumstances in which people sought to live responsibly, and, again, how all of this could be integrated with the conceptual and experiential capabilities of these same people. The impetus and focus—both for modernity and afterward—lay in the critical coordination of science, morality, and religion.

From this point on, however, religion had to be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it is the historical and communal expression of the worldview and orientation of a given time (and thus a concept valid for all religions with such a tradition and function). On the other hand, starting with Kierkegaard, it is more importantly the always personal (existential) appropriation and obligation of the human condition in humankind's self-relation, which, as the destiny of this relation, presupposes relation to God in principle. This latter meaning is more exactly expressed by the term "religiousness."

II. RELIGIOUSNESS

Kierkegaard did not develop his conception of religiousness with a historical, theological, or dogmatic intention. However, he always places this dimension of the problem foremost in the presuppositions of thinking that characterize his age when he wants to high-
light with fullest fidelity the urgency of the existential appropriation and obligation of personal religiousness. This sought-after fidelity quickly becomes dialectical in the process of appropriation. On the one hand, a merely personal event stands opposed to its universalized presentation, just as the systematically elusive concretion of individual life stands opposed to the abstraction of propositions about human life in general. On the other hand, this universalization in thought and language can in no way be avoided—else the existential personality would be wholly impossible to understand and cut off from all communication. Kierkegaard is compelled by this necessity to use the indirect means of access afforded by the literary disguise of the "religious author," an artifice that is intentionally misleading on the surface but at the same time conducive to true understanding (SV I XIII 524ff).2

The (existential) concretization of religion that always emanates from the biographical details of Kierkegaard's life and toward which his entire work ultimately aims is the Christian piety drawn from Lutheran theology and Pietism: the paradoxical experience—at once tormenting and liberating—of sin and forgiveness in the image of the crucified Christ. In order to shield this basic configuration from all the misunderstandings of his age—from romantic, idealistic, atheistic, political, ecclesiastical, missionary, and so on—Kierkegaard erected above this foundation the divergent and thus complementary complex of the pseudonymous polemical texts addressed to intellectuals and Upbuilding Discourses appealing directly to human proximity.

Johannes Climacus's famous distinction in Concluding Unscientific Postscript (cf. SV I VII, 485ff) between Religiousness A and B, that is, between the universal religious dialectic of a person's relationship to his or her eternal destiny [A] and the specifically Christian [paradoxical] dialectic based on the connection of this relational destiny with the historical contingency of the New Testament Jesus [B], is a consequence of Kierkegaard's strategy as a religious author of both safeguarding Christianity and providing an exacting delineation of what it means to be Christian. Talk about Christianity in the strict sense must first focus on the extremity of the impassioned struggle for genuine, ineluctable self-examination in one's relation to life and to God. This struggle is especially characterized as paradoxical because of the polemical separation of
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Christology (of God in history [cf. Philosophical Fragments, SV¹ IV 250ff, 271]) from literally all other approaches: from the religious and societal (civic) approaches of contemporary “Christendom,” as well as from the intellectual trends of historical or speculative academic theology. Moreover, despite Religiousness A’s marked differentiation from Religiousness B, it is nevertheless the necessary presupposition of the latter! This condition does not contravene the just-mentioned rupture with all other avenues of approach, for Kierkegaard does not maintain that there is a smooth transition between them, but only wants to note consistently a necessary condition of every existential understanding: impassioned self-relation without any external constraint.

It is Upbuilding Discourses that explicitly tread the path of Religiousness A, and in so doing, at first consciously avoid Christological categories – omitting even to speak the name of Christ. At their center stands the eloquent endeavor to focus sympathetically, with full cognizance of human nature, on that which can be said to count generally as the phenomenological realm of Religiousness A (and therefore also as its definition): That what we seek most of all in life, what we seek with all passion of feeling, thought and action, can in no way be either brought under the control or placed at the disposal of any human being.

A perfect example of Religiousness A is the 1845 discourse, “On the Occasion of a Confession.”

1. The discourse invites one to confession, and the proper situational mood of confession is that of “stillness,” in which the external world with all its distinctions and intentions disappears, so that the differences between the human and the world are canceled sub specie aeternitatis: “Whoever says that this stillness does not exist is merely making noise” (179). “Seek God,” the theme of the discourse (183), becomes identical with unreserved self-surrender to this stillness. An argument or desire to excuse oneself from this situation must perforce appear as a suppression of its inexorable power, drowning out its stillness with doubt. This circularity in the perspective of God does not offer itself explicitly as an argument for the reality of God; yet ultimately, in the pathos of the discourse, the insistent defense of this structure of the confessional experience amounts to this: There is a perspective (that of God), and a situation coupled with it (that of confession), in which rich and poor,
guilty and innocent, fortunate and unfortunate, and so on, are relativized and neutralized to the point of a reciprocal inversion: "The injured party possesses the most" of something – namely, "forgiveness" – that "someone else needs" (180). The "emptiness" that here appears to the worldly, human perspective, "the infinite nothing" (181) marks the very turning point that was sought: Standing before God in stillness and purity is "becoming a sinner" (182). In this way the decisive reversal takes place – in the situation of stillness and the perspective of God: The person who seeks God is the one who is transformed, "so that he himself can become the place where God in truth is" (189).

The Lutheran doctrine of justification – simul iustus et peccator – is renewed in the existential situational mood and its eloquent insistence on precisely this "moment" (189). The simultaneity of "fearing" and "finding" God in this moment becomes the condition of the only acceptable experience of God, an experience here illustrated. This grounding of the basic situation of religion echoes Luther's oft-repeated guiding question for the interpretation of the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism of 1529: "We should fear and love God!" Only here, under the conditions of the nineteenth century, God and "nothingness" have a situationally intensive correspondence: the "nothingness" of self-feeling becomes a "sign" of the proximity of God (194). In contrast, all universal, objective, philosophical, or ecclesiastical frameworks, which in Kierkegaard's time could no longer safeguard either the divine or religiousness, retreat completely into the background.

2. The experiential situation sub specie aeternitatis sought in this manner has to become at the same time a human-religious basis, a point of departure – although it is hardly possible, in keeping with its nature, to conceive of this as such with full precision. Kierkegaard specifies a triple step: first, adoration as "sighing without words," unclear and ambiguous; second, the increasing awareness of God in adventitious "thought"; and third, the thought that "[finds] the words" (183). But Kierkegaard's discourse in no way thus endorses the preeminence of words, the preeminence of rationality and concepts in opposition to the emotionally stronger imprecision of "sighs." The invoked absurdity of the Zeitgeist consists precisely in this: That without deliberation, it sought to draw forth rational communication – as the "highest" communication – from the "still-
ness” (185ff). This stillness begins, however, with the conceptually ambiguous and elusive “sighs of adoration”! Hegel’s critique of the “beautiful soul” testifies to the philosophical disparagement of “religion of feeling” and its objectless and conceptless “yearning.” Kierkegaard’s discourses, however, seek human proximity also prior to its conceptual and systematic evaluation, namely, in “a sigh . . . , if the thought of God is only to shed a twilight glow over existence” (183). It is precisely here that the discourse unfolds its own aesthetic and religious power.

3. If the next level of understanding is to make explicit where human seeking—under the condition of stillness—ultimately finds its object, it is clear that the “highest” goods among conceivable goods is not determinate and is thus not something to be aimed at. Instead, fully in accord with the mode of seeking and desiring, it is “the unknown—and this good is God” (185). The response to this unknown is fulfilled then not with any being or having, but rather in the mode of “wonder, and wonder is immediacy’s sense of God and . . . the beginning of all deeper understanding” (185). The discourse intends to sketch in due course how such “deeper understanding” can be effected and how it is structured, so that here such conceptual labor remains better hidden for the sake of presenting the value of the universal human experience with greater imaginative power. The human-religious universality of this experiential value is in a sense presupposed; it can be verified only in the individual experience of a concretely lived life. This is the crux of the whole discourse; its address to the individual “listener” who, before God, becomes an individual “alone in the whole world” (190) demonstrates the hermeneutic turn of the religious dialectic. The presupposition of God is not controlled by humankind, but shines forth in the conditions of the experience of confession, in its stillness, individualization, and “wonder” in the face of the authentically “unknown.”

