

**Philosophy P335 (§ 13649)/  
P535 (§ 28458):**

**Søren Kierkegaard**

**Spring 2011**

**Lecture Notes**

**by**

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# Table of Contents

Course .....	1
<b>Readings .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>First reading assignment.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Mechanics of the course .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Weekly quizzes.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mid-term examination.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Term paper.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Peer reviews.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Plan of attack .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Life .....	5
<b>His name .....</b>	<b>5</b>
What to expect .....	8
Writings.....	9
<b>“Kierkegaard’s Writings” (KW) and the “Journals and Papers” (JP) .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Pseudonymous vs. “signed” works .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Aesthetic vs. religious works .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Works in the “authorship” and the other works .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Some of the main works .....</b>	<b>16</b>
The Concept of Irony .....	16
Either/Or .....	17
Fear and Trembling.....	17
Philosophical Fragments (or Philosophical “Crumbs”) .....	18
Concluding Unscientific Postscript.....	18
Others.....	18
Background on Hegel .....	19
Hegel .....	21
The “standard” picture .....	26

<b>Reading</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Sources</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>(1) Reaction to Hegel</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>(2) Emphasis on the individual</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>(3) A “practical urgency” to Kierkegaard</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>(4) Kierkegaard’s “dialectic”</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>What are the three lifestyles?</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>The aesthetic life</b> .....	<b>33</b>
Texts .....	34
<b>The ethical life</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>The religious life, the life of faith</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>Contrasts between Hegel’s dialectic and Kierkegaard’s “stages on life’s way”</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>Things to ask</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>Criterionless choice</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Dread or anxiety</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>Other notions in Kierkegaard</b> .....	<b>42</b>
Existence .....	42
Truth .....	45
The paradox .....	48
<b>Fear and Trembling</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>51</b>
The story of Abraham .....	53
<b>Situating the text</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>“Attunement”</b> .....	<b>55</b>
First version (pp. 45–46).....	56
Second version (p. 46) .....	56
Third version (pp. 46–47) .....	57
Fourth version (pp. 47–48).....	57
General observation .....	57
<b>Speech in praise of Abraham (pp. 49–56)</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>Preamble from the heart</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Offering the best you have</b> .....	<b>60</b>

<b>The “special case” interpretation .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>The “context of his times” .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>The “knights” .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>The “structure” of the knight of infinite resignation (p. 72) .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>The “aesthetics” of the knight of infinite resignation .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>The “structure” of the knight of faith .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>The “aesthetics” of the knight of faith .....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>The knight of faith cannot make the additional movement on his own .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>The first two “problemata” .....</b>	<b>70</b>
The first <i>problema</i> .....	71
<b>What Is the question? .....</b>	<b>73</b>
The ethical sense .....	74
The “personal preference” sense .....	75
<b>Some suggestions .....</b>	<b>75</b>
First suggestion .....	75
Second suggestion .....	76
Third suggestion .....	76
<b>What’s wrong with the “standard picture”? .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Summary review of the “standard picture” .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Initial problems with the standard picture .....</b>	<b>79</b>
How many stages are there? .....	79
How rare are criterionless choices? .....	81
What about faith? .....	82
<b>The aesthetic life .....</b>	<b>83</b>
Diapsalmata .....	84
The “dead club” .....	87
<i>The First Love</i> .....	88
The last two essays .....	89
Don Giovanni .....	91
The upshot of it all .....	92
<b>The “ethical” .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>The Judge’s diagnosis of the aesthetic .....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>The Judge’s diagnosis of A in particular .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Indirect communication, or the problem of the pseudonymous authors .....</b>	<b>102</b>

<b>Nonsense about indirect communication</b> .....	<b>103</b>
Ineffability .....	103
Other nonsense.....	104
<b>Sources on indirect communication</b> .....	<b>108</b>
<b>Point of View</b> .....	<b>109</b>
<b>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</b> .....	<b>112</b>
<b>Two Lectures on Communication</b> .....	<b>115</b>
Conclusion .....	121
<b>Practice in Christianity</b> .....	<b>121</b>
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>122</b>
Kierkegaard’s “epistemology” .....	123
<b>The title and the statement of the problem</b> .....	<b>125</b>
<b>The issue</b> .....	<b>127</b>
A digression on Socrates and Plato.....	127
<b>Application to Kierkegaard</b> .....	<b>129</b>
<b>The task of Fragments</b> .....	<b>129</b>
The “moment” .....	131
<b>Why make such an hypothesis?</b> .....	<b>132</b>
<b>Pelagianism</b> .....	<b>135</b>
<b>Repetition</b> .....	<b>137</b>
The story of <i>Repetition</i> .....	137
The moral of the story.....	139
What does it have to do with <i>Fragments</i> ?.....	140
<b>Offense</b> .....	<b>141</b>
<b>The contemporary</b> .....	<b>144</b>
The Concept of Anxiety .....	146
<b>Orientation</b> .....	<b>146</b>
<b>The title page</b> .....	<b>150</b>
<b>Other themes in the introduction</b> .....	<b>152</b>
Quantitative vs. qualitative change .....	152
The two ethics.....	153
<b>Hereditary sin</b> .....	<b>154</b>

Conceptual link with <i>Sickness</i> .....	155
<b>Highlights .....</b>	<b>156</b>
“Hereditary” sin vs. “original” sin .....	156
We are all in the same situation as Adam .....	157
Sin vs. sinfulness.....	159
The individual and the race .....	160
Anxiety .....	162
The demonic .....	167
Sin and sexuality .....	169
The role of anxiety in faith.....	170
How are we to read all this?.....	171
The Sickness unto Death.....	172
<b>Contents of Sickness unto Death .....</b>	<b>178</b>
Three forms of despair .....	183
A link between <i>Sickness</i> and <i>Either/Or</i> .....	186
The Judge as in the third form of despair.....	191
The Judge as a Pelagian .....	195
Despair is a disease, not the <i>consciousness</i> of the disease .....	195
Is despair a bad thing or a good thing? .....	196
Anyone in despair is bringing it on himself.....	200
Random observations.....	200
Do the three forms of despair reduce to one another?.....	203
Conscience .....	206
<b>Purity of Heart and Works of Love.....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>The Moment .....</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>Kierkegaard on cannibalism.....</b>	<b>226</b>

## Course

Pass out *Syllabus*.

### **Readings**

- Susan Leigh Anderson, *On Kierkegaard*. (I'll say more about this later.)
- Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*.
- *Fear and Trembling*, Alastair Hannay trans.
- *The Concept of Anxiety*, Reidar Thomte trans. (Princeton series.)
- *The Sickness unto Death*, Alastair Hannay trans.

### **Optional:**

- Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. There will be some assigned readings from this (the volume is on reserve in the main library), but not enough to warrant buying the entire book for those two items alone. (Nevertheless, it's a good book!)

### **First reading assignment**

Your first reading assignment, which you should get started on right away:

- Anderson, *On Kierkegaard*. Read the whole thing; it's short. This is for general orientation and background. I'll have some more to say about this book in a moment.
- Also, the MacIntyre article from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, on E-Reserves for this course. (I'll say more about our E-Reserves collection in a moment.)
- *Cambridge Companion*, Chap. 1, on SK's life and times, and a little more general orientation. (On the Extras page of our Oncourse site. I'll say more about our Oncourse site too in a moment.)

Then, after that

- *Cambridge Companion*, Chap. 4, on SK's relations with Hegel.

## ***Mechanics of the course***

Important parts of this course will take place on the University's Oncourse website (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx). Both those who are taking this course under the P335 number and those taking it under the P535 number should go to the Oncourse tab for the P335 version. It reads: **SP11 BL PHIL P335 13649**.

Here on our Oncourse site, you will find:

- A copy of the *Syllabus*.
- Announcements relevant to this course.
- A quiz-taking utility, for (almost) weekly quizzes, as I'll describe in a moment.
- An "Assignments" utility, where you will submit all examinations and papers for this course in digital format.
- A page of instructions for how to do this.
- Toward the end of the semester, you will find a "drop box," on Oncourse, the function of which is described in the *Syllabus*.
- A "Post'Em" grade-reporting utility, where you can see your running grades for this course: quiz grades, examination grades, paper grade, comments, etc. (Note : I have to upload these grades manually from my Excel spreadsheet gradebook. So there will be some lag-time between, say, taking a quiz and seeing the results posted here.) I'm not using the regular "Gradebook" utility on Oncourse, since I find the "Post'Em" utility much more flexible.
- An email archive, where you can view messages from me or your classmates relevant to this course. You can send ordinary email from home on on-campus to xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx, and it will be automatically forwarded to all members of this class and deposited in the email archive on Oncourse for later viewing. I'll be using this utility to send you comments on the quizzes, for instance, or follow-up remarks on things that come up in lectures. Note that this email utility is to be used only for matters relevant to this class. If you start abusing it and sending random emails to everybody, I'll just have to reconfigure it so that only I can send mail through it.
- A link to our E-Reserves collection, run through the main library. You can go to that page either through the general Library website or directly through our Oncourse page.
- A page of suggested bibliography that may be useful to you in writing your term papers. This page also contains a list of things on our E-Reserves page.
- A page where I will post links to online versions of all class handouts that supplement the lectures.

You will be expected to keep current with what is going on on this Oncourse site.



## **Weekly quizzes**

- There will be a total of eleven more or less weekly quizzes in this course, starting next week. They will be conducted through Oncourse, outside the classroom. (Once on our Oncourse site, click on “Original Test and Survey” in the menubar on the left of your screen.) For the details of how these will work, see the *Syllabus*. On weeks when we are having a quiz, they will be available to take any time between Wednesday afternoon at 2:15 (right after our class is over) and the following Sunday midnight (strictly, Monday morning at 00:00.)

The quizzes are meant to cover the kind of factual and basic conceptual material you need to keep straight if you are going to do any real work on Kierkegaard. They will be demanding, but as fair and reasonable as I can make them.

**Note:** These are in a sense “open book” quizzes. You can use your textbooks, your lecture notes, on-line materials, things from the library, or other such materials when you take these quizzes. You can ask one another, if you like. You can go print out a copy of the quiz and then come back after you’ve done some homework and actually fill it in and submit it later.

There is really only one way you can cheat, and that’s to have someone else log in as you and take it for you. But the way I’ve set it up, why bother?

Note: You only get to submit each quiz once, so be sure you have it the way you want it before you do.

## **Mid-term examination**

There will be a mid-term examination (around mid-term, naturally). It will be submitted through the “Assignments” utility on Oncourse. For the details, see the *Syllabus*.

## **Term paper**

There will be a full-dress term-paper due near the end of the semester. For the paper, I want you to do a philosophical analysis of some fairly extended passage or passages from Kierkegaard himself. In other words, I want your paper to be text-based (and not just an abstract discussion of overall “themes” or a “what Kierkegaard means to me” paper), but also philosophically sensitive (and not just a “book report”). I will provide further advice on your paper, and some suggested topics, as we get into the semester.

## **Peer reviews**

Instead of a final examination, we’re going to try something a little different this semester. After you submit your term-papers through Oncourse, I will go through and assign you one or two papers by your classmates for you to read and “review.” (One if you’re taking this course under the P335 number, two if you’re taking it under the graduate P535 number.) These papers will appear in your Oncourse “drop box,” which

I'll turn on at that time for this purpose. By "reviewing" a paper, I mean in effect read it, grade it and write comments on it. These "reviews" will be due by the beginning of the final examination period for this class during finals week. Once they are all submitted, I'll submit the reviews of your own paper to the same "drop box," so you can see what your classmates think of your own work. (This will all be done anonymously both ways. That is, you will not know whose papers you are reviewing, and you will not know who is reviewing your own paper. Depending on whether people turn in late papers, you may or may not get a review of your own paper back, or you may get more than one back.)

### ***Plan of attack***

Here's how we're going to proceed:

First of all, I'm going to give you a kind of capsule presentation of what might be called the "standard" view of Kierkegaard (if there is one).

Some of you may have taken P135 with me before. And in that course, I've given you a kind of "standard" picture of what SK is up to. This is roughly the picture you'll see in lots of surveys, histories and "once-over-lightly" treatments. If you've taken P135 with me, or similar courses elsewhere, this much will be review and should sound pretty familiar. But I need to include it for the sake of those of you who haven't taken such a course before. (And for those of you have, I'll be including some further material you probably haven't heard before.)

This is why I want you to read the Anderson book, and the MacIntyre article on E-Reserves. For my purposes, these are representative statements of the "standard" view.

Then: We'll go on. In effect, this "going on" will amount to a test of that "standard" picture. It's not so much that the "standard" picture is just wrong (although I think a lot of it is), as that—as we'll see—there so much more to be said, and it's not nearly as tidy as it's sometimes presented. That's where we get into the good stuff, and that's what we want to spend the bulk of the semester on.

What I want to talk about today, then, is a brief introduction to SK's life and times. On Wednesday, I want to talk about his writings, since he wrote a lot, and keeping track of it all is a complicated business. (I've included a web page on this on our Oncourse site.)

Then, next week, we'll talk about SK's philosophical context, who he was reacting against, the philosophical climate of the times, and so on. In particular, some background on Hegel.

After that, I'll spend the next two weeks giving you a quick tour of what we're calling the "standard" picture, and introducing some basic concepts and notions in SK. This will involve our first actual taste of SK's writings, as given in the *Syllabus*.

But our first in-depth look at a complete work of SK will come after that, when we talk about *Fear and Trembling*. I've used this work a lot in P135, and so does almost everyone else who teaches Kierkegaard. It's undoubtedly his most widely read book, and

it's probably the best single work he ever wrote to get people really turned on and kick started about this guy.

We'll see, I think, that although some of this will sound familiar if you've taken my P135 before, and some of it will surely sound familiar from our presentation of the "standard" view—things are not quite as we thought! And at that point, we'll be ready to get into the real thick of it!

## Life

I've put a fairly detailed chronology of Kierkegaard's life on the Extras page of our Oncourse site, compiled from several sources. You may want to consult that from time to time. (See also Anderson, Chap. 1, and Chap. 1 from the *Companion*.)

If you're interested in more detail about his life, I should mention a major biography by Joakim Garff, first published in Danish in 2000, translated in 2005, and now available in paperback: *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Bruce H. Kirmmse, trans. (Princeton University Press, 2007). It's enormous, rather controversial, pretty inexpensive, and a pretty good read. I've asked the Library to put this on physical reserves.

Here are the bare bones of SK's biography:

He was born on May 5, 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark. He died in the same city on November 11, 1855.

**Note:** He died when he was 42. So he was relatively young. A lot happened in a fairly short time.

SK pretty much stayed in Copenhagen all his life. He did make a few trips to Berlin, but they were short and infrequent. And occasionally he would go visit somebody in the countryside near Copenhagen. But basically, he was a city-boy through and through.

And he loved it. For all his caustic criticism of Copenhagen society (which we'll see as we go along), SK was obviously very proud of being a Dane, and of living in Copenhagen in particular.

### **His name**

SK's name is: Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.

The first name is a Danish form of the Latin 'Severinus' (or 'Severus', for fans of Harry Potter). The 'ø' in it is pronounced like German o-umlaut: ö, and is found spelled that way in some older Danish texts. (Round your lips as though you were going to say 'oh', and then—holding your lips in that position—say a long 'a'.)

In modern Danish, the double-a in his middle and family names is spelled with what English-speakers sometimes call "a-ring"—'å', taken from Swedish. It's pronounced roughly like 'aw', or even roughly (to an American ear) like a long "o". (But the double-a is preserved in some place-names and in some traditional names. So we never see

‘Kierkegård’.) ‘D’ is never pronounced after ‘r’ in Danish, so we get: “Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.”

Basically, the surname ‘Kierkegaard’ means “churchyard.” (In the modern spelling, there is a perfectly ordinary word ‘kirkegård’—no ‘e’ immediately after the ‘i’—with exactly that meaning.) Just as in English, the word in Danish suggests “cemetery,” “graveyard.”

This seems like a pretty unlucky name to be saddled with all your life, but there’s a story behind it. An older meaning of the name is something like “church farm” or “church grounds.” (‘Gård’ is related to English “garden” or “yard.”) And in fact, that’s where the family got its name: from an old social arrangement (leftover from feudal times) whereby the family tended sheep on lands (the “farm”) belonging to the local Lutheran church up on the Jutland peninsula.

SK’s father in fact was originally a country shepherd in Jutland before he moved to the city (to Copenhagen) and made good.

In fact, the father moved to Copenhagen in 1768, at the age of 11, and lived with an uncle, a successful dry goods merchant of men’s clothing (a “haberdasher”). When he was 21, he was officially released from his feudal obligations by the local Lutheran priest up there in Jutland.

The father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, proved to be a good businessman. At the age of 32, he branched out—with the official blessing of the King of Denmark—and got into the importing business, specializing in goods from the Danish West Indies—what are now the Virgin Islands—and from India and China. He was very successful.

At the relatively late age of 37, in 1794, Michael married his business partner’s sister, a certain Kirstine Nielsdatter Røyen, who was 34 or 35 at the time.

She died childless, some two years later. In the same year, the uncle (whose house he and his wife were living in) died, and Michael Kierkegaard suddenly found himself in possession of a considerable fortune. When Michael himself died, sometime later (in 1838), Søren Kierkegaard—our man—inherited the bulk of the fortune, including the family house, and never had to work a day in his life at a real job.

Søren was the youngest of seven children. But not by Kirstine, the woman his father had married in 1794—because, remember, she died childless shortly thereafter.

Rather, the mother of all Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard’s children was a certain Ane Sørensdatter Lund. She had been a family servant and kind of “attendant” to Michael’s wife Kirstine. Well, after Kirstine’s death, Ane Lund found herself “in the family way,” and she and Michael were married in 1797. Their first of seven children was born with unseemly haste soon afterward. Michael and Ane raised a family, and she died at the age of 66 in 1834. Whatever you want to make of it, our Søren says absolutely nothing at all about her.

The family seemed to be jinxed. SK’s father Michael was apparently a morbid, obsessed man. Not without fondness for his children, but he was a severe father, with a very

demanding and harsh view of religion—not uncharacteristic for Denmark at the time, although Michael seemed to be especially taken with the severity of it.

Michael also seems to have thought he had committed some literally unforgivable sin in his youth. Not his obvious lapse with the household servant Ane (later his second wife—that wouldn't have been “in his youth”), but much earlier—before he had moved to Copenhagen as a child. (There is some uncertainty about exactly what it was. The following story did happen, but whether it was the source of Michael's melancholy is debated.)

It seems that one day, when he was very young, he was tending sheep up there on that barren, windswept church farm in Jutland, and he finally had had enough, raised his fist and cursed God. This was a serious matter in the prevailing religious views of the time, and later Michael became convinced that this unforgivable sin of the father would be visited on his entire family.

In a sense, he was right.

Of the seven children Michael had with his second wife Ane, the oldest one—a daughter—died before she was 25. A second daughter died at 33, and the third child (also a daughter) likewise died at age 33. One son died from a blow to the head in a schoolyard accident at the age of 12. And another son, who became something of a professional crank, emigrated to America and died in Trenton, N.J., at the age of 24, in 1833.

Of all seven children, the only one—besides Søren, the youngest—to survive their father's death at the age of 82 in 1838 was his older brother Peter Christian Kierkegaard, who became a Lutheran theologian and bishop and eventually died at the ripe old age of 83 in 1888 (long after Søren's death in 1855).

In addition, various other branches of the family were populated by people who were deformed or crippled in some way, who went clinically mad, who committed suicide—or in some other way lent support to the notion that the whole clan was just plain cursed!

In fact, SK was for a long time convinced that he would never survive his father, and was genuinely quite surprised to wake up one morning in 1838 to discover that the old man had died and he, Søren, was still alive!

OK, let's turn the clock back a bit. In 1821, at the age of 7, SK was enrolled at the primly-named “School of Civic Virtue” in Copenhagen, a very strict school, a kind of combination of grade-school and our high school. He proved a precocious student, bright but rather undisciplined and lazy.

In 1830 (at age 17), he enrolled at the University of Copenhagen, where his chosen field was theology. Although he did quite well in the work he actually did, he was something of a “perennial student.” He spent a total of ten years at the University (although not just at what we would call the “undergraduate” level), apparently deciding not to let his “classes interfere with his education,” and living as a free-spirited “man about town.”

Eventually, he came to find his father's influence stifling, moved out of the house, and began to question the significance (note: never the truth) of his own religious convictions.

In 1837, he met the one love of his life, Regine Olsen. He was 24, she was 14—which at that time was no particular cause for scandal.

His father died the following year, in 1838, after he and Søren had had a kind of reconciliation. The death of his father seems to have rejuvenated Søren. He published his first real book the following month, and went on to finish, publish and defend his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. In the meantime, he had proposed to Regine Olsen in 1840 (she was now 17), and she accepted.

The following year, in 1841, Kierkegaard for some reason decided that this marriage just wasn't going to work. He returned the ring, and eventually the engagement was formally broken. SK never really got over Regine, who keeps popping up thinly disguised in a lot of his writings, particularly the early ones.

A little later, in 1843, he began the major part of what he called his “authorship.” We'll talk about that next time.

Between then and 1851, he published an astonishing array of works.

Then, in 1851, he went into a kind of hibernation. He published nothing, until in 1854 he started what amounted to a kind of “pamphleteering war” against the established Lutheran Church in Denmark.

In the meantime, he continued to spend his inherited family fortune, and eventually—just after he had withdrawn the last sum of money from the account—he collapsed on the street outside, was taken to the hospital, and died there about a month later, probably of some kind of lung infection.

## What to expect

SK is a religious author. Even though you can't always tell on the surface, in fact pretty much everything he ever wrote has a religious purpose to it.

If you're squeamish about this, you'll just have to get used to it—or you should get out now, because there's going to be no getting away from it.

SK has a very particular notion of what religion is and what it ought to be. And he doesn't mince words trying to be “broad minded” and “non-judgmental.”

Furthermore, his views on religion are almost guaranteed not to be your own. Whether you think of yourself as on the whole a religious person or not, I can confidently assure you: it isn't what SK is talking about.

But along the way, SK also has some very intriguing and insightful things to say about human psychology and philosophy of mind, about “human nature,” about the metaphysics of the self, about time, about the arts, about ethics in general, and so on.

It would be a violent distortion to suppose we can focus on those more purely philosophical aspects of SK's work and ignore the religious component. Not only would

you miss what he himself took to be most important, you would also not even understand the aspects you do focus on.

So, we're just going to have to take SK as he comes.

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## Writings

[At this point, I displayed the collected works, including *Journals & Papers*, all nicely lined up on a table. It makes for an impressive display!]

The display is all the more impressive once you realize that, with a few exceptions, he wrote all this in a span of nine years (1843–51). (So, there are no excuses for not getting your term papers in on time!) There's a page on SK's writings on our Oncourse site.

There are several ways to classify and divide up this mass of material.

### ***“Kierkegaard’s Writings” (KW) and the “Journals and Papers” (JP)***

To some extent, this division is an artificial one and merely reflects the publication facts about these writings.

In English, the “standard” modern translation of SK’s works is a series edited by Howard and Edna Hong. (The name is not Chinese. Howard was born in North Dakota, and grew up in Minnesota. His wife’s maiden name was Edna Hatlestad, and she was born and raised in Wisconsin.) The series is translated either by the two of them working as a team or by various other people they commissioned to do certain volumes. These translations are not necessarily the “best.” In fact, there is some controversy about that. (I put on E-Reserves an article called “The Dangers of Clarity” by Marilyn Piety that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1997, talking about the merits and problems of the various available English translations.)

For this course, the translation of *The Concept of Anxiety* (by Reidar Thomte, who taught at St. Olaf College in Minnesota) is part of this “Hong and Hong” series. The various translations in the Bretall volume are all earlier ones.

Our translations of *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death* are by Alastair Hannay. Hannay’s translations are universally agreed to read better than any of the others, and in my judgment are more philosophically accurate as well. Howard Hong got his degree in English, and Edna Hong was a poet. Neither one was especially trained in philosophy, although Howard taught in the Philosophy Department at St. Olaf College for many years. (Again, you can look at that “Dangers of Clarity” article if you want more details about the various Kierkegaard-translations.)

But whatever their literary merits or philosophical accuracy, the “Hong and Hong” series has become the *de facto* standard. That series is published in two parts: **(a)** *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, in 25 volumes (plus an *Index* volume), published by Princeton University Press;

and **(b)** and *Journals and Papers*, in six volumes (plus a slim index volume), published by Indiana University Press. (The latter is available in its entirety on-line through an IU subscription; see our Oncourse site.)

This division corresponds roughly (but only roughly) to a division in the original Danish language editions. And it is based on the fact that SK wrote a lot of stuff he never published. His published works were of course gathered together and published in a kind of *Collected Works* edition shortly after his death.

But there was a lot of other stuff too, some of which was eventually edited and published in the original Danish under the heading *Papirer* (= *Papers*). (But there is stuff left that is still unpublished!) Among these materials is a quite extensive set of *Journals*—a kind of diary SK kept virtually all his adult life. The first entry was made on April 15, 1834 when he was not yet quite 21; the last one was made on September 25, 1855, less than two months before he died.

I said these *Journals* amounted to a kind of “diary,” but that’s not entirely correct. They do constitute a “diary” in the sense that they consist of jottings on various topics, often very personal, and often—although certainly not always—explicitly dated. But they are not a diary, in the sense that they were obviously intended to be read by others. He fully expected them to be published after his death, and they were. So, while the *Journals* are sometimes very personal, they are not and were not really intended to be private; they were meant for an audience.

The physical objects themselves were originally bound volumes of blank pages, just as you would buy today if you were to buy a diary for your own use. And we know that SK would sometimes write things down on random scraps of paper, whatever he had handy—we know this because we still have some of them—and then later on recopy them carefully into the bound *Journals*. So they are in no sense the unrehearsed outpourings of his innermost feelings.

The *Papirer*, including the *Journals*, are arranged and sorted in a complicated way that still confuses me, although it’s been explained to me many times. But in your readings (mostly in the footnotes), if you see a reference of the form “*Pap.*” (for “*Papirer*,” obviously), followed by a Roman numeral, sometimes with a superscript, and then some other stuff, it’s a reference to the *Papirer*. For example, the chronologically very last entry in the *Journals* is cited as: *Pap.* XI<sup>2</sup> A 439. (The “*Pap.*” is often left out if it’s clear that you’re referring to the *Papirer* to begin with.) In the English *JP*, lots of these papers are arranged topically, totally out of chronological order, and totally out of the order they actually have in SK’s own volumes.

But, in addition to the *Journals*, there are also other things included in the *Papirer*. For example, they include also **(a)** a number of rough drafts and preliminary versions of things he at some point actually published. There are also **(b)** several fairly polished drafts, pretty much ready for publication, of works that for one reason or another SK did not publish during his lifetime. For example, there is a very important work called *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* that was written in 1848 but was only published



after his death by his brother, Peter Christian Kierkegaard. (Recall, Peter was the only one of SK's siblings to survive him, and the only one to live to old age.)

There is also another, very important work, now called *The Book on Adler*, that went through several complete but different drafts, and that SK withheld from publication, in part because he felt it would do too much damage to a certain Danish pastor named Adolph Adler, who SK thought was an utter fool, but who was nevertheless at least an honest fool, and SK thought he didn't really deserve the ridicule his book would bring upon him. Nevertheless, certain parts of the complete draft of this book were extracted and included in a work SK did publish, called *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* (1849).

So the conventional distinction in the Hong & Hong translations between the *Kierkegaard's Writings (KW)* series and the *Journals and Papers (JP)* has its origin in a corresponding distinction in the original Danish editions.

But in fact it's more complicated than that. Both in the Danish editions—particularly in later editions—and in the Hong & Hong set, some of the things SK didn't publish nevertheless come to get included among the *Collected Works*. For example, the Hong & Hong series of *KW* includes both *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* and *The Book on Adler*.

Furthermore, the Hong's *KW* series also includes a volume of *Letters and Documents*. This includes, for instance, letters between him and Regine Olsen, the great love of his life, as well as various documents not by SK himself, and not letters addressed to him, but in some other way related to him. For instance: (a) what amount to report cards from when he was a student, and (b) hospital records from when he was hospitalized right before his death; (c) a document stating his physical unfitness for military service—and therefore his exemption from what amounted to a universal draft (a kind of “national service” law that they have in many countries even today).

So it's all very complicated, and I don't pretend to be able to keep clear about all the details. Nevertheless, you need to know that there is this basic but conventional distinction between two types of works.

### ***Pseudonymous vs. “signed” works***

More intriguing is another broad division of SK's writings into what we might call his “signed” works—that is, writings that he actually put his own name to—and his pseudonymous writings.

Again, the distinction is a little messy. The *Journals*, I suppose, count as “signed” works in the sense that there was absolutely no pretense of their being written by anyone other than SK himself. And there is one work, the so called *Johannes Climacus*—an interesting little work about what happens to a man who tries to put into real practice the “Cartesian” principle that philosophy begins with doubt. This work was never published at all during SK's lifetime, and has no name at all attached to it in the draft form. So, in effect, I guess it's strictly “anonymous” and doesn't belong to either the “pseudonymous” or the “signed” works.

But—apart from these few “funny” cases—this is a fairly straightforward and extremely important distinction. For the fact is that, in addition to the works he published under his own name, SK also published many works under various pseudonyms—including all the main works we’re going to be reading this semester.

For example, *Fear and Trembling* has the author “Johannes de silentio” on the title page. *The Concept of Anxiety* has “Vigilius Haufniensis” (= “The Watchman of the Harbor” or “The Watchman of Copenhagen”—Copenhagen is in fact a port city, and in fact the name for it—‘København’—just means “Commercial Harbor” or “Buying Harbor,” or something like that). *The Sickness unto Death* is by “Anti-Climacus.”

Other works are attributed to people like “Victor Eremita” (= “Victor the Hermit” or “The Hermit Victor,” or something like that), “Constantin Constantius,” “Johannes Climacus” (who was a real person, an early Christian author of a mystical treatise called *The Ladder of Perfection*.) Also people like “H. H.” (who knows what that’s supposed to mean), “Hilarius Bookbinder,” “Nicolaus Notabene” and others.

Furthermore, some of his main works are divided into subparts that claim to be by different people yet: “John the Seducer,” “Judge William,” “Frater Taciturnus” (= “The Quiet Brother” or “The Quiet Friar”), and even “Quidam”—which is just Latin meaning “Somebody.”

Now what’s going on? Well, first of all, nobody was fooled. For the most part, the names SK chose for his pseudonyms were transparently made-up names. Even if you didn’t know who really did write these things, you wouldn’t for a moment really think someone named “Hilarius Bookbinder” had written them. They were obviously meant to be pseudonyms. And this was quite common in literary circles at the time.

Furthermore, Copenhagen was not an enormous place in SK’s day—perhaps 100,000 people, about the size of Bloomington when all the students are here. And people in “society” more or less knew who was doing what, particularly someone as visible as SK.

And finally, to publish anything in SK’s Copenhagen, you first had to submit a copy to the “censors.” These were not concerned so much with public morality or the threat of pornography as with sedition and fomenting revolution. And you had to identify yourself for real to get past the censors. (None of this “Hilarius Bookbinder” nonsense.)

So in effect everyone knew who was writing these books.

Why then did SK take the trouble to write under pseudonyms?

Well, he tells us. Or at least he addresses the problem—in *The Point of View* and a few other places. We’ll talk about this in much greater detail later on, but it has to do with what is called “indirect communication”—a technique of more or less tricking people into getting the point of what you are trying to say, although for whatever reason you can’t just come right out and say it directly.

Sometimes you’ll also see SK refer to this as his “maieutic” method (from Greek μαϊεύματα). This is a Greek term, and refers to the role of a midwife, who doesn’t bring

forth children of her own (at least not in that capacity), but who helps other women give birth.

The allusion is of course to Socrates, who although he himself didn't have and didn't claim to have any wisdom of his own, could nevertheless bring forth wisdom in others. SK thought of himself as a kind of Socrates figure to Copenhagen. (And in fact, Socrates himself explicitly uses the “midwife” analogy for his own work.)

But still, what's it mean? And why does SK insist on using this indirect, “maieutic” method in some cases—as though he just couldn't proceed any other way?

Well, that's something we'll want to talk about later on.

But for the present, note that SK was very conscious of this distinction between the pseudonymous and the “signed” works. In some cases—for instance, in an important and relatively late work (1850) entitled *Practice in Christianity*, and in *Sickness unto Death*, which we'll be reading—SK adopted the fiction that the book is really by someone else but just edited by himself, Søren Kierkegaard.

So things get really subtle.

In any event, SK throughout the first half or so of his literary career adopted a curious practice: Every time he published a pseudonymous work, he would also publish a “signed” work, and *vice versa*—sometimes on the very same day and in any event very close in time to one another. (We'll see that this claim needs some qualifications.)

Often these “signed” works went under the name of *Edifying (or Upbuilding) Discourses*.

For example, in 1843—a tremendously prolific year for SK—he published the pseudonymous *Either/Or* (“by” Victor Eremita) in February, followed in May by a book called *Two Upbuilding (or Edifying) Discourses* under his own name. In October, he published two pseudonymous books on the same day: *Fear and Trembling* (by Johannes de Silentio) and *Repetition* (by Constantin Constantius). On the same day, he published *Three Upbuilding Discourses* under his own name. And—just to match the fact that in October he had published two pseudonymous works, in December he went on to publish another signed book, this time called *Four Upbuilding Discourses*.

The “upbuilding discourses” look very much like sermons. That is, they are built around a particular scriptural text, and just plain sound like sermons. SK insists they are not sermons but only “discourses”—a distinction we'll probably have occasion to talk about later on.

But there are other “signed” works as well that aren't called “discourses.” Again, the fine points get messy.

So for now all you need to be aware of is the fact that whenever you read SK, you always have be conscious of whether you are reading a signed work or a “pseudonymous” work.

At one point, SK actually warns the reader: “Don't attribute to me,” he says, “anything that doesn't have my own name on it.” In other words, the pseudonymous works don't necessarily represent SK's own point of view! They may be just presenting a viewpoint

that is not his own, but that nevertheless he wants you to think about as sympathetically as you can—so that you will come to see on your own what is wrong with it and thereby be “indirectly”/“maieutically” brought to the view that is really the one he thinks is right but that he thinks cannot be directly stated in a way that is really going to convince you.

The odd thing about this perverse method is that it actually works! When you read SK, you find yourself coming to believe things you don't want to believe, and to regard things as important that you previously were inclined to dismiss! And you wonder how exactly you got there—even though every step of the way was quite explicit and above-board and seemed compelling at the time!

Now, this raises a very interesting and puzzling problem:

If it's true—and it is—that we cannot automatically assume that what we find presented in the pseudonymous works is what SK really wants us to believe, can we turn it around and assume that what we find in his signed works is the “straight story”?

For example, in a lot of the secondary literature on SK, the practice seems to be to appeal to the *Journals* to help us disambiguate what's going on in the pseudonymous works. But can we do that?

The *Journals*, remember, even though they aren't pseudonymous, were carefully revised, gone over, and intended to be read. So, does the fact that they make no pretense of being by anyone other than Kierkegaard mean that here at last SK is “coming clean”? Or is it instead merely another layer of “indirection”? And the same goes for the *Discourses* and his other “signed” works?

In fact, is SK ever saying what he really means? It's not clear what the answer to that is, but I have my own doubts. And of course, if he doesn't ever “come clean,” then where does that leave us? Can we end up saying anything with confidence about what all this vast production of words is really doing?

In this situation, some secondary authors, perhaps overly-influenced by various recent trends in “deconstructionist,” “post-modern” thought, get really excited and start seeing SK as confirming convictions they have already come to on other grounds—namely, that we can never tell what an author is really up to, that in fact the question may not even be meaningful, and that—and here's where SK comes in—that this was in fact the whole point of SK's “indirect” method, to get us to see that there is no ultimate meaning behind the “text.”

I think this is a particularly dangerous way to read Kierkegaard, or any author for that matter. First of all, it's self-refuting. (How can the whole point be that there is no point?) But apart from that, it's always suspicious, and generally lazy, when one starts interpreting old authors in ways that end up being a ratification if not the outright glorification of presently-held views.

Nevertheless, not all critics on the “post-modern” end of the spectrum are lazy and careless, and there is a lot to be learned from them.

Still, if what SK is up to is not merely a matter of showing us that he's not up to anything at all, it's certainly fair to ask what he really is up to instead!

### ***Aesthetic vs. religious works***

Yet another way of dividing things up is to draw a distinction between SK's so called "aesthetic" works and the "religious" works.

This is a distinction SK himself draws in *The Point of View*, as we'll talk about later on. There he seems to suggest that his pseudonymous works are all what he calls "aesthetic," whereas his "signed" works are "religious"—and that the subtle plan of the whole "authorship," as he calls it, was to lead the reader to the religious point of view by way of the "aesthetic" works, which are certainly much more fun!

But—as always—we have to be careful. *The Point of View*, where this line is taken, was after all never published! Why not? Because it presented a false picture? And besides, it was written in 1848, when SK still had three more years of productive publishing ahead of him, plus a few other things even after that. He thought about publishing it, and in fact at one point thought about publishing it under a pseudonym—Johannes de silentio! But he ended up deciding against it.

Still, the distinction between the aesthetic and the religious works is a distinction you should know about, even if it isn't neatly to be identified with the distinction between the "signed" works and the "pseudonymous" works.

### ***Works in the "authorship" and the other works***

Also in *Point of View*, SK talks about his "authorship" as if it had a kind of subtle design to it from the very beginning. And yet what he says there is plainly a bit of a falsification.

First of all, he obviously means to include among the works of his "authorship" only the works he actually published. This would exclude the *Journals* and some other fairly "complete" works that nevertheless for one reason or another he never published—but also some other things. For that matter, it would exclude *Point of View* itself, since that was never published during his lifetime!

But more to the point, SK excludes from his "authorship" some works he did publish. For example, there is a well-known work called *A Literary Review*, which is a review of a novel entitled *Two Ages*. Sometimes SK's review is referred to as *Two Ages* as well, or even *The Present Age*, which is the second of the two "ages" referred to in the novel, and the most interesting part of SK's review. But whatever it's called, it's not included in what SK thinks of as his "authorship," apparently because it is merely a "review."

At the same time, SK regarded his "authorship" as beginning with *Either/Or*—an absolutely crucial and terribly interesting book, published in 1843. But before that time, he had published several other things. For instance, his dissertation in 1841, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*. In *Point of View*, SK apparently regards

this early work as out of the sequence, as not really “counting” as part of the plan—even though he does sometimes refer to it in later writings.

Again, even while he was a student at the university, SK published a book entitled *From the Papers of One Still Living*, a kind of protracted review and criticism of a novel by SK’s Danish compatriot and contemporary, Hans Christian Andersen, on the notion of what a “genius” was.

These early works are sometimes ignored when treating of SK’s writings, but it’s worth asking whether they really should be. There’s a good case to be made that, no matter what SK says in *Point of View*, a number of themes brought up in these early, “pre-authorship” writings are crucial to understanding what is going on his later works.

### **Some of the main works**

Let’s now step back and talk a little about some of SK’s works in more detail, just to let you get familiar with some of the names and ideas.

### **The Concept of Irony**

We’ve already mentioned this. It was SK’s master’s thesis—although the “master’s” degree at that time was far more than our own M.A. degree. In fact, it was recognized as the equivalent of what was called the “doctor’s” degree in the other faculties of the University.

*The Concept of Irony* had been tinkered with on and off for many years, but after his father died SK finally got serious, finished it, published it, and defended it in 1841. (Publication was part of the requirement for the degree.) The full title is *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*.

It was done for the theology faculty of the University, which may seem odd if you actually read the thing, since it has very little obviously to do with anything theological at all.

But it does offer a subtle and insightful analysis of the notion of “irony” in ancient Greek life—particularly in Socrates, whom SK regarded as having been the first “ironist” in history. But then, in a later section of the dissertation, SK goes on to discuss the notion of “irony” in more modern thought—in particular in Hegel (we’ll talk about him next week) and the German Romantics.

It’s an important work, because SK himself was a master of the “ironical” way of talking and writing, as you’ll see once we get into him. So in a sense, this work perhaps gives us a clue about how to read SK in his other works.

Yet *The Concept of Irony* is an odd work in several respects. First of all, it’s written in Danish, not Latin. The custom at the time was to write all academic works in Latin, which was after all the universal academic language of the day. But SK actually petitioned the King of Denmark for permission to write his thesis/dissertation in Danish, not in Latin. The argument SK gave was that the topic of “irony” required something

more than the rather stilted, dry academic language of the day. The permission was granted, but this wasn't an especially big deal. It was becoming increasingly common for people to write their academic treatises in the vernacular rather than in Latin, and in fact the same King had granted permission to a couple of other people to write in Danish that very same year! So SK's petition was not anything unprecedented or even especially unusual.

Note that it's not as though SK couldn't handle writing an academic treatise in Latin. On the contrary, he was quite fluent in Latin, and even had taught Latin for several years privately. Indeed, although the work itself was written in Danish, SK defended it in Latin for seven and a half hours in a public forum, on Sept. 16, 1841. So it's not as though SK was pleading inability here.

But more than that, the work simply doesn't read like an academic thesis or dissertation. It's far too polemical and sarcastic for that. And in fact, everyone on the examining committee for SK's oral defense of the dissertation complained about the style of the work and suggested he tone it down and stick to the more usual style. (He didn't.)

One of the audience at the public oral defense (in Latin) of this thesis described the occasion as SK's playing "toss in a blanket" with his examining committee. Whatever exactly this is supposed to mean, it's clear that SK was arguing circles around his committee members, and decidedly had the upper hand.

Some of the other works we need to mention at least:

### **Either/Or**

*Either/Or* (1843). The first work in the so called "authorship" as recognized in *Point of View*. The work pretends to be two sets of papers found by the author, "Victor Eremita," in an old desk he had bought. The first set of papers was by an "aesthete," with a particular view on life. The second set is a set of three letters by one "Judge William," addressed to the author of the first half. The third letter includes what purports to be a sermon Judge William had just received the text of, by someone else.

The point of the work is that it presents two entirely different views on how to live life.

In February, we will be reading some passages from *Either/Or*. See the *Syllabus* for details.

### **Fear and Trembling**

Also in 1843, we get probably SK's best known and most electrifying work, *Fear and Trembling*. This is a profound and disturbing meditation on the Biblical story of Abraham's "sacrifice" of Isaac, in Gen. 22. It's the first work we'll be reading in its entirety.

## Philosophical Fragments (or Philosophical “Crumbs”)

Marilyn Piety, in her review of *Fragments* (“The Dangers of Clarity,” see the handout of bibliography), argues that the title should be translated as “Philosophical Crumbs,” in order to preserve an allusion to a Scriptural passage that any native Dane would immediately catch. I’m not convinced. Besides, “Philosophical Crumbs” just sounds silly, and suggests that the book is supposed to be “crummy,” which it definitely isn’t. You’ll occasionally see some secondary authors who adopt Piety’s suggestion, but the title *Philosophical Fragments* is too entrenched to be displaced now, and that’s what I’ll call it.

This is an exceptionally interesting work, published in 1844 under the pseudonym “Johannes Climacus,” although the title page says it was “edited” by Søren Kierkegaard.

*Fragments* is in effect SK’s response to the Socratic/Platonic theory of “recollection” that we find, for instance, in the *Meno*. But it’s not a purely philosophical work by any means; it’s religious through and through.

This is the earliest of what are sometimes called SK’s “algebraic” works—a description taken from his own discussion of them. It means a work that is fairly short, concise and theoretical. From the point of view of reading SK philosophically, the “algebraic” works are perhaps the most important and rewarding ones. In addition to *Fragments*, the “algebraic” works include *The Concept of Anxiety* (also 1844) and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849). We won’t be reading much from *Fragments*, although some passages are in Bretall, but we’ll be reading all of the other two. They are some of SK’s most exciting and profound works.

## Concluding Unscientific Postscript

This is a major work that we will be reading parts of, but by no means the whole thing—it’s over 600 pages long in the Hong & Hong translation. It was published in 1846, and was in some sense intended to be the end of SK’s “authorship.”

SK was morbidly half-convinced he would never live to be 34 (because Jesus died at 33). And in 1846, when *Postscript* was published, he was 33.

Well, *Postscript* wasn’t the end of the authorship. He went on to write a lot more. But it’s the last pseudonymous work before he wrote—but didn’t publish—*Point of View*.)

The point of the title is that this was supposed to be a minor “postscript” to the *Philosophical Fragments*. In fact, of course, it’s enormously longer than *Fragments*, and one of SK’s most important works. Like *Fragments*, its pseudonymous author is Johannes Climacus, although it is “edited” by Søren Kierkegaard.

## Others

I should also mention a few other works. In 1847, SK published two series of “deliberations” collectively called *Works of Love*. This was published under his own



name—so it's one of the “signed” works. Recently, there has been a lot of secondary literature on this work. It's one of SK's truly great writings!

In 1850, there is an important work called *Practice in Christianity* (formerly translated as *Training in Christianity*), by the pseudonymous author “Anti-Climacus,” who was likewise the author of *The Sickness unto Death* in 1849. (Both were “edited” by Kierkegaard.)

And finally, let me mention a series of “newspaper” articles (not “news reporting,” but more like extended “letters to the editor”), together with a series of pamphlets SK published under the title *The Moment*, right at the end of his life (1854–55). These were polemical pieces, not to say vitriolic, and amounted to a sustained attack on the established Lutheran Church of Denmark, which SK thought had betrayed true Christianity. This last flurry of writings are sometimes collectively called *The Attack upon Christendom*. (There is no actual work by SK with that title.)

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## Background on Hegel

Fair warning: I am no expert on Hegel, to say the least. And so some of what I'll be saying in this section is going to be rather sketchy and “schematic.” But I'll just have to do the best I can.

Why should we be talking about Hegel at all in a course on SK? There are several reasons:

- A. If you've looked at the MacIntyre article from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which I asked you to read, you'll know that SK strongly reacts against Hegel. So one basic reason for knowing something about Hegel in a course on SK is simply “know the enemy.” But in fact the situation is much more complex than that.
- B. For second, despite his reaction against Hegel, SK was himself at one time a Hegelian of sorts, who later came to regard his adoption of Hegelianism as a mistake.

Hegelianism was all the rage in Denmark when SK was at the University, not the pure Hegelianism of the “master” himself, but a kind of “Danish” Hegelianism that was in the air, largely as a result of the influence of J. L. Heiberg, a kind of arbiter of Danish intellectual and cultural thought in the early nineteenth century.

Perhaps the high-water mark of Kierkegaard's Hegelianism was his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*. Later on, he wrote,

Influenced as I was by Hegel and whatever was modern, without the maturity really to comprehend greatness, I could not resist pointing out

somewhere in my dissertation that it was a defect on the part of Socrates to disregard the whole and only consider numerically the individuals.

What a Hegelian fool I was! It was precisely this that powerfully demonstrates what a great ethicist Socrates was. (*Concept of Irony*, xiv.)

- C. Third, although SK comes to reject Hegel vehemently, there is much of Hegel that remains active in SK's writings, perhaps most obviously in his description of the ethical life in *Either/Or* and in *Stages on Life's Way*.
- D. Fourth, even where he is disagreeing with Hegel, Hegel often sets the context for much of what is distinctively Kierkegaardian.

Here are seven questions Hegel in effect asks and that are answered (often in a quite different way) in SK:

1. **Philosophy/Religion:** What is the relation between philosophy and religion in general? For Hegel, religion is basically a "feeling" about "spirit," while philosophy rationally comprehends what religion only felt. So, for Hegel, there is no real disagreement between faith and reason; it's just that reason and philosophy "go further" than faith. For SK, no. On the contrary, for SK religion shows the limits of philosophy.
2. **Understanding/Knowledge:** (This is closely related to the preceding question.) How are we to conceive of faith and its relation to understanding and knowledge? For Hegel, faith does not go beyond knowledge. As we've just said, it's the other way around. For SK, it does go beyond knowledge.
3. **Self/God (Absolute):** What possible relations are there between the self and God (or the Hegelian "Absolute")? For Hegel, we can in effect adopt the viewpoint of God, a kind of absolute viewpoint. Not for SK; for him, God is wholly other.
4. **Ethics:** Does living an ethical life constitute the highest form of human existence? For Hegel, yes. For SK, no.
5. **Thought/Being:** What is the relation between thought and "being"? For Hegel, they are in the end pretty much the same. "The real is the rational and the rational is the real" (a famous line from Hegel, although it's often taken to mean all sorts of things Hegel never intended.) For SK, no.
6. **System of Existence:** Is a "system" of existence possible? For Hegel, yes. For SK, no—at least not for us.
7. **Presuppositionless:** Can philosophy have a presuppositionless beginning? For Hegel, yes. For SK, no.

As we will see later on, questions 1–4 figure prominently in *Fear and Trembling*, and the others appear throughout SK’s writings too.

E. The fifth point is that SK often uses Hegelian terminology without really defining it in any way that helps. Being clear about what Hegel meant by his terminology does not, of course, necessarily mean you can just assume SK uses the terminology in the same way, but it’s a good place to start. And getting clear on what differences there may be is a good way to start to understand SK on his own terms. Here are some examples of Kierkegaardian terms “borrowed” from Hegel (in no particular order):

1. The finite and the infinite
2. Dialectic
3. The Absolute
4. The System
5. Social Morality (*Sittlichkeit*)
6. Spirit
7. Immediacy
8. The aesthetic
9. The universal.

See also the handout on “buzzwords.”

## Hegel

Gottfried Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). He died when SK was 18.

Hegel represents the culmination of (and to some extent already the transition *beyond*) the so called Romantic tradition in philosophy, which was largely a reaction to Kant, and in particular to Kant’s views about the limits of what we can know. This Romantic tradition includes, in addition to Hegel, people like Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. (SK actually attended some lectures by Schelling in Berlin, shortly after his break-up with Regine Olsen.)

What kinds of limits did Kant think there were on what we can know? Well, consider the questions of the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, human free will. Kant thought we cannot know these things in what he calls “speculative metaphysics”; they are rather “transcendental ideas.” We cannot know them, but reason impels us to think them anyway—and in fact to accept them, if we’re serious human beings.

This is part of Kant’s attack on speculative (or theoretical) metaphysics.

Kant’s project in part was to define the scope of what we can know theoretically.

Knowledge for Kant has two components: an intellectual component, what he calls “understanding,” and a sensory component, what he calls “intuition” or “sensibility.”

Understanding	Intuition or “sensitivity”
active	passive
<i>a priori</i> concepts (“categories”)	space and time

For Kant, all our experience, and therefore all possible knowledge of that experience, must conform to space and time, and to the concepts of the understanding—the categories.

Intuitions are mere appearances; they do not give us any knowledge whatsoever of the “things in themselves.” Neither does understanding, since that comes from our own activity.

God knows the “things in themselves,” but we don’t. We cannot theoretically know them, but we can “know” them practically—or at least deal with them practically, since “know” is probably not the right term to use here (even though Kant sometimes does use it). Otherwise, for Kant, ethics simply makes no sense.

There are two related aspects of this picture that upset the Romantics, including Hegel.

1. We can’t apprehend ultimate reality (“things in themselves”).
2. We can’t have theoretical (philosophical or metaphysical) knowledge of the Absolute (in effect, of God).

One of the reasons they were so upset about these consequences of Kantian philosophy was that such consequences seemed to lead to complete skepticism and moral anarchy. But the whole philosophy of the Enlightenment, including Kant, was to throw off mere belief and superstition and to follow the light of reason precisely in order to avoid skepticism and moral anarchy—to uphold the stability of an orderly society, not to undermine it!

Schelling came up with a “solution” to answer this threat. The Romantics in general stick as much as they can to Kant, treat him with respect, but they don’t like these two points. Schelling’s answer is what he calls “intellectual intuition.”

For Schelling, unlike Kant, yes you can intuit God’s existence. Kant was right that we can’t do it through the intuitions that come in terms of space and time (sensation), but we can do it through this other faculty of the mind called “intellectual intuition.” As a result, we can have knowledge of the Absolute, we can apprehend ultimate reality. In effect, we can know ultimate reality just the way Kant had said God knows it.

Hegel inherits this much from Schelling. That is, he agrees with Schelling’s result, that we can know these things. But he came to reject Schelling’s odd notion of “intellectual intuition.”

The problem of course was how to give this “intellectual intuition” a good basis. What happens when people claim to have conflicting “intellectual intuitions”?

As I said, Hegel eventually gave up Schelling’s notion of “intellectual intuition.” Instead, what he put in its place is this: He tried to come up with a conceptual system that would give us knowledge of ultimate reality (“things in themselves”) and of the Absolute (God)—exactly what Kant had said we couldn’t do.

Hegel’s substitute for “intellectual intuition” involved his notion of dialectic.

The dialectic is what is going to allow us to know ultimate reality, including God.

There are lots of ways of describing the Hegelian “dialectic,” but all (1) involve starting with some putatively “presuppositionless” starting point, (2) analyzing it, letting it work itself out, with the result that (3) it turns out that this “presuppositionless” starting point isn’t really as “presuppositionless” as it was initially described. This involves a continual process of self-undermining, which ultimately leads (here’s the mysterious part) to “absolute knowledge”—i. e., God’s knowledge, or knowledge of the Absolute.

In Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, this process is described in terms of “thesis/antithesis/synthesis.” An initial thesis generates its opposite, its “antithesis,” and their conflict or tension inevitably produces a kind of compromise or “synthesis” of the two. But the “synthesis” becomes a new thesis, which generates a new antithesis, and so on.

#### A Quick Example:

In Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the first step, the putatively “presuppositionless” beginning—**THE THESIS**—is what Hegel calls “sense certainty.” This is the view that the truest and most adequate way of grasping things is just to sense them, without doing anything else—without actively thinking about them. This is pure “immediacy,” independent of any prior assumptions or presuppositions. Just “open your eyes.”

But (the *Phenomenology of Spirit* goes on), once we think about this notion of sense certainty, we realize it presupposes a distinction between the one doing the sensing and the object sensed. Even just saying “This is here, now” presupposes the taking of a point of view or perspective (from the “here” and “now”), which is an active role on our part.

This realization—**THE ANTITHESIS**—undermines the original notion that “sense certainty” is as “presuppositionless” as we thought. As a result, we must adopt some other candidate for what the truest and most adequate way of apprehending things is. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* itself, this leads to Hegel’s next step, what he calls the doctrine of perception. (**THE SYNTHESIS.**)

In the end, this cyclic process leads to a final goal: the standpoint of “absolute consciousness.” Here we get what Hegel calls “rational knowledge of the Absolute.”

Hegel doesn’t seem ever to use the term ‘metaphysics’. But he does talk about “rational knowledge of the Absolute.”

What is the Absolute? For Kant, it meant the “unconditioned,” there are no “conditions” on it. Roughly speaking, the Absolute is “uncaused,” “necessary,” “independent” or “presuppositionless,” as we just put it. Or, as both Schelling and Hegel would sometimes put it, that which doesn’t depend on anything else in order to exist or in order to be conceived. (If you’re familiar with Spinoza, you might recognize this pairing of “existing” and “being conceived” as sounding a lot like Spinoza’s notion of substance. The Romantics were in general very taken with Spinoza.)

For Schelling and Hegel, only one thing can satisfy this description: God, or the universe as a whole. (Again, this sounds like Spinoza’s “God or Nature.”)

This is a big move. Notice what it does: It brings God “home,” down into this world. God in effect just is the whole of this world. God is not in some metaphysical “beyond” for Schelling and Hegel. So, in an odd sense, Kant was perfectly right in saying we cannot theoretically know God—if by God we do mean something “beyond” like that (which Kant certainly did mean). There isn’t any such thing.

Both Schelling and Hegel adopt a kind of biological model for this dialectical process, a model that is sometimes called “vitalism.” This is to be contrasted with the more mechanical picture of the world we find in Newton or Hume (“billiard balls” bouncing into one another). For Schelling and Hegel, the process is better thought of along the lines of the development of an organism. Not just a process of coming to know the Absolute; the Absolute itself develops!

This is not an atheism, but rather a kind of pantheism. God ends up being identical with the whole of nature, conceived along “vitalist” lines.

This quasi-biological process goes on, getting more and more “organized” and “developed.” Spirit—a “buzzword”—is the highest level of this organizational structure.

This means that for Hegel, God, the whole of reality, is a process, not a static thing. And this in turn means God is temporal, in time; God develops over time. As Hegel says, “The divine nature is the same as the human.” That is, we ourselves are divine, and in the course of the dialectic we gradually come to realize this.

This ultimate truth about Spirit is at first comprehended only in “feeling”—in religion and faith. Later on, philosophy comes to comprehend it rationally—in Hegel’s own day.

Individuals, particulars or parts of the whole universe are described as “finite,” whereas the universe as a whole is described as “infinite.” (See the handout on “Buzzwords.”) Individual consciousness partakes in but also constitutes (in the sense of being an ingredient of) Spirit—the highest level of organizational structure of the universe.

The process of the dialectic takes place in world history. The stage at which history finds itself at any given time sets a limit on what can be comprehended at that time. In effect, Hegel is trying to get away from the view of philosophy as “ahistorical” or a matter of “eternal” viewpoints. (It’s curious but true that Hegel is the very first person to write a real “history of philosophy”—as distinct from a mere “lives of the philosophers” or a survey of how your own predecessors were wrong.)

Hegel seems to think history had got far enough in his own day that we could at least get a glimpse of where it will end—what the goal of it really was all along.

Earlier we described this goal as “rational knowledge of the Absolute.” But Hegel also describes it in other terms, as the realization of human freedom. And this leads us to his ethical theory. (**This is a transition now!**)

When Hegel speaks of human freedom, he’s not thinking so much in terms of individuals and of the question of “free will.” He’s mainly thinking of human freedom in terms of nation states.

The “archenemy” of Hegel’s conception of freedom is the so called “liberal” conception of freedom, and the “liberal” conception of the state.

This is not “liberalism” as opposed to “conservatism.” The “liberal” conception of freedom makes it a matter of being able to do whatever you choose to do. The only constraint is that you are not allowed to get in anyone else’s way. So too the “liberal” conception of the state; it’s a matter of competing individual interests, which are to be pursued subject only to the constraint that we don’t get in one another’s way and prevent others from pursuing their individual interests too.

Hegel thinks this conception of freedom leads, if you take it as the whole story, to a bankrupt view of human freedom and the state.

Instead, Hegel has what might be called a “self-actualization” picture of freedom. We must now try to figure out where this view comes from.

There are really two sources: Aristotle and Kant.

From Aristotle, Hegel takes the view that the notion of human freedom has to be based on a conception of human good, which in turn draws on a particular picture of human nature—it’s not arbitrary or “up to us.” For Aristotle, achieving that human good is in effect realizing, “fulfilling” our own essence, and we fulfill it, Aristotle thought, by seeking happiness.

Hegel accepts part of this: the notion that freedom is based on human essence. But he doesn’t think this is all a matter of seeking happiness, as Aristotle does. (So Hegel’s ethics is not a eudamonism.)

It is from Kant that Hegel gets the notion that the human good is not based on happiness. Rather, it’s based on the notion of “realizing oneself through one’s own activity.” On the other hand, Kant disagreed with Aristotle on the human good’s having to do with human essence or nature.

For example, finding a job that fits your own inclinations and talents is a realization of your self through your activity, even though it may not make you particularly happy, and may not have anything to do with your human nature. There may be a lot of unhappiness and day-to-day drudgery in that job.

So human freedom, based on the human good:

<b>Human freedom, based on the human good:</b>	is a matter of fulfilling our human nature of essence	is achieved through seeking happiness	is a matter of realizing oneself through one's own activity
<b>Aristotle</b>	Yes	Yes	?
<b>Kant</b>	No	No	Yes
<b>Hegel</b>	Yes	No	Yes

In the end, Hegel thinks this kind of “self-realization” can only take place in the context of the State. The State, like the universe as a whole, is a totality, an organism. And just as a lung, for instance, doesn’t “realize itself,” doesn’t “fulfill its essence” by just doing whatever it wants to, provided only that it doesn’t interfere with other organs, so too with human beings. (So Hegel’s ethics is an anti-liberalism.) Just as the lung “fulfills its essence” only in the context of the larger organic structure of which it is a part, so too with human beings.

Ethics, therefore, is for Hegel a kind of social morality (*Sittlichkeit*) or conventional morality.

(This doesn’t just mean doing what everyone else does, any more than it does for the lung. It involves critical reflection on one’s culture. Still, it is “context-dependent.” But now we’re getting well beyond my knowledge of Hegel, and we’ve done enough for present purposes.)

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## The “standard” picture

OK, let’s move away from Hegel now, and back to SK.

What I want to do in this and the next few lectures is sketch for you a kind of “standard,” “capsule” overview of what SK is up to. And then one of the things we want to do throughout the rest of the course is to keep one eye on which parts of this “standard” view need to be adjusted.

### ***Reading***

For your reading, you should by now have finished Anderson’s *On Kierkegaard*. I have also asked you to read the short article on Kierkegaard by Alasdair MacIntyre in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the two articles I’ve listed from the Companion volume. Together, Anderson and MacIntyre will give you some “documentary evidence” for various aspects of the “standard” picture I’m about to present.



Also, you should now start on *Fear and Trembling*, if you've not done so already. I'm asking you to read all of it, including the very mysterious "Problem III," which I don't think anyone really understands. Also, read Hannay's "Introduction," which is pretty good—although when he gets to talking about "Problem III," it's just as mysterious as Kierkegaard himself. We'll be talking directly about *Fear and Trembling* very soon.

More immediately, there is an upcoming reading assignment on the *Syllabus*, from the Bretall volume. It's a passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and one of the most important passages in Kierkegaard.

But for now, let me give you some background on "The Standard Picture."

## **Sources**

When I first started preparing more advanced lectures on Kierkegaard for the first version of this class, back in 2000, I worried for a while about just how "standard" this so called "standard" picture is.

To tell the truth, what the "standard" picture really is is the story I've been telling my P135 classes for the last thirty-some years.

Now I never claimed to be an expert on Kierkegaard in those courses (and don't in this course either), but he was just one of the people we were going to talk about in them. And as these things go, when you have to teach material you're not an authority on, you tend to shape it, develop it the way you think it would go, answer questions the way you think it goes—and then, later on, remember those answers and begin thinking of them as part of the original view. And of course, all that happened in my teaching of Kierkegaard.

But then, when I started reading Kierkegaard more seriously, I gradually began to realize that things were not altogether as I had thought. This "picture" I had been presenting to my classes (and still do) wasn't quite right.

And that's, I say, why I worried a bit when I began to put together the first version of this course for the Fall of 2000. In short, is there anything really "standard" about what I was calling the "standard" picture—or is it just another name for Spade's uninformed and highly idiosyncratic "take" on Kierkegaard, one that I had come up with gradually over the years before I knew any better and that, far from being "standard," you'll probably only find on the Bloomington campus of IU?

Well, I went back and did some poking around, and I'm happy to report that:

No. What I'm calling the "standard" interpretation is not just the product of my ignorance and an overactive imagination. It really is a fairly "standard" view.

You won't find it all nicely set out in any one author, and the details will vary depending on who you read. But, by and large, if you read brief summaries of Kierkegaard, they'll probably look a lot like the view I'm going to sketch for you.

For example:

1. Donald D. Palmer, *Kierkegaard for Beginners*, part of “A ‘Writers and Readers’ Beginning Documentary Comic Book, Philosophy Series.” You may have seen other volumes in this series. They have one *Freud for Beginners*, *Marx for Beginners*, etc. There’s one *Sartre for Beginners*, which I think is just silly. But, somewhat to my surprise, the Kierkegaard volume is actually rather good. It doesn’t go very deep, but it does have a lot of useful information in it. By and large, Palmer presents what I’m calling the “standard” picture of Kierkegaard.
2. The article on Kierkegaard by Alaisdair MacIntyre in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which I mentioned earlier.
3. Susan Leigh Anderson’s book *On Kierkegaard*.

There are other places that give the “standard picture” too, and I’ll cite some of them as we go along. Each of these sources has its own idiosyncrasies, and each one has a certain “spin” that’s not to be found in the others. But never mind. For now, I just want to paint in very broad strokes.

### **(1) Reaction to Hegel**

Now what is the “standard” picture? What are its features?

Well, surely the most uncontroversial part of it is that SK represents a strong reaction to Hegel.

So, in effect, take everything I was talking about in our discussion of Hegel, and put a great big ‘NOT’ in front of it.

Putting it that strongly is obviously a caricature, but there’s a lot of truth in it anyway.

### **(2) Emphasis on the individual**

In what ways did SK react to Hegel?

One of the big ways was in shifting the whole emphasis to the individual.

Think back to our discussion of Hegel. Did you notice how much emphasis there was in all of that on large scale generalities?

We had all this talk about the Absolute, which turned out to be—well, everything! The whole universe.

We talked about the goal of the entire course of World History, which was: to realize human freedom. Everything was in very broad strokes.

Even human freedom itself was not thought of as primarily a matter of individual human freedom. Morality, for instance, is not a matter of the individual’s freedoms and responsibilities. The individual is situated within a whole series of larger and larger totalities—the family at the most foundational level, then civil society, and ultimately the nation as a whole.

SK rejects all that. And he rejects it not so much because it's wrong (although he thinks a lot of it is wrong), as because it misses the point.

You don't really understand what's going on—you don't really understand what you want to understand—if you insist on dissolving everything into ever more abstract generalities.

As a result, therefore, SK rejects the attempt to construct vast, all-inclusive systems of philosophy. Not just the Hegelian attempt, which is really the only one he had any familiarity with, but ultimately any such attempt. It won't work, and it misses the point even if it does work.

Let me read you a passage that illustrates part of what's going on here. It's not from SK, but from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, the chapter on "Existential Psychoanalysis" (pp. 713–15). Although it's Sartre and not Kierkegaard, I think SK would enthusiastically agree with it.

Sartre is talking about "psychological biographies" of a certain kind that used to be more fashionable than I suppose it is nowadays. And to make his point, he picks as a specimen, a biography of the French author Gustave Flaubert by someone named Paul Bourget. Here's what Sartre says:

A critic, for example [he's thinking of Bourget], wishing to explain the "psychology" of Flaubert, will write that he "appeared in his early youth to know as his normal state, a continual exaltation resulting from the twofold feeling of his grandiose ambition and his invincible power ... The effervescence of his young blood was *then* turned into literary passion as happens about the eighteenth year in precocious souls who find in the energy of style or the intensities of fiction some way of escaping from the need of violent action or of intense feeling, which torments them."

In this passage there is an effort to reduce the complex personality of an adolescent to a few basic desires, as the chemist reduces compound bodies to merely a combination of simple bodies. The primitive givens will be grandiose ambition, the need of violent action and of intense feeling; these elements, when they enter into combination, produce a permanent exaltation. Then—as Bourget remarks in a few words which we have not quoted—this exaltation, nourished by numerous well-chosen readings, is going to seek to delude itself by self-expression in fictions which will appease it symbolically and channel it. There in outline is the genesis of a literary "temperament."

Now in the first place such a psychological *analysis* proceeds from the postulate that an individual fact is produced by the intersection of abstract, universal laws. The fact to be explained—which is here the literary disposition of the young Flaubert—is resolved into a combination of *typical*, abstract desires such as we meet in "the average adolescent." What is concrete here is only their combination; in themselves they are

only possible patterns. The abstract then is by hypothesis prior to the concrete, and the concrete is only an organization of abstract qualities; the individual is only the intersection of universal schemata. But ... we see clearly in the example chosen, that it simply fails to explain what makes the individuality of the project under consideration [= Flaubert's life]. The fact that "the need to feel intensely," a universal pattern, is disguised and channeled into becoming the need to write—this is not the *explanation* of the "calling" of Flaubert; on the contrary, it is what must be explained.

.....

At each stage in the description just quoted, we meet with a hiatus. Why did ambition and the feeling of his power produce in Flaubert *exaltation* rather than tranquil waiting or gloomy impatience? Why did this exaltation express itself specifically in the need to act violently and feel intensely? ... And why does this need instead of seeking to appease itself in acts of violence, by amorous adventures, or in debauch, choose precisely to satisfy itself symbolically? And why does Flaubert turn to writing rather than to painting or music for this symbolic satisfaction; he could just as well not resort to the artistic field at all (there is also mysticism, for example). "I could have been a great actor," wrote Flaubert somewhere. Why did he not try to be one? In a word, we have understood nothing; we have seen a succession of accidental happenings, of desires springing forth fully armed, one from the other, with no possibility for us to grasp their genesis. The *transitions*, the becomings, the transformations, have been carefully veiled from us, and we have been limited to putting order into the succession by invoking empirically established but literally unintelligible sequences ...

I've quoted this passage at some length because I think Sartre's point is utterly convincing, completely irrefutable—and obviously right!

Now we have to be careful: Sartre is not Kierkegaard, and certainly Bourget is not Hegel. But there is a lot of carry-over. The emphasis in Hegel, as in Bourget's biography, is entirely on the general, the universal, the large-scale. In Kierkegaard, as in Sartre, the emphasis is shifted onto the individual above all.

Even if you agree with all the general, universal, large-scale themes the other guy is addressing, they aren't going to be enough to do the trick if what you're interested in dealing with is the individual. As Sartre says, all the "*transitions*, the becomings, the transformations," are veiled from us.

### **(3) A "practical urgency" to Kierkegaard**

But there's more. In the passage from Sartre, you get the sense that what he's mainly interested in is understanding an individual such as Flaubert. It's an intellectual, cognitive matter.

For SK, that's not the main worry. It's much more a practical matter for him, and moreover a pretty urgent practical matter. But it's still a matter of individual concerns.

For example, here's a famous passage from SK's *Journals* (August 1, 1835—one of the very earliest journal entries) [Bretall, p. 5]:

... the thing is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find *the idea* [see the handout on “buzzwords”] *for which I can live and die*. What would be the use of discovering so-called objective truth, of working through all the systems [a Hegelian term] of philosophy and of being able, if required, to review them all and show up the inconsistencies with each one [exactly what Hegel claimed to have done in his “dialectic”]; what good would it do me to be able to develop a theory of the state and combine all the details into a single whole [again, as Hegel had claimed to do], and so construct a world in which I did not live, but only held up to the view of others [and for that matter, to my own view]; what good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity [as Hegel had tried to “explain” Christian dogmas “rationally”] if it had no deeper significance for me and my life ...

In short, system-building is useless when it comes to the really important questions: What does it mean for me? How is it going to affect the way I live my life?

That's what SK is interested in.

#### **(4) Kierkegaard's “dialectic”**

Recall Hegel's “dialectic,” the three-cylinder engine that drives the whole of World History toward reaching its goal—Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis (which becomes a new Thesis). And round and round we go in this spiral fashion.

Well, SK has something we might call a “dialectic” too. At least that's what *I* have called it in other classes, although SK himself uses the term “dialectic” much more broadly. And like Hegel's dialectic, Kierkegaard's too has three parts.

Nevertheless, apart from its triadic structure, there's very little else in common between Hegel's dialectic and Kierkegaard's “answer” to it.

Kierkegaard's “dialectic” is not about three stages of an inevitable, one way progression through a given sequence, but rather three different ways of living—three different “lifestyles.” Only we're not talking about “lifestyles” in any trivial, small-scale sense. We're not talking about whether you live in the urban metropolis/suburbia/rustic countryside, for instance, or whether you're straight or gay, of whether you live a simple, frugal lifestyle or a lavish, frantic one.

No, we're talking about three different ways of living—lifestyles—in a sense that goes much deeper than that, as we'll see.

What are these three “lifestyles” in Kierkegaard’s so called “dialectic”? They are generally called:

- The “aesthetic” [The Hongs spell it “esthetic”]
- The “ethical”
- The “religious” [= the life of faith]

Now let’s pause. As far as I’ve been able to determine, SK himself never uses the term ‘dialectic’ to refer to this threefold distinction. He does use the term ‘dialectic’ frequently, but not for this. He will even say there is a dialectical relation among these three ways of life. But that’s not the same as saying that SK’s notion of dialectic has to do with these three ways of life—as it is true to say that Hegel’s dialectic has to do with the tripartite pattern we call Thesis/Antithesis/Synthesis.

Furthermore, as far as I’ve been able to determine, even the convention of calling these three lifestyles SK’s “dialectic” does not seem to be part the “standard picture”—at least not of other people’s “standard picture.” That much does seem to be something I just invented on my own.

But there is pretty general agreement in the “standard picture” that SK does recognize three basic ways to live. For example.

(1) James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (an older but still useful book, first published in 1953), p. 42:

That there are three stages on life’s way [= the title of one of SK’s works]—the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious—is Kierkegaard’s most famous doctrine, the one contribution with which he is usually credited by general histories of philosophy.

(2) Again, Donald Palmer’s *Kierkegaard for Beginners* says (pp. 76–77):

Kierkegaard divides humanity into three possible modes of existence: “the aesthetical,” “the ethical,” and “the religious.” Each of these modes of existence is more than just a “stage on life’s way,” as he sometimes calls them [there’s that phrase again], rather they are whole human worlds, complete with their own ideals, motivations, and forms of behavior. Each one is a complete world view. Any of these frames of reference can be chosen voluntarily by the individual ...

That quotation is a very full statement of what I take to be the “standard view” on this point. We’ll talk more about the various parts of it later on.

(3) In Alasdair MacIntyre’s article in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, he has a section entitled “The aesthetic and the ethical”—describing what he calls “two ways of life.” And

the next section is entitled “Christianity,” which is obviously going to be the “religious” way of life.

(4) John Douglas Mullen, *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy: Self-Deception and Cowardice in the Present Age* (see the handout on “bibliography”—a very nice little book) describes these three lifestyles in Chaps. 6–8.

(5) And finally, Susan Leigh Anderson’s *On Kierkegaard* presents the same tri-partite picture.

### **What are the three lifestyles?**

OK, let’s look now at these three lifestyles (“stages,” “spheres of existence,” “existence-spheres”), and see if we can figure out what they are and how they are related.

I want to organize this in a kind of schematic and tabular fashion, for easy reference. (Distribute handout.)

<b>“Stage” or “Lifestyle”</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Character</b>	<b>Book</b>	<b>Problem</b>
<b>Aesthetic</b>	What do I <u>want</u> to do today?	Pleasure	Don Giovanni, Johannes the Seducer	<i>Either</i>	Despair
<b>Ethical</b>	What <u>should</u> I do today?	Duty or obligation	Socrates, Judge William	<i>Or</i>	Guilt, or Sin
<b>Religious or Life of Faith</b>	What does <u>God</u> want me to do today?	God’s will (?)	Abraham	<i>Fear and Trembling</i> . Also all the <i>Upbuilding Discourses</i> and the signed works generally	Fear and Trembling

### **The aesthetic life**

This is a life governed by pleasure, impulse, emotion. The “aesthete” wakes up in the morning and asks, “What do I want to do today? Notice that it’s all about what you want to do. The idea is to do what pleases you. This is not necessary sensual, although it can be. So the “aesthetic” lifestyle is a kind of hedonism.

Kierkegaard sometimes uses the figure of Don Juan or Don Giovanni as a kind of literary symbol of this lifestyle. Also, John the Seducer, from “Diary of a Seducer” in *Either/Or*.

In the “aesthetic” life, no ethical rules count. You might know about ethical norms and standards, and even feel their “pull,” but they aren’t going to count for you if they interfere with doing what you want.

SK wrote a lot about this kind of life. See the “Either” part of *Either/Or*, where we get, among other things:

1. A brilliant study of Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*.
2. *The Rotation Method* (an after-dinner speech on how to avoid boredom).
3. *Diary of a Seducer*—where the point of the story is not to get the woman (whose name is Cordelia, as it turns out), but rather the artful pursuit of her.

But the aesthetic life is not entirely satisfactory. It leads to something called despair. (Note: SK uses the term ‘despair’ in lots of different ways—“despair” in fact is the “sickness unto death” SK talks about in the book by that title.) But one of those ways is this way.

“Despair” (in this sense) is the dissatisfaction you get over the lack of purpose and meaning in this way of leaving. There is no “point” to it. “Despair,” in this sense, is a kind of jadedness. Imagine a moment of the most intense pleasure possible. When that moment has passed, you ask yourself “is that all?” That’s “despair.”

This is not a dissatisfaction because you aren’t getting enough pleasure, but rather a dissatisfaction with getting nothing but pleasure.

## **Texts**

Here are some texts to illustrate “despair” in this sense:

*Journals*, Bretall, p. 7 (from 1836):

I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me—but I went away—and the dash should be as long as the earth’s orbit \_\_\_\_\_ -  
\_\_\_\_\_ and  
wanted to shoot myself.

Again, *Journals*, Bretall, p. 5 (from 1835):

I have looked in vain for an anchorage in the boundless sea of pleasure and in the depth of understanding; I have felt the almost irresistible power with which one pleasure reaches out its hand to the next; I have felt the kind of meretricious ecstasy that it is capable of producing, but also the *ennui* and the distracted state of mind that succeeds it.

Kierkegaard doesn’t think the presence of despair in this sense in any way refutes the aesthetic life, that it somehow shows that the aesthetic life is not the lifestyle to choose.



He's just observing that if you live that way, you're going to feel dissatisfied with it. He's simply describing this way of living, with all its ramifications.

### ***The ethical life***

(2) The second stage of SK's "stages on life's way" is the ethical life.

It accepts a universal code of ethics. The ethical person lives a more rule-governed life. If the "aesthetic" person wakes up in the morning and asks himself, "What do I want to do today," the "ethical" person wakes up and asks himself, "What should I do today?"

As a result, this kind of life has a kind of coherence, meaning and purpose (belonging to a larger whole— recall Hegel) that the aesthetic life lacked. The ethical life overcomes despair.

The ethical life for SK is typified by marriage. (Judge William in *Either/Or* is all the time talking about marriage.) Contrast this with Don Juan for the aesthetic life. Socrates and Judge William are the figures he uses to symbolize this life.

SK writes about this life in the "Or" part of *Either/Or*. Significantly, that part is much more organized, prosaic, and just plain "long-winded" than the lively, witty "Either" part. (But it's interesting reading anyway.)

Hegel's social morality (= *Sittlichkeit*) belongs here, and is no doubt primarily what SK is thinking of. From that point of view, being ethical means playing your role in society, fitting in to your niche, being a "good citizen."

Nevertheless, there are passages where SK seems to be distinguishing Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* from what he (Kierkegaard) means by the "ethical" life. For example, there are passages where he says that Hegelianism "doesn't really have an ethics"! I'm not yet quite sure what to make of those claims.

Now you may think you've gained something by living this kind of life. After all, you are no longer in despair. But now you have a new problem.

If the aesthetic life was unsatisfactory, left you feeling not quite satisfied because of the despair over its pointlessness, there is a similar negative emotion that accompanies the ethical stage: guilt and sin.

This didn't arise at the aesthetic level. Guilt and sin arise only when you fail to live up to the standards you guide your life by. You didn't have those standards at the aesthetic level; it is only at the ethical stage that we try to live by such standards.

Now you may object that the aesthetic life does have a kind of standard. The standard or ideal is to get as much pleasure as possible! But that's not the same thing. In the aesthetic life, if you fail to get as much pleasure as possible, you might feel disappointed, you may regret an "opportunity lost," and so on. But you won't feel guilty about it! That's a whole different kind of response.

Guilt and sin are inevitable in the ethical life—because the standards we live by at the ethical stage are ideals. And the whole point of ideals is to be—well, “ideal,” and so, out of reach. They are something to strive for, even as we inevitably fall short of them.

### ***The religious life, the life of faith***

(3) The third “stage on life’s way” is the religious stage, the life of faith. (There are two forms of the “religious” stage. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we get a distinction between “Religion A” and “Religion B.” So does this mean there end up being four stages? As we’ll see, there is some question over just how many “stages” there are for SK.)

SK doesn’t really describe this religious stage in *Either/Or* at all, but he does at great length in *Fear and Trembling* and in other works. *Fear and Trembling* will be the first place where we will see this lifestyle described at some length.

The religious life, the life of faith, involves for SK a direct, one-on-one relation with God. (Not a God-relation that has to go through any general principles or rules—like the Ten Commandments—to get to God. You don’t relate to God through the intermediation of a “priestly” class, for instance. This is one strand of Reformation though.)

If the aesthete wakes up in the morning and asks himself “What do I want to do today?,” and the ethical person asks himself, “What should I do today?,” the religious person wakes up and asks “What does God want me to do today?” Abraham is the symbol for this kind of life.

Like the aesthetic life, the life of faith is not one governed by ethical rules. In some cases, it may in fact look from the outside a little like the aesthetic life. Much of “Problema III” of *Fear and Trembling* is devoted to ruminating on exactly what the difference is.

Faith, the religious life, is not without its problems too. Just as at the first two stages, so too here: the individual is not comfortable. This discomfort is what we can call “fear and trembling.” (From *Philippians 2*.)

We’ll see more about just what causes this negative emotion when we discuss *Fear and Trembling* directly. But we can begin even now. Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* goes beyond ethics.

You might say: Wait a minute! I thought ethics isn’t what mattered in the life of faith; that’s not what you’re living your life in terms of. So why should it bother Abraham? (For that matter, the same point can be made about the aesthetic life.) Reply: True enough. But the pull of ethics is still felt, even for Abraham; it’s just not decisive.

Note how the “ethical” is in a sense the “focal” standpoint here—it’s central. What bothers you about the aesthetic life is the lack of structure and focus that is supplied by the ethical. What bothers you about the life of faith is that it “goes beyond” ethics, is “no longer” ethical. And what bothers you about the ethical life is that it’s not ethical enough—you inevitably fall short.

But the “centrality” of ethics doesn’t decide anything. It doesn’t in any way force a decision.

### ***Contrasts between Hegel’s dialectic and Kierkegaard’s “stages on life’s way”***

Let’s contrast Kierkegaard’s “stages on life’s way” (Kierkegaard’s “dialectic,” as I’ve called it) with Hegel’s. And let me list here several putative contrasts. In every case, we have to keep our eyes on these contrasts later on, to see if they are really there. In other words, to see if this “standard picture” is right.

1. Hegel’s dialectic is broader in scope. He’s trying to explain all of reality. Kierkegaard is just talking about human beings. By the same token, Hegel’s dialectic is far more abstract and conceptual. Kierkegaard’s is much more particular, concrete.
2. Hegel’s dialectic involves a fixed order: thesis, then antithesis, then synthesis, which serves as a new thesis. Never any other way; you can’t go back in the other direction. Kierkegaard’s “stages on life’s way” don’t have this fixed order. They’re just three distinct, self-contained lifestyles, three different ways of approaching life.
3. Hegel’s dialectic involves an inevitable progression. Kierkegaard’s structure doesn’t. There’s nothing to say you have to move from one lifestyle to the next. (There really isn’t any “next,” since there’s no fixed order to them.) You can live your entire life at a single stage; many people do. On the other hand, you can change from one “stage” to the “another.” But if you do, it’s a matter of choice, not of necessity. And, I suppose, you can even change back again. Kierkegaard thinks such changes are possible and do happen, but they are relatively rare—they involve a complete renegotiating of your priorities. They are like religious conversion experiences, a complete reorienting of your life. Whatever you think of such “conversion” experiences, they do happen; they don’t happen to everyone, and they don’t happen every day. But there they are, and they involve a complete re-evaluation of everything.
4. Hegel’s dialectic is cyclic. It repeats itself. Kierkegaard’s “stages” don’t work like this. They don’t repeat. Therefore, Kierkegaard’s structure doesn’t map onto Hegel’s dialectic in any obvious way. Faith is not in any sense a “synthesis” of the aesthetic and the ethical. That doesn’t make a lot of sense.

### ***Things to ask***

Here are some questions to ask about this picture:

1. Is it possible to live in two “stages” at once? Despite Anderson’s remarks on p. 45, I think the answer is no. Take the aesthetic and the ethical stages, for example. Certainly it’s possible to do something that conforms to what you take to be your

- ethical duties and simultaneously is what you want to do. But that's not the point. The question is whether you would still do it if it weren't what you wanted to do, or whether you would still do it if, on further thought, you decided that it was in conflict with your ethical duties after all. In other words, it's not what you do, but why you do it. Similarly, you can be "ethical" all week, but then go out and behave very "aesthetically" (shall we say) on the weekend. But, again, this can be accommodated within the ethical stage; after all, we already know that guilt and sin are the negative features that accompany the ethical life.
2. Why are there only three stages? Aren't there other styles of life too? Anderson tries to argue (pp. 45ff.) that these three stages exhaust all the possibilities. There she claims one has to live either "for oneself," "for the community" (ideally all), or for "God"? But I think that's a patently flimsy argument. Why should those be the only alternatives? Right off the bat, there's another obvious possibility: to live for one other person (other than God)—consider "love," for instance. And we've been given no reason to think there aren't yet other possibilities too.
  3. Do you have to be in one stage or another? Can you be in none at all, or "in between." I suspect you can be, at least for short periods of time. I'm not sure what Anderson's view is here. She discusses the question briefly on p. 51. There she seems to think being in one of these "stages" amounts to being there knowingly and reflectively. But why suppose that's true?