In referring to the “object” of impassioned seeking, the discourse consciously avoids the concept that the pseudonymous author of Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus, had employed: the absolute paradox (cf. SV IV 204ff). The discourse is not concerned with concept and object as such, but only with the human relation to the unknown summum bonum: whether a person “is getting closer . . . or further away” from this unknown good (185). How is
such a relation to be more closely determined? Kierkegaard gives two answers: first a basic description of religious wonder itself, and then its development in the three stages of the dialectic.

3.1. The basic description of an indeterminate immediacy can be undertaken in two directions. First, in the direction of deepening its immediacy, that is, in taking advantage of its independence from precise knowledge and fixed practical goals in the sense that it is a unitary, qualitative state, a feeling. Schleiermacher's definition of piety fits with this approach, insofar as he generally highlights the legitimacy of "feeling" in opposition to metaphysics ("knowing") and ethics ("acting"). Furthermore, he understands the specific "determination" of religious feeling - "simply being subject to... awareness of God" in no way as an object-related consciousness, but rather as a "pure dependence," that is, as a qualitative emotional state. Kierkegaard's theology, by contrast, consciously avoids the concept of feeling, and thus strikes out in the other direction appropriate to a fundamental description of religiousness. It does not seek to deepen the originary circumstance of religion, but to grasp its relationality immediately in its ambivalence: "Wonder is an ambivalent state of mind containing both fear and blessedness" (185; cf. 187ff). This means that Kierkegaard agrees with Schleiermacher in the strict differentiation between religious wonder and "knowing" (cf. 187ff); however, in opposition to Schleiermacher, he does not want to begin with the unity of a basic (religious) feeling, but with the ambivalence of "blessedness in fear and trembling" (185; cf. Phil. 2:12) that stems from Lutheran piety. Two questions will return later: Why cannot this starting point (again in contrast to Schleiermacher), for its purity's sake, be conceived primarily as a community feeling? Why is another relation to "action" (cf. 201) implied in the existential situation of such individuation?

3.2. The developmental forms of religious immediacy or wonder proceed in three stages. The first of these stages will be described as a pagan-religious nature relation (185ff), in that the zeal for the unknown becomes confused with the unknown itself without being able to see through this confusion. Religion and poetry are two sides of the same appearance: "Idolatry purified is the poetic." In other words, the emotional world of wonder itself becomes, in the medium of feeling, quasi-objective - as polytheism in the history of religion, and as poetry in the epoch of Enlightenment. For both, a
definition of God as “the inexplicable all of existence” (186) would suffice.

In the second stage the subjective and the objective sides of wonder separate from one another, exactly as in Hegel’s phenomenological dialectic. The impassioned relationship is like a striving toward the ever-retreating unknown (187); the freedom of this striving is directed toward the infinite, which, however, does not allow of comprehension and withdraws as “fate” (187). The analyses of the pseudonymous author Vigilius Haufniensis (cf. CA III 2; SV IV, 366ff) bring to greater precision than the discourse does the idea that the anxiety-producing obscurity of the concept of fate can only be surmounted if the categories of guilt and sin, which are related to individual persons, intervene. In the face of God, striving by itself can never secure a return; it can neither reach God nor founder on him.

The third stage escalates the ambivalence of the possibility of insight into religious wonder to confuse the subjective and objective sides on still higher levels. Since the goal of wonder would be attained when “what is sought” is found, when “the enchantment is gone” (187), the passion of relation to the unknown would also vanish. Because the relation as such, in the sense of the human-religious foundation, cannot diminish to nothing, its appearance as “nothing” (187) must be either a misunderstanding or an expression of despair. This appearance is misunderstanding if the knower erroneously supplants the relation to the unknown with quantitative definitions of “knowledge” (187f): The unambiguous world of one who thinks all is known already or can be known leaves no room for either wonder or the unknown. In the second case – and in the design of the discourse, this is, no matter how hidden, the unique enlightenment sub specie aeternitatis – the appearance that the relation diminishes to nothing is an expression of despair if, in being “deceived” by knowledge, the actual human process of appropriation (187f) falls apart. The confusion arises from classification of the unknown as alien when the individual nevertheless “has what is sought” in the sense that he is in danger of “losing” it and thus in his “despair” suffers from this loss (189). In turn, this suffering is the best sign of the renewed wonder at wonder itself (188f). The dialectic of destiny and loss, the “ambivalent state of mind” of “fear and blessedness” (cf. 185) is thus taken up into the third stage describing the basis of human religion. One reaches again the religious
dialectic, in which, from the perspective of God, “the seeker himself is changed” (189). The reversal of recognition from fraudulent “knowledge” to existential transformation in “fear and blessedness” is the sign of relation to God: the sinner before God (193). Here it ought to be simply acknowledged, not considered an objection, that “understanding” meets its limit insofar as it cannot comprehend the abiding wonder and the ongoing action of appropriation (191). Only thus will the path be cleared for heightened wonder.

3.3. If in its renunciation of knowledge this religious dialectic remains close to Schleiermacher’s definition of piety, the clear difference lies nevertheless in what Kierkegaard always sees as the fundamental ambivalence of possible forms of renunciation, misunderstanding, anxiety, and doubt. Kierkegaard emphasizes the unconditionality of the irreplaceable individual expressly to protect this fundamental situation of “fear and blessedness” that is founded upon “fear and trembling” (185, 192). It is not simply that the religious situation concerns the “individual human being” in contrast to “humanity in general” (194); rather, Kierkegaard, in his perception of the sociocultural and political crisis of his time, is able to regard and reject social forms decisively as mere externals. They are seen as a “crowd,” the homogenized “common harmony of equals,” the anonymous “course of world-history” (195ff), and the “diversions of others” (200). In other words, social forms are to be avoided as purely quantitative, unhelpful reproductions that dissipate the existential gravity of the individual’s primordial experience of relation to God in stillness.

The theological rationale for this restriction of human social forms to mass phenomena is again that Kierkegaard does not start (as does Schleiermacher) with the fundamental human-religious phenomenon of “wonder” as the unitary ground or transcendental condition of possibility for all further differentiations and determinations, but with it as an intensification of experience situated directly in the conflict between the human and the world. On the other hand, the fundamental experience of “fear and blessedness” must be freed from its worldly perspective (poor and rich, happy and unfortunate, young and old, etc.) so that it can discover at the same time, in the same experience, the perspective of God. Because both positions are to be valid – the conscious proximity to everyday experience as well as the perspectival distantiation from this – the relevant religious-
ness must be concentrated on the impassioned self-experience of the individual, and only on this. For Kierkegaard, everything else would signify an inappropriate slackening of the existential situation.

*Upbuilding Discourses* before 1846/47 address this strategic duality of external world and existential seriousness with evenhandedness and stylistic charm, while the early pseudonymous texts and especially the later *Christian Discourses* and the writings of Anticlemachus shift to open and harsh polemic. For this reason it is fitting—and here is the further point of differentiation from Schleiermacher—that the immediate ambivalence of the existential situation evoked by the discourse is always pursued with a view to the decisiveness and the seriousness of a practical situation in which the basic religious feeling of “wonder” before the “unknown” is not only encountered but has to guarantee its own significance. Not to define abstractly the relation between God and self means for Kierkegaard that he must conceive of it solely as a practical situation of decision. This is what human religiousness enjoins in the dialectic it exhibits: “In regard to what is essential to be able essentially means to be able to do it” (200). Appropriation thus means that one “essentially appropriates the essential only by doing it” (201). The significance of knowledge and intellectual decisions is thereby neutralized, and the significance of ethics is taken up into the self-relation as the defining perspective for action.

### III. CHRISTOLOGY

Kierkegaard’s particular conception of Religiousness B in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* responds in a new way to both basic problems of modern Christology: (1) How, with the patristic and scholastic (Aristotelian-Thomistic) ontology of substances no longer at our disposal, can we still speak in any meaningful way of one divine-human person with two natures?8 (2) How, presupposing historical investigation, at least as it was developed as standard by Protestant theology, can the authority of biblical texts, from, for example, the miracle stories to the resurrection of Jesus, be in any way still effectively represented?9

Kierkegaard does not provide a direct scholarly discussion of these two questions, but his entire work should be read as a beacon lighting the way to a response. If Religiousness A must be con-
ceived solely as an impassioned relationship and not as somehow "objective," this is even more true for the paradoxical Religiousness B, and not only in regard to the crucial dogmatic question of the doctrine of reconciliation, but even in regard to the historical aspect of the New Testament. Kierkegaard solves this problem by undermining its legitimation: there is no "objective" means of access, in the sense of modern historical "objectivity," to an adequate understanding of Jesus Christ, not even of his crucifixion. Johannes Climacus expresses it thus: “One wants to consider objectively – that the God was crucified – an event that, when it occurred, did not permit even the temple to be objective, for its curtain tore, did not even permit the dead to remain objective, for they rose up from their graves” (CUP; cf. SV1 VII 238). Both the difficulty and the interest of this argument derive from the fact that historical objectivity is immediately obstructed by the dogmatic presupposition of the “God-man,” yet this presupposition itself is not advanced as quasi-objective but by referring back to the narrative of the New Testament: “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mk 15:38). While Kierkegaard balked at the historical research of his time, he anticipated and made use of one of its twentieth-century conclusions: the testimony of the gospels is to be understood as a literary form, and therein lies its power. The meaning of the "God-man" can therefore only be reached and rediscovered in this way, namely, in opposition to historicizing and objectivizing misunderstandings.

It is to this task of a reconceptualized Christology that the programmatic concerns of Johannes Climacus are dedicated, as well as the ever more explicitly Christologically elaborated discourses. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847) contain in their third part “The Gospel of Sufferings,” characterized as a “Christian Discourse.” Here Kierkegaard for the first time in a discourse goes beyond the foundational human-religious experience and invokes the authority of the New Testament (cf. Pap. VIII1 A 6f; JP §638). What does this shift to the sharper “pathos” of Religiousness B (cf. SV1 VII 485ff.) signify? This shift to the Christian paradox of reconciliation in Christ as a category invested with authority (Pap. VIII1 A 11; JP §3089)? The fourth of the *Christian Discourses* offers an exemplary response to the Christological questions.
That religious passion becomes "care" is a motif already contained in the discourse on confession of 1845 (SV IV 192). For in the moment when the individual before God is transformed, the person, without changing place, shifts position: From the one who seeks, wondering in the face of the unknown, the person is transformed into the one who is found – who is, before God, estranged, guilty, a sinner – and thus attains the heightened level of wonder (SV IV 188, 191f, 195). However, Christian Discourses do not speak of concern and care, but turn without hesitation to "suffering." In other words, the condition of suffering is consistently inscribed into the religious dialectic. And here first do we find direct reference to Christ: The sharpening of scandal, the authority of God, and the exemplary suffering of Christ mark the passage to Religiousness B. In this, Kierkegaard is careful to employ theological thematics and terminology as traditionally as possible, not wanting to promote anything at all new, original, or purportedly modern. But why then introduce this manifestly deliberate and innovative difference between two basic forms of religiousness?

The dialectic sub specie aeternitatis developed in Religiousness A has a decisive weakness: Its experience of contingency is always only on one side, the human. The divine perspective makes the human side dialectic, rendering it incapable of controlling the unknown that it seeks. Instead, the human side finds itself always facing the divine in ever-intensified wonder. In Religiousness B, by contrast, the divine side is itself exposed to the contingency of the human side. It is subject to time, to the historical moment, to the most extreme human suffering, and precisely here are found the title and tidings of reconciliation. Kierkegaard's own response to the historical investigations of the New Testament and dogmatic Christology's loss of authority is to use the literary form of the discourses to sharpen and intensify the scandal of the crucified God-man. Kierkegaard radically transforms the medium: For the philosophical-historical argumentation employed by the current theology, he substitutes the poetically imaginative power of discourses; for conceptual-dogmatic propositions, he substitutes analysis of the existential situation of guilt and suffering, with the [Christian] paradox as the limit-concept. These two transformations are inspired by one and the same reaction to the powerful experience of contingency, an experience sharpened both
historically and dogmatically in the nineteenth century. And this re-
action is obligatory if God is to be perceived not merely sub specie
aeternitatis but also sub specie crucis.

2. In this discourse on “The Joy of It That in Relation to God a
Person Always Suffers as Guilty,” themes and biblical texts are in-
troduced both narratively and by means of a progressive argument:
If one must place trust in the words of King Solomon by virtue of
his royal position and experience, how much more ultimate is the
authority to be attributed to the words of a thief on the cross, words
spoken in the face of death: “We are receiving what our deeds have
deserved, but this one has done nothing wrong” [Lk 23: 41; cf. 350].
The conversion of king to thief and the shift from life to death
endow the scene, the word, and the theme with the impression that
here every merely historical reference would fail.

In the next stage, first the human-religious passion (following
Religiousness A) must be traced through the situation familiar from
the discourse on confession with regard for “concern about oneself”
(350), the pain of “unhappy love” (350f), and finally the love of God
(351), so that doubt as to whether or not God is really love can be
seen to rest upon an unexamined and ultimately despairing misun-
derstanding, namely, that one has lost impassioned love altogether
(351f). Or, alternatively, so that the “becoming guilty” of im-
passioned (human) love must be understood in the context of “God’s
love, which always surpasses it and is its vindication. Doubt is con-
quered only when the roles are assigned as follows: on the human
side, guilt; on God’s side, true love. Such an arrangement integrates
the experience of shipwreck into the conception of one’s relation to
God, and this is “the joy” beyond all worldly limitations (352).

However, the transition to Religiousness B is only fully effected
when the discourse lets the situation of being before God appear con-
tradictory from God’s side as well as from the human side. In other
words, the contingency must be duplicated theologically. Kierke-
gaard acknowledges two conditions in regard to Religiousness A that
still permit one to doubt God’s love. (1) If a person were wholly free
from guilt (353), the whole dialectic of “joy” would be fruitless; God
could hardly function as the vindication of “becoming guilty.” Such
a scenario can here be disregarded insofar as it always takes place in
the misunderstanding and the evaporation of passion mentioned
above. (2) If one should enter into “the depth of this horror” (354),
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which stands in radical contradiction to "the idea that God is love" \((353)\), the situation would no longer admit of a human solution. The latter is, however, precisely the crux of Christology: The only one who was without sin before God is he who must suffer this death for sinfulness. The God-forsakenness of the crucified Christ \((354)\) is thus the most extreme conception of human contingency possible—embracing subjection to worldly and historical conditions, corporeality, the assumption of guilt, and the struggle with death—for it inscribes this human condition into the very idea of God.

Kierkegaard does not expound this train of thought as such, but rather uses a double criterion to guard it from invalid expropriation: Contingency in God cannot be "grasped" but only "believed" \((354)\).