### ***Criterionless choice***

This is important: There is no proof or criterion, or anything else for that matter, to push you inevitably from one stage to another in Kierkegaard's "stages on life's way." The choice of what stage to live at is a choice of criteria, a choice of what you are going to count as important to you in making subsequent decisions: pleasure, duty, God's demands—or what?

SK's three lifestyles are therefore three self-contained world-views, each with its own self-consistent set of priorities, and each one totally incommensurable with the others. It's no good arguing against the aesthete that he's being ethically immoral. From the aesthete's point of view, that just doesn't matter. He's chosen something else to guide his decisions. He feels their lack—in despair. But that is not what's decisive for him.

Similarly, it's no good arguing against the ethical person that his life is dry and dull. That's to argue from an aesthetic point of view, which simply carries no weight for the ethical person. The ethical person can understand the argument, and can even perhaps agree that his life is comparatively dull and uninteresting. He can even miss all the fun the aesthete is having. But, in the end, that's not what he lets decide things for him.

Here's some textual evidence that I'm not making this up, that it's really part of the "standard picture":

Palmer, *Kierkegaard for Beginners*, pp. 76–77 (I quoted this earlier):

Kierkegaard divides humanity into three possible modes of existence: “the aesthetic,” “the ethical,” and “the religious.” Each of these modes of existence is more than just a “stage on life’s way,” as he sometimes calls them, rather they are whole human worlds, complete with their own ideals, motivations, and forms of behavior. Each one is a complete world view. Any of these frames of reference can be chosen voluntarily by the individual ...

So, if you are going to move from one stage to another, it’s not because of any decisive factors internal to the various lifestyles.

You can find this claim throughout Susan Leigh Anderson’s book too.

How then do you choose the lifestyle to live at—if you ever do?

Well, Anderson seems to think you just look for the one that feels right to you (p. 45). There’s no one size fits all here. Different people will fit into different stages. There’s no one answer that’s right for everyone; you have to find the one that’s right for you (p. 44, and throughout).

The problem with this answer is it seems to be saying that some mysterious “feeling” is the decisive factor. But why should feeling count? Isn’t that an aesthetic criterion? And isn’t the question precisely whether aesthetic criteria (or any other criteria internal to one or another of the “stages”) are going to be the ones that count?

There’s another possible answer here, one that has had considerable circulation in the secondary literature. This is the notion that a decision of the kind we’re talking about is a criterionless choice. There is no place to turn; you are entirely on your own.

Here’s some textual support that this interpretation is actually held:

MacIntyre, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article, p. 337 (emphasis added):

Kierkegaard buttressed his doctrine of the will with his view of the ultimacy of undetermined choice. He maintained that the individual constitutes himself as the individual he is through his choice of one mode of existence rather than another.

.....

The essence of the Kierkegaardian concept of choice is that it is criterionless. On Kierkegaard’s view, if criteria determine what I choose, it is not I who make the choice; hence the choice must be undetermined. [Otherwise, “where’s the choice?”] Suppose, however, that I do invoke criteria in order to make my choice. Then all that has happened is that I have chosen the criteria. And if in turn I try to justify my selection of criteria by an appeal to logically cogent considerations [for example], then I have in turn chosen the criteria in the light of which these considerations

appear logically cogent. First principles at least must be chosen without the aid of criteria, simply in virtue of the fact that they are first.

Note that the kernel of what MacIntyre is saying here is not a claim about what SK actually thought (although MacIntyre goes on to claim that as well), but rather about the nature of choice. It's really a theoretical claim, not a historical one.

### ***Dread or anxiety***

Such ultimate choices are things we don't like to make. They are accompanied by a negative emotion called dread or anxiety. This is the later existentialists' notion of Angst or anguish. (Note the title of SK's book *The Concept of Anxiety*.)

This notion of dread or anxiety is crucial. There is no proof that you are making the "right" choice. The choice you are making is a choice of what is going to count as the "right" choice for you. So dread is not fear of making the wrong choice. It is simply the fear of choosing, fear of our own freedom, fear of ourselves. SK compares this "anxiety" to a kind of "vertigo" or dizziness. Jean-Paul Sartre makes use of a similar metaphor. I'm walking along a mountain path, very close to the edge of a cliff. I pause and go right up the edge and peer over. And what do I feel? A certain queasy imbalance—vertigo. Now, since we're telling the story, we can set the scene any way we want. Let's suppose it's a calm day, with no wind; so there's no real danger that a sudden gust is going to puff me over the edge of the cliff! And let's suppose I'm the only person on that particular part of the path; so there's no worry that someone is going to jostle me over the edge! And let's stipulate that the ground is solid, and that we're in a seismically stable area, so the ledge isn't likely to give way suddenly and tumble me over the edge! And yet—and yet, I feel vertigo. What's going on here? What's bothering me?

What's bothering me is not the possibility that I might fall over the edge, but the possibility that I might jump! Why would I do that? Well, no particular reason—but I could. What is to prevent me from doing that? Nothing at all; I could. It's up to me. And that possibility, that freedom, is what I don't like.

I went to graduate school in Toronto. Now Toronto has a very nice subway system, which I often rode. And, after a while, I began to notice something. While people were waiting on the subway to pull into the station, they would mill about on the platform and often lean way over the track, to see whether the train was coming. (Never mind that if there really was a train coming to the station, you could feel a wave of compressed air long before you could see the train!) And people would do this in what had to have been objectively a pretty dangerous way. (There was an electric rail off the edge of the platform, after all!) But never mind, dangerous or not, people did it all the time.

Until the train actually did start coming into the station! Now, understand, subway trains are constructed in such a way that they don't have protrusions sticking out on the sides to lop off the heads of potential passengers who happen to be standing too close to the edge. Still, as the train was actually coming into the station, all those people who, just a moment ago, were making the most acrobatic contortions to peer down the subway

tunnel, would suddenly step back away from the train—as if now they were in a particular danger.

What’s going on here? Those people were by no means in any greater objective danger than they were a moment earlier when they were leaning out into the tunnel. But now they are suddenly confronted with the possibility of leaping in front of the train! They step back, not to get to safety, but literally to “put a distance” between themselves and that terrifying possibility. That’s anxiety!

Once, when I was teaching this course at the graduate level, a student came up to my after call one day and said, “Oh, I know what you’re talking about with this ‘anxiety’ thing.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the end of the story, but he went on—and it turned out he had an excellent example. He and his wife were at home one evening after dinner, doing the dishes in a perfectly straightforward, domestic way. She was washing and he was drying. And, he said, “All of a sudden, there was this big knife!” Now, I hasten to add, nothing actually happened. But still, there was this knife, and as he put it, “You get strange thoughts while doing the dishes!”

Obviously, he was confronted with the possibility of using the knife to slash his wife. Now, why on earth would he want to that? After all, he loved his wife very much, and as far as I know, they’re still happily married. But still, there was this knife, and he could do that!

One final example, this time from an undergraduate, who volunteered it in class. Once, when he was a child, he was riding in the car with his parents, and he was in the back seat with the windows down. And all of a sudden he realized that he could just throw his teddy bear out the window. Now of course he liked his teddy bear, and didn’t want to lose it. But he could do that! This thought so upset the child that his parents had to stop the car to calm him down.

Again, that’s anxiety. The thought of what I might do, that it’s up to me, is terrifying, and yet it’s also fascinating; we can’t quite let go of the thought, we toy with it. And the resulting anxiety tells us something deep about ourselves!

The “standard” picture goes on to say that this is, in part, why Kierkegaard writes the way he does. (Anderson says this, for instance.) Kierkegaard presents you with alternatives. He’s not trying to persuade you that one way of life is to be chosen over another. In *Either/Or*, for instance, he doesn’t claim that the ethical stage is “better” than the aesthetic, or vice versa. He simply lays out both alternatives for you as fairly and as sympathetically as he can—but with all their features, both appealing and unappealing ones. And then you choose.

This is true even if you know where Kierkegaard himself stands. Earlier, I told you that in *Point of View*, SK says that he wrote in pseudonyms with the purpose of maneuvering you into seeing the superiority of the religious viewpoint. But that doesn’t change anything. It’s still true that nothing he can say is going to convince you unless you choose to give it weight, to make it count as a convincing consideration.

All right, those are the main features of the “standard picture.” We will need to watch to see how many of them have to be rethought—or just plain rejected—as we get more and more into this. (And for that matter, it would be good also to keep an eye on how many of them are things I just came up with myself, and aren’t found either in SK himself or even in the usual secondary literature on him.)

### ***Other notions in Kierkegaard***

But before we start on *Fear and Trembling*, I want to mention a few other basic notions we’ll find in SK. In a way, they are part of the “standard” view, although they’re not especially controversial.

#### **Existence**

Here we need a lesson in Kierkegaardian terminology, and at the same time a mini-lesson in Danish grammar.

Kierkegaard uses the word ‘existence’ (or ‘is’) in more than one way—or at least that’s the way it usually looks in translation. And it’s important to be aware of the various senses, and the various things the word might mean when you see it.

It’s also important for another reason: Kierkegaard is rightly regarded as one of the earliest figures in the so called “existential” tradition. And in fact one of the senses in which SK uses the term ‘existence’ is the basis for the term ‘existentialism’. That is, it tells us what “existentialism” has to do with “existence.”

But first a digression:

An important study tool: The first four volumes of the Hong/Hong translation of the *Journals and Papers* (which are basically the *Journals* part of that collection—and remember that these are available online through the Library website) are not arranged chronologically. In fact, we often don’t know the chronology of the entries.

Instead, they’re—quite artificially—arranged alphabetically by broad topic. For instance, vol. 1 contains entries under topics beginning with ‘A’ through ‘E’. Thus, we have *Journal* entries dealing with “Abstract, Abstraction,” “Absurd,” “Action,” and so on.

This is obviously messy, but that’s the way the Hongs do it. And these volumes come with tables in the back, correlating the various entries in the Hong/Hong *Journals and Papers* with their location in the original Danish editions.

But also, there are notes and commentary at the end of each volume, divided and arranged according to the topic headings in that particular volume.

Now—and here is the point—at the beginning of the various sections of notes and commentary in these volumes, there is a little discussion of the term or terms for that heading. Thus, in vol. 1, on p. 497, we begin with a “commentary”—really just a paragraph—discussing what SK means by ‘abstract’ or ‘abstraction’.



These little discussions are sometimes totally useless, but often they tell you things you want to know. It's good to be aware of this in doing your reading and study for your papers.

The point of this little digression is this: In vol. 1 of the *Journals and Papers*, there are two such “commentary” entries at the back that are relevant to what I want to talk about now. One is an entry for ‘being’, and the other is an entry for ‘exist, existence, existential’.

Now what is going on here involves two different Danish verbs (and their corresponding verb forms), plus a third verb (and its corresponding forms) that is really not Danish at all, but is just a Latin verb that SK imports and uses as though it were Danish. (The same thing had happened in German earlier.)

(1) But let's start with the two common or ordinary Danish verbs. One of them is ‘*være*’ = ‘to be’, the infinitive. In the present tense, the forms are ‘*er*’. Thus ‘*jeg er*’ = “I am.”

(2) The other is the same verb plus a preposition that goes with it: ‘*være til*’ = ‘to exist’. (‘*Jeg er til*’ = “I exist.”) When you make a noun out of it, you get ‘*tilværelse*’ = “existence.” (The German equivalent is ‘*Dasein*.’)

Thus:

To be/is	være/er;	(Værelse), Væren
To exist/exists	være til/er til;	Tilværelse, Tilværen

(By rights, there ought to be a corresponding noun ‘*værelse*’ going with ‘*være*’ = “being,” in the sense of what things that are do. But in modern Danish, and in Kierkegaard's Danish too, that word means something else—a “room” or an “apartment.” So let's not worry about that word. There is also an alternative form ‘*væren*’ = “being” which Kierkegaard does use.)

What's the difference between these two word-clusters? Well, the preposition ‘*til*’ in Danish means “to”—or, as a conjunction, it means “until.” And in both cases, it connotes—or can connote—time.

So, to talk about ‘*tilværelse*’, to say of something that it ‘*er til*,’ is to say that exists in time, it endures. To say of something merely that it ‘*er*’ doesn't suggest that connection with time. (It doesn't rule it out either, I suppose, but it certainly doesn't require it.)

Furthermore, to say of something that it ‘*er til*’ sometimes means not just that it exists in time, that it endures—but that it is itself a process, and should be thought of in dynamic rather than static terms.

This should remind you of what we were talking about earlier in terms of Hegel. For Hegel, the Absolute is to be thought of, recall, as a kind of dynamic process, in organic terms. It changes and develops; it doesn't just sit there.

So a Danish Hegelian could well say that the Absolute “*er til*.”

Kierkegaard will say that human beings “*er til*”—they develop and change, they are not static things. In fact, you might almost say that Kierkegaard thinks of human beings as processes rather than as things.

By contrast, for Kierkegaard, abstractions or abstract essences don’t develop and exist in time in this way. They don’t “*er til*”; they only “*er*.” (They don’t exist; they are.)

So too—and **get this**—God doesn’t “exist”; he “is.” He’s not a process, an event; he’s eternal. (SK disagrees with Hegel over this.)

Later on, we’ll see SK talking about the relation between time and eternity. When that happens, you should keep this terminology in mind. Eternal things cannot be described by saying they “*er til*”; rather they just “*er*.”

By contrast, “*er*” isn’t usually confined to things in time. You can talk about temporal things by saying they “*er*,” but you can’t talk about non-temporal things by saying they “*er til*.”

Hegel, by moving God down into this world—by saying that human nature and the divine nature are really the same nature—in effect took God out of eternity and put him squarely into time.

If you know your theology, you might very well ask “Isn’t that exactly what the doctrine of the Incarnation does—bring God down from eternity into time?” Well, yes, that’s part of what Hegel thought he was doing, and why he thought his own philosophy gave a kind of rational account of traditional Christian dogmas.

We’ll need to watch what happens to this move with Kierkegaard.

OK, I said there were three Danish verbs we needed to deal with. We’ve got two of them, but what about the third?

(3) Well, the third verb is ‘*eksistere*’ (modern spelling = ‘*eksistere*’).

This word does occur in Danish, but it’s a fancy word, and is obviously taken over more or less intact from Latin. (The same thing happens in the German Romantic tradition as well.) And the word does have the ‘-e’ on the end of it, which fits the normal pattern of Danish verbal infinitive endings. But really, it comes from Latin, and just means “to exist.”

So we have two words in Danish that are translated into English as “exist”—‘*være til*’ or ‘*er til*’ and ‘*eksistere*’. What’s the difference?

Well, in Latin, ‘*eksistere*’ = *ex* + *sistere* = “to stand out,” to “emerge.” The original idea was “standing out” against the backdrop of non-being, or something like that. But for SK, it refers to the person who stands out from the general mass of people by choosing how to live, by consciously and deliberately adopting one or another of the “stages on life’s way”—making a riterionless choice.

So, using ‘*eksistere*’ now, not everything exists. Not even everything in time exists. Only human beings do. And not even all of them.

After all, most people perhaps never stop to make any kind of conscious decision about how to live their lives. They just unreflectively “go with the flow,” and carry on in whatever “lifestyle” they start off in.

For SK, such people don’t exist in the sense of ‘*existere*’, although of course they do exist in the sense of ‘*være til*’.

Furthermore, as we’ll see, for SK, at anything beyond the most superficial level, simply deciding to live a certain way is not the end of the matter. You have to work at it; you have to achieve it.

So one way of putting it is that the “existing (*existerende*) individual” is the striving individual, someone who’s consciously and deliberately trying to become a certain kind of person.

This is the sense of “existence” that is behind the term ‘existentialism’. In later existentialists, this notion re-emerges in the notion of authenticity, deciding for yourself, not just getting caught up in the flow.

Unfortunately, the Hongs in their translations are not entirely consistent in rendering this vocabulary. Where it matters, they pretty faithfully distinguish between being and existence—that is, between forms of ‘*være*’ and forms of ‘*være til*’ or ‘*existere*’. What they conspicuously do not do is to distinguish regularly between forms of ‘*være til*’ and forms of ‘*existere*’. These are both routinely translated as “exist,” even though they don’t mean the same thing. Sometimes the Hongs will insert the Danish in parentheses to warn you, but not always. This seems to me to be a major failing of their translations (and of most of the others I’ve seen as well).

## **Truth**

SK is famous for coming up with a peculiar notion of “truth as subjectivity.” This is a large part of the point of the passage I’ve asked you read already from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in the Bretall volume (pp. 207–31). Let’s see what we can make of it.

SK distinguishes at least three different senses of ‘truth’.

(1) “Eternal” truth. This basically means God, or at any rate the “divine.” Sometimes this is also called “essential” truth, although that term may in fact be broader.

(2) “Objective” truth. This is the normal notion of truth, as a kind of correspondence between our thoughts or claims and the facts, reality. This sense of truth goes back at least to Aristotle, who said “To say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not is true.”

SK is perfectly happy to accept this kind of truth, to grant there really is such a thing and even that in some cases we can know what it is—that is, what is true in this sense. But he’s just not very interested in this kind of truth.

E.g., Bretall, p. 215:

In the case of a mathematical proposition the objectivity is given, but for this reason the truth of such a proposition is also an indifferent truth.

(3) The interesting kind of “truth” for SK is what he calls “subjective” truth, or “truth as subjectivity.” And what is that?

Well, as SK tells us (Bretall, p. 213), when we’re talking about “objective” truth, the emphasis is on what is said, but when we’re talking about “subjective” truth, the emphasis is on how it is said, and not at all on what is said.

In other words, objective truth is a matter of matching up our beliefs or claims with reality. It is a relational notion—and if the relation between my thoughts or claims and the external facts is a “match up” relation, then we say our thoughts or claims are true, and if they’re not, then we say they’re false. And if we aren’t really sure whether we’ve got this match up relation or not, then we just have to say we don’t know whether we’ve got the truth or not.

For subjective truth, on the other hand, the point is not so much a matter of matching up with external facts. It’s mainly a matter of my own subjective state of mind. In a sense, subjective truth has nothing at all to do with whether what you are saying or believing is objectively true in the “correspondence” sense. It’s possible, for instance, to hold in subjective truth something that’s just downright false in the objective sense.

Well, what then counts as “truth” in this “subjective” sense? Here is how he defines it (Bretall, p. 214):

*An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing (existerende) individual.*

This is a famous definition, and you should get it down. But what does that mean?

Let’s break it down part by part:

appropriation process = grab and hold on. To “appropriate” it, make it your own. So we’re talking about a truth that is “true for you.” (Recall the passage from the *Journals* about what is “true for me.”).

most passionate inwardness = it’s something important to you, not something indifferent or trivial like one of those mathematical truths considered as a point of pure curiosity. “Inwardness” of course refers to the subjective state, the fact that this kind of truth is an internal matter, and has nothing especially to do with how things turn out in external fact.

But the crucial part of the definition is:

objective uncertainty = i. e., “truth” in this sense is going to have to deal with something that isn’t objectively certain or obvious, with something that can’t be proved.

In effect, SK is saying he’s just not interested in what you can prove. The only kind of “truth” he’s interested in is about things you can’t prove.

(Anderson makes a big deal out of this. And she’s right to do so! It’s a very troubling notion! Anything goes? It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you can’t prove it?)

Why is SK interested in this? In the case of an “objective certainty” that you can prove, you don’t have to exert any energy of your own to believe it; you just passively observe the evidence. But in the case of an “objective uncertainty,” the energy has to come from you. You have to work at it, decide to believe it.

Think of people who are obviously trying to persuade themselves of something. They’re working very hard at it, sometimes to the extent of refusing to listen to contrary evidence!

The kind of truth SK is talking about, then, “subjective” truth, always involves a risk. The more risk there is, the more energy you have to put out to believe it—and the more “subjective” you are, the more you have to do with it.

Note: We’re talking about the “most passionate inwardness”—something that is unqualifiedly, infinitely important to you, like one of those three ultimate stages or lifestyles. Now look what SK says (Bretall, pp. 214–15). In such a case, he says:

... the subject [i.e., the person] merely has, objectively, the uncertainty; but it is this which precisely increases the tension of that infinite passion which constitutes the inwardness. The truth [i.e., the subjective truth] is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite. I contemplate nature in the hope of finding God, and I see omnipotence and wisdom [this is the so called “argument from design”]; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. [He’s talking here about the “problem of evil.”] The sum of all this is an objective uncertainty. But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is, for it embraces this objective uncertainty with the entire passion of the infinite.

(Then he goes on to make the remark I’ve already quoted about mathematics, which is objectively certain and therefore “indifferent” as far as SK is concerned.)

Now this, SK says, amounts to a kind of “faith.” Bretall, p. 215:

But the above definition of truth is an equivalent definition for faith.

But be careful. This is not the full-blown notion of “faith” SK is aiming at. It’s the kind of “faith” that was available to Socrates, who was a very impressive and noble character but was after all still a pagan. This will turn out to be what later on, in *Postscript*, SK

calls “Religion A,” as opposed to “Religion B”—which is the really high octane kind of faith.

Now (Bretall, pp. 215–20) we get a discussion of Socrates, not all of which I understand—particularly where it starts talking about “sin.” But here are some important highlights of it.

### **The paradox**

One crucial notion to come out is what SK calls “paradox.” For SK, ‘paradox’ doesn’t just mean the “surprising”; it means the contradictory. Not necessarily what’s logically contradictory, but the incommensurable, a juxtaposition of opposites. For example—and this is really the only kind of example he has in mind throughout this entire passage: the juxtaposition of the eternal with the temporal, or of the finite with the infinite, what is not at all subject to time with what is irreducibly subject to time.

In particular, a juxtaposition of the divine with human beings.

For example, when human beings make the reality of God [notice how I do not say “existence,” which is a restricted term for SK], which cannot help but be objectively uncertain, a matter of absolutely infinite importance to them, that is paradoxical. The uncertainty is completely incommensurable with the infinite “passion” of such a commitment; it in no way warrants such an infinite commitment, and would in fact warrant only a tentative hypothesis at best.

So someone who believes in God with infinite passion is in a paradoxical situation in this sense. Look at Bretall, p. 216:

The eternal and essential truth [recall, that’s God], the truth which has an essential relationship to an existing individual because it pertains essentially to existence [whatever that means] ... is a paradox. But the eternal essential truth is by no means itself a paradox; it becomes paradoxical by virtue of its relationship to an existing individual.

That’s the mismatch—a double mismatch: simultaneously the mismatch between the eternal and the temporal and the mismatch between the objective uncertainty and the infinitely passionate commitment.

This is the kind of “faith” Socrates had, SK says.

But things get more complicated. Let me do a little “reading” (with commentary) from SK himself (Bretall, p. 219—skipping some material):

When the eternal truth [= God] is related to an existing individual, it becomes a paradox [as we’ve seen] ... But since the paradox [= that is, here, God] is not in the first instance itself paradoxical (but only in its relationship to the existing individual [as we have seen]), it does not repel with a sufficient intensive inwardness. ... [But] [w]hen the paradox is paradoxical in itself, it repels the

individual by virtue of its absurdity [not just a *paradox* this time, but an *absurdity*], and the corresponding passion of inwardness is faith [in the stronger sense of “Religion B”—contrast the sense of “faith” we got in the earlier passage I quoted from p. 215].

In other words, first of all there’s an infinite contrast between the objective uncertainty of God’s existence and my infinite, unqualified commitment to it nevertheless. That contrast SK calls a “paradox.” But there’s nothing “paradoxical” about the reality of God all by itself—only if I believe it, and only if I believe it with this totally outlandish commitment that’s completely incommensurable with the limited evidence.

But if what I believe is paradoxical all by itself (and not just in relation to my commitment to it), then we have what SK calls the “absurd,” and not just a “paradox.”

Now remember the kind of “paradox” we said was the only kind SK was interested in? Bretall, p. 218:

The paradox emerges when the eternal truth [= God] and existence [= human beings and the human, temporal perspective] are placed in juxtaposition with one another.

Therefore, the “absurd” arises when what we have is not just a paradoxical relation between my infinite commitment and the uncertainty of what I’m committed to, but an infinite commitment to something that’s already paradoxical all by itself—that all by itself combines God and the human.

And what fundamental Christian doctrine can you think of that all by itself, whether you believe it or not, is a doctrine that combines the divine and the human in this way?

Answer: The Incarnation. That’s not just paradoxical; that’s downright absurd. And it’s the commitment to that absurdity that marks the distinction between what SK calls “Religion A” and “Religion B.”

Listen again (Bretall, pp. 219–20—repeating a little bit):

When the paradox is paradoxical in itself [and not just in relation to our commitment to it], it repels the individual by virtue of its absurdity, and the corresponding passion of inwardness is faith [= Religion B].

.....

When Socrates believed that there was a God, he held fast to the objective uncertainty with the whole passion of his inwardness, and it is precisely in this contradiction and in this risk, that faith [i. e., Religion A] is rooted. Now it is otherwise. Instead of the objective uncertainty, there is here a certainty, namely, that objectively it is absurd; and this absurdity, held fast in the passion of inwardness, is faith [in the sense of Religion B].

.....

What now is the absurd? The absurd is—that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, has come into being precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals.

## Fear and Trembling

*Fear and Trembling* is probably Kierkegaard's most widely read work. It was published in 1843, along with two other works on the very same day, one called *Repetition* (by "Constantin Constantius") and the other a set of *Three Upbuilding Discourses* under Kierkegaard's own name.

The book is pseudonymously authored by one "Johannes de silentio" (= John of Silence). The significance of the name is not clear, although one of the themes of the book (in Problema III) is Abraham's "silence" about what he was up to. (I have a page on our Oncourse site—and a handout—following up a conjecture about the source of Kierkegaard's pseudonym in one of Grimm's fairly tales. The conjecture is reported in Alastair Hannay's "Introduction" to our volume, p. 10. As far as I can tell, it's purely conjectural, and I don't see much basis for it myself.)

The book is a prolonged meditation on the notion of faith, and what it is to have faith. It focuses on the story of Abraham's aborted "sacrifice" of Isaac in Gen. 22, which you absolutely must familiarize yourself with if you are going to be able to deal with this book. (A copy of the relevant passage is posted on our Oncourse site—and again, here is a handout.)

I've asked you to read the entire book, including Hannay's "Introduction." Apart from that "Introduction," here is a kind of roadmap of the book as a whole:

The book falls into two main parts, a bunch of preliminary build-up material at the beginning, and then three "problems" (SK for some reason uses the Greek plural 'problemata')—in effect, three questions raised by the story of Abraham. Then there is a short "Epilogue" at the end.

- Preliminary material:
  - Preface
  - "Attunement" (that is, a "tune-up" to get you all primed for what is coming up)
  - "Speech in Praise of Abraham"

Then we finally (p. 57) get to the section called "Problemata." But we're not quite yet ready to start on them. We get one more, fairly substantial piece of "build up":

- "Preamble from the Heart"

And only then (p. 83):



- Problema I: “Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?”
- Problema II: “Is there an absolute duty to God?”
- Problema III: “Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah [= his wife], from Eleāzar [= his servant], from Isaac [= his son and “victim”]?”

And finally:

- Epilogue

(Notice, incidentally, that Problema III is the only one of the three that is directly concerned with a detail of the Genesis story. The other two are more general questions.)

We need to be clear from the outset that some parts of this book—particular sentences, particular concepts, whole sections of the text—are very mysterious and hard to interpret. In fact, Problema III, when Johannes goes off on a “riff” about the story of “Agnete and the Merman,” seems to me just to fall apart. Even Hannay’s “Introduction, which in other respects is very helpful and clear, becomes baffling here (see pp. 26–27), as Hannay himself acknowledges (p. 26):

The reader is begged to excuse the complexity of the next few lines, which is due as much to the subject-matter as to my poor ability to express the point more clearly.

### ***Preface***

The Hegelian background against which SK is writing is made plain already in the Preface to the work. Johannes de silentio makes the observation that (p. 42):

Today nobody will stop with faith; they all go further. It would perhaps be rash to inquire where to, but surely a mark of urbanity and good breeding on my part to assume that in fact everyone does indeed have faith, otherwise it would be odd to talk of going further. In the old days it was different. For then faith was a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill thought to be acquired in either days or weeks.

The talk about “going beyond faith” is a direct jab at Hegel’s view, as we have seen, that religious concepts that operate on the level of intuition and feeling (“faith”) can be made conceptually understandable in philosophy. In particular, Hegel claimed that “the substance” of the Christian religion and of his own philosophy were “the same.” In that sense, Hegel did not think he was abandoning religion in favor of philosophy. On the contrary, he maintained:

I am a Lutheran, and through philosophy have been at once completely confirmed in Lutheranism.

It was just that, for Hegel, the essence of religion could now be expressed in two different languages that adopted two different cognitive forms. One language was the language of “feeling” and “piety” (faith). Scientific cognition, on the other hand, manifested itself in speculative philosophy, which sought “scientific ascertainment of religious truth.” This scientific cognition is comprehensible only to the few, the educated, while the language of faith, of “feeling” and “piety,” is open to everyone. For Hegel, the difference was one between knowing and merely believing.

So in that sense the Hegelians of SK’s day thought of themselves as having gone beyond faith. But, SK thinks (strictly, Johannes thinks), they’re badly mistaken. Consider (pp. 42–43):

The present author is no philosopher, he has not understood the System, nor does he know if there really is one, or if it has been completed. As far as his own weak head is concerned the thought of what huge heads everyone must have in order to have such thoughts is already enough. Even if one were to render the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it would not follow that one had grasped faith, grasped how one came to it, or how it came to one.

And then, almost at the very end of the Preface (43):

No, I prostrate myself before any systematic bag-searcher; this [i.e., what I’m doing] is not the System, it hasn’t the slightest thing to do with the System.

(In other words, he has great admiration [said ironically] for those who understand the Hegelian “System.” But, no matter what they say, they don’t understand what faith is.)

Notice what Johannes is saying here. He’s not saying that the Hegelians have never reached the point of having faith, much less that they’ve never gone beyond it (although he no doubt believes that’s true). He says they haven’t “grasped faith, grasped how one came to it, or how it came to one.”

And that’s what Johannes is trying to do in this book. The official point then isn’t so much get the reader (or Johannes himself) actually to have faith (note that Johannes doesn’t claim to have faith himself), but to “grasp” it, to understand what it is. The question of the book, then, is a cognitive one. The Hegelians, who have made faith into a doctrine that can be either believed in faith or known “systematically” and philosophically, have missed the target. That’s not what faith is.

So, if the Hegelian attempt is the wrong way to go about trying to grasp faith, what then is the right way? Where are we to go if we want to come to an understanding of what faith is, insofar as we can?

Well, one traditional Christian (and perhaps Jewish) response to this question is to point to the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham is said to be the “father of faith,”

and we are often told that if we really want to know what faith is all about, look to this story.

*Fear and Trembling* as a whole, then, can be regarded as an attempt to take an unflinching look at the Abraham story, and to come to grips with some startling choices we are going to have to make about whether or not to accept the vision of faith that comes out of this story. As we'll see, the vision of faith that emerges is quite contrary to the Hegelian version of faith.

### **The story of Abraham**

OK, so what is the story of Abraham.

Well, you know it. Abraham had an agreement going with God. In return for leaving his homeland and the traditional pagan ways of his culture, and for adhering to the one true God, God would guarantee that Abraham would become the father of a great nation of people, his progeny would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, as the grains of sand on the seashore.

But there was a problem: Abraham had no children. At one point earlier in Genesis, Abraham's wife Sarah is so concerned about this that she arranges to let Abraham sleep with a servant woman Hagar, and Abraham does produce a son Ishmael. But Genesis makes clear (Gen. 17, Gen. 21:12) that the agreement with Abraham is for a legitimate succession; for this purpose Ishmael doesn't count. But Abraham was getting very old, and his wife Sarah was well beyond her child-bearing years.

Nevertheless, Abraham had faith. And sure enough—wonder of wonders—eventually he and Sarah do have a son: Isaac. Isaac then is the fulfillment of the covenant.

Understand the picture here: The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is not just a father-son story, which would be powerful enough. No, everything is at stake in Isaac—the whole covenant!

Well, things seem to be in order at last. But one day, Abraham hears the voice of God. It tells him: Take Isaac, go up over there into the land of Moriah, and sacrifice him to me. Kill him! I so order!

And Abraham doesn't hesitate. He gets the pack animals, gathers up Isaac, and starts out on a journey of three days and nights—that's a nice touch: Abraham has plenty of time to think about what he's about to do—goes up into the mountains, ties up Isaac, raises the knife to do the deed—and at the last moment an angel comes to stay his hand and says, “Stop! It was all just a test.”

This then is the story Johannes asks us to focus on to see what faith involves; this is the story that is the paradigm of it.

Notice the situation Abraham is in, even though SK doesn't actually put the matter this way. If God doesn't really intend for the sacrifice to be carried out (which presumably is actually the case, given the outcome of the story), then God is a liar, since he deliberately deceived Abraham into thinking he did! If he does intend the sacrifice to be carried out,

then once again God is a liar, since he has this solemn covenant with Abraham—and now he’s canceling it! And yet Abraham puts his complete faith in this God who, he must realize, ends up being a liar no matter what! And Abraham has had three days and nights to realize this!

The only way out is for Abraham to suppose that

- Either God will let him kill Isaac, but then miraculously bring him back to life. This is the interpretation offered by Heb. 11:17–19 (see the handout with the text of Genesis 22), as a kind of anticipation of the Resurrection of Jesus:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son [NB: Ishmael doesn’t count—it has to be a legitimate son], of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” [Gen. 21:12] He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

- Or else, I suppose, God could let Abraham kill Isaac and then provide another legitimate son in his old age. (Note that this possibility is rejected by Heb. 11:18: “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.”)

On either of these alternatives, faith ends up looking like a high-stakes, calculating poker game with God. Is that what it means then to have faith? On these interpretations, Abraham thinks he’s not really going to lose anything in the end! Faith is just a matter of having “nerves of steel,” of being able to “out-bluff” God!

### ***Situating the text***

Before going on the next section, the “Attunement,” let’s take a moment to situate *Fear and Trembling* in terms of SK’s other writings. Remember, we can’t just assume that Johannes de silentio’s views are Kierkegaard’s own. In fact, in the later work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pseudonymously “authored” by Johannes Climacus—but, please note, “edited” by Søren Kierkegaard—Climacus says in a footnote late in the book, where he’s discussing how faith cannot be detected by any external means (*CUP*, Hong/Hong trans., p. 500):

In *Fear and Trembling*, a “knight of faith” such as this was portrayed. But his portrayal was only a rash anticipation, and the illusion was gained by depicting him in a state of completeness, and hence in a false medium, instead of an existence medium, and the beginning was made by ignoring the contradiction—how an observer could become at all *aware* of him in such a way that he could place himself, admiring, outside and admire that there is nothing, nothing whatever, to *notice*, unless Johannes de Silentio would say that the knight of faith is his own poetic production. But then the contradiction is there again, implicit in the duplexity that as poet and

observer he simultaneously relates himself to the same thing, consequently as poet creates a character in the medium of the imagination (for this, of course, is the poet-medium) and as observer observes the same poetic figure in the existence medium.

That's not exactly crystal clear, but we can at least see that here we have another of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms (Johannes Climacus, whose work SK says he is "editing") criticizing the "author" of *Fear and Trembling* and calling the view of faith presented there a "rash anticipation" and an "illusion." So we need to be careful about attributing the view of faith we get in *Fear and Trembling* to Kierkegaard himself.

A second complication arises from the fact that in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, SK lists *Fear and Trembling* (along with all the other pseudonymous works) among the so called "aesthetic" works (p. 21), and later on goes on to claim in one of his section titles in *Point of View* (§ 5—not in the selection in Bretall):

That the whole of the aesthetic work, viewed in relation to the work [i. e., the authorship] as a whole, is a deception—understanding this word, however, in a special sense.

This has to do with the notorious problem of SK's "indirect communication," which we'll talk about later on.

Finally, Johannes de silentio himself repeatedly remarks that he himself does not have faith; he can only recognize its glory.

In short, there are at least three possible ways in which the picture of faith we get in *Fear and Trembling* is not SK's own, final view:

1. It's the view of an "outsider"—Johannes de silentio.
2. It's an "aesthetic" treatment of the topic, and therefore designedly deceptive.
3. In any case, it's at best a "rash anticipation" of the true picture, as Climacus says.

All this is inconclusive, of course, but it needs to be kept in mind. In any event, let's move on to the next section.

### **"Attunement"**

This is a section of the text (pp. 44–48) that first-time readers often find especially tantalizing. It's very nuanced, beautifully written—even in translation—and just a knockout. But what is going on?

What we have here is a series of four "variations" on the Abraham story, each one accompanied by some comparisons with the process of weaning children. The "weaning" metaphor I don't know what to make of. But I do have a partial story about the four versions of Abraham.

First of all, it's important to note that none of these alternative “versions” is the true version, according to Johannes de silentio; none of them is what actually took place. Rather, what we have here—I suggest—is a series of alternatives to the real Abraham story, alternatives that are close enough that we can mistake them for the real story, with the result that we can make Abraham's deed comprehensible to us, make his motives understandable in ways such that we would not be inclined to fault him. Johannes's implicit argument, I think, is that to the degree we make Abraham and his motivations understandable to us in these ways, we trivialize faith.

So each of these four “Abrahams” is an imposter, not the real Abraham, who had faith. What are the four variations, then, and the four “trivialized” versions of faith they would imply?

### **First version (pp. 45–46)**

In the first variation, Abraham lets Isaac know he is going to be killed, but tries to convince Isaac that it is really his—Abraham's—idea, not God's. As Abraham tells himself, “[I]t is after all better that he believe I am a monster than that he lose faith in Thee.”

(Note: This is exactly what SK himself did with Regine Olsen after his breaking of their engagement. He tried to convince her that he was a scoundrel and a completely disreputable fellow. Why? Because he somehow got it into his head that otherwise—if she saw what was really going on—Regine would somehow lose faith in God. Whether Regine was really as unstable as that, this seems to be obviously in the back of SK's mind when he is writing this first variation on the Abraham story.)

On this first variation, what would the story of Abraham tell us about faith? Well, it seems:

Faith is:

- A willingness to do God's bidding, even in extreme cases.
- A willingness to cover up the truth about God, in order to protect someone else's faith in him.

So faith → a willingness to lie in order to hide the truth about God from others. Is that the lesson we are to draw from the story?

### **Second version (p. 46)**

On this version, Abraham does things exactly as happened in fact, except that he comes away a broken man, fed up with God: “From that day on, Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac thrived as before; but Abraham's eye was darkened, he saw joy no more.”

So faith → doing what God tells you to do, even at the expense of your personal relation to God. Faith will destroy you?

### **Third version (pp. 46–47)**

This one is harder to tell a story about:

First of all, notice that in this version of the story, Abraham goes up the mountain twice. The first time he goes with Isaac, and the second time he goes back alone, to think about what happened the first time.

On this second occasion, Abraham recognizes that being willing to kill Isaac violates his ethical duty to him, and asks God to forgive his sin. He cannot see how it could be a sin to offer the best he had to God, and yet he cannot see how it isn't a sin to be willing to sacrifice his son for any reason.

So faith → a conflict of duties? Perhaps. (There's no doubt a lot more in this third version, but this is the best I can do for now.)

### **Fourth version (pp. 47–48)**

Abraham was cool and composed until he actually drew the knife, but then Isaac sees him shudder and loses his own faith. Abraham suspects nothing.

Note that this is the only one of the four variations to discuss what Isaac actually thinks. And it's perhaps the hardest of the four to interpret.

What is the picture of faith we are to draw from this variation? That faith is what Abraham had when he drew the knife and shuddered? In that case, faith → a willingness to do the horrible even though it revolts you?

Or are we to say that faith is what Isaac lost when he saw Abraham shudder? In that case, faith → the belief that God will make everything work out without a high price to pay? Or perhaps that faith depends on other people's attitudes and reactions? I'm not sure.

### **General observation**

However you work out the details of these variations on the story of Abraham, there is one crucial thing to note about them:

In all of them, Abraham is actually willing to kill Isaac. And yet none of them is a real Abraham, the “father of faith.” Hence, whatever we are to make of the details, it appears that faith is more than just doing whatever God commands you to do—even in extreme circumstances. At least for Johannes de silentio, the point of the story, and the point of faith, has got to be more than just a willingness to obey no matter what.

(Note: Kierkegaard drafted several versions of these preliminary variations on Abraham, and continued to do so even after the book was completed and published. In fact, in a couple of versions from much later in his life [1851 and 1853], Abraham actually kills Isaac. In one of them, God asks Abraham, “Didn't you hear me tell you to stop at the last moment?” And Abraham says, “Yes, I did. But I knew it couldn't be you, because you

told me to do it!” [I must say, Abraham has a good point here.] God gives Abraham another Isaac—but it isn’t the same Isaac, and Abraham is not happy.

In another version of the story, God brings Isaac back to life. But Abraham decides it’s in a sense not the same Isaac, because Isaac has grown old as a result of the knowledge that he was picked out by God for the sacrifice! Isaac was ruined.

The passages may be found in *Journals and Papers* III, pp. 361–62 [*Pap.* X<sup>4</sup> A 338, n.d. 1851] & II, p. 508–09 (*Pap.* X<sup>5</sup> A 132, n.d. 1853), and in the Hong/Hong translation of *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* [KW VI], pp. 267–6, 270–71.)

If none of these versions is the “real” Abraham, what more is involved? Well, let’s see if we can find out.

### ***Speech in praise of Abraham (pp. 49–56)***

The next section of the text is a “Speech in Praise of Abraham.” By and large, we don’t have to spend a lot of time on this. It is mainly a kind of prolonged, lyrical rhapsodizing about Abraham, coupled with a highly dramatic telling of the story of Abraham’s sacrifice—which I’ve already told you.