3. This opposition of "conceive" and "believe," coupled with the fact that the remainder of the discourse is wholly motivated by the Christological question concerning "doubt"\(^{12}\) as to whether "God is love," makes it clear that this is a discourse against theoretical doubt. What Upbuilding Discourses achieved by the delimitation of knowledge can here succeed only by laying bare the existential devastation that would ensue were the theoretical doubt at all indulged. The project of asking what grounds there are that God should actually be love is flawed from its inception; it is "presumptuousness" \((357, 362)\) because it wants to "demonstrate" that which is inherently contradictory \((362)\). Whoever undertakes such a project is already finished with God \((365ff)\). For, since it begins with an artificial abstraction that endlessly perpetuates itself, the existential situation falls apart, and thus neither logically nor existentially can the "conclusion" that is actually sought be found \((369)\). It is clear, however, that the concerns of dogmatic theology completely displace such vain processes as are necessarily produced in the sphere of knowledge, thought, and doubt. Although the discourse does not state this in so many words, it nevertheless expresses it quite clearly. To be inherently "guilty" before God—this alone effectively destroys doubt \((cf. \ 357, 368)\), and only the destruction of doubt casts the suffering individual without illusions back on him- or herself, but now as one in relation to God. This cannot be completely grasped, known, or theorized in terms of proof, but faith "grasps" it \((357)\). Still, how is this mode of understanding to be understood?

4. What faith "grasps" is manifestly something double: \((1)\) If the human being is always guilty—not just guilty here and there and
in this or that respect – then the question of guilt is decided once and for all, and it cannot and must not be as if this question were yet to be decided by reference to God. [2] What is “joyful” (358), what faith understands, lies in the living possibilities that open up, lies in the fact that, in the light of one’s own guilt, “there must always be something to do.” In place of hopelessness and anxiety for the future appear hope and activity (358ff, cf. 362). The ethical theme for the discourse on confession is resumed and amplified: the ethical is to be taken up into one’s self-relation not only as the defining perspective for action but also as the “joyful” perspective. And, seen from within the religious dialectic of relation to God, it makes for joy precisely on the basis of inherent guilt before God. There is therefore no situation that cannot be overcome, for failure and guilt do not need to be repressed and God’s love is no longer in question.

5. Moreover, a decisive intensification of the impassioned self-relation now becomes apparent because the repression of guilt or doubt concerning one’s own situation (cf. 361f) is no longer a concern. Now an appropriate situational analogue is available: the humanly incomprehensible comparison with the “superhuman” suffering of the innocent crucified one (363). Thus does Christianity ground its “clarity” on this question: Although it may not be able to understand extreme and unfathomable suffering, nevertheless, in the image of the crucified one it can stand thoughtfully in the presence of such suffering. For one thing, there is certainly an “ever-yawning gap” between the (innocent) crucified one forsaken by God and all other (guilty) human suffering, even though it cannot be made transparent to human intelligence. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Christ’s suffering is at once “human” and “superhuman.” In this existential differentiation and correlation at the limits of comparability, Kierkegaard repeats and substantiates the Christological doctrine of Jesus’ double nature and its soteriological function: Sub specie crucis there is an image of God-forsakenness that cannot and must not remain a human model. If God himself takes up the God-forsakenness that only the crucified one experienced, all doubts and questioning beyond this come to an end, so long as it is clear that the human side stands in guilt – and God is love. This thought – that God is love – “contains all the blessed persuasion of eternity” (364).
6. The final conceptual differentiations offered by Kierkegaard in this discourse – God and human, and "being in the wrong" and "being guilty" – indicate once again the heightened Christology of the relation to God addressed here. [1] From the human perspective guilty signifies guilty before humankind as well as guilty before God. [2] From the human perspective innocent suffering must be judged ambivalently: Humanly speaking, "injustice" before God remains warranted, but to assert guilt from this external perspective would be cynical. The example from Job [366ff; cf. Pap. X1 A 196; JP §1386] shows that although it is really inadmissible to label him guilty, [3] everyone is sub specie crucis, that is, in one's basic relationship, guilty before God [368]. Furthermore, this has been revealed Christologically in God himself as what is "joyful": There is simply no longer any quarreling or grounds for doubt with God; whoever persists in this direction attacks only himself [368]! What this means is that here, under the rhetorical conditions of the discourse, Kierkegaard views the opposition of God's love and guilt as a complete disjunction that is similarly divided in the unequal relation between God and the human. Either God is love, in which case guilt falls to the human side (and this is for Christians precisely the conclusion that is "joyful"), or God is potentially (in terms of doubt, knowledge, proof) not love, in which case not only would God himself be quasi-guilty, but on the human side there would loom the horror of the loss of self. The passion of relation with God would be rendered a vain illusion about either oneself or God.

This train of thought is persuasive only because it starts from the impassioned human seeking of Religiousness A, then sharpens this Christologically by means of the double contingency of Religiousness B in order to make the God's love–guilt alternative inescapable. Every conclusion other than the joyful one must disqualify itself, lest one opt for a solution that would be either passionless or horrific. But such would only improperly reiterate and misconstrue the existential problem of guilt in self-relation, as it would reopen the question of theological doubting of God's love. Neither the passionless nor the horrific solution need be entertained, because "there is one" that has introduced the horror of innocent suffering to God himself, so that the loss of God is worked out within the relation to God itself: Religiousness B.
In the years after 1848, Kierkegaard elaborated the Christological dialectic even more essentially by giving an increasingly polemical shape to the narrative form of the discourse (cf. *Christian Discourses* [1848]) and by allowing both aspects to be fused with the theological and conceptual literary expression of the late pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, above all in *Practice in Christianity* (1850). The critical highpoint of this literary form, which integrated the religious author’s preceding approaches, is presented in the sarcastic tract *The Moment* (1854/55). These late presentations of the paradoxical Religiousness B, while strongly New-Testamental in many of the specific ways they conceptualize the dogmatic tradition, are always and essentially presented as narrative, persuasion and exhortation. By way of conclusion, they will here be summarily presented and employed for critical evaluation by focusing on three key themes.

1. *Historical knowledge* about Christ, writes Anti-Climacus in the first part of *Practice in Christianity*, “is not worth a pickled herring.”\(^3\) For, from the religious point of view or under the presupposition of Religiousness A and in Anti-Climacus’s perspective of Religiousness B, there is only a “contemporaneous,” passionate relationship to Christ, which immediately excludes a distant relationship to something in the past. As the God-man who suffers both humanly and superhumanly, Christ is “an extremely unhistorical person” in the “situation of contemporaneity” (60f). Kierkegaard does not therefore argue with historical investigation and scholarship as such and in general, nor does he ever endorse an irrationality inherently devoid of concepts. But, in matters of religiousness, the historical and scientific approach cannot serve as the path to personal belief. The Christian doctrine of the God-man and reconciliation is not accessible by means of knowledge, but rather solely in the existential seriousness of belief.

In this way, Kierkegaard shifts the compelling power of Christianity into the textual narrative’s ability to “make present,” or, more precisely, into the existential proximity of all content of the Christian tradition. To effect this proximity is Kierkegaard’s task as a religious author. Kierkegaard also sees that his contemporaries, stamped as they are by the cultural and social situation of the mid-nineteenth century, are hardly in a position to make this turn in the
understanding of Christianity with him. But he refuses to accede to either scientific apologetics or the simple traditional acceptance of Christianity as the state religion. It were best, in direct attack upon Christianity, to come to a kind of contemporaneity with its message—namely, “offense”—the dark side of belief (cf. Part II of *Practice in Christianity*).

Here too there occurs a Christological escalation of his thought insofar as Christ himself was obliged to become this offense in his suffering for others (cf. 93f). In this tension inherent to Christian contemporaneity, Kierkegaard sees more than ever that his age and his society are far removed from any religious insight. Compelled to view passionless detachment as religion’s fundamental affliction and most catastrophic misunderstanding, he polemically attacked the state religion of Christianity by directing his characterization of Christian religiousness outward: The banality of the Zeitgeist misunderstood Christianity’s synthesis of the most sublime and the most lowly—the suffering of the God-man—as either barren sentimentality or pointless comedy (*SV* XI 56). The disappearance of impassioned seriousness, obligation, and resolution, which reduces Christ to a merely traditional or comic figure, is the chief target of Kierkegaard’s late writings.

The one-sidedness of the literary battles Kierkegaard undertook in his last years is not a reason to reject them, for such ventures in learned exaggeration represent one of the stylistic genres he consciously brought to bear in his work. The self-appointed role of the corrective (cf. *Pap. X* A 640, *JP* §6467) is to be taken seriously. But this does not mean that the polemicism of Kierkegaard’s distinction between historical knowledge and narrative-existential appropriation must be obligatory for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well. Historical mediations and contemporary appropriation are not identical, but neither must they reciprocally fear one another. What Kierkegaard pointed out with regard to the medium of contemporary understanding in the conflict over the application of the historical-critical method to Christology was that the desire to understand oneself as somehow distanced would be a manifest misunderstanding.

2. The image of Christ and the aesthetic work of the religious author become the preeminent and decisive argument of the discourses of Kierkegaard, and they do so paradoxically because he desires to separate the poetical strictly from the Christian (since, by
definition, the poetical is not existentially serious).\textsuperscript{14} For the allusion to what is no longer assimilable in purely human terms, to the crucified one, requires the utmost effort and application of aesthetic resources if it is to be effective. This occurs paradigmatically in the representation of the suffering of the God-man, in the "gripping sight" of the image of Christ (cf. 162; also \textit{Pap. IX A 395, JP §270}). The power of this representation, carried out through several pages, is heard in the innocent response of a child viewing a gallery of children's pictures among which has been surreptitiously placed a picture of the crucified Christ: "But why were they so mean to him, why?" (164). Ought innocence, God's love for humankind, be so tortured?

The power of reconciliation arises from the image of suffering, which discloses human guilt and sympathy, and brings the passion of the religious to its highest pitch, to belief in the God-man, belief embodied in the relationship of sin and guilt. Kierkegaard wishes to put Christology in play only through the disclosure and appropriation aroused by literary and aesthetic experience, and decidedly not by dogmatic or historical warrant. This does not mean that Kierkegaard had grown indifferent to the Lutheran dogma of his religious origins, nor that he ignored or wanted to abjure it. The meaning of the corrective signifies here too. The premises of the tradition are to be brought critically to bear in such a way that only their appropriation is emphasized, since tradition as such is virtually irrelevant to this appropriation: The present "telling" of the story of the crucified Christ must be made so aesthetically independent that its tradition can and should be "forgotten" in the actual telling\textsuperscript{164}!

Metacritically, one must also keep in mind here that this primacy of appropriation can only bear the burden it is charged with so long as its correlate, the textual and conceptual tradition, remains culturally viable. An appropriation sundered from its religious tradition would dissolve itself. In this precise respect Kierkegaard's initiatives presuppose very specifically the circumstances of his age, while the twentieth and twenty-first centuries find themselves increasingly in circumstances that must be defined as reversed: In the interests of appropriation, they must first make the genuine objects, concepts, and texts again accessible.

3. From Kierkegaard's posture as a corrective there proceeds, with regard to politics and cultural critique, a \textit{Christian critique of ideol-}
ology, which he, on the basis of his radical demands for a contemporaneous and impassioned Christianity, directed against the emerging mass and mass-communication society. Under the complex conditions described for Religiousness B, the Christian truth cannot be safeguarded by institutions. Kierkegaard relied upon Reformation theology and developed it further in his critique of church and society: Truth can only lie in striving for truth, in becoming Christian: “A Church triumphant in this world is an illusion” [193]. In this respect Kierkegaard had counted subsisting Christendom the worst enemy of Christianity and also strictly rejected church participation in the civil political reforms. Conservative and revolutionary agendas are mixed here; and here, too, the role of the corrective is not to be overlooked. Kierkegaard’s concentration on the impassioned appropriation of Christianity does not in any way exclude reforms, social development, participation in politics, a Christian social ethic, and so on, and the anarchist demand for destruction of all social forms is nowhere to be found. Instead, Kierkegaard fought against the – on his view – false value placed on the social. Reforms, societies, political participation – without individuals capable of making judgments – quickly deteriorate into mere power games played for group interests, into a caricature of the community as a whole. As its fundamental criterion, a Christian social ethic requires individual persons and relations of personal trust. Kierkegaard has not only been justified in harboring the suspicion that the collectivity would always be favored over the individual, but this suspicion has proved a prophetic analysis at the onset of the industrial society of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, those ethically responsible for the direction of these industrial societies must not renounce the questions of social organization if they are to take charge of or effect changes for the better.

Kierkegaard’s entire work – and ultimately his own self as religious author – was an outcry: a fervent protest against the disappearance of human and religious individuality, against the leveling of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation. Stated positively, Kierkegaard proclaimed the existential truth that, in the figure of the crucified Christ, salvation has become visible, believable, and ethically binding. That Kierkegaard, in order to sharpen the edge of this existential religiousness, undertook a massive critique of all the social structures of his age does not in any way mean that it is not our
task at the end of the twentieth century, and in the name of Religiousness A and B, to work to make these social structures succeed.

NOTES

1 F. D. E. Schleiermacher, On Religion (1799); G. W. F. Hegel, Encyclopedia (1830), §§384, 573.
3 Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions [trans. Hongs, 1993], SVI V 177ff. In this section of the article, further references to this work will be made with simple parenthetical citation of the page number from SVI V.
6 Ibid., §4.
7 Ibid., §4/4.
9 Cf. Härtle, Dogmatik, chap. 9.2; Neville, A Theology Primer, chaps. 11/III, 12/IV.
11 In two places the discourse itself makes slight reference to this first condition: it is an “impossibility” (358) and therefore destructive of relationship to God, from which follows in turn the fact of “hopelessness” (360).
12 Cf. SVI VIII 356, 357, 362, 365, 367, 368, 369.
13 Practice in Christianity [trans. Hongs, 1991], SVI XII 39. Further citations in this section refer to the SVI XII page number in parentheses.
16 The utilitarian self and the "useless" passion of faith

I.

A constant theme in Kierkegaard is what might be called the presence of the Absolute, though Kierkegaard does not often use this Hegelian term. He talks instead of God's unchangeableness, of the infinite, the unconditioned, or the absolute good. What can unchangeableness in the presence of change mean to us today? More than a limited scientific rationality would allow, no doubt. But within the so-called postmodern context, indifference and skepticism to such an idea have as their counterpart nothing but an escalation of irrational religious needs.

The dizzying speed of change in highly industrialized societies has given wide currency to talk of "crises of meaning" and with that ample scope for the expression of religious needs. But we should prevent such talk or needs from entering into theoretical discourse as a way of bolstering argument; pressure emanating from a need can substantially distort discussion in matters of truth. Today, it is only by skeptically insisting on even greater caution, and minimizing as best we may (for we can never altogether eliminate) the powerful dynamic of wishful thinking that we can keep the ideological function of religion separate from its absolute truth claim. The functions of religion can of course be analyzed from sociological and psychological points of view, but it is impossible in principle to reduce the meaning of absolute spiritual presence to these functions and they themselves contain hints of something more. Certainly, religion may be indispensable for the stabilizing of societies caught up in rapid social change, but a skeptical theology will be very

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much aware of the radical critique of religious needs as presented, for example, by dialectical theology. And perhaps the areas illuminated by the Feuerbach- and Marx-inspired critique of the need for religion—namely, compensation and projection—are symptomatic of a thoroughgoing misunderstanding of the God-relationship, on the part of the self.

After this word of caution the main thesis may be formulated thus: The God-relationship should no longer be made to serve life's purposes. Or, to put it more drastically: The Absolute is pointless.