But there are a few things to be said about this passage:

1. Johannes de silentio is clearly trying to get us—both here and in other parts of the text—to put ourselves in Abraham’s place, to try to ask what it must have been like for Abraham.

In other words, let’s not soften the story by rushing to explain what it means in abstract terms—“obedience to God,” “sacrificing the best one has,” etc. Those considerations are all correct as far as they go, but they miss something essential—the “pathos,” the “passion.”

And this is what Johannes finds so astonishing and difficult about the story. It’s not so much that there is a conceptual problem about the story (although there is no doubt some of that as well); it’s rather how can he do that!

Suppose you’re told about someone who rubbed his eyeballs out with a piece of coarse sandpaper—slowly, while pouring salt on all the time. There’s no special conceptual problem about doing that; you just take a piece of sandpaper and a salt-shaker and go to work. But the problem is: How could he do that!

2. There’s at least one other thing to notice about this *Speech*. Johannes says (pp. 53–54) that Abraham had faith for this life. That is, his hopes, his confidence, his faith—in fact, the whole Covenant he had with God—was all about this world, not about how “it will all work out for the best in eternity.” As Johannes says (p. 54—emphasis added):



But it was for this life that Abraham believed, he believed he would become old in his land, honoured among his people, blessed in his kin, eternally remembered in Isaac [that is, he would be remembered in this world even after his own death], ...

Keep that focus on this world in mind.

### ***Preamble from the heart***

First of all, notice something about the structure of *Fear and Trembling*. The full title is *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric*. Now I remarked earlier on how we get we first get all this preliminary material:

- The Preface
- The “Attunement”
- “Speech in Praise of Abraham”

And only then we come to the section called “*Problemata*.” The first part of that section is entitled “Preamble from the Heart,” and then finally we get a discussion the three problems.

I want to suggest—and it is only a suggestion—that the phrase “Dialectical Lyric” reflects the two main divisions of the book:

(1) The first part, the “buildup” material,” is the lyrical part. That doesn’t mean it’s poetry, or that it is to be judged only on the basis of its literary merits (which are pretty strong). But it is true that these qualities are especially on display in this first part of the book.

(2) The second part, the “*Problemata*” section, is the dialectical part. That is, it is the more theoretical part. We can already begin to see this in the “Preamble from the Heart,” where we get the discussion of the important notions of the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith, and where we begin to get some actual theory and not just rhapsodizing over how great Abraham is and how no one can understand him! We certainly don’t abandon the high-powered rhetorical flourishes of the build-up material, but we do get more theory.

As partial confirmation of this hypothesis about the significance of the phrase “Dialectical Lyric,” I call your attention to the very last paragraph of the “Preamble from the Heart” (p. 82):

What I intend now is to extract from the story of Abraham its dialectical element, in the form of *problemata*, in order to see how monstrous a paradox faith is, a paradox capable of making a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God, a paradox which gives Isaac back to Abraham, which no thought can grasp because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.

(That last part is a jab at Hegel, for whom thought—philosophy—went beyond faith.)  
All right, now what goes on in the “Preamble”?

### ***Offering the best you have***

At first it looks as if we’re simply going to get more of the same—more lyricism. For instance (p. 58):

Now the story of Abraham has the remarkable quality that it will always be glorious no matter how impoverished our understanding of it, but only—for it is true here too—if we are willing to ‘labour and be heavy laden’. But labour they will not, and yet they still want to understand the story.

But what’s he talking about? He’s saying, in effect, people (“they”) want to talk about Abraham, they want to praise him, glorify him. But they want to do it on the cheap. That is, instead of facing up to the full significance of the story, what they do is water it down and then praise that! He goes on (p. 58):

One speaks in Abraham’s honour, but how? By making it a commonplace.

For example, they look at the story of Abraham, and interpret it like this (p. 58):

his greatness was that he so loved God that he was willing to offer him the best he had.

Note: We’ve seen that phrase before. Recall, back in “Attunement,” Variation III, Abraham could not see how it was a sin to offer the best he had to God, although how could it not be a sin to be willing to sacrifice his son? But again, the variations we get in the “Attunement” are not the way the story actually happened; all those versions of “Abraham” fall short of the real Abraham.

The same phrase comes up back in the “Speech in Praise of Abraham” (in the “lyrical” part, earlier in the book than the “Preamble,” which is where we are now), where Johannes suggests what might have happened if Abraham had doubted (p. 54)—NB another false Abraham:

He would have marched out to the mountain in Moriah, chopped the firewood, set light to the fire, drawn the knife—

And then, Johannes suggests, instead of sacrificing Isaac, he would have killed himself! (p. 54):

[H]e would have cried out to God: ‘Do not scorn this sacrifice [i.e., me], it is not the best I possess [there’s the phrase again], that I well know; for what is an old man compared with the child of promise, but it is the best I can give. Let Isaac never come to know [recall Variation I], that he may

comfort himself in his young years.’ He [= Abraham] would have thrust the knife into his own breast. He would have been admired in the world and his name never forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired, another to be a guiding star that saves the anguished.

Remember how in “Attunement” Version III, Abraham couldn’t understand how it could be a sin to offer God the best he had. But here in the “Speech in Praise of Abraham”—we’re still not in the “Preamble”—the doubting Abraham (a fiction) certainly does understand how it can be a sin, and that’s exactly why he can’t go through with it: It’s a sin because it’s not just the best he had—it’s Isaac, his own son, whom he loves!

And that’s basically what Johannes brings out here in the “Preamble.” It’s all very good to say Abraham was willing to offer the best he had. As far as it goes, that’s true enough. But it leaves out the important part, Johannes says; it leaves out the anguish (p. 58).

(Note: The word ‘anguish’ here is ‘*Angest*’, otherwise translated as ‘dread’ or ‘anxiety’. But the word does not seem to be used here in the sense of making a criterionless choice [recall the “standard interpretation”], or in the sense in which we find it in *The Concept of Anxiety*. At least not obviously so. Here it seems to mean “anguish” in the more ordinary sense of the word.)

It was exactly the anguish, in this sense, that was the reason the doubting Abraham of the “Speech” couldn’t go through with the sacrifice of Isaac. And here in the “Preamble,” it’s exactly the anguish that people tacitly leave out when they conveniently slide from talking about Abraham’s sacrificing Isaac, whom he loves, to talking about his sacrificing the best he has.

In the Gospel, Christ meets a rich young man who wants to know what he has to do to be saved, and Christ tells him to sell all he has and give it to the poor (Matt. 19:16 ff.). Johannes tells us (p. 58):

Yet he would not have become an Abraham even had he given away the best he had. What is left out of the Abraham story [by comparing him to the young man] is the anguish; for while I am under no obligation to money, to a son the father has the highest and most sacred of obligations. Yet anguish is a dangerous affair for the squeamish, so people forget it, notwithstanding they want to talk about Abraham.

Well, fair enough. Leaving the story at the level of “offering the best you have” omits the anguish. But what does it add if we do take account of the anguish? Does that somehow make everything OK? Is it OK to kill your son, whom you love, as long as you’re anguished over it? Surely that can’t be what Johannes is suggesting!

### ***The “special case” interpretation***

And yet Johannes praises Abraham. Why? He goes on (p. 60):

Is it because Abraham has acquired proprietary rights to the title of great man, so that whatever he does is great, and if anyone else does the same it is a sin, a crying sin?

In other words, is Abraham some kind of “special case”? No, he says (p. 60):

If so, I have no wish to take part in such mindless praise.

And now we get an important passage (p. 60):

If faith cannot make it into a holy deed to murder one’s own son, then let the judgement fall on Abraham as on anyone else. If one hasn’t the courage to think this thought through, to say that Abraham was a murderer, then surely it is better to acquire that courage than to waste time on undeserved speeches in his praise. [Note: That’s exactly what Johannes himself gave just a few pages earlier, although perhaps that one wasn’t “undeserved.”] The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac.

Notice the phrase ‘the courage to think this thought through’. This, I’m convinced, is one of the key notions to get in Kierkegaard. In some of his later writings, SK says quite explicitly, “I don’t claim to have faith; but what I do claim to have is the courage to think through what it means to have faith, not to shy away from it—the courage to think the thought whole.” And even in *Fear and Trembling*, at the beginning of the very next paragraph, Johannes says, “For my own part I don’t lack the courage to think a thought whole” (p. 60).

In this case, the “thought” we’re talking about is that Abraham is a murderer—or at least an attempted murderer. How then can we praise him? As Johannes says, it only works if faith can “make it into a holy deed to murder one’s own son.”

Notice what he’s saying. Faith doesn’t make it not murder. It’s still murder; it just calls that murder (or willingness to murder) a holy deed. As he says, the ethical expression for it is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac.

This is a little like the Hegelian notion of the same thing’s being described by the language of “feeling” and “piety” vs. by the language of “philosophy.” But now the tables are turned. Rather than philosophy’s making it philosophically intelligible why we want to praise Abraham in the language of feeling and piety, instead it makes it unintelligible how we can praise Abraham without leaving something out!

### ***The “context of his times”***

But maybe you don’t think that ethically it was really murder. We need to take the Abraham story in context. Thus (p. 60):

Or perhaps Abraham simply didn’t do what the story says, perhaps in the context of his times what he did was something quite different.

That is, we sometimes hear, “human sacrifice wasn’t so unusual in the ancient world” (which is probably false), or something like that. But in that case, Johannes says (p. 60):

Then let’s forget him, for why bother remembering a past that cannot be made into a present?

### ***The “knights”***

What do we get out of this so far? The suggestion is that if we look at the Abraham story ethically and philosophically, he doesn’t come off looking like a glorious character at all. He’s an out and out murderer, or at least someone you ought to take into custody for the sake of public safety.

Obviously, if we’re going to praise Abraham, we need to say a lot more.

In any case, let’s go ahead and look at two other notions that come up in the “Preamble from the Heart”: the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith.

The “Knight of Infinite Resignation” first comes up on p. 67, although the phrase ‘infinite resignation’ is used on p. 66.

What are these two figures? Well, whatever else we can say about them:

- The Knight of Faith has faith, whereas the Knight of Infinite Resignation doesn’t; he doesn’t get that far. Therefore, we can use this discussion to illustrate what “faith” means in this book.
- In *Fear and Trembling* we get the important claim that the Knight of Infinite Resignation is the last stage before faith, that you can’t be a Knight of Faith unless you’ve already been a Knight of Infinite Resignation (75).

Does this mean you can’t have faith without being a Knight of Infinite Resignation first? (Yes, it seems so.) Or, can you have faith without being a Knight of Faith? (No, apparently not.)

In other words, does faith amount to being a Knight of Faith, and does faith require that you have been a knight if infinite resignation?

In the “Preamble from the Heart,” the discussions of the two “Knights” takes place on two levels simultaneously: **(a)** an “aesthetic,” literary description (the young man who loves a fair princess, etc.); **(b)** a more “structural,” conceptual description.

Let's look at the structural description first, and let's start with the Knight of Infinite Resignation.

***The “structure” of the knight of infinite resignation (p. 72)***

The Knight of Infinite Resignation does three things (72):

1. “For the knight will then, in the first place, have the strength to concentrate the whole of his life's content and the meaning of reality in a single wish.”

This is what is “infinite” about the situation. There is nothing that counts more for this person—it trumps everything else. (Don't think of mathematics when you hear SK talking about “infinity.” And don't use ‘infinity’ as a mere excuse to start “speaking in tongues,” to roll your eyes, sway back and forth and say anything you want. No, whatever ‘infinity’ means in Kierkegaard—and it perhaps doesn't always mean the same thing—it isn't being used as just a “mumbo-jumbo” term.)

Note: This “single wish” sounds at first like “purity of heart is to will one thing.” But I don't think that's necessarily what's going on here. Certainly the young man who loves the fair princess is not “willing one thing” in the sense SK is talking about in the Upbuilding Discourse by that title.

Then (72):

2. “Secondly, the knight will have the strength to concentrate the whole of the result of his reflection into one act of consciousness.”

What is this “whole of the result of his reflection”? Well, I think he's talking about a very particular reflection we've been told about on the previous pages. On pp. 70–71 we get the example of the young man and the princess:

A young lad falls in love with a princess, the content of his whole life lies in this love [that's the first ingredient above], and yet the relationship is one that cannot possibly be brought to fruition, be translated from ideality into reality.

And then, in a footnote (p. 71), Johannes observes that “any other interest whatever in which an individual concentrates the whole of life's reality can, when it proves unrealizable...,” do just as well. (Note once again: This is not what SK means when he's talking about “purity of heart.”)

But then a little later on p. 71, we read:

He reflects over his life's circumstances, he summons the swift thoughts that like trained doves obey his every signal, he waves his rod over them, and they rush off in all directions. [Note: the implicit reference to the story of Noah after the Flood, when he sent out some doves to see whether they

came back. If they did not, that meant there was dry land someplace.] But now when they all return as messengers of sorrow and explain to him that it is an impossibility [i.e., there is no dry land], he dismisses them, he remains alone, and he performs the movement [that is, he makes the “infinite resignation”].

I think this is the “reflection” Johannes has in mind when says on p. 72 that the Knight concentrates the whole of the result of his reflection into one act of consciousness. In short, he focuses on the impossibility of his life’s most important goal.

Notice here that, if our description of the ethical “sphere” is correct, then anyone who seriously lives the ethical life and thinks about it is going to fit these first two requirements. Ethical standards—which are “the whole of his life’s content and the meaning of reality” in that “sphere”—are ideal and “out of reach”; we will inevitably fall short.

But let’s go on. What does the Knight do in this situation? This is perhaps the puzzling part (p. 72):

3. “So the knight makes the movement, but what movement? Does he want to forget the whole thing?”

Certainly not, Johannes says. Does the Knight say, “Well, if I can’t get what I’m after, then I guess I’d better change my goals and go after something more realistic instead”? No. The Knight is not some fickle opportunist; this goal is the most important thing in his entire life, after all. He’s not just going to pretend he doesn’t want it any more.

So, Johannes says, the Knight doesn’t just “forget the whole thing.” Rather, Johannes says (p. 72):

... the knight will remember everything; but the memory is precisely the pain, and yet in his infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence.

What does that mean? Well, it means the Knight doesn’t stop trying to achieve his goal (doesn’t “forget the whole thing”), and yet he knows good and well he’s going to fail. He resolves, in other words, simply to put up with this situation (he’s “reconciled with existence”). In short, he’s willing to live a life of infinite frustration rather than

- a) be so cheap as to abandon what counts infinitely to him (in short, he preserves the first ingredient above); and rather than
- b) engage in a kind of self-deception in which he deludes himself into thinking that perhaps there is some chance of success after all (in short, he preserves the second ingredient above).

Once again, perhaps it’s the case that anyone who is a clear-headed ethical person is going to fit this description, and will therefore be a Knight of Infinite Resignation.

(Compare Kant on “regulative ideals.”) But you don’t get that sense from what Johannes is saying here. Here it seems that the Knight of Infinite Resignation is supposed to be relatively rare.

### ***The “aesthetics” of the knight of infinite resignation***

I’ve said a little about what state of mind the Knight of Infinite Resignation is in, how he is resolved to put up with a life of infinite frustration. But let’s see if we can’t get a little better feel for what it’s like.

And here let’s return to our figure of the young man who loves a fair princess (pp. 70–71). He realizes he can’t possibly marry her, not realistically, and so he “makes the movement”? What happens, exactly? Well (p. 72):

His love for the princess would take on for him the expression of an eternal love, would acquire a religious character, be transfigured into a love for the eternal being which, although it denied fulfillment, still reconciled him once more in the eternal consciousness of his love’s validity in an eternal form that no reality can take from him.

He goes on to say (p. 73):

He pays no further finite attention to what the princess does, and just this proves that he has made the movement infinitely ... [Again,] [w]hat the princess does cannot disturb him.

What does this mean? Well, some commentators—e.g., John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 46ff.—notice the talk about “a religious character” and “the eternal being,” and think Johannes is talking about God. In that case, once the Knight “makes the movement,” his love for the princess is somehow mysteriously turned into a love of God.

In my view, the problem with this interpretation is that it seems utterly implausible. Granted, the frustrated Knight could, I suppose, console himself by joining a monastery or becoming a mystic. But this sounds to me like exactly what the Knight doesn’t do; remember that the Knight doesn’t stop loving the princess, doesn’t change his goal.

I suggest that what Johannes has in mind here is not so much taking refuge in religion as a kind of eternalizing of his love for the princess. It’s no longer a matter of constant adjustments to the circumstances of daily life; it becomes a matter of principle—in a sense frozen. He’s going to love the princess no matter what she does. In a sense, as Johannes says, his love takes on a religious character, but I don’t think that means it has anything especially to do with God.

Now notice what Johannes says happens here. Once the Knight’s love is “transfigured” into “a love for the eternal being”—that is, a love for an eternal version of the princess—the Knight is reconciled “once more in the eternal consciousness of his love’s validity in



an eternal form that no reality can take from him” (p. 72). That is, this so called “transfigured” love is guaranteed not to fail. The Knight doesn’t succeed in actually winning the princess in this life, but he does win a kind principled dignity or honor. That’s why Johannes described him as so “other worldly”—Knights of Infinite Resignation are “strangers in the world” (p. 70).

My point is that this is exactly what Abraham does not do! Abraham, we know, “had faith for this life” (p. 53), not in some eternal realm; his faith was not “other worldly.”

### ***The “structure” of the knight of faith***

OK, now let’s talk about the Knight of Faith. Structurally, the Knight of Faith does everything the Knight of Infinite Resignation does, but he does one thing more.

The fact that the Knight of Faith does everything the Knight of Infinite Resignation does means you cannot be a Knight of Faith without being a Knight of Infinite Resignation first. Thus (p. 75):

Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith.

But what’s the extra thing the Knight of Faith does? Well, in addition to recognizing the impossibility of achieving the whole goal and purpose of his life, and in addition to reconciling himself to that fact—while still keeping the same goal and purpose—the Knight of Faith also is quite confident he will achieve his goal anyway, “on the strength of the absurd.”

What does this mean? One thing it means is that the Knight of Faith is committed to a contradiction: both to the impossibility and to the sure success of getting what he’s after. In short, he’s committed to the absurd.

In a sense, this fits what we’ve seen earlier, where we were talking about *Postscript*, where Johannes Climacus tells us that faith is not just “holding fast” to an objective uncertainty but “holding fast” to an absurdity.

Now some commentators—Alastair Hannay, our translator, among them—go to some pains to insist that this does not mean that the Knight of Faith is committed to an out and out logical contradiction. For instance, in his “Introduction,” Hannay says (p. 17):

The word ‘absurd’ here means not ‘logically impossible’ but ‘humanly impossible’, or ‘in any intelligible way impossible’.

Surely there is textual evidence for this. In the “Preamble,” just after introducing this extra step the Knight of Faith takes, Johannes de silentio says (p. 75):

The moment the knight was resigned he was convinced of the impossibility, humanly speaking; that was a conclusion of the

understanding, and he had energy enough to think it. In an infinite sense, however, it was possible, through renouncing it.

But I'm not so sure. I don't think the textual evidence is that clear. It is easy to understand why commentators want to say this. They want to clear Kierkegaard of the charge of advocating out and out irrationalism. But

- First of all, Johannes de silentio—and for that matter Johannes Climacus—are not Kierkegaard; they are pseudonyms.
- Second, I think it is always dangerous to try to defend Kierkegaard from the charge of maintaining outrageously extreme views. He does maintain outrageously extreme views, he tells us you're going to be offended by his extreme views, and he does all this repeatedly in his signed works.
- Third, Abraham goes up the mountain fully believing that God can be trusted to keep his word, even though—as we've already seen—he has to realize that, no matter how the story turns out, God is a liar and therefore cannot be trusted to keep his word! That is an outright logical contradiction: God will keep his word, even though he's a liar no matter what happens. You can reword this in a way that isn't contradictory if you want to tone it down, just as you can tone down the story of Abraham in other ways (“sacrificing the best you have,” “Abraham is a special case”). Or you can word it this way, which is contradictory, and which is, after all, a correct description of what Abraham is committed to.

Nevertheless, there's room for argument here, and let's leave it as an unsettled question just what kind of “absurdity” is involved here.

### ***The “aesthetics” of the knight of faith***

Once we turn to the “aesthetics” of the Knight of Faith—that is, once we pick up our story of the young man and the fair princess again—we get some further information about the Knight. And things become pretty puzzling.

The Knight of Infinite Resignation, recall, continued to love the princess, but his love became eternalized, elevated to a matter of principle, no longer subject to the contingencies and uncertainties of this life.

But the Knight of Faith doesn't do that. Abraham's faith, recall, is for this life (p. 53), not just for eternity.

This raises an interesting problem about the relation between the two knights. Both **(1)** have an infinite goal, and both **(2)** recognize its impossibility. That much stays structurally the same throughout the two stories. In addition, we said, the Knight of Infinite Resignation required a third ingredient, which we called **(3)** the “infinite movement,” “resignation,” or being “reconciled with existence.”

But if we ask what that third ingredient adds over and above what we already have in the first two ingredients, the only story we got was about making everything eternal and other-worldly. This is a point about the psychology of the Knight of Infinite Resignation.

Now, we say, that is just what the Knight of Faith does not do. His faith is “for this life.”

Does this mean that Knight of Faith does not after all do everything the Knight of Infinite Resignation does (and one thing more)? But Johannes tells us he does (p. 75):

He does exactly the same as the other knight, he infinitely renounces the claim to the love which is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain; but then comes the marvel, he makes one more movement, more wonderful than anything else, for he says: ‘I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible.’

The picture here doesn't seem to be that infinite resignation is a stage the Knight of Faith passes through, so that by the time he becomes the Knight of Faith he is no longer making the “movement of resignation.” No, the picture seems to be that he continues to make the “movement of resignation” even while he is a Knight of Faith.

But the problem is that we don't have any idea what that “infinite resignation” consists of psychologically, except for the description of eternalizing the love for the princess, making it other-worldly—which the Knight of Faith doesn't do.

I don't know how to solve this puzzle.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The knight of faith cannot make the additional movement on his own***

In any case, notice something: As a Knight of Infinite Resignation, you've made the “movement of infinity” and given up what is infinitely important to you. (Not that you no longer want it; it's just that you're realized you're not going to get it.) That's hard work—in fact, it exhausts you. You have no energy left. In particular, you have no energy left to make the additional movement required of the Knight of Faith.

Therefore, if nevertheless you do go ahead and make that additional movement—if you not only renounce but also firmly believe you're going to get the object of your infinite

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<sup>1</sup> But consider this. In the passage I just read you, we read that the Knight of Faith, like the Knight of Infinite Resignation (p. 75):

infinitely renounced the claim to the love which is the content of his life.

Nevertheless, a couple of pages later, we read (77):

Through faith Abraham did not renounce his claim on Isaac, through his faith he received Isaac.

And a few lines earlier, we read (77):

Through faith I don't renounce anything, on the contrary in faith I receive everything.

focus—that’s not something you can do on your own; on the contrary, it has to be something that is done to you, or—perhaps better—something given to you. Thus (p. 78):

But by my own strength I cannot get the least little thing of what belongs to finitude [once I’ve become a Knight of Infinite Resignation]; for I am continually using my energy to renounce everything. By my own strength I can give up the princess, and I shall be no sulker but find joy and peace and repose in my pain, but with my own strength I cannot get her back again, for all that strength is precisely what I use to renounce my claim on her. But by faith, says that marvelous knight [= the Knight of Faith], by faith you will get her on the strength of the absurd.

In short, faith—much less the success of what you believe by faith—is not something you can get under your own power. You can be a Knight of Infinite Resignation on your own, but you cannot be a Knight of Faith on your own.

As Johannes says (p. 76):

that requires more-than-human powers.

He means this—and I think Kierkegaard himself, not just his pseudonym Johannes de silentio, means this—quite literally.

This is our first look at the problem of Pelagianism in Kierkegaard. Pelagianism is a theological heresy that, in effect, maintains that it is possible to save oneself under one’s own power, that it’s possible to have faith on your own. The orthodox view instead is that no, you cannot do this by yourself; you need God’s help.

We’ll talk a lot more about this later on. But I think it is an absolutely crucial thing in Kierkegaard.

In any event, let’s now move on to the *Problemata* themselves.

### ***The first two “problemata”***

I’m not going to touch the third *problema* except in passing, even though I’ve asked you to read it. There is a lot of interesting stuff there, but I confess I have no idea what it all comes to.

Instead, I’m going to focus on the first two problemata. And I’m not going to spend a lot of time on these, because I think we’ve got a lot of the questions out on the table already.

The first problema is (p. 83): “Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?”

The second is (p. 96): “Is there an absolute duty to God?”

The two are very similar questions. And we are surely given to understand that the answers to the two questions are going to be the same. They go hand in hand. And we are also surely given to understand that if the answer to them is yes, then we have a radical reversal of the Hegelian picture.

For example, notice how all three *problemata* begin. Each of them begins by saying

The ethical as such is the universal

and then goes on to say that as the universal it “applies to everyone” (*Problema* I, p. 83), it “is the divine” (*Problema* II, p. 96), and “it is in turn the disclosed” (*Problema* III, p. 108—i.e., the “public”—from which we then go on to talk about why then didn’t Abraham disclose what he was up to, why he kept silent).

The claim that begins each of the three *problemata*, that “the ethical as such is the universal,” is a basic Hegelian claim. Remember the Hegelian notion of “social morality” (*Sittlichkeit*).

Then, in each of the three *problemata*, we get a little development of the implications of saying “the ethical as such is the universal.” Then we get the statement (this structure isn’t quite so marked in *Problema* III, but you can find it) that, if this is the way it is, then Hegel is right (about ethics), but that Hegel is wrong in treating Abraham in these terms.

### **The first *problema***

What does the question in the first *problema* mean? What does the phrase “teleological suspension of the ethical” mean?

Well, ‘teleological’ comes from Greek ‘*telos*’ (τέλος) meaning “goal” or “purpose” or “end.” (Most basically, a “target.”) So a “teleological” suspension of the ethical is going to be a “suspension” of the ethical for the sake of some goal or purpose.

The term ‘suspension’, I think, is meant to suggest the Hegelian dialectic. In the Hegelian dialectic, the thesis and the antithesis are sometimes said to be suspended in the synthesis. So ‘suspended’ doesn’t just mean “cancelled”; it means rather something like “preserved, but at a higher level.”

So the question “Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?” in effect asks whether it is possible to “go beyond” ethics for the sake of some further goal or purpose, but in such a way that one is justified in doing so?

The notion of being “justified” is crucial to *Problema* I. The question is clearly not simply whether we can stop being ethical for the sake of doing something else, because the answer to that is “of course we can.” We can act for the sake of whatever we choose. We can sin, for instance; or we can be an aesthete, a Don Giovanni.

No, the question is something more than that. As Johannes repeatedly wonders, can we be justified in doing so? Thus the Knight of Faith (Abraham) (p. 90):

puts himself as the single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute.  
Is he justified? His justification is, once again, the paradox ...

And again (p. 90):

How does the single individual assure himself that he is justified?

So the question is all about being justified in not being ethical. But “justified” in what sense? Ethically justified? But in that case, we haven’t gone beyond the ethical at all.

The same thing arises with *Problema* II: “Is there an absolute duty to God?” The word ‘duty’ sounds like an ethical word if I ever heard one. So what’s going on?

*Problema* I spends a lot of time talking about how if we treat the story of Abraham ethically, then we cannot praise him; ethically speaking, he is a murderer, and cannot be justified.

That’s the point of the discussion of three “tragic heroes” early on in *Problema* I (pp. 86–87—look at Hannay’s notes for details on these allusions): Agamemnon, in the context of the Trojan War; Jephtha in the Book of Judges; and the story of Brutus from Roman history, who had to execute his two sons for treason. (This is not the same as the Brutus of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.)

In each case we have a story that looks superficially like Abraham’s; in each case we have a father who is prepared to kill his child. And yet in each case, Johannes argues, we have a story that can be treated entirely in terms of ethics in such a way that the tragic hero ends up looking heroic, whereas in the case of Abraham we do not have such a story.

In these other cases, what we have is what in ethics is sometimes called a collision of duties. We often find ourselves in situations where we have conflicting ethical duties, and we have to make a choice. In such a case, what we do if we’re being ethical is to prioritize our ethical duties and then follow the higher duty. And that’s exactly what happened in the case of our three tragic heroes.

In each case, the father’s personal ethical duty to his child is overridden by a prior ethical duty to the state (or, in the case of Jephtha, to keep his vow to God). So, while their situation was terrible, and while they would each surely have fulfilled their duty to their children if they weren’t in this situation, a higher duty takes precedence.

In each of these cases, the tragic hero is courageous, in each case he is being heroically so. But in each case, we don’t go beyond the ethical.

A point of clarification: Note that the tragic hero is not a Knight of Infinite Resignation. The tragic hero does not give up what he values most of all; it is not impossible—humanly speaking or otherwise—for him to get what he values most of all, or at least that’s not the point of the story. (He just can’t get everything he wants.) What he does instead is to give up something he values very much for the sake of something he values even more. At best, the tragic hero is a Knight of Finite Resignation.

In any event, the case of Abraham, Johannes argues, cannot be understood in terms of the tragic hero. Why not?

Well, what higher ethical duty is being served by sacrificing Isaac? His duty to the state? No, the state is not involved here at all. There is no “state” in this story, only Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac.

His duty to the Covenant? But he’s not servicing the Covenant by sacrificing Isaac; on the contrary, Isaac is the embodiment of the Covenant. By sacrificing Isaac, he’s destroying the Covenant by his own hands!

Perhaps, you might want to say, there is a prior ethical duty to obey God no matter what, and that this duty overrides everything else.

That might work, although it’s not the interpretation Johannes adopts. Notice what it means. It means we have, in effect, something like what is called a divine command ethics, whereby ethical duties get to be duties simply because God commands them. (It’s not as if he commands them because they are in some independent sense “ethically right”; no, they get to be “ethically right” because he commands them.)

It also means that Abraham was “justified” in doing what he did, justified in the sense of ethically justified.

Further, it means the story of Abraham, so interpreted, could be treated entirely in “ethical” terms. Thus, the story of Abraham would not in that case imply a “teleological suspension of the ethical.”

But—notice—it still means that Hegel was wrong in saying what he did about Abraham, because this picture of ethics is not Hegel’s. Hegel does not have a “divine command” (and so arbitrary) picture of ethics.

### ***What Is the question?***

Let’s back away from the text for a moment and see if we can orient ourselves. An important part of the problem in talking about this part of the text is to get clear on exactly what is being asked.

The *problemata* ask about ethics, about teleology, about duty, about justification. All these expressions tend to run together in our minds, and that perhaps confuses what is going on here. So let’s look more closely.

We already know—or we take ourselves to know, in virtue of our discussion of Kierkegaard’s three “existence spheres” or “stages”—that there is a distinction between “values” in the sense of ethical values (“ideals”) and “values” in the sense personal priorities.

When we talked about the three “stages,” we said which one you were in is a question of what your priorities are, and that when one makes a “criterionless choice” to change from one stage to another, it’s a major event, a complete reordering of your priorities, of what ultimately counts for you.

In that sense, we can talk about personal values. One thing you might adopt as your personal value, what counts most for you, is ethical value, ethical ideals. But that's not the only option. You might choose to let other things have more weight for you.

And insofar as we can talk about personal values, we can perhaps also talk about certain behaviors' being "justified" in terms of those personal values. Don Giovanni's lecherous behavior is in that sense "justified" in terms of his overriding goal of enjoying himself, even though it's far from being justified in ethical terms.

Similarly, with a little stretch of terminology, it is perhaps not implausible to talk about duties to one's personal values. That is, certain kinds of behavior follow naturally if you have certain priorities. These may be far from ethical duties, of course. Don Giovanni may well feel regret or disappointment if he fails at some conquest he's going after in accordance with his priorities, but he certainly doesn't feel ethical guilt or pangs of conscience.

And finally, if we can—with a little stretch—talk about non-ethical duties, perhaps we can also talk about a non-ethical teleology as well.

So, a lot of the terminology we encounter in these *problemata* can be tracked in two parallel senses at once: (1) the ethical sense, and (2) the personal preference sense.

But, while I think it's probably important to recognize this distinction, recognizing it does not help one bit in explaining what is going on in the questions these first two *problemata* are asking.

## **The ethical sense**

Consider the ethical sense first:

1. *Problema I*: Is there an ethical "teleological suspension of the ethical"? That is, is it possible to suspend the ethical for the sake of a higher ethical goal? No of course not, because—as we saw with the cases of the tragic hero—that's not a suspension of the ethical at all. That stays entirely within the ethical realm. Of course we can suspend one ethical goal for the sake of a higher ethical goal, and that's exactly what happens in the case of "collisions of duty." But it's clear that *Problema I* means to contrast those cases with what the *Problema* is asking about. So *Problema I* becomes trivialized if we read it as about a higher ethical telos.
2. *Problema II*: Is there an absolute ethical duty to God? That is, is obedience to God our highest, our absolute, ethical duty? Well, yes, if you have a divine command ethics, or perhaps if you have any ethical theory where God is guaranteed never to command anything contrary to ethics. But in either of those cases, the story of Abraham does not contain a "teleological suspension of the ethical," contrary to what Johannes says in *Problema I*. In short, is there an absolute ethical duty to God, as *Problema II* asks? Only on an account that is inconsistent with what he says in *Problema I*. So once again, if we read our terms in an ethical sense, the answer has to be "No, of course not"—not if Johannes knows what he's saying.



## The “personal preference” sense

Now consider the personal preference sense:

1. *Problema I*: Is there a preferential “teleological suspension of the ethical”? That is, does Abraham choose to let something besides ethics count more for him? Yes, of course, he does, at least to hear Johannes tell the story. But by the same token, Don Giovanni also chooses to let something besides ethics count more for him. Is Abraham “justified”? Well, he’s not ethically justified, as we’ve seen Johannes argue; but he’s justified in terms of faith. So too, Don Giovanni is not ethically justified in seducing “in Spain 1003”; but he is justified aesthetically. In general, any behavior conforming to one or another of the three “lifestyles” is justified in terms of that lifestyle. But once again, if that’s all the question means, then *Problema I* is trivialized.
2. *Problema II*: Is there a preferential absolute duty to God? Well, there is if you prefer the life of faith, obviously. But not if you prefer the aesthetic life, and maybe not if you prefer the ethical life, depending on what kind of ethics you prefer. Again, the point is so obvious that you wonder why Johannes would bother to ask it.

So what exactly is the issue here?

### **Some suggestions**

Here are some suggestions. I don’t have any knockdown arguments against any of them, although I have my own favorite suggestion.

#### **First suggestion**

The first suggestion is that the ethical meaning of the terms is the one intended throughout the *Problemata*, and that what Johannes is doing is in effect just arguing against the view that Hegelian “social ethics” (*Sittlichkeit*) is the only way to think about ethics.

In short, there is another kind of morality besides social morality—a “teleological suspension of Hegelian ethics.” So the reply to *Problema I* is yes there is a teleological suspension of the ethical—and it’s Abraham!

On this reading, when Johannes says “the ethical as such is the universal” at the beginning of each of the three *Problemata*, he doesn’t really believe that. He’s just quoting that Hegelian ethical notion in order to subject it to testing and scrutiny. And in fact, when tested against the story of Abraham, the Hegelian slogan breaks down. But we’re still talking about ethics in the sense of morality—just not Hegelian morality.

This is an interpretation that has caught on among some recent interpreters. For example, John Lippitt. And it is an interpretation that no doubt appeals to a lot of people working

in recent philosophical ethics, where there are all sorts of ways of thinking about ethics and morality besides social morality. There's virtue ethics, for example, or ethics that appeal to moral intuitions of real ethical facts ("moral realism") that may or may not fit the prevailing standards of one's society.

Still, I am disinclined to think this is what is going on. If that's all Johannes is doing, then he could have done it much more straightforwardly and easily. Why all this talk about how he can't understand Abraham? There's nothing particularly hard about understanding virtue ethics, for instance. But maybe he's just being ironical and making fun of the Hegelians.

### **Second suggestion**

Notice that our difficulties with the personal preference reading of our terms were all derived from the view that the various lifestyles or ways to live are each independent "spheres of existence," each one self-contained and immune to criticism from outside. Thus, the aesthetic life is aesthetically "justified," etc.

But that picture of the lifestyles is part and parcel of the standard interpretation of what Kierkegaard is up to.

So perhaps our difficulties here are our first indication that SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH THE STANDARD INTERPRETATION.

Well, maybe.

### **Third suggestion**

But the suggestion I like best is different. The questions Johannes is asking are not relativized at all. He's not asking us whether within the ethical sphere, there is an ethical "teleological suspension of the ethical," for instance. As we've seen, that trivializes the discussion. And he's not asking us whether each sphere is "justified" in its own terms. Once again, we've seen that this trivializes the questions.

Rather, what Johannes is doing is asking us to decide which sphere WE'RE in, to take a stand. The question is not whether Abraham is ethically justified, or whether he's justified in terms of whatever "existence sphere" he finds himself in. The question is whether he's justified—period. And in order for you to decide that, you're going to have to decide where you stand.

The reason I like this interpretation is that it is exactly the kind of thing SK is worried about elsewhere.

In his book *A Literary Review*, for instance, SK says that what the "present age" lacks is passion, the courage to take a stand. Before anyone is willing to say what he thinks, he first has to look around for confirmation from others, and only when he is reassured by them will he timidly venture to say what he—that is, everyone else—thinks.

I recall when it first dawned on me how right SK is on this. Shortly after I had read *A Literary Review* for the first time, I was teaching a course on Philosophy of Religion, and we were talking about various “proofs” for the existence of God. I don’t remember which “proof” it was we were talking about, but I tried to make the case as strongly as I could, and to present the argument in as persuasive a light as I could manage. And then I asked the students for their reactions to the argument.

One student raised his hand and said he thought the proof wasn’t a very good proof because “you’re never going to get everyone to agree on that.” I don’t recall the details of what I replied, but I do recall that it was unsatisfactory and that I went home bothered by his response.

I finally figured out what was bothering me. He wasn’t answering my question. I asked him what he thought, and he told me not everybody else would agree. Yes, no doubt, but did he agree? Well, he replied (I’m reconstructing and extrapolating now), “who’s to say?”

Answer: YOU’RE to say! You’re the one I asked, what do you think? Don’t tell me about other people. I’m not asking for a statistical report, I’m asking for your verdict. Are you afraid to form an opinion of your own unless you’re in a crowd of other people? Reply: “But I could be wrong.” Answer: OF COURSE you could be wrong. I’m not asking for an infallible guarantee, I’m asking for what you think. Come on! What is it?

And, I suggest, the same thing may well be what is at stake in *Fear and Trembling*. “Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?” “Is there an absolute duty to God”—regardless of what ethics says? I’m not asking what some anonymous “one” would say in one or another lifestyle, I’m asking what you say!

In short, what do you think about Abraham? Johannes tells us (p. 95) that the story of Abraham contains a teleological suspension of the ethical. Do you agree?

I suspect something like this is responsible for why it is so difficult to frame the questions in the *Problemata* in innocent, theoretical, non-committal terms.

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## What’s wrong with the “standard picture”?

So far, I’ve given you pretty much a “standard” interpretation of Kierkegaard, taken from no one source in particular, but from a variety of sources, with probably some idiosyncratic features of my own thrown in too. I now want to begin talking about what’s wrong with this “standard picture.” But first, let’s look back over what we’ve done.

### ***Summary review of the “standard picture”***

Distribute handout on “The ‘standard’ picture”

1. Kierkegaard is a reaction to Hegel. (Not that this is all there is to Kierkegaard, but it's certainly present.)
  - a. Part of that reaction consists of a reversal of emphasis, so that Kierkegaard puts a strong accent on the individual, not on general principles.
  - b. Another part of that reaction is the sense of “practical urgency” in all of Kierkegaard’s writings, and his lack of patience with the purely theoretical aspects of philosophical “system-building.”
2. Then we had the three “stages on life’s way,” the “existence spheres,” the “lifestyles” that frame much of Kierkegaard’s writing: the “aesthetic,” the “ethical” and the “religious” spheres
  - a. Each sphere has its own governing principle, its own disadvantages or negative aspects, its own self-contained way of looking at things.
  - b. There is a sense in which the “ethical” stage is central, insofar as what’s bothering you in the aesthetic stage is exactly the lack of focus or purpose or commitment that the ethical stage offers; it is not yet ethical. What’s bothering you in the religious stage is just the sense of going beyond ethics; the religious stage is no longer ethical. And what’s bothering you in the ethical stage is just that you will inevitably fall short of your ethical standards and ideals, so that in that sphere you are inevitably not ethical enough.
  - c. Despite this, the three “spheres” or “stages” don’t really have any necessary order to them, even though they are always conventionally presented in the order I just gave them.
  - d. There is nothing inevitable about moving from one stage to another in this structure. The disadvantages or negative features of one stage are never enough by themselves to force you into one of the other stages, since—first of all—the other stages have their own disadvantages and negative features too, and—second—moving out of the stage or sphere you are currently in involves turning your back on the priorities that are most important to you, abandoning what matters most to you in life. And, while it’s always possible to do that, it’s not very likely. What could possibly matter so much to you that it would make you abandon what matters most to you?
  - e. It is impossible to live in two (or all three) spheres at once, because you “cannot serve two masters” (as the Scripture says). If you’re lucky, you can perhaps get by living for a long time in circumstances where the demands of two or more lifestyles don’t conflict with one another—so that you can’t tell which one is governing you. But in fact you’re following the one or the other—and it would be clear which one you’re following if the occasion should ever arise where the demands of the two lifestyles do conflict.