This is not to disvalue individual and collective needs, hopes, and desires; these are the proper subject matter of the strategies we devise for providing humane solutions to human problems. But such needs should be freed of all entanglement with the idea of God. The Absolute is "absolute" in a pregnant sense precisely to the extent that it is conceived to be absolved from whatever teleology lies, or is thought to lie, in living processes, as well as from all instrumental rationality immanent in human society. The interlocking of instrumental rationality with considerations of ethical and cultural value and of human salvation (which Max Weber, among others, brought to our attention) fails to hold up under critical scrutiny. Whereas the reasoning that judges means in relation to finite ends suggests that what is superfluous in this regard lacks "meaning," life in its fullness has its highest form of freedom in an abundance—even overabundance; the expressive possibilities of the self triumph over the calculations of expansive self-assertion. Absolute truth as freedom is at one with the "intentionlessness" so much stressed by Walter Benjamin. In this freedom the Absolute is absolved from any need to provide justification, from all exploitation as a "meaning resource."

No one adopting Kierkegaard's skeptical theological approach imagines nowadays that it is possible, just by providing reasons, that is to say, by making statements claiming to be universally true, to point conclusively to what makes some particular situation or event "good." That would require ascertaining the proper place of such a good within the total scheme of things, but all belief in the human being's ability to determine such an onto-theological state of affairs "by its own powers" has vanished. For what "one's own powers" never fail to do is assert themselves, thus introducing into discourse an egoistic distortion—as will be discussed more fully below under the theme of power. If there really were an ability to appreci-
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ate the value of some significant occurrence, that could only be by
virtue of a suspension of all desire for direct mastery over things.
Such a suspension, or abstention, is itself a confession of the need
to be forgiven for one's own insurmountable particularity and for
the self-assertion inherent in that.

All this is in fundamental opposition to the embodied dynamic of
wishing that infiltrates and infects all our thinking and runs
counter to the various strategies people adopt in their attempts to
suppress the idea of their finitude. Lack of purpose— or existential
dysfunctionality, as the mirror image of the absolute meaning of
freedom— transports one into a state of wonder and dread; it is only
by traversing this abyss of uncertainty hard by the edge of despair
that the self can acquire that fathomless lightheartedness (Johannes
Climacus's "humor") that is the courage required of the leap into
the absolute sovereignty of God. Kierkegaard, who occasionally
draws on the metaphor of the tightrope dancer for this particular
configuration of human existence, says: "whoever has truly learned
how to be anxious will dance when the anxieties of finitude strike
up the music" [CA 161].

In a time when the apathy, religious indifference, and frivolous-
ness characteristic of the "last man" (so vividly portrayed by Nietz-
sche) prevail, it becomes clear why for Kierkegaard faith is primarily
passion. Even decisive opposition to religion is preferable to a luke-
warm Christianity:

The iron resolve to have no religion already has an element of the passion-
ate and is therefore not the most dangerous kind of indifference. That is
why it seldom occurs. No, the most dangerous, and thoroughly ordinary,
kind of indifference is the following: to have a certain religion, but one that
has been watered down and vulgarized to pure twaddle.¹

Ignorance and indifference habitually betray themselves in the
stock phrase "to a certain degree" [CUP 229].

The kind of thinking that arises in Kierkegaardian faith, passion-
ately relinquishing imperial intentionality and the reduction of rea-
son to instrumentality, challenges the self to understand itself as
absolute over against the "general" [Almene, often misleadingly
translated "universal"], living as an exception to the rule, if that is
what is called for. Freedom in this sense remains untouched by the
widespread accusation of infantilism directed at religion particu-
larly by Freud. However, the fact that the constellation of faith and freedom in this sense has become so distinct and accessible is the result of the historical unfolding of a thoroughly instrumentalized form of life. Secularization as a condition to be desired (at least in retrospect) was a necessary preliminary to the progressive debunking of the manifold secondary functions of religion, as well as of their metaphysical presuppositions. It was this that first made it possible for faith finally to understand and express itself, authentically, as that purpose-free exposition in which the person accepts the glorious gift of grace freely granted and becomes a "gestalt" of the sovereign presence of God. In particular, this type of thinking takes the ground from under speculations on what goals history might possibly have - whether they be religious or atheistic. A new relationship between absoluteness and contingency has been brought to light in Christology. In order to experience infinite, transient facticity as meaningful in spite of the inevitability of its passing, to "know" that even the failures and evil of one's own existence are forgiven, it is no longer necessary for the self to insist upon the transparency of the underlying causes of the occurrences in question, as if they could be "coped with" only by ascribing to them some ultimate aim. An end is thus put to those compulsive theological rationalizations that with the help of "providence" explain away the horrors of history, tracing events back to an ultimate will manipulating our fates behind our backs. The new Kierkegaardian way of thinking and the freedom that comes from it leave the traditional view of God behind, that is, God as an omnipotent being ruling in the mode of domination. God rejects rule by despotism "because He communicates creatively in such a way that in creating he gives independence vis-à-vis himself" (CUP 260; emphasis original). Omnipotence on Kierkegaard's understanding proves itself in the granting of autonomous freedom to finite existence. In order to explicate this Kierkegaard makes use of the notion of the contractio Dei, which is of course also found in the cabbalistic tradition. The free and independent finite being emerges as such from the continuity of God's omnipotence only to the extent that God holds himself back or withdraws. The nothing of the creatio ex nihilo is the sphere of finite freedom, in the all-encompassing being of God made available by this withdrawal.
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All finite power creates dependence. Omnipotence alone is able to make independent, to bring forth out of nothing that which receives its inner being by virtue of the fact that omnipotence constantly withholds itself.

Omnipotence is not intent on a relationship with the other, for there is no other to which it could relate. No: it is able to give without thereby relinquishing its power in the slightest, which is to say that it is able to make independent.

This is what is incomprehensible, that omnipotence is not only able to bring forth that which is most imposing, the visible totality of the cosmos, but also that which is most delicate and fragile: a being independent vis-à-vis omnipotence.... It is indeed an impoverished and worldly notion of the dialectic of power that it steadily augments itself to the extent that it can coerce and make dependent. ([P §1251; translation mine])

As stated above, on Kierkegaard’s view it is only through passion that the person is elevated to the spiritual existence of faith; the correlative determination of God is one of the passion of almighty love—an understanding that has transcended once and for all the old ideas of an overbearing sovereignty, these now exposed as un-serious products of the imagination ([P §2452]. Intense spiritual self-relatedness manifests itself concretely in the courage to be powerless. This is true in a preeminent sense of almighty love, which in a changeless act of condescension places itself at the mercy of man and his freedom and, by so doing, manifests itself concretely in the suffering of God on man’s account. “From a religious point of view, the greatest impotence is the greatest power. Therefore Christ has no sceptre in his hand, only a reed, the symbol of impotence—and yet at that very moment he is the greatest power” ([P §4214].

Nothing in the Gospels is as striking as Jesus’ abstaining from the exercise of the power to which he at the same time lays full claim: According to Scripture, to him “has been given all power.” The renunciation of this power is indeed the decisive offense, and offense was taken by his contemporaries from the very start. A perfect fullness of power, which refrains from asserting itself out of respect for the freedom of the weak and the guilty, is a stance that flies in the face of all expectations and wishes. The powerful acceptance of powerlessness in the life of Jesus should provide us with the occasion radically to question our own desires. Whoever takes the risk of
breaking away from the fixation on his own power, and from anxiety about the deficits of this power, to him it will no longer seem plausible to use or, rather, to abuse God as a symbol of his own wish-fulfilling fantasies. And what is more, he will stop interpreting the Incarnation as a means to an end, for instance, the tallying up of guilt and sin. Within the horizon of an absolute, purpose-free spiritual presence, finite reflection understands the provisional nature of all its concepts, including its theological speculations.

II.
Within this postmetaphysical horizon a logically compelling demonstration of the certainty of the belief in God becomes superfluous in any case. This is especially so in view of the fact that instrumental science, with its steady production of reasons, is quite willing, for every position in public discourse, to meet society's needs for the provision of grounds. It is nevertheless a worthwhile enterprise to present the good grounds of faith, and the power of metaphor to convince on the periphery of that silence in which the strictly logical demonstration ends "speaks for itself" – each time in a different way to each single individual. A "verbalization of the sacred" adequate in the sense of forming a set of intersubjectively verifiable and controllable statements is neither desirable nor possible, for the sacred is a truly luxuriating dimension of our freedom in which the will to power over one's own existence has been renounced. For each person this embarkation on a purpose-free existence under the aegis of overabundant divine being takes on a different form. One will recall the Mémorial of Pascal, who wrote down a dated testimony of his conversion and sewed it into the lining of his frock. This act is highly significant: the existential center of the individual remains a mystery, kept intentionally from the inquisitive looks of others. Making it communicable would jeopardize the possibility of the absolute individuality of the other, who has the task of finding his own unique path. There is nothing here that can serve as a model. Pascal is certainly the most apt example of the refusal to make the center of one's own existence the material of a narrative that can be imparted, and Kierkegaard with his "theory of indirect communication" has said the final word on the matter. To be sure, if in our lives we actually experience an encounter of unconditional concern, then our
hearts abound and we wish to communicate this to others. There is an intense desire to hold fast to what has transpired and make it accessible. Hence it is a personal, theologically grounded resolve not to impart the facticity of such events, to withhold one's *kairos* from communication and from the possibility of its becoming an object of idle talk. The decision not to go about spreading the news of one's own fundamental experience and making it "intelligible" to everyone is a conscious decision. It is precisely the center of one's own existence that remains the exclusive province of the incognito, for otherwise the temptation that lies in public acclamation and in putting one's inwardness to use as a beacon for the half-hearted and insipid would be too great. Discovering one's own integrity is a task for and the responsibility of the individual alone. And besides, it is not possible in one's own life to reproduce the life of another, not even that of the Saviour. The story of Jesus is not intended to explain everything once and for all but to encourage living a life that no longer seeks, or requires, a derivation from an overarching principle or an explanation in terms of such.

The irreducible particularity of each individual's movement of transcendence cannot be made compatible with the communicative processes with which human beings reach understanding among themselves. From the point of view of what is of unconditional concern to me, this kind of "intersubjective exchange" appears as the avoidance tactic of one who shrinks from the annihilation (*Zu-Grund-Gehen*) of being taken up (*Eingehen*) into the power of God (*JP §1960*). A radical theological reflection on freedom shows "that one person cannot help another at all," for "the terms of salvation differ for every individual, for every single solitary human being" (*JP §4922*). The ineffable nature of the concrete act of becoming a self is accomplished in the flicker of an eye - no postponing, no opportunistic weighing of pros and cons. Above all, no sideways glances in search of others' approval. It is certainly more comfortable to abstain from such a way of acting in favor of standardized ethical norms; most individuals content themselves with the simple reproduction of life, with life at second hand. The life context within the framework of science and technology mechanizes life's decisions and eliminates the primordiality that actualizes itself in the sharp outlines of a clearly focused decision: "There is nothing to live through, nothing to experience, everything is finished" (*CUP 344*).
Knowledge replaces experience and becomes a substitute for action: "One does not love, does not have faith, does not act; but one knows what erotic love is, what faith is" \(CUP\ 344\), and "limited and busy people fancy that they are acting and acting and acting," while on the other hand, continues Kierkegaard, intellectuals of a particular type can be said to cultivate a "virtuosity in knowing how to avoid acting" \(CUP\ 604\). According to Kierkegaard it can be appropriate, even mandatory, to refuse to enter into discourse. It is of course inadmissible to dispense with the notion of universalizability when weighing the acceptability of maxims for acting, and even the passionate existential decision should possess relevance for the universal. But there is no leveling of the absolute difference between the universal and the individual. Withdrawal into subjectivity could well draw the attention of the prevailing normativity to certain fissures out of which a new historical constellation of order could arise. The silence of nonconformity can be both a demonic, self-destructive manifestation of total refusal and rejection and a manifestation of an authentic possibility that can provide an important impulse for others. This inspiration must not, however, become the occasion for mere imitation.²

Judged in terms of standardized thinking and the unreflected normality of our attention to everyday problems, the contrariness of such Christian existence represents a breach. Whoever attempts to live in accordance with the impulse of absolute purposelessness becomes in some way suspect, for such a person by undermining the fixation on self-preservation is to some extent a destabilizing factor. It means, after all, a refusal to take part in that market of possibilities with its offers to satisfy the need for meaning, where religion is prepared and served up as an elixir for coping with extreme situations.

III.

A key role is played in these processes by the fixation upon one's own vital powers. The self does to a limited extent have power. It manifests itself in the striving for self-realization. The rarely acknowledged awareness of the limits of its finite power is a source of unrest in the self. One must strive for more power in order not to sink into oblivion. This striving for ever more power is born of the
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anxiety one has for one's own self-preservation, the inner mechanisms of which have been lucidly depicted by Hobbes.

Kierkegaard describes the impulse of Christian faith as the unnatural suspension of creaturely self-assertion: "The tragedy of the majority of men is by no means that they are weak but that they are too strong – genuinely to be aware of God" (IP §4453). The danger lies in becoming aware of one's own strength, the illusion of being able to stay the process of one's own transitoriness, or at least of being able to circumvent or defy time. One historical variation of this transcending of the frailty and limitation of individual power is self-dissolution in the "mortal" god of the collective ego. For human beings have an enormous anxiety about becoming "solitary individuals"; they are constantly casting about for excuses to hide behind others (people, institutions, ideas) in order to avoid being called upon to assume a risk-laden responsibility in which the risk of failing one's self is greater (IP §2166). It is true that the alienation and anonymity of power in mass action is not infrequently experienced by the individual in an illusionary manner as a pleasurable sensation of enhanced power. Where mass activity predominates, the individual sense of responsibility dissipates in the process. This being so, Kierkegaard observes: "Everything that is mass is eo ipso perdition" (IP §2970).

Anxiety in the face of the risky odyssey of becoming a self is only one motivating factor behind the secret lust for collectivization. The other lies in our fallen nature itself, the dynamic structure of our rationality with its virtually inherent tendency to dominate. Closed systems of meaning, be they of traditional or recent vintage, help to cope with the precariousness of existence by suggesting a totality of explanatory connections, for the self derives a feeling of security from the notion of having real mastery over a given state of affairs. This dynamic of reason is simply the counterpart of a sensual impulse infecting reason. The human being "continually feels an urge to have something finished, but this urge is of evil and must be renounced" (CUP 86). For anyone who opens himself to God, the daunting nature of becoming a self becomes clear by the very contrast: In faith the self should bring itself "to think infinitely the uncertainty of all things" (CUP 87). What makes this proposal extraordinary is the fact that reason on Kierkegaard's understanding cannot help but continue to integrate in its holistic (re)constructions of the totality of sensible reality every phenomenon with any
claim to meaning. Reason has "always already" fallen prey, as it were, to the utilitarian temptation that helps to patch over and disguise the fragmentary nature of the human being's existential constitution. In this manner reason is a victim of the "most subtle of all deceptions" (CUP 253). Therefore, the first step of letting oneself in for the venture of faith means to mobilize the "distrust of infinity" against oneself. Arguments from finality, which confine theological speculation within a teleological framework, are deprived of their claim to validity: "The divine passion is present right here in the most decisive hatred of everything which even in the remotest manner resembles human probability and calculation" (JP §2096).

The theology of sacrifice is thereby removed from the center of theological theory: "The thought: to do this or that, to offer this or that, to venture this or that – in order to serve the cause of God – this thought has never moved me" (JP §1431). It is the infantilism of the grown-up that creates the fantasy of God's pursuing some sort of activity. One probably comes closest to imagining the God-relationship if one pictures it in terms of the well-known situation in which an older person really joins in a child's game in order to make the child happy (JP §1431). Thus, Kierkegaard's existential earnestness ultimately culminates in divine-playful humorousness.