- f. The choice of which “sphere of existence” to live in has to be a riterionless choice, simply in view of the kind of radical choice it is. (Anderson doesn’t seem to have this feature of the “standard” view.)
  - g. Such choices are always accompanied by dread or anxiety, and are quite rare.
3. Also as part of the “standard picture,” we talked about the notion of “existence” in Kierkegaard, as meaning existence in time, as a changing, developing being, as opposed to the timeless, “eternal” kind of changeless reality God has.
- We also talked about another sense of ‘existence’ in Kierkegaard, according to which the only things that “exist” are people who make riterionless choices.
4. Then we got the discussion of “truth,” where we found the distinction between:
- a. “Eternal” or “essential” truth, which is just God.
  - b. “Objective” truth, which is just a matter of corresponding with the facts.
  - c. “Subjective” truth, which we saw defined as “an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness” (Bretall, p. 214)—that is, a passionate commitment to something we have insufficient evidence for.
5. Finally, we got the discussion of the “paradoxical” and the “absurd.” Basically, a “paradox” for Kierkegaard is a blatant incommensurability, a mismatch between two things. For example, in “subjective” truth, the incommensurable mismatch between my passionate commitment, on the one hand, and the meagerness of the evidence, on the other. Or to make it even more paradoxical, an existing human being—in time—makes a passionate commitment to the reality of a completely uncertain God, who is outside time and is eternal. That’s a double mismatch, and a high-order paradox.
6. If what we’re passionately committed to is not just uncertain, without sufficient evidence, but paradoxical all by itself—so that the paradox is not just in our passionate relation to this uncertain object, but already in the object itself—in particular, if what we’re passionately committed to is the idea of the Incarnation, an eternal God who is also a temporal human being, then Kierkegaard calls a paradoxical object like that “absurd”—and defines faith as “this absurdity, held fast in the passion of inwardness.” (Bretall, p. 220.)

### ***Initial problems with the standard picture***

#### **How many stages are there?**

We’ve already seen at least one thing wrong with this standard picture—or if not exactly wrong, then at least more complicated than the standard picture presents it. And that’s the

business about there being exactly three “stages on life’s way” or “existence spheres” in Kierkegaard’s view.

Kierkegaard does give the conventional list of stages in his *Stages on Life’s Way*. (See the handout on “The Standard Picture,” p. 2, passage 1.) And the same three “spheres” do come up elsewhere as well. But in *Postscript*, he divides the “religious” sphere into two: “Religion A” and “Religion B.” Religion B is full-blown Christian faith, whereas Religion A is something less. Does this mean there are four stages?

Again in *Postscript*, we get a discussion of “irony” and of “humor” as belonging somewhere in this picture, although it’s not clear just where.

The claim is that “irony” is a kind of “border territory” between the aesthetic and the ethical, and “humor” is another such “border territory” that comes right before the “religious.” Does that mean it’s a transitional stage between Religion A and Religion B, or between the ethical and either form of the “religious”? Who knows?

Consider this passage, for example (*Postscript*, Hong/Hong, p. 531 n.)—see the handout again, p. 2, passage 2:

The spheres are related as follows: (1) immediacy [that is, aesthetics?], (2) finite common sense; (3) irony, (4) ethics with irony as its incognito; (5) humor; (6) religiousness with humor as its incognito—and then, finally, (7) the essentially Christian, distinguished by the paradoxical accentuation of existence, by the paradox, by the break with immanence, and by the absurd. Therefore, religiousness with humor as its incognito is still not Christian religiousness.

Notice the punctuation in that list. Kierkegaard was very conscious of punctuation, and prided himself on using it extremely carefully to suggest important nuances. In the English, we have “immediacy [comma], finite common sense [semicolon]; irony, [comma], ethics with irony as its incognito [semicolon],” and so on. But that’s not how it goes in the Danish. In the Danish, each item is separated by a semicolon. So it looks to me as if this passage gives us no fewer than seven “spheres,” including some we haven’t heard anything about yet.

On the other hand, look at passage 3 on the handout, likewise from *Postscript* (p. 555, a few pages later):

The religious address [that is, an “upbuilding discourse” or a “sermon”] will represent the pathos-filled and cross out the dialectical [whatever that means], and therefore—however well intentioned, [it will represent] at times a jumbled, noisy pathos of all sorts, esthetics, ethics, Religiousness A, and Christianity—it is therefore at times self-contradictory ...

This time we seem to get four items in our list, and—if we want to take seriously the “of all sorts” in the passage—the passage at least suggests that the list is meant to be exhaustive.

Finally, look in Bretall, p. 324, right at the beginning of the selection from the posthumously published *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*. The title of PART ONE, section A, is “The Ambiguity or Duplicity in the Whole Authorship: As to Whether the Author is an Aesthetic or a Religious Author.”

Here we seem to be given only two choices: aesthetic and religious. Are there then no ethical authors? In the same work, *Either/Or* is listed among the aesthetic writings, even though the “Or” half of it is all about ethics. Is ethics being incorporated as a part of aesthetics here—or what?

My point in dwelling on this is just to ask where we get the idea that Kierkegaard has this three-part structure in mind in his overall authorship. There may be yet other places besides *Stages on Life’s Way* where he operates in terms of three and only three stages, but if so, I haven’t found them, although there are lots of places that suggest the three stages.

At the same time, I should point out that the “standard picture” doesn’t really allow for “transitional” stages, as we seem to find in that one passage from *Postscript* (p. 2, passage 2 on the handout). On the “standard picture,” there is no natural ordering among the spheres, no transitions that would lead from one stage to the “next.” There is no “next.” On the contrary, each “sphere” is “self-contained.”

### **How rare are criterionless choices?**

Another feature of the “standard picture” is that these life-defining “criterionless choices” we talked about are pretty rare. People do make them sometimes, but they don’t make them every day, and some people probably don’t make ever them at all.

On the other hand, criterionless choices are what give rise to dread or anxiety, as we’ve seen.

Now, as we’ll find when we get into *The Concept of Anxiety* in the second half of the semester, in that work “anxiety” is far from rare. On the contrary, it’s pervasive, it’s a permanent feature of human psychology.

How do we account for this difference?

Those of you who’ve had my introductory-level course on existentialism, where I talk about Sartre, will perhaps recall that in Sartre, anguish—for which he uses the French equivalent of the German ‘*Angst*’ and Danish ‘*angest*’ (alternatively, Danish ‘*Angst*’, just as in German, which is the word translated as ‘dread’ or ‘anxiety’—is something we cannot get away from. For Sartre, every decision we make is in effect a “criterionless choice.”

Sartre, in a famous passage, talks about a habitual gambler who is trying to break his habit but has to remake his decision every single time the opportunity to gamble arises. Having made the decision once, that decision provides no relief from having to make it again and again. (Sartre may very well have got this example from French secondary writing about *Either/Or* II or about *For Self Examination*—a late SK work.)

So if anxiety is as pervasive as it seems to be in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*, then perhaps our picture of Kierkegaardian "criterionless choice" should be more like Sartre's and less like the "standard picture's." If that is so, then perhaps for Kierkegaard too, every decision we make is as "criterionless" as Sartre would have it, but it's only rarely that we make such "criterionless" choices to change our "sphere of existence," to move from one sphere to another; most of our decisions remain within whatever sphere they start from. So, perhaps it's not criterionless choice or anxiety that's rare, rather it's moving from one stage to another in Kierkegaard's picture.

On the other hand, that's problematic too.

If all our decisions are "criterionless," then what could possibly account for the fact that most of our decisions stay within the sphere they start from? Without criteria, how could there possibly be any "bias" in favor of staying where you are? Force of habit? But how do we choose to follow habit?

Furthermore, if all our decisions are really criterionless, then what sense does it make to talk about "spheres" of existence, "lifestyles" at all? The whole idea of living within a given "existence-sphere" or lifestyle was that you would use the demands within that sphere as criteria for making subsequent decisions; it was only the criterionless choices that were made not within any given "sphere," but were choices of what sphere to live in subsequently and therefore of what criteria to use henceforth. (See the passage in the MacIntyre article from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

But if all choices are criterionless, then we never really do use the demands of any given sphere as criteria for making other choices, so that it's hard to see what's left of the notion of Kierkegaard's "existence-spheres" at all.

Obviously, a lot more work needs to be done here. But the main point is that the "standard picture" requires that criterionless choices, and their consequent anxiety, should be extremely rare—whereas in fact Kierkegaard says—at least in some places—that anxiety is far from rare and is effectively universal.

### **What about faith?**

A third problem with the "standard picture" emerges over how faith works.

In *Postscript*, as we saw earlier, faith is a matter of passionately committing yourself to an absurdity—and in particular to the absurdity, the incommensurability, involved in the doctrine of the Incarnation.

On the other hand, this makes it awkward, to say the least, to regard Abraham as the "father of faith," since he definitely wasn't thinking in terms of any kind of "incarnation" of God as a human being.

To be sure, I've already mentioned that Johannes Climacus, in *Postscript*, criticizes Johannes de silentio, in *Fear and Trembling*, for having an over-simplified interpretation of faith. But on these grounds? (Answer: No. Rather, because Johannes de silentio claims



to praise the Knight of Faith, even though the Knight of Faith is unidentifiable and looks just like anyone else.)

Again, we can't just say that *Fear and Trembling* presents a broader and looser version of faith than *Postscript* does, so that while in *Fear and Trembling* Abraham is committed to the absurdity of canceling the covenant and yet having it remain intact in Isaac, he isn't committed to the Incarnation, as *Postscript* would require.

For in that case, *Fear and Trembling* would just be presenting a broader view of faith than the later *Postscript* had. But no, that won't work, because the differences between *Fear and Trembling* and *Postscript* seem to go deeper than that.

In *Postscript*, as we've seen, faith amounts to a passionate commitment to an absurdity, and in particular to the absurdity of the Incarnation.

On the other hand, in *Fear and Trembling*, we saw that you couldn't have faith without being a Knight of Infinite Resignation first:

Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith. (Hannay, p. 75.)

Furthermore, the Knight of Infinite Resignation, as we saw, has to give up something—and in fact, give up the whole point of his or her life, be infinitely “resigned.” Recall that, in *Fear and Trembling*, it was precisely because I had used up all my human energy to renounce the most important thing in my life that I had no energy left over to make the next movement on my own—to get it back. That required a more than human strength.

So suppose I do passionately believe in the Incarnation (as in *CUP*), absurd though it is. I believe it as passionately as Kierkegaard could ever want. Still—what have I “infinitely resigned” thereby? I've renounced reason, perhaps, but was that the whole focal point and meaning of my life? I don't see why it has to be. In other words, “infinite resignation” seems to have no place in the *Postscript* picture of faith.

In short, Kierkegaard's views on faith are far more nuanced and subtle than we've seen so far.

## **The aesthetic life**

Now let's focus on the aesthetic life in particular. I want to take as my text for this the “Either” half of *Either/Or*, where the aesthetic life is the main theme. (I've asked you to read the Bretall material from *Either/Or*—both parts—on pp. 19–108.)

I think we will begin to see that the aesthetic life is not quite what we have been led to believe.

First of all, let's just survey the contents of the “Either” half of *Either/Or*.

To begin with, as a kind of general “Foreword” to the whole book, the editor—Victor Eremita—tells the story of how he came into possession of the two sets papers he is

editing in this book. We do not have that Foreword in the Bretall volume, but I have done a translation of my own, available [here](#).

Part One of *Either/Or* consists of a series of papers, essays, jottings, by an anonymous “aesthete” known simply as “A.” It consists of eight parts (see the handout on “Writings”):

1. *Diapsalmata* (partly in Bretall).
2. *The Immediate Stages of the Musical-Erotic*. (The analysis of *Don Giovanni* —not in Bretall.)
3. *The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama*. (Not in Bretall.)
4. *Silhouettes*. (Not in Bretall.)
5. *The Unhappiest One*. (Not in Bretall.)
6. *The First Love*. (Not in Bretall.)
7. *The Rotation Method* (Hong & Hong, *Rotation of Crops*, partly in Bretall).
8. *Diary of a Seducer* (Hong & Hong, *The Seducer’s Diary*, partly in Bretall).

### **Diapsalmata**

These are a random collection of sayings, “thoughts” on life and the cosmos. (The word means something like “pauses,” and is taken from a word found in the old Greek version of the Psalms.)

Some of the *Diapsalmata* are found in Bretall, pp. 33–36, although the full set includes more. (For some reason, Bretall places these after his selection from “The Rotation Method,” even though “Rotation” comes much later in the original.)

Now remember, the “aesthetic” stage is the life governed by pleasure and desire of the moment. And we do find some of the tone of delightful whimsy in the *Diapsalmata*. For instance (Bretall, p. 34):

The essence of pleasure does not lie in the thing enjoyed, but in the accompanying consciousness. If I had a humble spirit in my service, who, when I asked for a glass of water, brought me the world’s costliest wines blended in a chalice, I should dismiss him, in order to teach him that pleasure consists not in what I enjoy, but in having my own way.

Again (Hong & Hong, p. 25—not in Bretall):

And now the innocent pleasures of life. It must be granted to them that they have only one flaw—that they are so innocent. Moreover, they are to be enjoyed in moderation. When my physician prescribes a diet for me, there is some reason in that; I abstain from certain specified foods for a

certain specified time. But to be dietetic in keeping the diet—that is really asking too much.

Yet again (Hong & Hong, p. 20—not in Bretall):

I don't feel like doing anything. I don't feel like riding—the motion is too powerful; I don't feel like walking—it is too tiring; I don't feel like lying down, for either I would have to stay down, and I don't feel like doing that, or I would have to get up again, and I don't feel like doing that, either. *Summa Summarum* (= the sum of the whole thing): I don't feel like doing anything.

It's a mildly amusing passage, and describes a kind of "aesthetic" idleness. But note: He doesn't feel like doing anything. Does that sound as though he's having fun?

Here's another along the same line (Bretall, p. 34):

My life is absolutely meaningless. When I consider the different periods into which it falls, it seems like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary [i.e., a German dictionary; in Danish it's 'Snor'], which means in the first place a string, in the second, a daughter-in-law. The only thing lacking is that the word *Schnur* should mean in the third place a camel, in the fourth, a dust-brush.

Here we begin to see the sense of what we called "despair," jadedness, the sense of "seeing through" everything, the "meaninglessness" of it all.

There's more along these lines (Bretall, p. 34 again):

Wine can no longer make my heart glad; a little of it makes me sad, much makes melancholy. My soul is faint and impotent; in vain I prick the spur of pleasure into its flank, its strength is gone, it rises no more to the royal leap. I have lost my illusions. ... (There's more.)

"Lost his illusions"—he's seen through it all.

So far, there's nothing really surprising here. We see some illustrations of wit, humor, pleasure—but also of the "*ennui*," the jadedness that we said always accompanies a dedicated aesthete. (We called it "despair.")

But there's more. When you read through the entire *Diapsalmata* section, the overall impression is that this guy's not just burnt out, not just jaded; he's positively morbid—and furthermore loves it! And this is something we wouldn't have expected from the Standard Interpretation.)

Consider (Hong & Hong, p. 20—not in Bretall):

In addition to my other numerous acquaintances, I have one more intimate confidant—my depression. In the midst of my joy, in the midst of my work, he beckons to me, calls me aside, even though physically I remain on the spot. My depression is the most faithful mistress I have known—no wonder, then, that I return the love.

Note: He loves being depressed!

Again (Hong & Hong, p. 21—not in Bretall):

I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow *is my castle*. Many people look upon having sorrow as one of life's conveniences.

He's positively wallowing in sorrow!

It gets worse (Hong & Hong, p. 20—not in Bretall):

There are, as is known, insects that die in the moment of fertilization. So it is with all joy: life's highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death.

And, one of my favorites (Hong & Hong, p. 30—not in Bretall):

In a theater, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed—amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke.

But the grimmiest one of all is perhaps this one (Hong & Hong, p. 19—not in Bretall):

What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music. It is with him as with the poor wretches in Phalaris's bronze bull,<sup>2</sup> who were slowly tortured over a slow fire; their screams could not reach the tyrant's ears to terrify him; to him they sounded like sweet music. And people crowd around the poet and say to him, "Sing again soon"—in other words, may new sufferings torture your soul ...

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<sup>2</sup> Phalaris, an ancient tyrant in Sicily, had a bronze bull made. It was hollow, with a door in the side. It was fitted out with a cunning acoustic device that would make screams sound like the most melodious music. Jolly old Phalaris put his enemies inside the bronze bull, built a fire under them, and enjoyed the fine concert made by his enemies' roasting to death.

Enough examples. What does all this come to?

What did we expect to find? Well, the “standard interpretation” would lead to the picture of the dedicated aesthete, at least, as someone who is fundamentally cultivating a life of pleasure, even though he’ll come to find that an empty, pointless life. “My life is utterly meaningless,” as we just saw. The aesthete would be someone who is pursuing pleasure and is willing to pay the price of a meaningless existence in order to do so.

But what do we find instead? Someone who is not fundamentally cultivating pleasure, but rather cultivating the meaningless! The author of the *Diapsalmata* loves his depression; he’s as “faithful” to her as she is to him. He’s cultivating “depression,” “meaninglessness”—to the point of dwelling obsessively on death!

### **The “dead club”**

This theme carries over to many of the other sections of the “Either” part of *Either/Or*.

Thus, parts (3)–(5) in the list we gave above all pretend to be “addresses” or speeches delivered before the Συμπαρανεκρώμενοι (= “Dead Club,” Hong & Hong “Fellowship of the Dead”).

In *Silhouettes* (part (4)), we have a speech given at a meeting of the club right after the summer solstice: “we rejoice anew that the happy occasion has repeated itself, that the longest day is over and night begins to triumph” (Hong & Hong, p. 167). “... we all regard death as the greatest good fortune” (*ibid.*). In effect, it’s an essay on various types of sorrow. For example, we get a certain kind of “secret sorrow” that is “similar to the sensual pleasure in bleeding to death” (p. 175). We get talk about the “knight of grief” (p. 175).

Again, *The Unhappiest One* (part (5))—which he describes as “an inspired address to the Συμπαρανεκρώμενοι—starts off (Hong & Hong, p. 219):

As is well known, there is said to be a grave somewhere in England that is distinguished not by a magnificent monument or a mournful setting but by a short inscription—“The Unhappiest One.” [Actually, it’s in Worcester Cathedral.] It is said that the grave was opened, but no trace of a corpse was found.

Again (*ibid.*),

And look, the grave was empty! Has he perhaps risen from the dead [?] [A rather vicious play on the doctrine of the Resurrection.] ... Did he find no rest, not even in the grave; is he perhaps still fitfully wandering over the earth?

So the author suggests that they try to find him—“the unhappiest one”—and that they should therefore hold a kind of competition (p. 221):

So, then, we are inaugurating an open competition ... every worthy member of the community of the unhappy is welcome; a seat of honor is designated for every really unhappy person, the grave for the unhappiest one.

So we get, throughout several sections of the “Either” half of *Either/Or*, this sustained dwelling on death, this working at being unhappy.

### ***The First Love***

The sixth part—*The First Love*—is different, and I’m not really sure how to fit into the overall picture of *Either*. It purports to be a review of a translation by Johan Ludvig Heiberg (a kind of literary “poobah” in Copenhagen circles of the day) of a play called “The First Love” by a Frenchman named Augustin Eugène Scribe (1791–1861).

Scribe actually existed, and moreover turns out to have been pretty important in French theater at the end of the eighteenth century. He wrote a number of opera librettos, including some for operas by people you’ve heard of—like Verdi. And he did in fact write this play called “The First Love”—actually, “The First Loves” (plural, which may be significant) in the French original—and it was translated into Danish by Heiberg (who turned it into the singular), and was in fact performed on stage in Copenhagen during the time Kierkegaard was writing *Either/Or*.

I could not find this play translated into English, and in fact could find no evidence that it ever had been translated into English, although we did have the French in the library. So I hired a graduate student over a summer several years ago to translate it for me. (Handout.) The play is the stuff of comic opera, a piece of “vaudeville,” really. There’s a lot that turns on mistaken identities, disguises, and all the familiar props of comic opera. But basically, it’s all about Emmeline and the return of her childhood love (her “first love”) Charles.

The overall impression of the play, and the point Kierkegaard—or A—drives home, is the silliness of being single-mindedly dedicated to one’s first love, as though you could never have another. It’s the stuff that comes from reading too many novels, A says. Contrast what Judge William says in the second part of *Either/Or*, where he takes this idea quite seriously, as being the key to ethical earnestness.

As I say, I don’t know exactly how this fits into the theme of the “Either” part of *Either/Or*.

(Alaistair Hannay, in the “Introduction” to his abridged translation of *Either/Or* [p. 4], suggests that this essay was written earlier than most of the rest of *Either/Or*, before SK really had a clear picture of what he was going to do in the book. Still, even after he did have a clear picture of what he was going to do in the book, he decided to include this essay.)

## The last two essays

The last two parts of the “Either” half of *Either/Or* are rather different. They are “The Rotation Method” and “Diary of the Seducer,” both of which are present in ample extracts in the Bretall volume (although both are considerably longer than the extracts—the “Diary” is in fact 145 pp. in the Hong & Hong translation).

Here we don't see this morbid obsession with death, this dedicated cultivation of depression and sorrow. But in both cases, we see something along the same lines. As you read through those passages, I think you get—if you read carefully—the distinct sense that something has gone terribly wrong here.

Consider “The Rotation Method,” for instance (Bretall, p. 26):

To forget—all men wish to forget, and when something unpleasant happens, they always say: Oh, that one might forget! But forgetting is an art that must be practiced beforehand. The ability to forget is conditioned upon the method of remembering, but this again depends upon the mode of experiencing. Whoever plunges into his experiences with the momentum of hope, will remember so that he cannot forget. [Notice what he's telling us here: *Have no hope.*] *Nil admirari* [Bretall, in a note, translates this as “to wonder at nothing”—it doesn't mean “to have no questions,” but something more like “to be *amazed* at nothing” or even “to be *impressed by nothing*”] is therefore the real philosophy. No moment must be permitted a greater significance than that it can be forgotten when convenient; each moment ought, however, to have so much significance that it can be recollected at will. ... Enjoying an experience to its full intensity to the last minute will make it impossible either to remember or to forget.

Notice what he's saying here. This isn't the picture of someone enjoying life to the full, draining each experience to the last drop. In fact, that's exactly what he's telling us not to do!

Again (pp. 31–32):

The whole secret lies in arbitrariness. ... One does not enjoy the immediate, but rather something which he can arbitrarily control. You go to see the middle of a play, you read the third part of a book. By this means you insure yourself a very different kind of enjoyment from that which the author has been so kind as to plan for you. You enjoy something entirely accidental; you consider the whole of existence from this standpoint; let its reality be stranded thereon.

What the author is recommending here is, far from plunging into life, precisely to insulate yourself from it! There's always this lack of commitment, this reserve.

Once again, this is not what we would have expected from the “standard picture.”

The same thing emerges in “Diary of the Seducer.” Consider:

How beautiful it is to be in love, how interesting to know that one is in love. (Bretall, p. 48.)

It is indeed a wonderful thing to find a pure immediate femininity, but if one dares to attempt a change, then one gets the interesting. (p. 51.)

Like a physician I can therefore take pleasure in observing all the symptoms in her case history. (p. 56.)

Have I been constantly faithful to my pact in my relation to Cordelia? That is to say, my pact with the aesthetic. ... Has the interesting always been preserved? Yes, I dare say it freely and openly in this secret conversation with myself. Even the engagement was interesting, exactly because it did not offer that which one generally understands by the interesting. (p. 76.)

Here again, there is this process of insulating going on. Johannes the Seducer is not really enjoying the seduction of Cordelia. His enjoyment is only vicarious; what he’s really enjoying is watching himself seduce Cordelia. (The “interesting.”)

He talks about how “enjoyable” it all is, but by ‘enjoyment’ he means “interesting.” So too in “The Rotation Method.”

It’s all very cerebral, all very reflective. And of course “reflection” always involves some kind of mental distance between you and the object you’re reflecting on.

The same kind of thing is going on in the *Diapsalmata*, and in the “Dead Club” sections. There is this careful avoiding of any kind of entanglements with life.

In fact, you come away from the “Either” part of *Either/Or* with the decided impression that there’s something desperate—almost panicked—about these people, that they’re driven by fear, not by any kind of “lust for life.”

All their talk about the “interesting” instead of full-blooded, honest pleasures, all their dwelling on death and depression—all this strikes me as dishonest. These people are hiding something! Avoiding something!

Notice: We can call all these things symptoms of “despair” if we want. But “despair” in this sense is certainly not “boredom,” not even *ennui* or “jadedness.” No, these people are scared!

What we have then is not really a picture of the “aesthetic” life that more or less succeeds on its own terms, although of course there is a price to pay and there are other perspectives. What we have is the picture of the “aesthetic” life as a complete failure, a failure even on its own terms. It doesn’t even succeed in being aesthetic! They’re not really having fun, and not even trying to.



## Don Giovanni

The only part of the “Either” half of *Either/Or*—apart from “The First Love,” which I said I didn’t know what to do with—where we don’t have this sense of desperate failure is in “The Immediate Stages of the Musical Erotic,” the analysis of Mozart’s “Don Giovanni.”

There’s no holding back there, no reserve, no taking refuge in the interesting. Quite the contrary! There’s nothing reflective about Don Giovanni!

But, at the same time, Kierkegaard says, Don Giovanni isn’t really a full human being either, he’s not a person. Listen (Hong, p. 134):

What it means to say—that Don Giovanni’s essential nature is music—is clearly apparent here. He dissolves, as it were, in music for us; he unfurls in a world of sounds. This aria has been called the champagne aria,<sup>3</sup> and undoubtedly this is very suggestive. But what we must see especially is that it does not stand in an accidental relation to Don Giovanni. Such is his life, effervescing like champagne. And just as the beads in this wine, as it simmers with an internal heat, sonorous with its own melody, rise and continue to rise, just so the lust for enjoyment resonates in the elemental boiling that is his life.

Again (pp. 118–19):

Don Giovanni is the hero in the opera; the main interest is concentrated upon him; not only that, but he also endows all the other characters with interest. This must not, however, be taken in any external sense, for the very secret of this opera is that its hero is also the force in the other characters. His passion sets in motion the passion of the others. His passion resonates everywhere; it resonates in and supports the Commendatore’s earnestness, Elvira’s wrath, Anna’s hate, Ottavio’s pomposity, Zerlina’s anxiety, Mazetto’s indignation, Leporello’s confusion. ... Compared with his life, the lives of all the others are only derived ... [Don Giovanni]—precisely because he is not a character but essential life—is absolutely musical. The other characters in the opera are not characters, either, but essential passions, which are posited by Don Giovanni ... [T]hey are the external consequences that his life itself continually posits.

One more (p. 123):

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<sup>3</sup> It’s in Act I, Giovanni’s aria “Fin ch’han del vino.”

Just as in the solar system the dark bodies that receive their light from the central sun are always only half-luminous, that is, luminous on the side turned to the sun, so it is also with the characters in this piece. Only that part of life, the side that is turned toward Don Giovanni, is illuminated; otherwise they are obscure and opaque. This must not be taken in the narrow sense, as if each of these characters were some abstract passion [i.e., as if it were an *allegory*], as if Anna, for example, were hate, Zerlina, irresponsibility. Such insipidity does not belong here at all. The passion in the individual is concrete, but concrete in itself, not concrete in the personality, or, to express myself more specifically, the rest of the personality is devoured by this passion.

In short, Don Giovanni not really a human being. He's a force of nature—like the sun, like a whirlwind, like thunder. It's true, Giovanni is presented as being conscious; he has desires and wants, for example. But he's conscious the way a goat is conscious. There's no reflection there at all.

In short, Don Giovanni is not really a human being!

### **The upshot of it all**

Where does this leave us?

Well, Don Giovanni certainly doesn't feel despair. He doesn't seem to feel the lack of any central "meaning" in his life. He's not bored, he's not jaded, he's not defensively insulating himself from life, he's not taking refuge in thoughts about death. He's having lots of fun—apparently with no ill consequences. (Of course, he does go to hell at the end of the opera, but we'll pretend we don't know that.)

So it looks as if, quite in opposition to the "standard interpretation," there is a lifestyle, a way to live that avoids the negative disadvantages we talked about in all three of Kierkegaard's stages: Be Don Giovanni, be Joe Six-Pack. (An alternative explanation might be that the aesthetic life does not always entail despair.)

But notice what this means: We can do this, but only at the cost of being sub-human, by not exercising our capacity for reflection, which is the very thing that sets us apart and makes us "human."

You may think this sounds like pious moralizing, and perhaps it is. You may think that Kierkegaard, by portraying Don Giovanni as sub-human, is really just telling us that he personally holds such life in contempt. Perhaps that's right.

But in any case, it's certainly true that Joe Six-Pack, the non-reflective person (if you want to call that a "person"), has no part in the main themes Kierkegaard will be talking about. He's simply not interested in such cases.

## The “ethical”

Now let’s talk about the second part of *Either/Or*.

Part II is supposed to be written by a judge, “Judge William,” and is supposed to be directed TO A, the anonymous author of the first part. And what the judge is trying to argue is the superiority of the ethical life over the aesthetic life of A. So what we get from the Judge is a kind of critique of the aesthetic.

Note: From the point of view of the “standard” interpretation, this is a pointless and hopeless task from the outset. If the three “stages” are the self-contained, self-sufficient worlds we have been led to believe they are, then there is no way the Judge can argue for the superiority of his own point of view—except by begging the question, i. e., except by arguing from his own ethical point of view, which by hypothesis the aesthete is not going to accept. (See the MacIntyre article.)

Of course, to say what the Judge is doing is pointless and hopeless is NOT necessarily to say the Judge isn’t doing it anyway. Perhaps he just doesn’t recognize the true situation here. After all, “preaching to the choir” is something that happens all too often.

And yet, when we actually read what the Judge says, it doesn’t seem that this is what is going on at all. What he’s arguing is not just that the ethical life is superior to A’s life in some ethical sense, but that A’s life fails—and fails on its own terms, that is, fails in a way that A himself, if he’s being honest with himself, will recognize is a failure. (This is something we already got a bit of a sense of in our discussion of the *Either* half of *Either/Or*.)

Notice, for instance, the odd title of the first long “letter” in *Or*: “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage.” Now the Judge is not only the “author” of the second half of *Either/Or*; he also comes back and is the “author” of the second third of *Stages on Life’s Way*. And in all these places, he’s constantly talking about marriage. Marriage, for the Judge, seems to be the sum and substance of the ethical life.

And yet here, in the first “letter,” the argument is not for the ethical validity of marriage, but for its aesthetic validity. That is, whatever it is you’re after, A, you’re not going to find it living the way you do; the only way you’re going to find it is to get married and settle down—in short, to become ethical.

This is not just a matter of what we’ve seen on the “standard interpretation,” where what the aesthete is after is pleasure and enjoyment, although of course he has to put up with the feeling of emptiness we called “despair.” No, on that interpretation, the aesthete can get what he’s after, on his own terms, although there is a price to pay. The Judge, on the other hand, is here arguing that the aesthete cannot get what he’s after, even on his own terms. And, as we’ll see, it’s a fairly powerful argument.

Of course the fact remains, we can still say the Judge is just wrong, that he doesn’t understand the situation. And perhaps that’s right. But nevertheless, it does seem that what *Either/Or* gives us as a whole is not what we have been led to expect. It is not a

neutral laying out of two alternative viewpoints, showing the positive and negative features of each, so that the reader is left to choose for himself. (See Anderson's book.)

Of course, in the end the reader is going to have to choose for himself. But never mind, the book as a whole is written in such a way that it looks at first as if the Judge wins! For example, he gets to give a critique and analysis of the aesthetic life, but the aesthete does not get to respond. A is given no chance in the book to give a counter-critique of the ethical. The Judge gets the last word.

You might think at first that this doesn't really matter, that the *Either* part, presenting as it does the aesthetic viewpoint, is in effect an implicit critique of the ethical, and that the fact that it comes first is purely incidental. (After all, books by their very nature are sequential things, and somebody has to go first!)

But that's not right. What we get in the *Either* part, whether it comes first or second, is not a critique of the ethical in the same sense in which the Judge gives us a critique of the aesthetic. If you actually read the *Either* part, there's really no critique of the ethical there at all. And there's certainly no argument—implicit or otherwise—that the ethical life fails on its own terms and that what it's really after can only be found in aesthetics.

Nevertheless, although we do perhaps get the sense that the Judge wins the contest with A, there are indications in the book that the Judge doesn't win altogether.

For instance, although there are two main parts, there are in fact three parts to *Or*.

1. "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage," as we've already seen.
2. "Equilibrium between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of the Personality" (Bretall)—or "The Balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality" (Hong and Hong).
3. And then, finally, "Ultimatum [= The Last Word]: The Upbuilding that Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong."

The third part is a not supposed to be a letter written by the Judge to A, but instead a copy of a sermon written by one of the Judge's older friends, an anonymous pastor out in Jutland. The pastor had sent it to the Judge, and the Judge is forwarding it to A. In a little prefatory note, the Judge says

In this sermon he has grasped what I have said and what I would like to have said to you; he has expressed it better than I am able to.

The problem, however, is that what the sermon says turns out to be not just different from, but quite opposite to, what the Judge has been saying all along. In short, we are left at the end of the book with the distinct impression that the Judge doesn't quite know what he's saying!

Again, as we have seen, at the end of the *Either* part, we got the strong sense that there was something wrong with A, that he was hiding something, afraid of something. And

that's right, and in fact is exactly what the Judge is going to pick up on. By the same token, at the end of *Or*, we perhaps also get the impression that there is something wrong—or at least something very suspicious—about the Judge.

It's not what we might have thought from the "standard interpretation." On the standard interpretation, we should expect to find the Judge feeling guilty because of his inability to live up to ethical ideals. But the Judge gives no sign of feeling the slightest bit guilty. On the contrary, the Judge seems totally content, self-satisfied—even complacent.

What the Judge does do, however, is to make a big deal out of glorifying mediocrity. In the ethical life, one should avoid being exceptional. (Recall the Hegelian "fitting in.") One should cultivate the small things, the little domesticities, the wonderful hum-drum details of daily life. In fact, you come away thinking the Judge's own view is:

How glorious it is to be mediocre!

Or, to put it more paradoxically: "How great it is to be anything but great!" "How extraordinary it is to be ordinary!"

This is so obvious that I think it's deliberate. We're supposed to get the sense that the Judge is protesting too much—that he too is avoiding something, just like *A*. But the point is not developed at all in *Either/Or*. It's just a seed of suspicion left planted in the reader.

### ***The Judge's diagnosis of the aesthetic***

What is the Judge's critique of the aesthetic life? Unfortunately, we don't get a lot of the important passages in the short selections in the Bretall volume. I'll try to fill in the blanks for you as we go along. (HANDOUT ON "SOME PASSAGES FROM JUDGE WILLIAM.")

First of all, we have to realize that the "aesthetic" covers a lot of ground. As we've already seen from the *Either* part, at one extreme we have the immediate, spontaneous, unreflective case of Don Giovanni—who is such a limiting case that he can be regarded as sub-human. At the other extreme, we have *A*, who doesn't do anything spontaneously and unreflectively, who is shielding himself from all that.

And then we have everything in between. This entire spectrum can be regarded as the sphere of the "aesthetic."

The Judge's overall view is that all of these people are not really in control of themselves. The ethical person, by contrast, is in control of himself, is—by and large—master of his own fate. That of course doesn't mean he can control the forces of nature that determine a lot of what happens to him; but it does mean that the things he really cares about are things that are under his control.

The Judge seems to have a view that there is in all of us—no matter where we are in the "stages"—a kind of fundamental drive to "be somebody." I don't mean this in the sense of being somebody exceptional, since we've already seen that the Judge glorifies

mediocrity and the un-exceptional. But we all have a drive toward acquiring some kind of sense of ourselves, a sense of self-identity.

Notice: This is a psychological claim. And in fact we might even say it's an ontological claim about the structure of human nature. There's nothing peculiarly ethical about the claim. It's not a claim about priorities or values; it's a claim about the dynamics of the psyche. Thus, it's a claim that might well be accepted anyone in any of SK's "spheres" of existence.

Furthermore, I think it's a claim that not only the Judge holds, but Kierkegaard himself holds as well. We find throughout SK's writings—the signed ones as well as the pseudonymous ones—constant talk about acquiring a self, about the development (or "composition"—Bretall) of the personality (see the title of the second letter in *Or*), or about the emergence of "spirit."

Now of course it's easy to make fun of such talk about "acquiring a self" or having a "self-identity." Of course I have a self-identity! If I'm not identical with myself, who am I identical with instead? How can I possibly acquire a self? If I don't already have a self, who is there to do the acquiring?

But we're not primarily making a logical point here. Rather, the claim is a psychological one. And although I suspect there may be all sorts of ontological and perhaps even logical implications, in the first instance what we're talking about is your sense of yourself.

This is a view we find all through Kierkegaard, although we're encountering it first in the Judge. Here's part of what he says ("Equilibrium" passage #1 on the handout):

Every human being, no matter how poorly talented he is, no matter how subordinate his position might be in life, has a natural urge to formulate for himself a life-view, a notion of the significance of life and of its purpose.

This "significance of life" and its "purpose" are not necessarily the "fitting into the larger picture" notion that we got in the standard interpretation's account of the ethical life. No, it can be quite individual. The aesthete too has this "natural urge," for instance (immediately following the preceding quotation, continuing passage #1 on the handout):

He who lives aesthetically does this too, and the common expression one has heard at all times and from the different stages [Danish: *Stadier*. I'm not sure what this means here, but it doesn't refer to *other* "stages" besides the aesthetic—perhaps it just means "from various platforms"] is this: One must enjoy life. There are naturally very many variations of this, according as the notion of enjoyment is different. But all are united in this expression, that one must enjoy life.

(He doesn't literally mean "all are united" since, as we'll see, he doesn't agree; he means all aesthetes are united and agree on this, and they amount to a lot of people.)

Notice: Although the Judge gives this as the guiding theme of the aesthetic life, it doesn't seem to describe A. As we've seen, he's doing anything but throwing himself into the enjoyment of life. As I said a moment ago, A is at the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum from Don Giovanni, who is portrayed as effectively sub-human. In fact, at one point Judge William says A is "to a certain degree beyond" the aesthetic (still in passage #1 on the handout):

You [= A] run the risk of getting into bad and coarse company [namely, all those run-of-the-mill aesthetes], you who are so outstanding. I do not deny it must be uncomfortable to have a life-view in common with every boozier or *Jagtliebhaber* [Hong/Hong translate this "hunting buff"]. Neither is that quite the case. For you lie to a certain degree beyond the aesthetic territory, as I shall show later

Notice the surprising consequence of this: It means that *Either/Or* does not present us with a straightforward picture of the aesthetic life in the first half and of the ethical life in the second half, as virtually everybody says. What we get in the first half is only a limit, the edge of the aesthetic life, the point of view of someone who's already "to a certain degree beyond" that life. Even the discussion of the sub-human Don Giovanni at the other extreme is written by this hyper-aesthetic A. We never get to hear from Don Giovanni himself.

In any case, here is the Judge's fundamental diagnosis of what is going wrong with any aesthete, including presumably A (passage #1 on the handout, the first paragraph):

But he who says he wants to enjoy life, he always sets up a condition that either lies outside the individual or is in the individual in such a way that it is not there by means of the individual himself.

This is italicized in the original, to indicate that it's important. And, in case there's any doubt, the Judge goes on (*ibid.*):

Concerning this last point, I will ask you to hold rather fast to the expressions, for they have been carefully selected.

What does this mean?

What he's talking about is the aesthete's own self-interpretation. And in every case, he says, the aesthete is thinking of his life in terms of something beyond his control—either something "outside the individual" altogether, and therefore beyond his control, or else some personal characteristic ("in the individual") that nevertheless is still not in the individual's control ("is not there by means of the individual himself").

For example:

“Outside” the self	“In” the self
Wealth (a banker, an entrepreneur)	Beauty (a “model,” a movie-star)
Honors, reputation, fame (a statesman, a public figure, an author, a celebrity)	Somewhat more refined, taking satisfaction in the development of some great <u>talent</u> (a painter, a musician).
One’s social class, being a “blue blood”	

But of course all of these things can be lost, and are not within a person’s complete control. With respect to the internal factors, beauty can and does fade, the painter can go blind or lose the use of his hands, the musician can go deaf or become paralyzed and unable to play. The same thing holds of the external factors, where it’s even more true. Money can be lost, reputation and honors depend on the opinions of others and can be lost, whether justifiably or not, at any time. Social class-lines can and do fluctuate. And while you might think being a “blue blood” or having a certain pedigree is something that cannot be lost, since after all the facts of your birth don’t change, nevertheless it may turn out that in fact you’re not who you thought you were—scandals come to light about your parentage, or there was some dastardly switcheroo at the hospital and in fact you’re someone else’s child. All that’s possible.

So all these things can fail you. And obviously this means that if you build your whole self-identity around these things, you’re taking a risk.

You might think these observations sound quite traditional, that they could have been said by Boethius or by any classical Greek or Roman Stoic. And that’s right. This part of the Judge’s second letter does sound very classical.

All of these conditions, both the external ones and the internal ones not under your control, are what the Judge calls “finite” or sometimes “immediate” conditions. In the present context, this simply means they are worldly things.

Now, let’s tell a story. Consider someone whose sense of identity is based on one or another of these finite or immediate ends. Consider, for example, a concert pianist whose whole sense of himself is in terms of his art and skill. There’s no doubt his skill is beyond measure and his art is impeccable. Everything is successful and more than satisfactory. The aesthetic pianist is enjoying life, everything is working to reinforce the identity he sees himself in terms of. It seems as if he’s perfectly happy with the way things are going.

Now, suppose this fellow suffers a stroke and loses the use of his hands, or suppose there’s some horrible accident and he loses his hands altogether. What happens? The poor fellow is devastated. His whole sense of himself has been shattered. In an important sense, he’s lost his self. As Judge William says, he despairs.



Now you may say that this is not “despair” in the sense in which we talked about it earlier in connection with the aesthetic stage. It’s not a sense of jadedness or lack of larger purpose. Rather, it’s “despair” in the more ordinary, everyday sense. Fair enough, but let’s let the Judge continue.

The Judge goes on to say that the fact that the pianist despairs in this situation shows that he was really in despair all along. Even at the height of his artistic success, when to all appearances he was happy, no—he was really in despair, even if he didn’t realize it.

This is a crucial claim. Here is exactly what he says (passage #2 on the handout):

... [H]ere I merely insist that you admit that a very great many people would find it all right to despair. Now let us see why they despaired. Because they discovered that what they had built their lives on was something transient? But is that a reason to despair? Has there occurred an essential change in what they built their lives on? Is it an essential change in the transient that it shows itself to be transient? Or is there rather not something accidental and inessential about it the fact that it does not show itself so? Nothing new has happened that could be the basis for a change. Thus when they then despair, this must lie in the fact that they were in despair already. The difference is merely that they did not know it. But this is a completely incidental difference. Thus it turns out that every aesthetic life-view is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether or not he knows it. BUT WHEN ONE DOES KNOW THIS, AND YOU INDEED DO KNOW IT [this is addressed to A], THEN A HIGHER FORM OF EXISTENCE IS A PRESSING DEMAND.

As it stands, this is a very puzzling passage, and looks like a blatant *non sequitur*. Because I despair now, I must have been in despair all along?

In a case like this, we can either dismiss what the Judge is saying as simply confused, or else we can ask ourselves if there is something going on here that we don’t yet understand. Well, what else might be going on?

Consider the part about “Is it an essential change in the transient that it shows itself to be transient?” In other words, did we think it was impossible for the pianist to suffer a stroke or to lose his hands altogether? The answer is no, obviously not. Are we baffled, confused when it happens? No, of course not. We perhaps didn’t expect it, since these things are rather out of the ordinary, and we may be surprised and even shocked when it happens, say it’s a damned shame, incredibly bad luck, a “tragedy.” But of course we knew all along it was a possibility.

Now—and this I think is the crucial point—THE PIANIST KNEW IT TOO. After all, the fact that the use of your hands is something you can lose at any moment is hardly a secret. It’s something everybody knows; it doesn’t take any specialized knowledge or inside information. So neither we nor the pianist can be surprised when he loses the use of his hands in the way we would be if the law of gravity were suddenly repealed, for instance.

So by basing his self-identity on his skills as a pianist, the fellow was in the end taking what he had to have known was a colossal gamble. And yet, when he loses the gamble he knew was never a sure bet, he's thunderstruck, he's completely disoriented—in short, he's surprised by what cannot have surprised him.

The pianist had been deceiving himself all along. He blinded himself to what he was doing—staking everything, his entire identity, on a risky bet.

**Crucial point:** The problem with the pianist—and in fact the problem with any aesthete, as far as the Judge views it—is not that he's “staking his entire identity on a risky bet” (Abraham does that, and he's certainly no aesthete, although the Judge doesn't talk about Abraham), but the fact that he's blinding himself to what he's doing, with the result that he's completely at a loss when the bet fails.

This is what the Judge calls despair—self-deception. It shows up—it's unmasked—only when the pianist is disabled, but it was there, the Judge says, all along.

Once again, you might say this isn't despair in the sense in which we used the term earlier, for the sense of jadedness, lack of overall purpose, in the aesthetic life. **But it is.**

Think about it. The description of “despair” as “jadedness” or “purposelessness” that the “standard interpretation” got—probably from thinking about the *Either* part of *Either/Or*—is basically a description of the realization that our immediate, finite, “aesthetic” defining values have failed us, that even if they're not taken away (as they were with the pianist), they're just in some sense not enough. That's what we called “despair.” (The sense of “Is that all there is?”) So it is “despair” in the sense we talked about earlier.

And the Judge is saying that as long as we continue to stay at the aesthetic level—that is, as long as we continue to define ourselves in terms of something we have to realize is not sufficient to define ourselves—we are deceiving ourselves. That is, we are in “despair” in the Judge's sense.

It's still despair, it's just despair thought about more deeply.

### ***The Judge's diagnosis of A in particular***

What we have so far is the Judge's diagnosis of any aesthete. But A, as we have seen, is not just any aesthete; he's a limiting case. What then is the Judge's diagnosis of A in particular?

Well, A has in a sense realized the truth of what the Judge is saying. He recognizes the futility of defining himself in terms of a finite, immediate goal. A is in the position of the paralyzed pianist—he realizes his finite goals have failed him.

And in fact A realizes this is not just a problem with some particular finite, immediate goal. It's not just that, if this one is insufficient, I'll just go and pick another one instead. No, A has seen through it all—no finite goal is going to be of any real consequence to him; that's why he is systematically shielding himself from all of them and always moving to “reflection” instead.

The problem is: A doesn't know WHAT TO DO NEXT.

If I can't identify myself with any of the things that suggest themselves, then who am I?

The problem with A, as the Judge sees it, is that A in an important sense isn't anybody. His identity isn't given in terms of attachments to the world around him, since he's seen through all that. A doesn't seem to have any available self-descriptions or ways of interpreting himself that he would not be willing to renegotiate on a whim. ("A bank teller," as A says at one point.)

The Judge's diagnosis is that what A is lacking is fundamentally a will. What he needs to do is make a choice, an "either/or." The ordinary aesthete defines himself in terms of some finite end or goal. A has seen the futility of all that and so refuses to do it. But what to do instead? A doesn't know; he's in effect paralyzed. He's in despair big-time. In fact, he makes a point of being in despair, as we have seen from some of the *Diapsalmata*.

The Judge's view is that acquiring a self—a real self—is basically a matter of the will. Once you identify yourself, once you get your sense of self-identity, not in terms of all those "iffy" things you can't control but in terms of your own will, which you can control—now you've got a real self, one that isn't subject to the contingencies of the world but is stable and firm. Now you've acquired an "eternal self," as it's sometimes put.

Well fine, A needs to will. But what should he will? He's seen through the futility of all the obvious choices, and that's precisely why he's in conscious despair about what to do.

Well, the Judge says, if nothing else, then choose despair (passage #4 on the handout). Choose something! But choose it, and don't just kind of choose it while you're telling yourself you're doing something else—like simply recognizing the obvious way to go, or something like that.

Once you choose, once you explicitly define yourself like this, you acquire a self—a real self that's in charge of who it is, not a bogus self that can be shattered on a moment's notice.

## **Conclusion**

The Judge, it seems to me, has made a pretty good case. There's something wrong with the aesthetic life, even the limiting case of the aesthetic life represented by A. The ordinary aesthete identifies himself in terms of something he knows good and well is no basis for self-identity; in short, he's deceiving himself. A has seen through all that, but is paralyzed, doesn't know what to do next. The Judge's prescription: Choose something, even if it's only choosing despair.

There is an interesting problem about the Judge's argument. It's not a small point, but I don't want to take lecture-time on it now. Instead, here is a handout on it. (HANDOUT: "THEY CAN'T TAKE THAT AWAY FROM ME!")

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## Indirect communication, or the problem of the pseudonymous authors

I want to talk now about “indirect communication”—the “maieutic” method whereby Kierkegaard plays the role of a “midwife” in maneuvering people where he wants them to be. We talked earlier about how this was a big feature of Kierkegaard’s work, and how all readers and scholars of Kierkegaard have to come to terms with it at some point.

To some extent, we can view the problem of “indirect communication” as equivalent to the problem of trying to figure out what Kierkegaard is up to with his device of writing under pseudonyms. Why does he do that?

We’ve seen, for instance, that *Fear and Trembling* is written under the pseudonym “Johannes de silentio,” whereas *Either/Or* is written by A and B (where B = Judge William), and the whole thing edited by Victor Eremita. Even within the “Either” part, the “Diary of a Seducer” is not written by A (at least if we take what A says at face value) but by another person “Johannes the Seducer,” a copy of whose diary somehow came into A’s possession, and is now “edited” by Victor Eremita—all of whom, of course, are really Kierkegaard.

Why all these layers upon layers of “covering”?

We’ve also talked a little about how Johannes Climacus in *Postscript* (Hong/Hong, p. 500) criticizes Johannes de silentio in the earlier *Fear and Trembling* for what Climacus calls a “rash” picture of the Knight of Faith. Quite apart from the question exactly what the criticism is here, what’s going on? If this were just a matter of Kierkegaard’s having thought about faith some more and changing his mind about it, why didn’t he just say so? People change their minds all the time, and go back to revise or retract things they had said earlier—and they do it without resorting to these veils of pseudonymity. Why does SK then resort to them?

But “indirect communication” perhaps goes beyond the business of pseudonymous authors. For instance, there is a book by one Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification*. On the whole, I do not think this is a very good book. But it does make the interesting point that we really have no reason to think Kierkegaard is being any more “up front” in his signed writings—for instance, in the *Upbuilding Discourses* or the *Journals*—where, once again, things are not always as they seem. Or if we do have reason, it’s a matter that has to be thought through carefully for each particular passage.

(Note: I was privileged to direct a very fine recent dissertation on “indirect communication”: Antony Aumann, *Kierkegaard on the Need for Indirect Communication*, Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2008.)

## ***Nonsense about indirect communication***

### **Ineffability**

This question of “indirect communication” I find one of the most puzzling and intractable issues in all of Kierkegaard. And, in my judgment, it’s also probably the one on which more utter nonsense has been written than on any other.

A lot of the time, in my experience, people try to explain Kierkegaard’s method of “indirect communication” by claiming that what he’s trying to say is strictly speaking ineffable, so that of course he can’t just come right out and tell you what he’s up to.

The advantage of this explanation is that you can arrive at it without actually reading what Kierkegaard really says. On the other hand, the corresponding disadvantage is that if you do actually take the trouble to look at his texts, you’ll soon realize that there’s no basis at all for supposing that what Kierkegaard is trying to convey is “ineffable,” or that he thought it was. In fact, as far as I can tell, nowhere in Kierkegaard is there any notion of “ineffability.”<sup>4</sup> There are lots of things we don’t know, to be sure. But that doesn’t mean they’re ineffable.

Consider *Fear and Trembling*, for instance, where—if anywhere—you might think that, in the discussion of the Knight of Faith, we do have something ineffable. There Kierkegaard (or Johannes de silentio) explicitly says that a Knight of Faith cannot explain himself to anyone else, and that one Knight of Faith cannot even help another.

Doesn’t that sound like “ineffability”? No, it doesn’t—not if you think about what Kierkegaard is really claiming here.

The Knight of Faith can perfectly well say—quite straightforwardly and directly—what it is that justifies him. Kierkegaard even tells us what he could say. He could say, “I’m justified in (say) slaughtering Isaac because I heard the voice of God commanding me to violate every ethical duty in the book, in such a way that the single individual is above the universal”—or something like that.

That’s quite direct, and in fact—if he really is a Knight of Faith—it’s even straightforwardly and literally true.

But what the Knight of Faith cannot do in this direct and “up front” way is get anybody else to believe him. Not even another Knight of Faith. Another Knight of Faith would presumably believe that such things happen, since he believes he himself is a single individual above the universal. But he certainly isn’t going to be inclined to think it’s happening with the Knight who’s trying to explain himself. In fact, he’ll have just as much if not more reason than the ordinary person to be suspicious of people who make such claims.

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure, there is a mention in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. But nothing is made out of term there.

Does that make the position of the Knight of Faith “ineffable”? Well, if it does, then it would seem that just about everything will be ineffable, since there’s very little I can make people believe if they don’t want to, just by my saying so.

This is not, of course, to deny that the Knight of Faith is in a peculiarly difficult position. But it is to deny that the inability to persuade people in any way makes what you’re trying to persuade them of ineffable—unless of course we want to make the notion of ineffability so broad that we trivialize it.

So let’s avoid this unseemly rush to declare things “ineffable,” and see if we can’t find out what’s really going on. If it turns out that Kierkegaard really is trying to express the ineffable, let’s draw that conclusion after we look at what he actually does and what he says about what he’s doing—not before.

### **Other nonsense**

But even where commentators don’t rush to appeal to ineffability, there’s still an inordinate amount of sheer nonsense written about Kierkegaard’s “indirect method.” (Handout on Indirect Communication.)

(1) Consider, for example, MacIntyre’s remarks on this in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article (vol. 4, pp. 336–37). Here’s the sum total of what he says about it:

One device of Kierkegaard’s must be given special attention: he issued several of his books under pseudonyms and used different pseudonyms so that he could, under one name, ostensibly attack his own work already published under some other name. His reason for doing this was precisely [don’t you just love that ‘precisely’?] to avoid giving the appearance of attempting to construct a single, consistent, systematic edifice of thought. Systematic thought, especially the Hegelian system, was one of his principal targets.

No doubt this is part of what SK was up to. But to stop with that “explanation” is to explain nothing at all. If that’s the end of the story, then the purpose of the pseudonyms is a purely destructive one. Furthermore, if SK’s trying so hard to avoid “giving the appearance” of a single, consistent point of view, then why do we have the “signed” works, which—whether they are to be taken “directly,” at face value, or not—certainly do present a fairly consistent viewpoint— precisely what MacIntyre said SK wanted to avoid and was in fact one of SK’s “principal targets.”

(2) Here's another passage, from a paper by John A. Mourant entitled "The Limitations of Religious Existentialism"<sup>5</sup>:

For Kierkegaard the problem of communication is bound up with that of truth. As is well known, he proclaimed the subjectivity of truth. He was convinced that what he termed the essential truth, religious truth, is subjective, inward, concealed and secret. As such it cannot be shared with others nor communicated directly to them.

Think about that quotation. "It cannot be shared with others nor communicated directly to them." So it cannot be shared and yet it can be shared after all—only indirectly, whatever that means? (This begins to sound like the typical confused "ineffability" claim—that Kierkegaard's method of "indirect communication" is his clever way of doing what we just said couldn't be done at all!)

Furthermore, if it's so concealed and SECRET, why would you want to communicate it at all, even indirectly? You see the problems.

(Actually, I don't want to ridicule this passage too much, because I think it's largely correct. It certainly says pretty much exactly what Kierkegaard himself says — except that it's Johannes Climacus — in a passage in *Postscript*.<sup>6</sup>)

What seems to be going on in this quotation—and it's a common way of "explaining" what Kierkegaard is doing—is that indirect communication is being thought of along the lines of "communicating in code." You can say what you mean, but you have to do under a pseudonym, with hints and veiled allusions—because after all—it's a secret, and needs to be concealed from at least some people. On this view then, the difference between direct and indirect communication is just the difference between what cryptologists call the "plain text" and the "cipher text" of the message.

For example, in World War II there would be radio broadcasts that would say things like, "The eagle's nest is empty. Repeat: The eagle's nest is empty." And, if you knew the code, you would know that this means "We've just spotted enemy submarines off the Straits of Gibraltar," or something like that. But of course the enemy themselves, who can easily intercept these broadcasts, would have no idea what the encoded message was.

Now Kierkegaard does mention this way of communicating. And he does so right at the very beginning of a work we've recently read: *Fear and Trembling*. The epigraph there reads (Hannay trans., p. 39)

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<sup>5</sup> *International Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1961), pp. 437–52 at pp. 437–38. Quoted in Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard & the Concept of Revelation*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Hong & Hong, pp. 79–80, the passage about the distinction between an accidental and an essential secret.

What Tarquin the Proud said in his garden with the poppy blooms was understood by the son, but not by the messenger.

This is a quotation from Johann Hamann, a German Romantic author. The Hong and Hong translation explains the quotation like this (p. 339):

When the son of Tarquinius Superbus [= an early Roman king] had craftily gotten Gabii [= a city] in his power, he sent a messenger to his father [i.e., *back to Tarquinius*] asking what he should do with the city. Tarquinius, not trusting the messenger, gave no reply but took him into the garden, where with his cane he cut off the flowers of the tallest poppies. The son understood from this that he should eliminate the leading men of the city [but the messenger didn't get the point].

Scholars have sometimes suggested that what Kierkegaard intended to signal by this quotation was that the whole of *Fear and Trembling* was in effect a kind of encoded message in this way, a message intended for Regine Olsen, who would somehow be able to decipher what it was all about.

But this won't work. And even if it does work, it can't be what Kierkegaard has in mind with his "maieutic" method of indirect communication.

Think through the implications of it. The point of Tarquinius's behavior was to conceal any hint of his true meaning from the messenger; the message was intended only for his son. Does that mean then that the "message" of *Fear and Trembling* was intended solely for Regine Olsen, and that the rest of us aren't supposed to have any clue what the true message is? But if that's what he's doing, why publish a book at all? Why not just write Regine a private letter, or speak to her on the street? Tarquinius resorted to his behavioral "code" because he didn't have the option of communicating in "plain text," as they call it in cryptography. But that's not Kierkegaard's situation with Regine.

Besides, the whole purpose of conveying secrets by "speaking in code" like this is defeated if you're simultaneously publishing a series of "signed works" where the very same secrets are publicly blabbed about for all to hear without any encoding at all!

No, the idea of "indirect communication" as "speaking in code" just doesn't work very well—even if Kierkegaard perhaps does occasionally resort to "codes" like this for other purposes.

(3) Here's another piece of nonsense, this time taken from Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard & the Concept of Revelation*, p. 136:

'Becoming' is, for Kierkegaard, the basic existential category. Subjective truth, which is related to becoming, requires an existential appropriation. Since subjective truth is an existence [that's not quite right, although it's true that only "existing" human beings can have or be "in" subjective



truth], and existence is a continual process of becoming, such truth cannot be directly communicated without thereby falsifying it.

What is he saying? Is he claiming, with Parmenides and Heraclitus, that we can't talk about "continual processes"? But of course we do that all the time, and do it quite straightforwardly. In fact, whole areas of physics and chemistry do so quite precisely and clearly. There are, to be sure, deep and profound philosophical problems about change, but it isn't "ineffable."

Or is he saying that we can talk about such "continual processes," but only if we do so indirectly?

Emmanuel quotes a passage from Kierkegaard to support his claim here (p. 136 again):

As Kierkegaard explains: "Precisely because he himself is constantly in process of becoming inwardly or in inwardness, the religious individual can never use direct communication, the movement in him being the precise opposite of that presupposed in direct communication."<sup>7</sup>

But whatever that last business is supposed to mean, the point here seems to be different from what Emmanuel is saying. Kierkegaard's claim doesn't seem to be that we can't talk "directly" about processes in general, but rather that we can't talk "directly" about the quite particular process of "becoming inwardly or in inwardness," whatever that means. But whatever it means, Emmanuel doesn't address that point at all in this passage.

(4) One last example. This is from Michael Strawser's book *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification* that I mentioned earlier. It's hard to come up with a good quotation from Strawser to illustrate what I find wrong with his view of indirect communication, because I think it's simply unclear what his view of indirect communication is. But he does talk a lot, in ways that are familiar through recent writings from a semiotic, literary criticism, postmodern point of view (although he nevertheless criticizes such approaches) about the intractable problems of interpreting texts—any texts, not just Kierkegaard's—about the inevitable distance between writer and reader, about the fallacy of assuming that the writer is always in the best position to say what his or her own writings actually mean (as distinct from whatever he may have intended them to mean), and so on.

And he seems to think that this is what "indirect communication" and Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms are really all about.

Yes, there are serious problems here. But it seems to me they are all in effect variations on the traditional problem of other minds, which has been around since the dawn of philosophy.

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<sup>7</sup> The quotation is from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 73–74 n. in the Hong & Hong translation.

It's a serious problem, no doubt, but it's a problem that applies to all communication among people, not just to what Kierkegaard is doing. So if this is all Kierkegaard has in mind when he's talking about "indirect communication," then there's nothing special about what Kierkegaard is doing—there's no particular problem about dealing with his writings that isn't also a problem about dealing with anyone else's writings.

But that seems plainly false! Don't you find him harder to interpret than a lot of other things you've read?

Furthermore, this approach seems to suggest that all communication is "indirect communication," so that the distinction between "direct" and "indirect" communication completely collapses.

Now all that may be true, but it certainly isn't what Kierkegaard says. He clearly thinks there is a distinction.

### **Sources on indirect communication**

Let's set all these preconceptions aside, then, and let's just look at what Kierkegaard actually says.

I want to focus my discussion on four passages in Kierkegaard where he talks more or less explicitly about what this "indirect communication" is all about. There are lots of others—he talks about it in many places—but I'll think we'll see even from these four discussions that they are not all the same. Indirect communication isn't necessarily one thing for Kierkegaard. He has quite different pictures in different passages.

These different "pictures" of what's going on with "indirect communication" are not necessarily incompatible, but some of them may be. We'll have to see.

In any event, none of the passages we'll look at is about ineffability, about communicating in code, about the supposed impossibility of talking about things that change, or about the problem of other minds in general.

Here are the texts I want to consider (in the order we'll be talking about them):

- *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, part of which is included in the Bretall volume. (I've asked you to read that selection.) This was written in 1848, but never published during Kierkegaard's lifetime.
- A particular passage in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: in the Hong & Hong translation, vol. 1, pp. 75ff. (Not in the Bretall volume.) The notion of indirect communication comes up repeatedly in *Postscript*, but I want to zero in on this one, because I think it is a particularly clear, interesting and provocative one.
- An extremely interesting series of notes in the *Journals and Papers* (Hong & Hong, vol. 1, pp. 267–308, §§ 649–57). These are notes for two "lectures" Kierkegaard drafted on the issue of "communication." In the "Supplement" section of the Hong/Hong translation of *Works of Love*, we read that

Kierkegaard had originally planned a series of twelve such “lectures on communication,” together with another twelve on love. The twelve on love were actually written, and appeared as *Works of Love*. But the lectures on communication were never completed, and we only have the draft notes for these two.

- A discussion in *Practice in Christianity*, Hong & Hong trans., pp. 133ff. (This is *not* included in the selection in the Bretall volume, where the title of the work is translated as *Training in Christianity*.) Here he links the idea of “indirect communication” very tightly with central doctrines of Christianity. We won’t have time to go into this passage in detail, but I will say a little about it.

Notice something ironic and perhaps significant: Of the four items on this list, two were never published by Kierkegaard at all (*Point of View* and the *Journals*), and the two that were published were published under pseudonyms. Even when he was considering publishing *Point of View*, he considered for a while publishing it under a pseudonym—Johannes de silentio!

### ***Point of View***

You have roughly a quarter of this work in the Bretall volume.

The full title is: *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication: Report to History*—except of course that he decided not to publish it, so that as far as he was concerned it isn’t really any kind of communication, direct or indirect.

Even if he had published it, the fact that he says it is a “direct communication” doesn’t by itself prove anything. Saying you’re speaking “directly” may just be a peculiarly subtle form of indirection.

In any case, here’s how he begins (Hong & Hong, p. 23—not in Bretall — TEXT (4) ON THE HANDOUT):

A point has been reached in my authorship where it is feasible, where I feel a need and therefore regard it now as my duty: once and for all to explain as directly and openly and specifically as possible what is what, what I say I am as an author.

He goes on to say that *Either/Or* is about to be republished in a second edition, and that therefore the time is appropriate for him to come clean. “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak,” he says (*ibid.*—Text (5) on the handout). Then (*ibid.*—Text (6) on the handout):

The content, then, of this little book [= Point of View] is: what I in truth am as an author, that I am and was a religious author, that my whole authorship pertains to Christianity, to the issue: becoming a Christian, with

direct and indirect polemical aim at that enormous illusion, Christendom, or the illusion that in such a country [as Denmark] all are Christians of sorts.

In Part One of the book (some extracts are in Bretall, pp. 324–30), he explicitly acknowledges authorship of the various writings up to that time (1848),<sup>8</sup> divided into two groups—the aesthetic and the religious works, with *Postscript* (1846) presented here as being in a category all by itself.<sup>9</sup>

He suggests that you might think what has happened here is that you have an author who was originally an aesthetic writer, but who “got religion” later on and then became a religious author. But, he argues, that’s not what happened at all. Then he points out that there were really two series of publications all along—the pseudonymous “aesthetic” writings and the signed “religious” writings—and claims that the purpose of the whole thing has been religious from the very beginning. (We’ve talked about some of this at the very beginning of the course.)

But the part I want to focus on is Chapter One of Part Two (pieces of which are in Bretall). Here he tries to explain why he is playing this tortured roundabout game.

Right at the beginning of Chap. 1 of Part Two, he asserts (Bretall, p. 330): “That ‘Christendom’ is a prodigious illusion.”

Be aware: Christendom is not the same as “Christianity” for Kierkegaard. When he talks about “Christianity,” he means the real thing, the kind of religion he’s interested in.

But when he talks about “Christendom,” he means the established Church—the situation he found himself in in Denmark, where everyone was considered to be a “Christian” simply by being a citizen of the land.

What SK is against is the idea of Christianity as a kind of “civic religion.” In the Denmark of SK’s day, you couldn’t vote unless you were baptized and confirmed in the Danish state church. And if you were baptized and confirmed, then you could consider yourself—and everyone else would consider you—a full-fledged “Christian,” with nothing more needing to be done. As SK asks (Bretall, p. 330):

What does it mean that all these thousands and thousands call themselves Christians as a matter of course?

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<sup>8</sup> Oddly, he does not mention *A Literary Review* (also called *Two Ages*, or *The Present Age*), presumably because it is “merely” a review and therefore not a “work.”

<sup>9</sup> Note: The listing he gives in the note in Bretall, p. 324, oddly includes the “eighteen edifying discourses” among the aesthetic works, even though in the body of the text he describes them as religious. Likewise, he lists *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* among the religious works, although he also says it is an “aesthetic article” and is treated as an aesthetic piece in the main text of *Point of View*. I think the explanation is that the works listed in the note are given in broadly chronological order.

Well, we know that, for SK himself, being a real Christian—having faith—is far from “a matter of course.” On the contrary, it was extremely rare. It was something you had to work at; you couldn’t achieve it just by going through a few liturgical ceremonies with no further commitments whatever.

The difference between SK’s view of Christianity and the prevailing view in a land where everyone thinks of himself as a Christian as a “matter of course” is just the difference between Christianity and Christendom for Kierkegaard.

Now of course Kierkegaard wants people to be Christians—that is, real Christians, not the bogus Christians of “Christendom.” As he puts it at the beginning of Part Two (Bretall, p. 330), “‘Christendom’ is a prodigious illusion.”

So what’s he going to do? Well, he says (Bretall, p. 331–32):

Once in a while there appears a religious enthusiast: he storms against Christendom, he vociferates and makes a loud noise, denouncing almost all as not being Christians—and accomplishes nothing. He takes no heed of the fact that an illusion is not an easy thing to dispel. Supposing now it is a fact that most people, when they call themselves Christians, are under an illusion—how do they defend themselves against an enthusiast? First and foremost, they do not bother about him at all, they do not so much as look at his book, they immediately lay it aside ... As the next step, they spirit him out of the way by carefully defining the whole concept, and settle themselves securely in their illusion; they make him a fanatic, his Christianity an exaggeration—in the end he remains the only one, or one of the few, who is not seriously a Christian (for exaggeration is surely a lack of seriousness), whereas the others are all serious Christians.

No, an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed ... it must be done indirectly, not by one who vociferously proclaims himself an extraordinary Christian, but by one who, better instructed, is ready to declare that he is not a Christian at all.

We’ll see how Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Fragments* and *Postscript*, claims not to be a Christian himself, but only thinking about Christianity, trying to figure it out. Again, we saw how Johannes de silentio, in *Fear and Trembling*, says that he can admire Abraham, but he himself cannot make the “movements” of faith.

Kierkegaard goes on (Bretall, p. 332):

That is, one must approach from behind the person who is under an illusion. Instead of wishing to have the advantage of being oneself that rare thing, a Christian, one must let the prospective captive enjoy the advantage of being the Christian, and for one’s own part have resignation enough to be the one who is behind him—otherwise one will certainly not

get the man out of the illusion, a thing which is difficult enough in any case.

And this is just exactly what Kierkegaard himself does—or at least often does—with his “indirect communication.”

Notice what we have here. In this passage, “indirect communication” is a rhetorical strategy, a device one adopts in order to persuade people who would surely not be persuaded by “direct” means.

Here there’s not one word (1) about expressing the “ineffable.” What SK is trying to convey “indirectly” is exactly what the “enthusiast” succeeds in saying directly—except that the enthusiast fails to accomplish anything by doing it his way.

Again, there’s not one word here about (2) avoiding the appearance of being “systematic,” about (3) the impossibility of discussing processes, about (4) the distance between “reader” and “text” or the author’s complete lack of authority in interpreting the “meaning” of his or her own texts.

Among the accounts we talked about earlier, what we find here is closest to the picture of concealing secrets by conveying them in code. Certainly the “indirect communicator” is trying to conceal something: he’s trying to conceal his intentions and purposes, since if he told his audience what he was up to, that he was really trying to convince them of the same thing the so called “enthusiast” is saying, he would be dismissed just as the “enthusiast” is.

But the “indirect communicator” is absolutely not trying to conceal the content of his message. On the contrary, that’s exactly what he’s trying to communicate. Indirect communication, in this passage, is not trying to keep the message itself a secret; on the contrary, it’s trying to use the most effective way of getting it across in a persuasive way.

In short, what we get in *Point of View* is the picture of indirect communication as a practical, strategic device SK adopts for the purpose of finding the most effective way to convince people of what he wants to say. The device is necessary because people are under an illusion. If they weren’t under that illusion, his message could be conveyed quite straightforwardly and directly. And in *Point of View*, at any rate, this seems to be exactly the difference between the “indirect,” pseudonymous writings and the “direct” or signed writings, the “Edifying Discourses” and similar texts.

### ***Concluding Unscientific Postscript***

All right, now let’s turn to *Postscript*. As I said earlier, there are lots of places in *Postscript* where SK talks about indirect communication, and in many of them I still haven’t figured out what’s going on. But I want to focus on just a single passage, beginning on p. 75 in the Hong & Hong translation (not in Bretall).

This is near the beginning of Part Two, Chapter II “Possible and Actual Theses by Lessing.” The first thesis is this (Hong & Hong, p. 72):

The subjective existing thinker is aware of the dialectic of communication.

Then we get a fairly extended discussion of the notion of communication, a discussion that runs on for some eight pages. Much of it, I'm afraid, is very obscure, largely because it repeatedly appeals to the notion of "double reflection," which is one of the most mysterious expressions in the whole Kierkegaardian vocabulary. (I've put it on the list of "buzzwords" on the an earlier handout.)

But in the middle of that discussion, we get this passage (p. 75—Text (7) on the present handout):

To require of a thinker that he contradict his entire thought and his world-view by the form he gives his communication, to console him by saying that in this way he will be beneficial, to let him remain convinced that nobody cares about it, indeed, that nobody notices it in these objective times, since such extreme conclusions are merely tomfoolery, which every systematic day laborer regards as nothing—well, that is good advice, and also quite cheap.

Let's pause. Note that, so far, this sounds very much like what we've already heard from *Point of View*. Remember what SK says there about the "enthusiast" who rants and raves about how Christendom is an illusion and who therefore is completely ineffective? He's just dismissed, no one reads his books, he's regarded as an extremist and not serious. So too here: "nobody cares" about the message, "nobody notices" it, its "extreme conclusions" are dismissed as mere "tomfoolery."

So it seems that we're in the same ballpark we were in with *Point of View*. But now we get an extremely interesting example (*ibid.*—Continuation of Text (7)):

Suppose it was the life-view of a religiously existing subject that one may not have followers, that this would be treason to both God and men; suppose he were a bit obtuse ... and announced this directly with unction and pathos—what then? Well, then he would be understood and soon ten would apply who, just for a free shave each week, would offer their services in proclaiming this doctrine; that is, in further substantiation of the truth of his doctrine, he would have been so very fortunate as to gain followers who accepted and spread this doctrine about having no followers.

In short, he would have defeated his own purposes.

Think about this. Here again we don't get the sense that there's anything ineffable about the message that's being proclaimed—no more than there was in *Point of View*. Here again, just as *Point of View*, the problem is not at all that we're trying to say what cannot be said, but rather that we're trying to do what cannot be done by saying it that way. It's a pragmatic paradox, not any kind of paradox about expressing it.

But still, there's a difference between this picture and the one in *Point of View*—and for that matter between this case and what we were perhaps led to expect by all that stuff at the beginning of the passage about nobody's caring about or even noticing what you're saying.

Here the danger is not that people are going to dismiss you as an extremist (as in *Point of View*) but, just the opposite, that they're going to believe you—believe you to such an extent that they get on the bandwagon too and become your followers! They believe what you want them to believe, but they don't act the way you want them to act.

The picture in *Point of View* of why SK has to resort to “indirect communication” was a very different and quite general picture. That situation would arise any time listeners or readers were suffering from an illusion that prevented them from taking seriously what you were saying. Indirect communication in that case is a matter of getting a foothold, of sneaking around the illusion and coming in through the back door.

It was not so much a matter of what you were trying to say but of the condition of your audience, something about them that prevents your proceeding directly.

Here in *Postscript*, on the other hand, the point doesn't seem to have anything to do with the condition of the audience. This time it seems to have everything to do with what it is you're trying to say: “Have no followers.”

This, I suggest, is what's going on at the end of *Postscript* where Johannes Climacus takes the extraordinary step of revoking everything he's said (Hong & Hong, p. 619—Text (8) on the handout):

Just as in Catholic books, especially from former times, one finds a note at the back of the book that notifies the reader that everything is to be understood in accordance with the teaching of the holy universal mother Church, so also what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot.

Why revoke it? Because, he says (p. 618—Text (9) on the handout):

... the book is superfluous. Therefore, let no one bother to appeal to it, because one who appeals to it has *eo ipso* [= by that very fact] misunderstood it. To be an authority is much too burdensome an existence for a humorist.

In short, he doesn't want to be appealed to as an authority; he wants no followers.

But why not? After all, if he really didn't want any followers, it would have been easy for him not to write the book in the first place.

The answer is that he thinks it's very important—vitaly important—for people to take seriously what he's saying. He just doesn't want them to follow him in taking it seriously; they must take it seriously on their own.



Here's another "thought experiment" along the same line as the one about having no followers (p. 77—Text (10) on the handout):

Suppose, then, that someone wanted to communicate the following conviction: truth is inwardness; objectively there is no truth [SK never actually claims that, although he does think that objectively there is no truth of the kind he's interested in], but the appropriation is the truth. Suppose he had enough zeal and enthusiasm to get it said, because when people heard it they would be saved. Suppose he said it on every occasion and moved not only those who sweat easily but also the tough people—what then? Then there would certainly be some laborers who had been standing idle in the marketplace and only upon hearing this call would go forth to work in the vineyard—to proclaim this teaching to all people. And what then? Then he would have contradicted himself even more, just as he had from the beginning, because the zeal and enthusiasm for getting it said and getting it heard were already a misunderstanding. The main point was indeed to become understood, and the inwardness of the understanding would indeed be that the single individual would understand this BY HIMSELF. Now he had even gone so far as to obtain barkers, and a barker of inwardness is a creature worth seeing.

There you have it. Kierkegaard does want people to understand his message—and even understand it in the sense of internalizing and acting on it. But he doesn't want them to get that from him, but rather on their own.

He wants them to do the work! In a way, this is all of a piece with what we what we were talking about in connection with truth as subjectivity, and even more with faith. Kierkegaard was interested in those notions because there the energy, the force of commitment has to come from you, not from the force of the evidence for what you're committed to. So too here. He doesn't want you to become convinced of—even passionately committed to—what he's saying because he was so good at saying it, at presenting the case. In that case, the passion doesn't really come from you.

### ***Two Lectures on Communication***

The two lectures on communication, contained in the Hong & Hong translation of the *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 267–308, §§ 649–57, contain an odd and tremendously interesting discussion of indirect communication. (It would be good to go dig up a copy of these "lectures" and read them now. But if you can't do that, or just don't want to, just pay attention to the following paragraphs.)

As I said earlier, they are notes and drafts for two lectures Kierkegaard never gave (and it's not clear he ever intended to give them). They come from 1847, which means they are after *Postscript* (published in February of 1846) and before *Point of View* (written in 1848 but never published during his life).

If you've read through the *Lectures*, you'll know that they are fragmentary and repetitive at the beginning. He's obviously just jotting things down and then re-working them, adding material, and so forth. But by the time you get toward the end of the material, you're getting some fairly coherent, sustained prose.

The discussion in these *Lectures* presents a somewhat different take from what we've seen so far.

(I'll be giving references by section and subsection numbers in the Hong & Hong edition. The passage as a whole runs from § 649 to § 657, with most of the sections further divided into numbered subsections. I'll also give you the page number to the Hong & Hong volume.)

At the beginning of the passage (§ 649.1, p. 267), the topic under discussion is what he calls the “delusion and confusion of the modern age.” (Note that this will turn out to be not quite the same as the “prodigious illusion” mentioned in *Point of View*.) Here he says (§ 649.5, p. 268):

More specifically, that the distinction between art and science has been forgotten. Everything has become science and scholarship, and art is understood only esthetically as fine art [that is, as something to STUDY]. But there is a whole aspect of art which science and scholarship have taken possession of—or wish to take possession of—this is the ethical. The ethical is indifferently related to knowledge; that is, it assumes that every human being knows it.

Then a few lines later (*ibid.*, p. 269):

... this is the confusion of the modern age, that the ethical is communicated as scholarship and science.

There's a lot built into this.

First of all, ethics is a kind of ART. He doesn't mean “art” in the sense of painting or sculpture, but “art” in the sense of the Greek *technē*—that is, a skill, a craft.

Furthermore, note the claim that ethics assumes that every human being knows it. That is, an ethical “sense” is in effect innate in all of us, whether we live in accordance with that sense or not. (We call it “conscience.”)

(Note this claim well. It will be crucial when we come to talk about Fragments soon.)

Now what does he mean when he says that the confusion of the modern age is that “the ethical is communicated as scholarship and science”? Well, basically, he's talking about the old Socratic question “Can virtue be taught?”

Does taking a course in, say, business ethics make you an honest businessperson—a more ethical human being? Like Socrates, Kierkegaard's answer is no—and even, “No, of course not.” You'll know more about ethics, perhaps—if it's a good course—but you

won't necessarily know ethics any better, in the sense of being any the more ethical personally. That's a totally different issue.

Kierkegaard gives an example—it's an example he returns to several times throughout these lectures (*ibid.*, p. 269):

The military assumes that every country lad who comes into military service possesses the necessary capacities to stick it out. Therefore he is first of all examined so that there be no difficulties in this respect [he's given a physical] (in the same way the ethical assumes that everyone knows what the ethical is). [OK. The *ethical* and the *army* start in the same place.] Now the communication begins. The corporal does not EXPLAIN to the soldier what it is to drill, etc.; he COMMUNICATES it to him as an art, he teaches him to use MILITARILY the abilities and the potential competence he ALREADY has.

And this is the way the ethical must be communicated. If one begins first of all with a course to instill the ethical into the individual, then the communication never becomes ethical and the relationship is disturbed from the beginning [because ethics *assumes* you've already got that.]

In § 649.14, p. 272, SK gives an amusing example of what can result from this confusion:

An example of the misunderstanding through conceiving instruction aimed at capability [that is, aimed at ART] as instruction in knowledge [in "science" or "scholarship"]. A sergeant in the National Guard says to a recruit: "You there, stand up straight." Recruit: "Sure enough." Sergeant: "Yes, and don't talk during drill." Recruit: "All right, I won't if you'll just tell me." Sergeant: "What the devil! You are not supposed to talk during drill!" Recruit: "Well, don't get so mad. If I know I'm not supposed to, I'll quit talking during drill."

What does all this have to do with "indirect communication"? Well, let's see. Early on in these *Lectures* (§ 649.7, p. 270), we get a discussion of communication as involving three categories: (1) the teacher, (2) the pupil, and (3) the object of teaching (= what is being taught). In other words, (1) the communicator, (2) the one who receives the communication, and (3) what it is that's being communicated.

(Notice, incidentally, how communicating has become teaching in this discussion. It's not just a matter of saying something and having your listener understand you. No, you have to give your listeners something new they didn't have before. Again, watch for this in *Fragments*.)

Later on in these *Lectures*, in the more fully developed drafts, these three components become four (§ 651, p. 281): the communicator, the receiver, the object, and the communication itself (the activity). But let's just keep it simple, and stay with the three we already have.

He says (§ 649.9, p. 271):

Let us now make an experiment and assume that there is an object or a knowledge which we all have. [And recall that ETHICS assumes that EVERY HUMAN BEING KNOWS IT.] What would be the implications for the dialectical in communication? [In other words, what happens when we are talking about communication/teaching *ethically*?]

Well, (1) the third category—the object communicated—drops out of the picture, since if everybody knows it already, one person can hardly communicate (i. e., teach) it to another. For the same reason, (2) the second category—the receiver—drops out as well, since you can't get what you've already got. And so too, (3) the first category—the communicator (= teacher)—drops out, since there's nothing to communicate and no one to communicate it to. Thus (*ibid.*):

The only communicator remaining would be the one who had given all men this knowledge ...

Or (§ 649.11, p. 272):

There remains only one communicator: God.

(If you know your history of medieval philosophy, you will perhaps recognize that this is beginning to sound an awful lot like St. Augustine's theory of illumination, which was in effect his answer to the famous slave-boy passage in Plato's *Meno*, and to the Platonic theory of Recollection. All that is correct, and all that is coming back—and all that we'll talk about in connection with *Philosophical Fragments*.)

But notice: This holds only if we're talking about something every human being already knows—like the ethical.

And we've been talking about it as if the task of the communicator is to give that knowledge to the listener, who therefore doesn't already have it. Hence, only God is a communicator.

In that case (§ 649.12, p. 272):

We have now thought through the dialectic of communication as knowledge and have seen that it is done away with [if we're talking about communicating the ethical]. Now follows a new conception of communication.

OK, so let's change the notion of “communication” then. Let's not think so much of imparting some new information to the receiver of the communication—that is, of putting something into the receiver—but of bringing something out, in the sense in which we speak of a sculptor as “bringing out” of the block of marble the figure that was

already latently present within it. It's a question now of the realization of something that's already potentially there. In the case of the ethical (§ 649, 13, p. 272):

The object of the communication is consequently not a knowledge but a realization.

Communication in that case is a whole different kind of process. And this process is what he calls indirect communication in these *Lectures*. The difference between direct and indirect communication, on this picture then, is the difference between imparting facts and developing the student's skills. Or, if we want to put it in more modern lingo, it's the difference between teaching that such and such is so and teaching how to do such and such.

Now this is something we haven't really seen earlier in the other discussions we've considered. You might think it's implicit in *Postscript*, with its emphasis on getting your listeners to come to the same result on their own. But in any case, it's not really put like this in *Postscript* or in anything else we've looked at.

There are some passages in these lectures that don't seem to fit this picture (of the distinction between knowing that and knowing how), and that sound more like what we saw in *Point of View*. For example, (§ 649.22, p. 274):

All indirect communication is different from direct communication in that indirect communication first of all involves a deception—simply because an attempt to communicate the ethical directly would mean to deceive.