But God has put sweat and tears in the way of the humorous side. The antiutilitarian dimension of meaning in the God-relationship is disclosed only to a mode of thought that does not shy away from the absurd effort of thinking against the grain of the quasi-inborn mechanisms of reason and its manifest or hidden instrumental constructions: "The believer derives no benefit whatever from his [understanding]" (CUP 226).

This sovereign freedom is betrayed by conformity – by adapting to, and fitting into, absolutized constructs of totality. Of course it is only natural for people to slink off into ideologized worldviews, for the Christian challenge to live an unsheltered existence is an imposition that produces malaise. It would seem that the human being has an innate tendency toward paternalism and authoritarianism, and a corresponding distaste for the mobility of the spirit, as well as for the mobility in real historical existence, and gladly succumbs to the sweet poison of an unconsciously desired captivity.

Of course if we wish to grasp reality, we must construct totalities.
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There is also no reason why we should not project utopias in order to reach a common understanding of our history. But we know that these constructions are merely provisional, and we also know that the ground of freedom, God, eludes every fixation in terms of any concept of reality as a whole. What is expected of us is to live and act in a world that no longer enjoys the status of a divine prefabrication. For this absolute esteem the solitary individual has to pay a high price: he becomes acquainted in his own soul with the loneliness of the God who suffers on account of mankind.

IV.

It is the intention of paradoxical Christianity so to express the crossroads where the Absolute encounters contingent, historical existence that all projections of historical continuity and a "gentle" entry of the divine into history are shattered. The volitional dynamic of the desire to subjugate meaning is hurled back upon itself by the roadblock of the absurd. Kierkegaard speaks of a crucifixion of reason—the reason, that is, that strives to subjugate every form of reality, including the fountainhead of all meaning, and conform it to its own hermeneutical project. Pierced and thrown back by the paradoxical, it dawns on the self that this specific reality can truly not be its own enterprise of thought. For as long as the self is capable of enduring this repelling alienation in the no man's land on the borderline of reason, just so long is it able to endure the absolute intensification of uncertainty in the paradox of the God-relationship. Where the paradox takes hold in truth, there thought must relinquish its attempt to subjugate this reality by comprehending it. And only this derailment can be referred to as a paradox. This is the meaning behind the remark that "nonsense" cannot be believed "against the understanding": you cannot believe what to the understanding by itself is transparently nonsensical [(CUP 568)]. So "believing against the understanding" is not a matter of being religiously inspired by what a positivistically constricted understanding concludes is nonsense—"just as if Christianity were a tidbit for dunces because it cannot be thought" [(CUP 557)]. On the contrary, the task with the paradox is to grasp its unthinkableableness and that requires full use of the categorical power of reason.
In the passionate leap of faith the suspicion against which, if left to its own devices, the understanding has no defenses is dispelled, the suspicion, namely, that even in the most deeply felt, godly fear of the "Wholly Other," the self confesses a god of its own making. For the idea of the absolute difference is itself a distinction inherent in reason. What is meant by "paradox," then, is a clearly distinguished negative concept demarcating the borderline of human reason. What reason recognizes as paradoxical "is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it into nonsense and prove that it is nonsense; no, it is a symbol, a riddle" (JP §7). That is to say, the paradoxical is a riddle precisely for reason. The power of reflection, as the pole opposite to passion, strengthens inwardness. Reflection is the instrument with which "to reset the trigger springs for the essentially Christian so that it may stand its ground – against reflection" (JP §3704). In order that faith's "simplicity armed with reflection" be attained at all, the battle "must of course be waged within the keenest qualifications of reflection" (CUP 607). The passion of faith draws reason into its infinite movement and brings it up against its limit – the very place where passion continually re-generates itself. At this limit the self experiences the provocative and evocative power of that which for reason is the absurd. In the at once attracting and repelling action of the absurd a fullness of being is disclosed to which there is no transition from the functionality of reason with its instinct of self-preservation.

Even in his most intricately theoretical moments Kierkegaard cannot suppress his sarcasm: "But let us never forget that not everyone who has not lost his reason thereby proves incontestably that he has it" (JP §2290).

The goal of this process of self-transformation is the successfully accomplished surrender of the self, the fortunate "loss of self" as a movement of transcendence to pure, that is to say, unmotivated communication with God. In the tension-laden strivings of our empirical existence, however, this movement means letting oneself in for "unintelligible" suffering. "To see yourself is to die, to die to all illusions and all hypocrisy – it takes great courage to dare look at yourself" (JP §3902). In the ordeal undergone in this struggle against the self, the person is implanted in the memoria dei. Not to have known this existential suffering is for Kierkegaard evidence of distance from God (JP §4681). To suffer in such a manner means hav-
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ing a secret with God. This secret is emblematic of the blessedness of being in agreement with God as the sovereign ground of existence, in which the omnipotence of love encompasses also the abyss of suffering.

A caveat must be attached to this explicit reminder that suffering is unavoidable: Its inevitability is no justification for thinking of suffering instrumentally as having some purpose within an economy of salvation! Religious masochism is subject to the same critical verdict as religious heroism and a readiness for sacrifice. Otherwise martyrdom could degenerate into an existential test of courage or be made into a tool for the self-satisfaction of the pious. It takes genuine courage to devote oneself to an idea and, in the extreme case, to let oneself be put to death for it. But that can also be a matter of lack of inwardness. The God-relationship also puts the readiness for self-sacrifice in question. Suffering may indeed be "the negative form of the highest," but in itself it brings no assurance of the authenticity of the God-relationship. No one should imagine "that sorrow is more meritorious than joy" ([IP §2178]). Here again the self goes astray on a utilitarian path; whoever is of the opinion that one must suffer in order to arrive at one's goal has already wandered into a blind alley.

In the leap of faith, finite ties are put at risk and cultivated capacities and dispositions are suspended along with allegedly ultimate commitments. What is known to faith as "eternal salvation" is disclosed only in a movement that runs counter to utilitarianism. The path of passionate discipleship, unflinching at the prospect of suffering, is what is decisive here - in contradistinction to every other good that can be "acquired" ([CUP 427]). As Kierkegaard puts it: "The absolute difficulty of this [appropriation] is the only sign that one is relating oneself to the absolute good" ([CUP 428]). "In the unconditioned all teleology vanishes. . . . Only when every 'Why?' vanishes in the night of the unconditioned and becomes silent in the silence of the unconditioned, only then can a man venture everything, if he dimly glimpses one 'Why?' something is impaired" ([IP §4901]). Inasmuch as faith delivers itself up to uncertainty in such a radical manner, it can no longer be unmasked as a pious form of barter ([CUP 425]). Hence the content of faith is not constituted by communicative behavior patterns such as care and comfort projected along an eternal trajectory. The content of faith is the almighty sovereignty
itself. Faith is a process in which the self pierces through the inherent utilitarian structure of its ontological constitution by virtue of the sublimity of the infinite, thereby becoming transformed by the reality of God. To this extent what is essentially Christian is not a specific content but rather a certain form of intensity of individual self-becoming whose spiritual enthusiasm is revealed precisely by the unconditionality of an ethical commitment that on pragmatic grounds would be wholly inexplicable \( [JP \text{ §}4224] \).

The Being-of-God-for-me is my own God-relationship as self-relationship, hence the freedom of God is my own freedom in the strenuous exertion of the spirit. Kierkegaard can therefore say, "It is really the God-relationship that makes a human being human" \( [CUP \text{ 244}] \). For in this process of transformation "God" is nothing external, "but rather infinity itself" or, as Kierkegaard also puts it, "infinite selfhood" \( [JP \text{ §}532] \).

At the pinnacle of intensity of the struggle, at the point where the "likeness with God" manifests itself \( [CUP \text{ 178}] \), existential earnestness becomes transformed into the lightheartedness of effortless discipleship. The self, however, is not capable of sustaining the concentration of this moment and therefore sinks once again into the distance from God, thereby according humor an eminent theological significance.

**NOTES**


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