If you think about it, that doesn't make a lot of sense. To try do it the wrong way (directly) would be a deception; therefore, the right way to do it also involves a deception? He seems to be thinking here—as he thinks in *Point of View* but as we have not seen so far in these *Lectures*—that to communicate indirectly (here, to impart a skill) means first of all to disabuse the student of certain illusions. And that perhaps involves “deceiving a person into the truth.” While this may be true, if it is true it tells us something about the nature of modern society or the condition of the audience (that they are “under an illusion”—not about the nature of “communication” in general.

There's one last point I want to make about these *Lectures*, although we could spend a lot more time on them. In § 650.13, p. 279, we get an extremely important claim:

The difference between upbringing [i. e., training] in the ethical and upbringing in the ethical-religious is simply this—that the ethical is the universally human itself [we've already seen that claim in FT, and in the view that everyone knows the ethical], but religious (Christian) upbringing must first of all communicate a knowledge. Ethically man as such knows about the ethical, but man as such does not know about the religious in the Christian sense. Here there must be the communication of a little knowledge first of all—but then the same relationship as in the ethical enters in ...

What he has in mind here is the idea that Christianity is a religion that depends essentially on a historical claim—that God became a human being, that this actually happened historically. While ethics may be in some sense innate in all of us, that historical claim is emphatically not innate. That's something we have to be told, and that's a matter of imparting a factual knowledge we didn't have before. But once we are told that (and presumably once we believe it), then we're back in the business of developing a skill.

What Kierkegaard is acknowledging here is the fact that Christianity is a historical religion, centered around certain events in the past. That's why we need the Scriptures, for instance—so we'll be able to know about those events.

But the actual content of those Scriptures, the actual details of the events they record, is for the most part completely irrelevant. What we need on that score is very minimal.

There's a striking passage in *Fragments* that drives this point home very forcefully (Hong & Hong, pp. 103–04—not in Bretall—Text (11) on the handout):

The heart of the matter is the historical fact that the god has been in human form, and the other historical details are not even as important as they would be if the subject were a human being instead of the god. Lawyers say that a capital crime absorbs all the lesser crimes—so also with faith: its absurdity completely absorbs minor matters. Discrepancies, which usually are disturbing, do not disturb here and do not matter. However, it does matter very much if by means of pretty-minded calculation someone wants to offer faith to the highest bidder; it matters so much that he never comes to faith.

What he's talking about here is the worry people sometimes have over reconciling the various discrepancies in the Gospels, for instance—getting all the facts straight, perhaps supplementing the Scriptures themselves with appropriate philological or archeological research.

Kierkegaard (actually, Johannes Climacus in *Fragments*) says he stands second to none in his admiration and respect for serious scholarship of that kind. But it doesn't help one bit when the question is about how we come to faith. And now we get the striking part (*ibid.*, p. 104—Text (12) on the handout):

Even if the contemporary generation [i. e., contemporary with Jesus, contemporary with the events recorded] had not left anything behind except these words, “We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died”—this is more than enough. The contemporary generation would have done what is needful, for this little announcement, this world-historical *nota bene*, is enough to become an occasion for someone who comes later, and the most prolix report can never in all eternity become more for the person who comes later.

As a little digression here, notice some things about this passage.

First, this passage confirms something you begin to sense from a reading of Kierkegaard generally: that for him, the main doctrine in Christianity is the Incarnation, and NOT the Resurrection. St. Paul says (1 Cor. 15:13–14) that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then our faith is in vain. But not for Johannes Climacus. The little report he says would have been more than enough has not one word in it about the Resurrection!

Second and even more shocking, notice that there's nothing in the passage to require that this little report from the contemporary generation even be true. We just have to have the report. And for that matter, this “more than enough” report doesn't even come right out and affirm that the events actually took place. All it says is that “we have believed” them. End of digression.

## **Conclusion**

What picture of “indirect communication” then do we get from these *Lectures*? Well, we get a fairly clear distinction between knowledge that such and such is so and knowledge how to do such and such—between factual knowledge and mastering a skill—and the identification of indirect communication with teaching the latter. This is something we've not found in the other texts we've looked at.

There is still nothing here about the ineffable—at least not unless we want to say that any real skill is ineffable because it can't be acquired just by listening to a lecture. Is gymnastics then ineffable? Perhaps, if you want to insist, but not in any very mysterious or “lofty” sense.

We also don't see anything here that's especially secret—any more than gymnastics is a “secret.” It's only secret, concealed, and can't be communicated if you try to communicate it the wrong way, as if it were a matter of factual knowledge rather than a skill.

On the other hand, there are some features of this account that don't sit well with other things we know about Kierkegaard. For example, in these *Lectures* Kierkegaard several times suggests that in order to communicate a skill, you must possess the skill yourself and must in fact practice it in the process of teaching it to others. In gymnastics, he says, the teacher displays and exercises the gymnastic skill in the process of teaching others to acquire it (§ 649.21, pl. 274).

Yet he himself is trying to teach the skill of Christianity to others, whereas he repeatedly protests—both in his pseudonymous and in his signed works—that he himself is not a Christian but only at best becoming one.

It may be possible to reconcile this, but it's something to think about.

## ***Practice in Christianity***

Lastly, I want to look very briefly at *Practice in Christianity* (Bretall: *Training in Christianity*)—published in 1850, and generally regarded as SK's last great work.

There is a discussion of roughly twenty pages in the Hong & Hong translation (pp. 124–44) that is a very interesting treatment of the notion of a sign and of indirect communication. What we get here is something we haven't seen in anything we've looked at so far—the direct and explicit connection between these notions and the central doctrine of Christianity, in SK's view: the Incarnation.

For SK, the Incarnation itself, the life and message of Jesus, is preeminently an indirect communication from God. In these pages, we get section titles like these:

- “The Impossibility of Direct Communication” (that is, direct communication of certain things).
- “In Christ the Secret of Sufferings Is the Impossibility of Direct Communication.”
- “The Possibility of Offense Is to Deny Direct Communication.”
- “To Deny Direct Communication is To Require *Faith*.”

I'm not going to go into any of this here, except to observe that in these sections we get a much more metaphysical and theological notion of indirect communication than in anything we've seen so far. Suddenly, everything becomes very concrete.

It's not clear to me yet to what extent the notion of indirect communication we get here is like what we've seen already. My initial sense is that it's really a quite new picture, but I've not yet worked all that out.

Before turning to something entirely new, however, I want to emphasize that I agree with the general consensus that *Practice in Christianity* is one of SK's genuinely great works! It's not only deep and profound, but also good to read.

## **Summary**

OK, now we've looked at four different places where SK talks about “indirect communication” in some detail. Let's summarize what we've seen.

- In *Point of View*, we saw the view that “indirect communication” was a strategic device, what might be viewed as a rhetorical strategy of communicating things your audience is not antecedently prepared to hear. First they have to be disabused of their illusion, and only then—once those obstacles have been cleared away—will they be in a position to realize the truth of what you're communicating. In *Point of View*, indirect communication is a very general notion that has nothing especially to do with what you're trying to communicate but only with the condition of your audience.
- In *Postscript*, in at least some passages, we get, on the contrary, a picture of indirect communication as having everything to do with the content of your message, and nothing especially to do with obstacles posed by the position of your audience. (Recall the doctrine that you should “have no followers.”) We also get at least the beginnings of another theme: that indirect communication is to be



used when you want your audience not only to agree with you—that is, to hold the same convictions you hold—but to come to agree with you ON THEIR OWN, not because you convinced them of it. This is the business of getting your hearer or reader to do the work on his or her own.

- In the *Two Lectures on Communication* we get a development of the idea that the difference between direct and indirect communication amounts to the distinction between teaching facts (what SK calls teaching “science and scholarship”) and teaching a skill. The former can be pounded in to people, but the latter must be pounded out—that is, brought out—and must therefore be in some sense latently present in there to begin with. Ethics, we are told, is not a science but a skill—it’s something you do, not something you learn. Hence ethics must be at least latently present in all of us. Similarly, Kierkegaard says, although Christianity has a factual claim as a central kernel, it is not a doctrine but a way of life, a practice. This is very much like what we saw in *Postscript* with its emphasis on getting your audience to do things on their own. But there it was more a matter of getting your audience to hold the same convictions you do—that is, a matter of what they believe—than of getting them to acquire a skill. (At least it was in the passage we looked at, although *Postscript* as a whole probably ends up more like the *Two Lectures*.)
- Finally, we touched quickly on *Practice in Christianity*, where we see the claim that the Incarnation, the central doctrine in Christianity, in SK’s view, it itself an indirect communication of the highest order. We won’t talk any more about that now, but instead turn to a new but related cluster of topics.

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## Kierkegaard’s “epistemology”

This new cluster of topics is what the tentative “Schedule” in the *Syllabus* describes as “Kierkegaard’s religious epistemology,” and I’ll be talking about them for the next few lectures. Among the topics that come together under this heading are:

- Teaching and learning. (We’ve just seen some discussion of that *Two Lectures on Communication*).
- Recollection vs. something SK calls “repetition,” another very mysterious notion in Kierkegaard.
- The notion of “offense,” which seems to be an important and central notion in Kierkegaard.
- The “moment,” likewise an important and central notion.
- The notion of being “contemporary” with something.

All this is a bit of a grab-bag, and to some extent our discussion of it will be a bit of a grab-bag too. I'm not in a position to weave all these things together in a way that I'm confident of and that satisfies me. So I'll just be able to highlight certain things and do the best I can. It will be something of a tangled web.

The central work I want to focus on in this section of the course is *Philosophical Fragments*, a fairly good selection from which is in the Bretall volume. Related to *Fragments*, I also want you to look at the selections from *Repetition* and *Practice in Christianity* in Bretall.

*Fragments* was published in 1844—just four days before *The Concept of Anxiety*, which is the next major thing we'll look at. *Fragments* is attributed to Johannes Climacus, who is also the author of *Postscript*, which was published some two years later in 1846. In fact, the full title of *Postscript* is *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.

The two works are not just presented as being by the same (pseudonymous) author, but are also presented as being of a piece, part of a single project.

*Fragments* repeatedly describes itself as “only a pamphlet,” which is in a sense correct. It prints up to slightly over a hundred pages. It's the first of the so called “algebraic” works—fairly short, theoretical and concise. (They read much more like what we normally think of as “philosophical” texts—“much more,” but it's still Kierkegaard, after all.) The other “algebraic” works are *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death*, both of which we'll read in full.

The conspicuous contrast between the relatively slim *Fragments* and the absolutely enormous *Postscript* to it is deliberate. In *Postscript* he mocks the Hegelians who were constantly going around talking breathlessly about the system as something that was for all intents and purposes completed. There are a few loose ends that still have to be tied up, of course, but that won't take long. It's as good as done. Any day now, “by Sunday at the latest,” as SK puts it at one point. All we need is a little “postscript” tacked on to the end of the system.

So he publishes not a grand philosophical system but a modest book called *Philosophical Fragments*—and then follows it up with a “postscript” that's about six times the size of the original.

But make no mistake about it. Small as it is, *Fragments* is a dense and enormously rewarding book.

### ***The title and the statement of the problem***

Remember some time ago when I mentioned a short article in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1997) by one M. G. Piety, a kind of review of the Hong & Hong set of translations.<sup>10</sup>

Well, Piety has some interesting things to say about the translation of *Philosophical Fragments*. First of all the title<sup>11</sup>:

That is, the motivation for translating a philosophical text is very often the belief of the translator that he can improve on an existing translation and thus put the reader in a closer relation to the original text. This implies, of course, that the translator is already familiar with the work in translation, and this familiarity can affect his understanding of the original text. He may unconsciously impose earlier translations on this text and, if he is unfortunate, repeat some of the mistakes of these earlier translations.

This is probably the explanation behind the fact that *Philosophiske Smuler* is translated by Howard and Edna Hong as *Philosophical Fragments* in the new edition. The Latinate “Fragmenter” was common in scholarly and philosophical writing in Denmark in the nineteenth century. It was not this expression Kierkegaard chose, however, for what was to become one of his most important philosophical works, but the less pretentious “Smuler”. “Smuler” means scraps or crumbs, thus *Philosophiske Smuler* is properly translated as *Philosophical Crumbs*. This may seem like a minor point, and indeed many Kierkegaard scholars would prefer the title to remain *Philosophical Fragments*. The difficulty is that this obscures the fact that the title is clearly an allusion to a popular Danish saying: “Smuler er også brød” (Crumbs are also bread), which is, in turn, an allusion to Matthew 15:27—something which is certainly relevant to an understanding of the substance of the text.

The passage in question is this (Mat. 15:22–28):

Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” [that is, not to this Canaanite woman]. But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” [that is, to mere Canaanites]. She said,

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<sup>10</sup> M. G. Piety, “The dangers of clarity,” *TLS* April 18, 1997, pp. 8–10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

The review goes on to suggest why knowledge of this fact might help in understanding what’s going on in the book. You may want to look at that part of the review; I don’t find it altogether convincing.

But, in any event, I want to call attention to another passage from the review. This is a fairly extended quotation and, again, I’m not sure how much it really matters in the long run, but it will serve to lead us in to the contents of the book. Piety says (p. 8):

The influence of earlier translations probably also accounts for the fact that the question with which the new translation [i.e., the Hongs’] of the *Crumbs* or *Fragments* begins is: “Can the truth be **learned**?” rather than “Can the truth be **taught**?” [Recall in particular the *Two Lectures on Communication* that we’ve just been through, which were largely about teaching.] Danish has only one word, “lære” for both “teach” and “learn”; it is thus up to the translator to determine which translation is appropriate in a given context. David Swenson, who produced the first English translation [of *Fragments*] in 1939, chose “learned,” and the Hongs followed his example both in their revision of the Swenson translation [which is the one we have in the Bretall volume] in 1962 and in the new Princeton translation in 1985.

There is considerable evidence, however, that the concern of the *Crumbs* is not whether the truth can be learned, but whether it can be taught. [Again, remember how in the *Two Lectures* the discussion of “communication” got transformed into a discussion of teaching.] Kierkegaard criticizes [in *Fragments*] the “Socratic” interpretation of the relation of the individual to the truth, on the grounds that it deprives both the teacher and the moment at which the truth is learned of any real significance. The alternative—i. e., Christian—interpretation invests the teacher with what Kierkegaard calls “decisive significance,” yet according to this interpretation, he argues, the teacher [i.e., *Christ*] “is not a teacher.” That is, Christ, asserts Kierkegaard, “goes beyond the definition of a teacher.”

One of the most important issues in both the *Crumbs* and its companion volume, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is whether there can be an intermediary between the believer and Christ, whether Christian truth can be passed down from one individual or generation to another. That is, one of the most important issues treated in these works is whether Christianity is a doctrine that can be taught in the conventional sense. Kierkegaard’s conclusion is an unequivocal No.

Piety has recently published a translation of what she calls “*Philosophical Crumbs*,” along with a translation of *Repetition* in the “Oxford World Classics” series, and Alastair Hannay has even more recently published a complete translation of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs* with Cambridge.

In my own view, “Philosophical Crumbs” just sounds funny, which the title doesn’t sound in Danish. I would suggest “bits” instead.

### **The issue**

OK, now let’s talk about what goes on in this book. As the *TLS* review indicates, the main issue in *Fragments* is whether “truth” can be learned or taught. And it comes up right at the beginning, in a section entitled “A Project of Thought”—in other words, a “thought experiment.” Johannes Climacus throughout the book carefully refrains from asserting any particular view. It’s all hypothetical—all a “what if”? (Bretall, p. 154)

How far does the Truth admit of being learned [taught(?)]? With this question let us begin. It was a Socratic question, or became such in consequence of the parallel Socratic question with respect to virtue.

### **A digression on Socrates and Plato**

The reference is to Plato’s *Meno*, where there is a long discussion of just that: whether virtue can be taught. If no one knowingly does evil (a common Socratic theme), so that evil-doing arises out of ignorance and confusion, then—conversely—virtue (doing good reliably) must involve a kind of knowledge. But if virtue is a kind of knowledge, we would expect to find teachers of it, like other branches of knowledge. And if there were teachers of virtue, we would expect virtuous parents to go to great lengths, to spare no expense, to hire those teachers—the very best ones—to teach virtue to their children. And so we would expect the children of virtuous parents to be conspicuously virtuous themselves.

But we don’t find that. In fact, we often find just the contrary. So something’s obviously wrong, and we need to discuss things.

We’ve already seen exactly this issue come up the *Two Lectures on Communication*, where, recall, Kierkegaard said “this is the confusion of the modern age, that the ethical is communicated as scholarship and science”—that is, people try to communicate it that way, but that’s a “confusion,” and it doesn’t work.

Now, in the *Meno*, the discussion soon shifts from being about teaching virtue in particular to being about teaching (or learning) anything at all—not just virtue, not just ethics, but anything.

And why is there that more general problem? Well, now we get the famous “slave-boy” passage in the *Meno*.

Socrates calls over one of Meno's slave-boys who has never been instructed in mathematics or geometry. In particular, he certainly doesn't know the Pythagorean Theorem. (Actually, in the *Meno* itself, it's a variation of the Pythagorean Theorem, but never mind.) Socrates verifies this by drawing diagrams in the dust and asking various questions that would require the slave-boy to know the Pythagorean Theorem—and the slave-boy keeps giving the wrong answers.

Yet, by asking him further questions (Socrates very carefully does not tell the slave-boy anything, but only asks him questions), Socrates gets the slave-boy into a position where he finally does come up with the Pythagorean Theorem and can give right answers now.

With this, Socrates triumphantly says: Look, a moment ago the slave-boy didn't know the Pythagorean Theorem, and now he does. Yet I haven't taught him anything, in the sense of giving him anything he didn't have before—all I did was ask him questions.

At this point, most initial readers of the *Meno* have an obvious objection: Yes, you just asked him questions—but they were obviously leading questions. You fed him the answers! You were in effect saying things like, “The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides, isn't it?” And of course the poor, intimidated kid is going to agree. No, you fed him the answers, even if you disguised them in the form of questions.

But, while Plato certainly writes the dialogue to encourage that initial impression—it's a trap. Because look: If that is what's happening, then it's still true that Socrates hasn't taught the slave-boy anything. The slave-boy doesn't really know the Pythagorean Theorem at the end any more than he did at the outset. He's willing to agree with anything Socrates suggests. He's answering not on the basis of any real insight or knowledge, but simply because of Socrates's authority or charisma or whatever.

As I said, Plato certainly writes to reinforce that initial impression. But—what if the slave-boy isn't doing that? What if he's answering honestly and candidly, and not agreeing unless he really does have that insight—really does “see the point”?

In that case, and only in that case, does the slave-boy appear to have really “learned” anything, but he certainly didn't learn it from Socrates. All Socrates did was to direct his attention along certain paths. He didn't—and couldn't—have given the slave-boy insight. That the slave-boy had to do on his own.

Socrates's role is purely that of a kind of midwife—someone who can help others give birth (in this case, to come up with knowledge), even if she doesn't—or *can't*—“give birth” herself. It's a “maieutic” method. For that matter, Socrates himself need not personally know the Pythagorean Theorem; he doesn't even have to believe it. All he has to know is how to point other people in the right direction, and then they can do it on their own.

All of this, of course, should sound familiar: the maieutic method, doing it on your own. We've seen these themes in Kierkegaard too—in the *Two Lectures on Communication*, and in some passages from *Postscript*.

Now—the crucial step: Socrates concludes that since the slave-boy obviously does have that knowledge now, and since he didn't get it from Socrates except as a mere catalyst to the process that was taking place in the slave-boy, he must in some sense have known it all along.

He knew it, but implicitly, latently. He knew it but had forgotten it. And what we normally call “teaching” (what Socrates was doing there with the diagrams in the dust) is really just a process of reminding the pupil of something he or she already knew.

As a result, we get the famous Platonic Theory of Recollection or “Reminiscence”—that what we normally call “teaching” is really just reminding, and what we normally call “learning” is really just remembering—“recollection.”

And then Plato goes on (in the *Phaedo*, for instance) to use these considerations to mount an argument for the immortality of the soul. Since the slave-boy had been totally uneducated (and therefore didn't originally acquire knowledge of the Pythagorean Theorem in this life and then forget it), and since Socrates obviously hasn't put that knowledge into the slave-boy for the first time (he only asked questions), therefore the slave-boy could only have acquired that knowledge originally before his soul was implanted in his body down here in the material world. Hence, his soul once existed apart from the body—and therefore, there's no reason to think it can't do so again.

But we don't have to follow Plato further along these paths. Let's turn back to Kierkegaard.

### ***Application to Kierkegaard***

All this should sound familiar—not just from what you perhaps already know about Plato but from what we've seen so far with Kierkegaard. We know Kierkegaard often describes his own method as a “maieutic” one, explicitly appealing to the “midwife” metaphors in Plato. And remember the difference in *Two Lectures* between the drill sergeant's pounding something into the recruit (the factual details of the field manual, for instance) and his pounding something out of him—in the sense of drawing it out—for example, making an actual soldier out of the farm boy.

Remember also how, in order to pound something out like this, it has to be at least potentially or latently present to begin with—in Platonic terms, “learning” is just recollection of something you already knew but had forgotten.

And remember how, from *Two Lectures*, the ethical somehow assumes that everybody already knows it. The military assumes all the recruits “have what it takes” to be a soldier.

### ***The task of Fragments***

OK, now we're set for the task of *Fragments*. *Fragments* is in effect Kierkegaard's answer to the *Meno*.

Suppose all that's FALSE. Suppose the “truth” is not already in us. Suppose “recollection” fails—that’s not what’s involved in what we call “learning” in this life. Bretall, p. 157:

Now if things are to be otherwise ...

Well, on the Socratic-Platonic picture, the so called “teacher” (Socrates) is completely incidental to the process of “learning” (= recollection). All he did was remind the slave-boy of what the latter already knew but had forgotten.

If something else had served as a “reminder,” it would have been the same. If shapes in the clouds, the Manhattan telephone book—or whatever—had served to remind the slave-boy, the outcome would have been the same. In short, there's nothing special about Socrates here. In a sense, the slave-boy doesn't come away really owing very much to Socrates.

By the same token, the particular moment when the slave-boy recollects the Pythagorean Theorem is, in a sense, purely incidental. The Pythagorean Theorem, after all, is a kind of timeless, “eternal” truth, and the knowledge of it has been lying dormant and latent in the slave-boy all these years. So the particular moment when that latent knowledge becomes realized is purely incidental; any time would be just as good as any other. Bretall, p. 156:

From the standpoint of the Socratic thought every point of departure in time is *eo ipso* [by that very fact] accidental, an occasion, a vanishing moment. The teacher himself is no more than this; and if he offers himself and his instruction on any other basis, he does not give but takes away [= that is, he DECEIVES and makes matters worse], he is not even the other's friend, much less his teacher.

Now the question of *Fragments* is: What if all that is false? (Cf. Bretall, p. 157: “If things are to be otherwise ...”) What if we don't already have the knowledge latently within us? What if the slave-boy doesn't already know the Pythagorean Theorem, even latently or implicitly? What if the Socratic picture is false?

Well then, Socrates's role is even less. No matter what he does, he can't give that sense of insight—of RECOGNITION—to the slave-boy. That's something that has to come from within the slave-boy himself. And if the slave-boy doesn't have even an implicit, latent prior knowledge of what he comes to recognize, then Socrates certainly can't point him in the right direction, can't remind him. There's nothing to be reminded of! The condition presupposed before Socrates can do his job is not there, and Socrates himself can't provide the condition. (So too with the military.)

In other words, in that case, Socrates can't even play the role of a midwife. He just plays no role at all and is utterly irrelevant to the story.

In a case like that, if nevertheless the slave-boy does come to have knowledge of the Pythagorean Theorem where he didn't have it before—not even implicitly or latently—then something utterly different is happening. In that case the “teacher,” if there is one—it isn't Socrates, but whoever puts that knowledge into the slave-boy's head—is not just



someone who reminds. No, in that case the real teacher is not just a mere occasion any longer, but absolutely critical to the whole process. He will be the one who gives the slave-boy the very condition that will allow him to recognize and come to terms with the Pythagorean Theorem. On the Theory of Recollection, the slave-boy owes his so called “teacher” Socrates very little; on this new (non-Socratic) picture, he owes the real teacher absolutely EVERYTHING.

### **The “moment”**

By the same token, Kierkegaard will hold, the moment when that knowledge is put into us becomes absolutely critical too. It’s no longer the case that one time is just as good as any other. I confess I don’t really see this point very clearly, but it’s part and parcel of the notion of the moment that keeps coming up in Kierkegaard.

And now let me say a little about this notion of “the moment.” The Danish word here is ‘øjeblikket’, which, just like the German ‘Augenblick,’ really means “blink of the eye” (“twinkling of an eye”). It’s also translated ‘instant’, and this may help us pin it down.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, which we’ll be looking at in a little while, there is a fairly extended discussion of “the moment.” There (Hong & Hong, pp. 82–91 and elsewhere) we get the notion that the “moment” or “instant” is the intersection of time and eternity. In a long footnote beginning on p. 82 of the Hong & Hong translation, this is linked up with some things going on in the notorious second part of Plato’s *Parmenides*—where no one knows what’s happening.

The basic idea seems to be that time “flows”; it’s a continuous passing. Eternity, on the other hand, doesn’t “flow.” Eternity is fixed and stable. (‘Eternity’ in this context doesn’t mean just an unlimited time, but rather something altogether timeless.) The “moment” or “instant” in a sense has features of both. An instant is temporal, for example, it’s “in time”—it can be dated precisely (“high noon, July 4, 1776”). And yet it doesn’t “flow,” it doesn’t change, it isn’t a continuous passing. It’s fixed and stable.

(Note: We’re talking now about datable “instants” like “high noon, July 4, 1776,” not about other—“indexical”—instantaneous notions like “now,” which are constantly changing and “flowing.” This is a standard, recognized distinction drawn by people who do the philosophy of time, and goes way back to antiquity.)

So the “instant” or “moment,” then, combines features of time and eternity, is so to speak the intersection of time and eternity. Or, to put it in a way that will obviously be significant for Kierkegaard—the moment is when the eternal enters time.

Doesn’t that sound like the Incarnation? It certainly does, and you can see why Kierkegaard wants to make a big deal out of it.

That’s not the end of the story about the moment, by any means. But it’s enough to get at least a preliminary orientation.

### ***Why make such an hypothesis?***

But let's go back now to *Fragments*. On the Socratic theory of "recollection," the knowledge of eternal truths is implicit in us from the very beginning. A so called "teacher," like Socrates with respect to the slave-boy, is merely a kind of catalyst, the occasion that prompts the slave-boy to recover the latent knowledge that is already in him. Any other occasion could have served just as well, and it could have happened at any time.

But if that's not right (Bretall, p. 157: "Now if things are to be otherwise ..."), then things are going to be different. The very condition is lacking for Socrates to do his minimal job. So if the slave-boy is going to learn anything under this new set of circumstances, the process is going to be a very different one.

Now you may be thinking: "All that's fine, but why make such an hypothesis in the first place? Why would we want to suppose the Socratic picture is wrong?"

Here I want to refer you back for a moment to *Postscript*, to a passage I've already asked you to read (Bretall, p. 218, in the discussion of truth as subjectivity and faith from *Postscript*):

Let us now call the untruth of the individual [= i. e., the fact that the individual does not *start off* with the truth—let us call it] *Sin*. ... By coming into existence [i. e., time] therefore ... he becomes a sinner. He is not born AS a sinner in the sense that he is presupposed as being a sinner BEFORE he is born [= i. e., we don't *sin first* in some other realm, and then somehow bring that sin with us into this life], but he is born in sin and as a sinner. This we might call *Original Sin*. [And that is the topic of *The Concept of Anxiety*.] But if existence has in this manner acquired a power over him, he is prevented from taking himself back into the eternal by way of recollection.

OK, now let's unpack that. As always, SK isn't very worried about philosophical notions of truth or anything else in a very broad sense. When he's talking about "truth" in contexts like this, he often means "the truth that will SAVE us."

In this passage, then, we see the notion that we don't have that "salvific" truth within us when we come into the world—it isn't built in. (That's what "Original Sin" is all about.) And if that truth isn't "built in" [= innate], then of course we can't just recollect it, as the Socratic picture would have it.

**To get to the point**—the doctrine of Original Sin means that we don't come into the world with the condition built in that will enable us to realize what we need to realize if we're going to be saved.

So the "project of thought" Climacus sets up at the beginning of *Fragments* is no idle speculation. When he says "Now if things are to be otherwise ..." (Bretall, p. 157), he's

in effect asking “Now if the Socratic picture is wrong, and if Christianity, and in particular the doctrine of Original Sin, are true ...”

What if they are true? What then? Well, go back and think about the example of the drill sergeant in *Two Lectures*. There Kierkegaard observes that the military assumes that its recruits have what it takes to be an acceptable soldier. That is, it assumes the condition is there in advance. The drill sergeant’s task then is to realize that potential, to draw out that latent potential into actuality. But if that precondition is not there—if the recruit is a quadruple amputee, for instance—then there’s nothing the drill sergeant can do. And not until some medical marvel comes along that will restore the man’s limbs will there be anything for the drill sergeant to do.

So too, there’s nothing any religious author can do, any pastor or missionary, any caretaker of souls—there’s nothing Kierkegaard can do with all his indirect, maieutic method—to get people to have faith, to acquire the knowledge (in the sense of skill or “knowhow”) of being a Christian, if people don’t have the necessary precondition for it in the first place. Until people get that precondition, we all might as well save our breath.

Where are they going to get that precondition? Not from any of us, that’s for sure. And people certainly can’t give it to themselves—since you can’t give what you don’t have.

So how do we get it? Listen (Bretall, pp. 158–59—from *Fragments*):

Now [i. e., given the situation we’ve just been describing] if the learner is to acquire the Truth, the Teacher [i.e., a real teacher] must bring it to him; and not only so, but he must also give him the condition necessary for understanding it. For if the learner were in his own person the condition for understanding the Truth, he need only recall it [= theory of recollection]. ...

But one who gives the learner not only the Truth, but also the condition for understanding it, is more than teacher [i.e., more than any ordinary, human teacher]. All instruction depends upon the presence, in the last analysis, of the requisite condition; if this is lacking, no teacher can do anything. For otherwise he would find it necessary not only to transform the learner [as, in a sense, Socrates did], but to RE-CREATE him before beginning to teach him. [The drill sergeant would have to RE-CREATE the quadruple amputee before he could do anything with him.] But this is something that no human being can do; if it is to be done, it must be done by God himself.

Recall *Two Lectures*, (§ 649.11, p. 272):

There remains only one communicator: God.

Again (Bretall from *Fragments*, p. 162):

Insofar as the learner was in Error, and now receives the Truth and with it the condition for understanding it, a change takes place within him like the change from non-being to being. But this transition from non-being to being is the transition we call birth. Now one who exists cannot be born; nevertheless, the disciple is born. Let us call this transition the new birth [i. e., being reborn, “born again”].

You see what Kierkegaard is doing here. He’s spinning out the implications of his purely hypothetical “project of thought” (“What if the Socratic picture is false?”) and systematically identifying those implications with central Christian theological notions. We’ve already seen that God is the only true “teacher” of the kinds of things we’re talking about now. But there’s more.

As we’ll see when we get to *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard has a view of original sin according to which it’s not just something we inherit from Adam, but something we do ourselves; we are responsible for it. So (Bretall, p. 159—from *Fragments*):

The Teacher is then God himself, who in acting as an occasion prompts the learner to recall that he is in Error, and that by reason of his own guilt. But this state, the being in Error by reason of one’s own guilt, what shall we call it? Let us call it Sin.

Again (Bretall, p. 161):

What now shall we call such a Teacher, one who restores the lost condition and gives the learner the Truth? Let us call him Savior, for he saves the learner from his bondage and from himself; let us call him Redeemer, for he redeems the learner from the captivity into which he had plunged himself ... But still we have not said all that is necessary; for by his self-imposed bondage the learner has brought upon himself a burden of guilt, and when the Teacher gives him the condition and the Truth he constitutes himself an Atonement ...

Also (Bretall, p. 161), the Teacher like this becomes a Judge.

Again (*ibid.*):

And now the moment (*Øjeblikket*). Such a moment [i. e., the moment when the CONDITION IS RESTORED] has a peculiar character. It is brief and temporal indeed, like every moment; it is transient as all moments are; it is past, like every moment in the next moment. And yet it is decisive, and filled with the eternal. Such a moment ought to have a distinctive name; let us call it the Fullness of Time.

We’ve already seen how the notion of being “born again”—the new birth—is derived here.

Again (Bretall, p. 162):

In consequence of receiving the condition in the moment, the course of his life has been given an opposite direction, so that he is now turned about. Let us call this change Conversion. [‘Conversio’ is just Latin for “turning around.”]

So what Kierkegaard has done in the opening pages of *Fragments* is to recognize a deep connection between the Socratic theory of recollection in the *Meno*, among other places, and the central issues of Christianity. It’s not they are the same; far from it. In fact, in a sense they are direct opposites. But they are closely connected anyway.

That’s what I meant when I said earlier that *Fragments* is Kierkegaard’s answer to the *Meno*.

### ***Pelagianism***

(Handout of “Miscellaneous Passages.”)

On the Socratic picture, the Theory of Recollection, we already have the condition for realizing knowledge. In principle, we could do it ourselves, although of course it’s easier if we have someone like Socrates to point us in the right direction—to remind us. In any case, everything takes place at the purely human level.

When we shift the topic, as Kierkegaard does, so that we’re no longer talking just about knowing the Pythagorean Theorem but about knowing the truth that’s going to save us, this Socratic Theory of Recollection amounts to the view that human beings can save themselves under their own power. We can do it ourselves! We don’t need any special outside help. And although we can surely help one another, as Socrates does with the slave-boy, there’s nothing here that requires any superhuman power.

In the theological context, there’s a name for this view. It’s called Pelagianism, named after the English monk Pelagius who first espoused it. He was a contemporary of St. Augustine in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and in fact Augustine got involved in heated controversy with Pelagius over exactly these issues.

Augustine thought original sin implied that we cannot save ourselves under our own powers. Merely human abilities are not enough; it takes a superhuman, supernatural help—it takes grace. Augustine’s views eventually prevailed, and Pelagianism is nowadays generally regarded as a heresy.

But the issue has not gone away—partly because Pelagius had some very good points on his side.

So, another way of looking at the Project of Thought in *Fragments* is that it is in effect raising the issue of Pelagianism. “What if the theory of recollection is wrong” amounts to “What if Pelagianism is wrong and Augustine is right?”

It's generally agreed that Kierkegaard, like all orthodox Christians, rejected Pelagianism. And in fact we've already seen some of this. Recall how, in *Fear and Trembling*, the step from being a Knight of Infinite Resignation to being a Knight of Faith is not a step we can take by ourselves, because we've used up all our energy—the infinite energy it takes—to be a Knight of Infinite Resignation.

But if Pelagianism is to be rejected, it's not clear exactly what Kierkegaard thinks is the correct view instead. For, while it's true that we cannot have faith (and so achieve salvation) on our own, it also seems that we ought to have at least some active role to play in our own salvation. Otherwise, salvation seems to be entirely arbitrary and to have no basis at all in what I do. God would just pick certain people out at random and in effect say, "You there, you're saved," while to others, "Sorry, you're going to hell—tough!"

This would amount to a form of predestination, a view associated with Augustine in his battle against the Pelagians. (But Augustine's own views are subtle, and he never really settled on them once and for all. They were never as simple as full-strength predestination.)

If Kierkegaard rejects Pelagianism, he also seems to reject predestination. There are several passages that indicate this. For example, here's one from the *Journals and Papers*, IV, p. 352:

... In order to constrain subjectivity [i. e., in order to keep us from doing it all ourselves, saving ourselves under our own power—in order to avoid Pelagianism], we are quite properly taught that no one is saved by works, but by grace—and corresponding to that—by faith. [This is classic Lutheranism. No Pelagianism here.] 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," [that's confusing, and it should be "yes"—"yes, we are unable"] and then we have fatalistic election by grace [= predestination], or we must make a little **concession**. The point is this—subjectivity [= the view that we can do it ourselves] is always under suspicion [= the suspicion of Pelagianism], and when it is established that we are saved by faith, there is immediately the suspicion that too much has been conceded here. [That is, our "little **concession**" a moment ago, to avoid the "fatalist" conclusion, is always suspected of slipping back into Pelagianism.] So an addition is made: But no one can give himself faith [that's how we still avoid Pelagianism]; it is a gift of God I must pray for.

Fine, but then I myself can pray, or we must 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.

[I. e., *faith* is something that has to be *given* to me. Praying *for* faith is likewise something that has to be *given* to me. And so on.]

There are MANY, MANY ENVELOPES—but there must still be one point or another where there is a halt at subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> 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.

Yet, late in *Postscript*, Kierkegaard seems to go pretty far toward this fatalism. There he repeatedly says we can do nothing—absolutely nothing—toward salvation BY OURSELVES.

So Kierkegaard’s views are complicated here—just as complicated as orthodoxy’s.

There is an article on all this in the *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, by one Timothy P. Jackson, “Arminian edification: Kierkegaard on grace and free will,” pp. 235–56. In fact, it quotes the passage I just read to you. (“Arminianism” is one of the variations of possible views on this issue, and Jackson argues it is what Kierkegaard holds.) I think it is a very good paper.

### ***Repetition***

There is a cluster of other notions related to what goes on in *Fragments*, and I want to say a few words about them now. I don’t pretend to have all these worked out—far from it. But I think I can give a little orientation.

The first such term is repetition.

If recollection is not going to give us the truth that will save us, since that truth is not in us to be recollected in the first place, then is there any hope for us at all?

Well, the answer seems to be something called “repetition.” I have no idea what it really is, or how SK thinks it works, but consider this:

### ***The story of Repetition***

A little background first. Please bear with me. (This will take a while before we get back to the theme.) The very same day SK published *Fear and Trembling* (October 16, 1843), he also published a slim little book entitled *Repetition*, under the pseudonym Constantin Constantius (a pseudonym he does not use anywhere else). It’s published in the same volume with *Fear and Trembling* in the Hong and Hong translation.

This is a very strange work, although it’s quite readable. In fact, it’s probably the closest thing SK ever wrote to what we would call an out-and-out novel. In it, the author—

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<sup>12</sup> Note: He says “a halt at subjectivity,” not “a halt to subjectivity.” That is, he’s not saying we must put a stop to subjectivity, but rather that we can’t stop until we get to subjectivity; we have to do something ourselves. We have to have some role to play in our own salvation!

Constantin Constantius—begins by asking about “repetition” (p. 131—none of what I will be quoting from *Repetition* is in the Bretall volume):

whether or not it [= repetition] is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated ...

Then he suddenly gets a brilliant idea: “I know. I went to Berlin once. [SK actually did go to Berlin for a short while on more than one occasion.] I’ll go back and see if everything’s the same!” Repetition, see?

So he does go back—but of course it’s not the same. Oh, there’s a lot that has stayed as it was. He goes back to his old apartment, he goes to the same restaurant with the same waiter and the same menu. But it’s no good—it’s just not the same the second time. So he goes back to Copenhagen and despairs of there ever being any true repetition.

Meanwhile—we’ve been introduced in the early pages to a Young Man. He’s not given any other name, but he does reappear a year and a half later, in *Stages on Life’s Way*, as a guest in the “Banquet” part (= *In vino veritas*). (At least everyone assumes it’s the same Young Man.)

The Young Man is an acquaintance of Constantin Constantius’s, and comes to him because he’s looking for a confidant, someone to whom he can freely unburden himself. Well, the Young Man has fallen madly in love with a fair maiden, but it isn’t working out for reasons we don’t have to go into here. (Basically, it’s because the Young Man is a nut!)

Eventually, the Young Man decides this can’t go on, that the only way out is for him to disappear. So he and Constantin contrive a scheme whereby he escapes to Sweden, but makes it appear that he’s really a dastardly scoundrel who’s run off with a seamstress, a young lady who’s been hired to act the part but who is in fact has no interest at all in the Young Man, and is perfectly honorable (apart from a willingness to engage in deception).

The Young Man disappears, although without the seamstress, leaving the original “fair maiden” rather bewildered and not knowing what to think.

(Note: Apart from the seamstress and the traveling details, this sounds exactly like what SK did to Regine Olsen.)

Well, in the second part of the book, we get a series of letters from the Young Man to Constantin (who never writes back). The Young Man has never got over his “fair maiden,” and desperately hopes to get her back—even though he knows he’s ruined it forever. He compares his case—significantly—to the sufferings of Job.

Well, this goes on for a while, and then—finally—in the very last letter from the Young Man,<sup>13</sup> we read (p. 220):

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<sup>13</sup> This part was rewritten. The MS copy has some pages literally torn out here. There is some reason to think that in the original draft version, the Young Man shot himself!



She is married [note that Regine Olsen eventually got married too]—to whom I do not know, for when I read it in the newspaper I was so stunned that I dropped the paper and have not had the patience since then to check in detail. I am myself again. Here I have REPETITION; I understand everything, and life seems more beautiful to me than ever. It did indeed come like a thunderstorm ...

Again (*ibid.*):

I am myself again. This “self” that someone else would not pick up off the street I have once again. The split that was in my being is healed; I am UNIFIED again. ... Is there not then a repetition? Did I not get everything back double?

My initial reaction here is, “No, you obviously didn’t.” You didn’t get the fair maiden back! You did get your self back, you say, but you’re still not right back where you started—any more than Constantin Constantius was right back where he started in Berlin—because you didn’t get her back.

But perhaps one might reply: But you never had her in the first place. So by getting your self back, you have achieved a kind of “repetition.” You’ve returned to (“repeated”) the *status quo ante*.

### **The moral of the story**

OK, now what’s all this about? Well, who knows, but consider these facts:

- In “The First Love,” from *Either/Or*, the pseudonymous A ridicules the idea that one’s first love is special (that’s the kind of idea you get from reading “too many novels”). But in the *Or* part, the staid and respectable Judge William makes a big deal out of the “first love.” It can never be REPEATED. You can have other lovers, but it’s not the same. He prides himself on the fact that his wife is his first love, that he has been utterly faithful to her, and that this—far from meaning that he’s missed out on a lot of fun—is something noble and irreplaceably beautiful. He wouldn’t have it any other way. So: the first love cannot be REPEATED.
- In *Fear and Trembling*, published on the very same day as *Repetition*, Abraham first “loses” the Covenant represented by Isaac and then—miraculously—gets it back, and we’re right back where we started. Repetition—or is it? (This is messy, because after all Abraham did not ever really lose Isaac; the sacrifice never took place.)
- The Young Man compares his lot with Job, who—what?—lost everything, and then got it back. Once again, repetition—or is it?

In fact, two months after the publication of *Repetition*, on Dec. 16, 1843, SK published his *Four Upbuilding Discourses*, the first of which is a meditation on the line, “The Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” And whose saying is that? Job’s!

You should know that there is an article in the *Cambridge Companion* on this work: Edward F. Mooney, “*Repetition: Getting the world back*,” pp. 282–307.

### **What does it have to do with *Fragments*?**

Let’s bring all this back to the point from which we got on to it. What does this have to do with *Fragments*, with the Socratic theory of recollection and its failure? Well, here are some clues. On the very first page of *Repetition*, Constantin Constantius writes (p. 131)

... *repetition* is a crucial expression for what “recollection” was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollection, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition ... Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is REPEATED backward, whereas genuine repetition is RECOLLECTED forward. Repetition, therefore, IF IT IS POSSIBLE, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy. [Note the contrast between past and future here.]

Again (p. 149):

... repetition is the interest of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief; repetition is the watchword in every ethical view; repetition is the *conditio sine qua non* for every issue of dogmatics [= theology].

And there are other such strident passages in *Repetition* and elsewhere.

Whatever all this means, it’s clear that repetition is going to be something important for Kierkegaard—theologically important. It’s going to make us happy—in theological vocabulary, it’s going to save us.

The Greek theory of recollection—which held that the truth is already in us and needs only to be remembered—runs aground on the doctrine of Original Sin, as we’ve seen. The truth that’s going to fix everything for us is just not in us to begin with.

(This of course doesn’t mean SK rejects the Theory of Recollection wholesale, although perhaps he does; but in any case it does mean he thinks Recollection isn’t going to do this for us!)

So—one rough way of putting it is that repetition is RECOLLECTION INTO THE FUTURE. Recollection looks backward; repetition looks forward. But there’s another difference not

to lose sight of too: recollection is a matter of knowledge; repetition is a matter of life. Recall (p. 131 again):

Just as they [the Greeks] taught that all knowing is a recollection, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition.

You live life forward; you think about it backward. (Sartre makes a similar point in *Nausea*.) And somehow, the difference is theologically significant—and is the answer to the implicitly Pelagian theory of recollection.

There's another factor here. The Young Man in *Repetition* has this sudden healing that comes like a thunderstorm—this reunification of the self—only after he realizes that he can do nothing more on his own; the woman is married! He stops trying to do it himself. (Again, in this case, it's not done unto him either. He never does get the woman back.)

Similarly, Job loses everything—his family, his cattle, everything! But he doesn't mope or get depressed. And he doesn't suppose he's being punished for something he's done, so that if he just stopped doing it God might relent. On the contrary, he knows he is a “good and righteous man,” and that he's done nothing wrong. No, there's nothing he can do to fix things. It's not up to him. “The Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” And then—he gets it all back and double.

Again, Abraham knows he can do nothing on his own to get the Covenant back. If he doesn't plunge the knife into Isaac, then he himself has broken the Covenant by disobeying God. If he does plunge the knife, then Isaac is dead and again the Covenant is destroyed. Only when he gives up trying to manage things himself does God take over and do it for him. Once again, Abraham cannot on his own make the step from the Knight of Infinite Resignation to the Knight of Faith.

There is obviously a lot more going on here than I understand. But that should give you food for thought.

With that—sketchy as it is—let's leave the notion of repetition and go on to another notion related to what happens in *Fragments*: the notion of “offense.”

## **Offense**

You will frequently encounter the notion of “the offense” in Kierkegaard. For example, the Appendix to one part of *Fragments* is entitled “Offense at the Paradox.”

Again, *Practice in Christianity* is made up of three discourses. (For practical purposes, they're just three more “upbuilding discourses”—except that they're pseudonymous—and look for all the world like sermons.) The second one is a meditation built around Jesus's remark in Matthew 11:6: “Blessed is he who is not offended at me.” And the same term comes up all over the place in Kierkegaard.

What he says about “the offense” may puzzle you. For example, he talks about being offended by “the paradox,” about the offense of Christianity, the notion of the God-man as being offensive.

Now, you may or may not find many things offensive about Christinity, but I'll bet it's not what Kierkegaard is talking about. The doctrine of the God-man, the Incarnation, may strike you as paradoxical, outlandish, absurd—but OFFENSIVE?

To call it “offensive” suggests indignation, outrage. And that's what seems not quite right about the locution here.

But there are some things you need to know, and they might help in dealing with this word.

First of all, I went and looked it up, and the word translated as “offense” here is ‘anstød’, which can also be translated ‘scandal’ and literally means something you “bump up against.” In Greek, σκάνδαλον, or “scandal” is literally a “stumbling block.”

In I Cor. 1:22–23, we read:

For the Jews require a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom [seekers after wisdom = “philosophers”]: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.

The word there is σκάνδαλον, and in the Danish Bible it's ‘anstød’. So when Kierkegaard talks about “the offense,” what he really means can often be best understood by thinking: “stumbling-block.”

The God-man, therefore, is what's going to trip you up, make you stumble.

That realization goes a long way, I think, toward lessening the puzzling sense of moral indignation, outrage suggested by the word “offense.”<sup>14</sup>

But we don't want to get rid of that sense entirely.

In the Notes to Vol. 3 of the *Journals and Papers*, there's a heading for “Offense.” There Hong & Hong explain that paradox is related to offense as intellect is related to will and decision.

So Christianity is not just a “stumbling block” in the sense of being a “stumbling block” to the intellect—a paradox. It's a “stumbling block” that first and foremost has to do with tripping up my actions, decisions, and will.

Here's what Hong and Hong say (*JP* 3.840):

According to Kierkegaard, no one can become a Christian without encountering the possibility of offense, whether one then becomes a Christian or not. In the first case [i. e., if one does become a Christian], offense acquires a positive significance for a person: he ceases his natural opposition to Christianity and humbles himself under it. This form of offense is presented in *Practice in Christianity*, where it is shown that

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<sup>14</sup> This isn't the case with many other passages in SK where we get words translated as forms of “offense.” Elsewhere, the word is frequently *Forargelse*, which does have the sense of “outrage.”

even Christ's disciples had to go through offense, which reached its climax when they were confronted by Christ's suffering and death.

The second case, being offended and remaining in offense, is described in *The Sickness unto Death*. The culmination of this offense, active hostility toward Christianity, is, according to Kierkegaard, the sin against the Holy Spirit.

[Note the slippage here between "offense" and the "possibility of offense." This is frequent in SK, and may be significant.]

So, the crucifixion, the utter humiliation of Jesus, must have given the disciples pause, to say the least, not just to their intellects, but to their wills and actions. Not to mention the fact that by associating with this man they were turning themselves into outcasts and weirdos. So they must have said to themselves, "Whoa! This is more than I bargained for. Come on! I'm not so sure I really want to get involved in this any further."—The possibility of offense.

Here's a good passage in the *Journals and Papers*, Vol. 3, p. 369 (§ 3033):

How often have I not caught myself thinking and saying to myself: Even if, humanly speaking, you know yourself to be well-meaning toward men, you must make an effort to be more loving; then things will go well and you will get along better with men. And what then—then Christianity steps up and says: You fool, what humbug is this, wasn't Christ love—and what happened to Him? Humanly speaking, there is something frightfully cruel in this thought. And yet this is Christianity. To be specific, Christianity declares: You must by no means refrain from doing what you had in mind [i.e., being more loving]—but you must know that it will lead you directly to the opposite goal. [I.e., you won't get along better with men.]

So, while the sense of moral outrage or indignation is surprising in Kierkegaard's use of "offense," and while that can be lessened somewhat by pointing out the word's frequent links with Scripture and the root meaning "stumbling block," the outrage and indignation are not entirely out of place either.

This, incidentally, makes some sense out of a very peculiar passage in *Either/Or*, Part II, where Judge William is addressing A, and at one point in the argument says that A would remind the Judge that he was talking about (Hong/Hong, p. 48):

...the God of the Christians, the God of spirit, jealous of everything that is not spirit. You would recall that in Christianity the beautiful and sensuous [that's a mistranslation—it should be 'sensual'] are negated; in a trice you would remark that, for instance, it would be a matter of indifference to the Christians whether Christ had been ugly or handsome, ...

And on the next page, he continues (p. 49):

And of course I know that it is not necessary for the Christian that Christ must have been physically beautiful, ...

When I read that, I was startled, to say the least. What an odd point to raise! And at first I thought Kierkegaard's answer was that no of course it doesn't make any difference, so that all these saccharine-sweet portraits of Jesus as a delicate, handsome man are really emphasizing something that ought not be emphasized, and that if someone were to make a point of portraying him as a hideous, deformed monster, there wouldn't have to be anything really wrong with that.

But no. In *Practice*, we get a lengthy discussion of the "abasement" of Jesus. And there he all but says that it's absolutely crucial to Christianity that Jesus be disgustingly ugly. It's essential that Jesus be the most despised and abased of men.

Why? Well, for at least two reasons. (a) First, in order to guarantee that Jesus is really the LEAST common denominator among human beings, so that salvation will be open to absolutely everyone—no one will be unavoidably left out. No one will be able to say, "Oh, that's all right for him. He had all those advantages I don't have."

(b) And second, in order to magnify the degree of offense involved. He's got to be so "abased" that the disciples are literally revolted at the prospect of even associating with him, much less following him.

### ***The contemporary***

Finally, I want to call your attention to one more notion that keeps coming up in Kierkegaard—the notion that the Christian is in an important sense contemporary with Jesus.

The first time I taught this course, in 2000, my colleague Jim Hart from the Department of Religious Studies was sitting in. And he made the following very interesting suggestion about a remark I made earlier this semester. I remarked, you will recall, on how Kierkegaard seems to downplay the importance of the Resurrection of Jesus. Well, in this connection Jim Hart suggested that perhaps we should read SK's repeated claim that all Christians are "contemporary" with Jesus as implicitly an acknowledgement of the Resurrection [= Jesus came BACK to life and is still living, so that he is still CONTEMPORARY with us today], and that therefore his emphasis on the claim of contemporaneity can be viewed as in a sense an emphasis on the Resurrection too.

But I want to suggest now a different take on the notion of contemporaneity. No doubt there's much in what Jim Hart was saying, but—as always—there are many sides to Kierkegaard.

The notion of being a "contemporary" is a big theme in *Fragments*, where we learn that there is no relevant difference, when it comes to acquiring faith, between (a) the people who were contemporaries of Jesus in the sense that they lived at the same time he did,

actually saw him and talked with him and witnessed the events, and **(b)** us today, some 2000 years later.

Jesus's contemporaries had no essential advantage in virtue of the fact that they were eyewitnesses. And on the other hand, we today have no essential advantage either, in virtue of having all these long centuries to observe the success of Christianity and thereby make things easier for us. No, when it comes to becoming a Christian, we're all in the same situation.

This is an important theme in *Fragments*, where Part IV is entitled "The Situation of the Contemporary Follower" [i. e., contemporary with Jesus], and Part V is entitled "The Follower at Second Hand" [i. e., us today, long after the fact—after a "Mellemstil" or "interlude" of 1800 years, he says.]. Kierkegaard argues that there's no difference.

He comes back to this issue in *Practice*, and says some things there that I think help a lot in understanding this. I just want to call your attention to one short passage (Bretall, p. 409):

For in relation to the absolute there is only one tense: the present. [That much does sound like Hart's suggestion. But SK goes on ...] For him who is not contemporary with the absolute—for him it has no existence. And as Christ is the absolute, it is easy to see that with respect to Him there is only one situation: that of contemporaneousness. The five, the seven, the fifteen, the eighteen hundred years are neither here nor there; they do not change Him, neither do they in any wise reveal who He was, for who He is is revealed only to faith.

Christ is (if I may express it so seriously) not a comedian, not at all a merely historical person, since as the Paradox He is an extremely unhistorical person. But this is the difference between poetry and reality: contemporaneousness. [That is, poetry is not contemporary; reality is.] The difference between poetry and history [NB the contrast poetry/reality vs. poetry/history.] is clearly this, that history is what really occurred, whereas poetry is the possible, the imaginary, the poetized. But what really occurred (the past) is not (except in a special sense, i. e. in contrast with poetry [we've just seen that contrast, since poetry is about the "imaginary"]) the real. It lacks the determinant which is the determinant of truth (as inwardness) and of all religiousness, the **for thee**. The past is not reality—for me: only the contemporary is reality for me. What thou dost live contemporaneous with is reality—for thee. And thus every man can be contemporary only with the age in which he lives—and then with one thing more: with Christ's life on earth; for Christ's life on earth, sacred history, stands for itself alone outside history.

This seems to suggest that being a "contemporary" with something is a matter of making it present to me, realizing its presence — i. e., making it "real," making it matter. It's not

enough for that thing's existence and mine merely to overlap chronologically. I HAVE TO DO SOMETHING in addition to make it contemporary for me.

If this is right, then the fact that Jesus came back to life, and is still living, and therefore chronologically overlaps with us today is not enough to make him “contemporary” with us. It makes it possible—but in order to actualize that possibility, I have to make it true for me.

Or—to put it another way—Jesus is not a contemporary with present-day non-Christians, only with present-day Christians. And, when you think about it, that's the way Kierkegaard puts it. He never says as far as I know that everybody today is contemporary with Jesus—he says only that the Christians are.

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## The Concept of Anxiety

As the next item on our agenda, I'm going to give you something of a “sight-seeing” tour of *The Concept of Anxiety*. We will not be able to go through this work in great detail, partly because it is an enormously dense work and no one really knows what all is going on in it, and partly too because we also want to work through *The Sickness unto Death* with some care and don't have an unlimited amount of time left. *The Concept of Anxiety* is a very important work, and in some significant ways related to *The Sickness unto Death*.

Oddly, what I will have to say about *The Concept of Anxiety* will have very little to do with anxiety itself—i. e., with the psychology or phenomenology of that feeling or emotion. That's because there's plenty of other stuff to talk about in this book, and because there is a fairly good article on this in *The Cambridge Companion*. It's by Gordon Marino, who's Director of the Hong Library at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. It's entitled “Anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*.” I refer you there for things we're not going to cover here.

### Orientation

First, let's orient ourselves. And, for the moment, let's consider *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Sickness unto Death* side by side. They are, conceptually, very closely related. *Sickness* was published July 30, 1849, under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. *The Concept of Anxiety* was published a full five years earlier—a long time as far as SK's authorship is concerned—on June 17, 1844. On the very same day, he published the curious little work called *Prefaces*, under the pseudonym Nicolaus Notabene.

Nicolaus says that, while he has some inclination toward writing, he doesn't want to be an out and out “author,” because his wife is against it. Authors just waste their time writing “works,” and so he's not going to do that. Instead, he's just going write



“prefaces” to works, because everybody knows no one ever really says anything in a “preface” anyway.

And so that’s what he does. *Prefaces* is just that, a collection of all-purpose prefaces the reader might find useful for one occasion or another. And in fact, one of them (the seventh) was originally intended to be the Preface to *Anxiety*, but he replaced it.

The work *Prefaces* is very slight, and one wonders whether there’s anything really serious going on in it at all. It’s very hard to fit it into the claim in *Point of View* that the entire authorship had a religious purpose from the very beginning.

Well, in any case, *Anxiety* and *Prefaces* were published on the same day, June 17, 1844. Four days earlier, on June 13, he had published *Philosophical Fragments*, under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. So, while *Anxiety* is, conceptually, very closely linked with *Sickness*, it is chronologically much closer to *Fragments*.

All three of these works, *Fragments*, *Anxiety*, and *Sickness*, are so called “algebraic” works. (And in fact, you’ll see SK actually using the term ‘algebraic’ in *Anxiety*, p. 113 n., and on p. 128. These passages are where we get the designation “algebraic.”) We’ve already looked briefly at one of the “algebraic” works (*Fragments*), although we’ve not read the whole thing, so we have some idea what to expect: The “algebraic” works are relatively short, as SK’s writings go; they’re more “structured” than many of his writings, and have a more coherent, developed “theme”; and there’s much more “theory” in them. They are very rich and rewarding works.

Why the term “algebraic”? Algebra uses variables—which can stand for anything. Accordingly, there aren’t very many examples in the so called “algebraic” works. Or at least the examples are not developed very much psychologically.

The best example is in *Fragments*: the example of the king who loved a humble maiden (*Bretall*, pp. 165ff.). It’s a stunning example, and helps a lot, but it’s not psychologically developed in the way Don Giovanni or Johannes the Seducer is in *Either/Or*, for instance.

Back in the late 90s, when I and a graduate student I was working with at the time first read through a bunch of Kierkegaard, we read *Anxiety* and *Sickness* one right after the other. And we came away with the initial impression that the two books are so closely related that the one might very well be considered a continuation of the other. In fact, we had—and I still have—to keep reminding ourselves that despite the continuity in their content, they are after all on different topics—and in fact are attributed to totally distinct pseudonyms.

*Sickness*, as you know, was published under the pseudonym “Anti-Climacus.” *Anxiety* is published under the pseudonym “Vigilius Haufniensis” (= “The Watchman of the Harbor” or “The Watchman of Copenhagen”), a pseudonym not elsewhere used by Kierkegaard.

In both cases, in fact, SK had considered publishing the works under his own name. Later on, we will look at some passages from his *Journals* where SK had considered published

*Sickness*, together with the material that was eventually published in *Practice in Christianity*, and together with all the other completed but as yet unpublished writings, ALL under his own name as a sort of last hurrah!

Well, it turns out that Kierkegaard also at least for a time—quite apart from that grand plan—considered publishing *Anxiety* under his own name. Look at *Anxiety*, Supplement, p. 177.

(Each of the items in the Hong/Hong series of translations comes with a Supplement of related passages from other works of Kierkegaard, and a full set of notes. The Supplement in the volume for *Anxiety* is fairly helpful—especially the notes.)

What is the significance of the fact that *Anxiety* and *Sickness* appeared under different pseudonyms?

Who knows, but it ought to warn us, at least, against thinking the two are works are too closely linked. Furthermore, consider this:

‘Anti-Climacus’ was the last pseudonym Kierkegaard used. Furthermore, as he says in his *Journals*, in some passages we’ll look at later, it’s a special pseudonym, a “higher” pseudonym, unlike the previous ones in that Kierkegaard considers himself inferior to Anti-Climacus (in the sense of being not as far “advanced” as him spiritually or psychologically), whereas he regards himself as more advanced than Johannes Climacus, and apparently than all the other, “lower” pseudonyms too. Notice what this implies: it implies that he considers himself “higher” than the “lower” pseudonymous Vigilius Haufniensis. If we are to take that remark seriously, then, it would follow that *Sickness* and *Anxiety* are written from different perspectives, so that they do not really present a continuous story after all.

Again, *Sickness* was published only in 1849, after *Point of View* was written (in 1848), whereas *Anxiety* was published in 1844, well before *Point of View*. Now in *Point of View*, Kierkegaard explicitly includes *Anxiety* among the so called aesthetic works (Bretall, p. 324 n. 1)—indirect works, the purpose of which, he says there, is to disabuse people of the “prodigious illusion” of Christendom. Whether this “disabusing” is in fact what we find in *Anxiety* you’ll have to judge for yourself. But it’s certainly not what is going on in *Sickness*.

So again, perhaps there’s reason to think *Anxiety* and *Sickness* are not written from the overall same point of view.

Nevertheless, despite what we read in *Point of View*, which would lead us to distinguish these works, there is contrary evidence to suggest the two are written from a single point of view:

(1) For example, there is a passage in *Postscript* (1846, before *Sickness*) where Johannes Climacus is discussing *The Concept of Anxiety*. And here in part is what he says (the “Survey of Danish Literature” in *Postscript*, Hong/Hong pp. 269–70):

*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.

Here we have the claim that *Anxiety* is a direct work, not an indirect one—although we have to be careful, since this claim is itself made in a pseudonymous work. In any case, there is at least some reason to think *Anxiety* is a special pseudonymous work, and may be more “direct” than most, despite what *Point of View* would have us believe. As we will see later on, there is also reason to think *Sickness* is itself a “direct” work in some sense, even though it too is pseudonymous. Of course, if they’re both to be regarded as “direct” works, then we should expect them to present similar viewpoints.

(Notice also in this passage the business about being assumed to have certain knowledge in advance, so that you don’t need to be told it directly, and how if you don’t have it in advance, then the only way you can get it is by being told directly, which is why *Concept of Anxiety* is in “a direct form.” And notice how that fits in perfectly with the discussion we got in the “Two Lectures on Communication.”)

(2) Here’s another reason to think *Anxiety* perhaps ought to be viewed as a direct work. Marino points out in his *Cambridge Companion* article (p. 310):

By 1831,<sup>15</sup> 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 [where does that come from? SK talks about them only as aesthetic.] orientation. To put it another way, with every indirect communication, Kierkegaard produced a direct communication—at least up until *The Concept of Anxiety*. [Note that *Point of View* makes no exception for *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. [The point of that last clause is that *Prefaces* is PSEUDONYMOUS, not a “signed” work, as we would expect.]

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<sup>15</sup> That date has got to be a misprint, although I’m not sure *what* year Marino means. SK’s *very first* publication was not until 1834, and was *not* accompanied by any kind of “upbuilding discourse.” In 1831, SK was only 18 years old! Also, SK *didn’t* just publish *an* “upbuilding discourse” for each pseudonymous work; it was a *book* of “upbuilding discourses.”

The point, then, is that *Anxiety* must be a “direct” work, since there is no corresponding “upbuilding discourse” to accompany it.

(3) On the other hand, he did publish a set of *Four Upbuilding Discourses* some two months later (on August 31, 1844) without any accompanying pseudonymous work. Perhaps these were to be the direct work matching the pseudonymous *Concept of Anxiety*. But then what matches *Prefaces*? The whole “two-track” picture presented in *Point of View* breaks down when you look closely at it—or at least it’s not at all clear how it’s supposed to work.

In the end, the whole situation is a mess, and we can’t be quite sure on the basis of these external factors just what the status of *Anxiety* is and how it should be regarded.

My point about whether *Anxiety*—and, as we shall see, *Sickness*—should be regarded as direct works is just that if they are both to be regarded as more or less “direct,” then SK is presumably (!) expressing his real views in both of them, so that we should expect them at least to agree with one another broadly and perhaps even to be closely related in content. So it wouldn’t be surprising that the graduate student and I had that impression when we read them.

But, as we’ve seen, on the basis of the external evidence, it’s just not clear what to do with *Anxiety*.

(4) Nevertheless, *Anxiety* and *Sickness* do seem to be connected, if you look at their actual content, rather than just at these external factors. Much of the discussion in *Anxiety* is predicated on exactly the same kind of metaphysics of the self we will see developed in *Sickness*. For example, at the beginning of *Anxiety* Chap. III, p. 81:

In the two previous chapters, it was maintained continually that man is a synthesis of psyche and body [= soul and body] that is constituted and sustained by spirit.

Again, p. 85:

Man, then, is a synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.

This sounds very close to what we’ll see in the opening pages of *Sickness*. There’s much more like that as well, and it goes beyond mere superficial similarities.

We don’t want to think that a full-blown metaphysics of the self, of the kind we will find in *Sickness*, was already developed by the time SK wrote *Anxiety*, and that he just waited another five years before he got around to telling us about the details. No, there’s no evidence for that. Nevertheless, it is true that many of the main pieces are already in place as early as 1844.

### ***The title page***

Let’s look now at the title page of the work.

- *The Concept of Anxiety*. Also translated as “The Concept of Dread”—e.g., by Walter Lowrie.

Now we’ve already talked to some extent about the notion of “dread” or “anxiety,” back when we were talking about the capsule or standard picture of Kierkegaard. There it was described as the fear of our own freedom. And that is in fact exactly what it is. So that much of the “capsule picture” still holds.

Again, we’ve already talked to some extent about how, despite the “capsule picture’s” claim that criterionless choice, and therefore anxiety, are relatively rare and confined to momentous, life-orienting decisions, Kierkegaard in fact seems to think anxiety is quite common—although I’m not sure he would go so far as to say anxiety accompanies every decision we make, as Sartre would have it.

Now let’s look at the subtitle:

- *A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*.

First of all, what on earth does he mean when he calls says the work is a “simple” deliberation? Well, it’s certainly not simple in the sense of being easy or elementary; on the contrary, our translator, Reidar Thomte, suggests (p. xii) that it’s “possibly the most difficult of Kierkegaard’s works”—which is really saying something!

No, the work is “simple” in the sense of focused, single-minded. The whole discussion centers implicitly around the implications of one theological doctrine, what he calls “hereditary sin.” (We’ll talk about that in a moment.)

But notice second that the book is described as “psychologically orienting.” In fact, this is one of the most psychologically rich of Kierkegaard’s writings (it’s only competitor is *Sickness*—not even *Either/Or* is as rich).

In the “Introduction” (pp. 14 ff.), Vigilius Haufniensis talks at considerable length about how the various sciences might try to deal with the concept of “sin”—and get it wrong. It’s only on p. 19 that we come to dogmatics—i. e., theology—as the “science” that can deal properly with sin. And even dogmatics doesn’t “deal with” sin in the sense of explaining it. On the contrary, it presupposes it (p. 20), and goes on from there, whereas the other sciences try to “explain” it, and end up explaining it away by distorting the concept of sin into something false.

Now, turn back to p. 14, in the “Introduction.” Here we get a kind of statement of the program of the book:

The present work has set as its task the psychological treatment of the concept of “anxiety,” but in such a way that it constantly keeps *in mente* [in mind] and before its eye the dogma of hereditary sin. Accordingly, it must also, although tacitly so, deal with the concept of sin [i. e., sin in general].

So the whole book is psychologically oriented.

Now notice the next sentence:

Sin, however, is no subject for psychological concern, and only by submitting to the service of a misplaced brilliance could it be dealt with psychologically.

We've just seen (p. 19) that sin is a proper subject of concern only for “dogmatics”—i. e., for theology.

But if sin has no business being dealt with psychologically, there's another, related and more or less parallel phenomenon that can be dealt with psychologically, at least in part. And that is anxiety.

So what we have here is the picture that anxiety is a kind of psychological manifestation of sin (or at least of sinfulness, and we'll see what difference that makes later on). At least this seems to be true at all but the very highest level of development. As we'll see in *Sickness*, unlike despair, which is gone once we're “saved” and have acquired an “integrated” self, anxiety persists even after we're saved and are therefore no longer in a state of sin—even if that can't be fully achieved in this life. So anxiety need not be always a psychological spin-off of sin, although it is up until that very last step.

What we're getting in this book, then, is not a “dogmatic” or “theological” discussion, but rather a psychological analysis of anxiety, something that pretty much parallels and so to speak “tracks” in synch with a central dogmatic or theological notion—sin, and in particular hereditary sin.

### ***Other themes in the introduction***

There are a couple of other themes I want to mention too from this “Introduction.” (In general I think the “Introduction” is extremely difficult and certainly not the most rewarding part of the book, at least not yet for me.)

### **Quantitative vs. qualitative change**

Throughout the “Introduction” and frequently in the body of the text, SK rejects—even ridicules—the broadly “Hegelian” tendency to think that qualitative changes can be accounted for in terms of an accumulation of quantitative differences. (Often SK describes this in terms of Hegelian “mediation.”)

What's he talking about?

In recent times, a good example of this kind of thinking would be the view that human-like self-consciousness (notice I say “self-consciousness”) will eventually be achieved by computers as they get faster and faster—as if the difference between your own self-consciousness and your computer were just a matter of processing speed or complexity.

Kierkegaard thinks that kind of thinking is hopeless. For him, a qualitative change—for instance (speaking of sin) the difference between being innocent and being guilty of sin—is not something you can sneak up on gradually. It's a matter of what he calls a "leap" (in Danish a *Spring*)—it's like a switch, it's either on or off. One moment you're innocent, and the next moment you're in a state of sin. You're not first (1) innocent, then (2) not quite so innocent, and then by stages (3) almost guilty, (4) really, really close to being guilty, (5) near as no matter to being guilty, and (6) finally at last guilty!

So too in switching lifestyles, on the "standard view."

You'll see this theme recurring all over the place. It's IMPORTANT.

### **The two ethics**

I want to call your attention briefly to something that is mentioned in the "Introduction" to *The Concept of Anxiety*, but is not developed in that book. This is the notion of the "second ethics."

Beginning on p. 14 in the "Introduction," as mentioned, we get a discussion of the various sciences and disciplines that might try (and fail) to deal with the concept of sin. Thus, we get aesthetics (bottom p. 14), metaphysics (p. 15 middle), psychology (p. 15), religion (top p. 16—"religion" in the sense of "sermonizing," not SK's full sense of religion), and finally ethics (p. 16 middle). About ethics, here's what we read (p. 16):

Now ethics should be a science in which sin might be expected to find a place. [Recall how "guilt/sin" was the negative feature of the *ethical view* on the "standard interpretation."] But here there is a great difficulty. Ethics is still an ideal science, and not only in the sense that every science is ideal. [Think of the ideal gas laws of physics.] Ethics proposes to bring ideality into actuality. [I.e., it tells us: LIVE AN IDEAL LIFE!] On the other hand, it is not the nature of its movement to raise actuality up into ideality. Ethics points to ideality as a task, and assumes that every man possesses the requisite conditions.

(Note the Pelagian tone of that last clause. And recall the *Two Lectures* and *Fragments*.) In other words, ethics doesn't want to get its hands dirty. It doesn't try to help you live an ideal life. Ethics stands before you as a kind of ideal model or pattern, demands that you live up to it, assumes that you have the wherewithal to do so (Pelagianism), and judges you if you don't. That's it; it's up to you. As we read (p. 17), ethics is "shipwrecked" on the notion of sin, on the notion that we cannot achieve that ideality after all.

We've already learned that the only "science" that can deal with "sin" is "dogmatics" or theology. Thus, we read (p. 19):

With dogmatics begins the science that, in contrast to that science called ideal *stricte* [in the strict sense], namely ethics, proceeds from actuality. It begins with the actual in order to raise it up into ideality [precisely what

ethics DIDN'T do]. It does not deny the presence of sin; on the contrary, it presupposes it and explains it by presupposing hereditary sin ...

On p. 20, he begins to talk about a new science that begins with “dogmatics,” presupposes sin, and within which something like ethics again finds its place:

It is easy to see the difference in the movements, to see that the ethics of which we are NOW speaking belongs to a different order of things. The first ethics was shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the single individual. Therefore, instead of being able to explain this sinfulness, the first ethics fell into an even greater and ethically more enigmatic difficulty, since the sin of the individual expanded into the sin of the whole race. [Don't worry about it. Just listen.] At this point, dogmatics came to the rescue with hereditary sin. The new ethics presupposes dogmatics, and by means of hereditary sin it explains the sin of the single individual, while at the same time it sets ideality as a task, not by a movement from above and downward but from below and upward.

[Note the difference in direction. The “second” ethics IS willing to get its hands dirty.]

Now, I don't pretend to understand all that completely. But you should realize that this notion of two ethics is not an isolated, one-time thing in Kierkegaard. It comes back again in a big way, three years later, in *Works of Love*, and again in parts of *Practice*. The late Philip Quinn has a paper on it—“Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics”—in the *Cambridge Companion*.

So we have to learn to be careful when we read Kierkegaard talking about “ethics.” Sometimes it means the “ethics” of Hegel, of Judge William, and sometimes it means “Christian ethics”—this “second ethics.” For the most part so far in this course, we've been dealing with the first sense exclusively. But you should be aware of this alternative sense.

### ***Hereditary sin***

Now what is this notion of “hereditary sin” that's built into the subtitle of *The Concept of Anxiety*? Well, it's what is otherwise called “original sin.”

We encountered the doctrine of original sin back when we were talking about “Pelagianism” in connection with *Philosophical Fragments* (which, remember, was published just four days before *Anxiety*).

The doctrine of “original sin” is in effect the claim that we cannot “save ourselves” under our own power, without outside help. (Pelagianism is the doctrine that we can.)

But there's more to it than that. Along with that bare-bones statement, there is a Biblical story you're no doubt familiar with. It's the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the consequences of their action there.



Adam and Eve were living on Easy Street. They had everything they wanted, and there were no problems at all. Then, one day God tells them, “You can eat the fruit of any of the trees in the Garden—except that one over there, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Don’t eat the fruit of that tree, or you will surely die.” Now Adam and Eve didn’t know anything about death yet, and they certainly didn’t know anything yet about the difference between good and evil, because there wasn’t any evil. But they did know—now, after this announcement—that they weren’t supposed to eat the fruit of that one tree.

Well, along comes the serpent, and he hisses in Eve’s ear and tempts her, and through her Adam—and the result is that they do eat the fruit. And sure enough, they do learn the difference between good and evil. As punishment for their sin, they’re kicked out of the Garden of Eden, they eventually die, and the entire history of the human race gets under way.

But there’s still more to the story. As a consequence of Adam’s and Eve’s sin, all the rest of us ever since have been born into some kind of a corrupt state, a fallen nature (which is why death is still with us). This corrupted, fallen state is what requires the Atonement—and is the “pit” that orthodoxy says we cannot climb out of on our own.

Those are the main factors of the doctrine. But of course there are lots of variations, lots of different emphases and ways of putting it in an attempt to make sense of it.

For there are all kinds of difficulties with the doctrine.

- (a) Just what is it that we “inherit” from Adam and Eve in this doctrine, and just how is that we “inherit” it? (SK speaks of hereditary sin.)
- (b) Furthermore, if we are still suffering the consequences of Adam’s and Eve’s sin thousands of years ago, and if those consequences include things like loss of eternal happiness unless we’re lucky enough to hear the Gospel, take it to heart and be “saved,” then doesn’t that mean we’re in a very real sense being held responsible for deeds we didn’t commit and had nothing to do with? What kind of sense does that make?

Those are all issues surrounding the discussion in *Concept of Anxiety*, and some of them are explicitly raised in the book.

Note that all this is going on even though Vigilius Haufniensis has told us in the Introduction that the book is going to be a psychological book and so has no business dealing with the concept of sin.

### **Conceptual link with *Sickness***

But there are yet other ways we can think about the topic of *Concept of Anxiety*, ways that conceptually link it with what we will be talking about in *Sickness unto Death*.

For example, the picture in *Sickness*, as we’ll see, is as if the self starts off, when it’s created, as a synthesis of body and soul, finite and infinite, the temporal and the eternal

[see pp. 81, 85 of *Anxiety*]—a synthesis that is set up by God at the outset in a proper balance or harmony. But then God “lets go,” so to speak, thereby setting the self free, and it immediately flops out of balance. Our task then is to restore that balance by coming to terms with God again, so that we end up in a kind of state of “integrated” selfhood.

This way of picturing the situation in *Sickness* suggests a number of questions and problems that are in effect exactly questions and problems about original sin. For example:

- When God sets us free, “lets go” of us, so to speak, do we inevitably fall out of balance? Is it impossible for us to go on in a state of equilibrium? If it is, if we can't help but fall “out of balance” as soon as we’re “set free,” then how can we be held responsible when we do fall out of balance? Isn't this just like the problem of original sin, being held responsible for sins we have no control over?
- On the other hand, if it's not inevitable, if it's not impossible to be “set free” and then continue on in a state of steady equilibrium, then why is it no one ever does? Kierkegaard seems to think in *Sickness* that no one can get to a state of “integrated” selfhood without going through the imbalance of despair first. But why should that be so unless there's some necessity about the matter?

So the issues of *Anxiety* and *Sickness* are very closely linked.

### ***Highlights***

Let me now highlight a few things in this book. I don't know how to make all of these themes consistent with one another. But here we go anyway.

#### **“Hereditary” sin vs. “original” sin**

First of all, notice that the title says “hereditary sin”; it doesn't say “original sin”—and so throughout the book. When I realized this, I wondered whether there is any significance to this terminological nuance. I'm not entirely sure, but I don't think so.

The old Walter Lowrie translation of *Anxiety* just translates the subtitle as “original” sin, and doesn't seem to worry about whether Kierkegaard intends some subtle distinction here.

The Danish, however, is ‘*Arvesynden*’ = literally, “inherited sin” or “hereditary sin.” This is just the regular Danish word for the doctrine of Adam's sin and the consequences of it, but this may reflect the fact that Denmark is a Lutheran country. That is, there may be some distinction between “original” sin in, say, the Catholic sense, and “hereditary” sin in a Lutheran sense. My knowledge of Reformation theology doesn't yet extend this far. In any case, what Kierkegaard says about “hereditary sin” is far from being commonplace, although it may not be entirely unprecedented. (I'd like to know, for

instance, more about the influence on Kierkegaard of Schleiermacher's *The Christian Religion*.)

On all this, you may want to look at the notes to our translation of *Anxiety*—p. 230, n. 6. There the translator seems to indicate that, among the people Kierkegaard was reading and familiar with, the expression 'original sin' referred to the consequences IN US of Adam and Eve's sin, not to what they did. On the other hand, 'hereditary sin' or 'inherited sin' would seem to refer to exactly the same thing, since Adam and Eve, of course, did not inherit their sin in any sense. (There was as yet nobody they could inherit it from.) In short, I'm still not sure there's any terminological significance to the distinction between "hereditary sin" and "original sin." It may be just a matter of translation.

### **We are all in the same situation as Adam**

One of the most striking things about *The Concept of Anxiety* is this: Kierkegaard seems to think that, in a very important sense, there's nothing special about Adam in the doctrine of original (or hereditary) sin. Adam was chronologically the first to sin (or Eve was, actually). But that fact is purely incidental. We are all in essentially the same position Adam and Eve were in.

And what was that? Well, to begin with they were completely innocent. Not only were they not guilty of any actual sins of their own, they also had no inherited guilt for the sins of their ancestors.

And we are all in that situation. Like Adam and Eve, every subsequent individual starts off in a state of innocence. Consider, for instance, p. 60:

To want to deny that every subsequent individual has and must be assumed to have had a state of innocence analogous to that of Adam would be shocking to everyone and would also annul all thought ...

And, in context, it's clear that he means "shocking" in the bad sense, not "shocking" in the sense in which we all ought to be "shocked" from time to time.

Again, p. 52:

In the state of innocence—and of such a state one might also speak in the case of subsequent man ...

More strongly, perhaps, p. 35:

Just as Adam lost innocence by guilt, so every man loses it in the same way. If it was not by guilt that he lost it, then it was not innocence that he lost; and if he was not innocent before becoming guilty, he never became guilty.

And p. 31:

Through the first sin, sin came into the world. Precisely in the same way it is true of every subsequent man's first sin that through it sin comes into the world. That it was not in the world before Adam's first sin is, in relation to sin itself, something entirely accidental and irrelevant. It is of no significance at all and cannot justify making Adam's sin greater or the first sin of every other man lesser.

Nevertheless, if we all start off innocent, just as Adam and Eve did, we also very soon fall ("fall out of balance"—*Sickness*), just as Adam and Eve did. So to speak, each of us eats of the fruit of our own personal "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." We each in effect re-enact the Garden of Eden scene one by one in our own lives.

I must confess, when I read this my first reaction was, "Well, there goes the doctrine of original sin. There's nothing inherited about it at all." Kierkegaard has in effect theorized the dogma away.

When he says, for instance, that it would be shocking to deny that we all start off in a state of innocence, just as Adam did, my reaction was: "Yes, but that's precisely why the doctrine of original sin is so shocking—because we're being blamed and held guilty for things we didn't personally do. To reinterpret the doctrine so as to avoid that shock sounds like exactly the kind of fainthearted behavior he's constantly accusing Christendom of."

Whatever you think of that, it's clear that SK does want to say this—that we are guilty only of the things we ourselves do on our own account, not of the sins of our ancestors. Look again at p. 60, immediately before the passage about what would be so "shocking to everyone":

Therefore, although anxiety becomes more and more reflective [don't worry about that part of it], the guilt that breaks forth in anxiety by the qualitative leap retains the same accountability as that of Adam, ...

There's a passage in the Epistle of James that seems to link to this, and SK frequently cites it (cf. e.g., *Anxiety*, p. 48). It's James 1:13–15:

No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God" [or, we might add, by anything except ourselves]; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.

That's not completely unequivocal, granted. But it does suggest that sin is our own doing, not something we "inherit" and therefore are not responsible for.

Note incidentally that, in general, the Epistle of James seems to be one of Kierkegaard's favorite Scriptural texts. When he's quoting the Epistles, he seems to prefer James's—in fact, he shows a marked suspicion of St. Paul, and in a very late passage in *The Moment*, he seems to criticize St. Paul for saying that, if you just can't stand being celibate and have to get married rather than commit fornication, well then it's better to be married than to burn in with lust! Kierkegaard suggests St. Paul was being too accommodating, compromising!

Note also that the Epistle of James was rejected by Luther. Luther called it a “straw epistle,” because of James 2:20–26, including the passages:

- “faith without works is useless”
- “Was not Abraham our father justified by works ...”
- “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”
- “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”

Note finally that, shortly after the passage I've just quoted above from James's epistle, we get the passage about how “Every true and perfect gift is from above,” a passage that Kierkegaard wrote several *Upbuilding Discourses* on.

### **Sin vs. sinfulness**

In any case, I say that was my first reaction. But, as always with Kierkegaard, things are not as simple as they appear at first.

For if we don't actually inherit guilt—out and out sin—from Adam and Eve, we do inherit something else: what Kierkegaard calls sinfulness.

And what is “sinfulness”? I suppose the best way to think of it is as a kind of tendency to sin—a tendency to actual sin.

How does it work? Well, we come into the world in a state of personal innocence. Nevertheless, we are surrounded by sin on all sides, the actual sins of other people. These actual sins serve as examples to us, perhaps—on p. 31 (near the bottom), SK in a throw-away but very illuminating phrase mentions “the power of the example” in connection with sinfulness.

There may be other ways in which this tendency toward sin operates as well. But in any case, this tendency may be greater or less. In fact, I think it's even true that SK says the tendency grows stronger over time, with each subsequent generation. (But I'm not sure about that.)

But notice: A tendency toward sin is not the same as sin, and a greater tendency toward sin is not any more the same as sin either. You might think that sinfulness, which after all can be traced back to Adam and Eve, somehow makes it easier to explain our own fall into actual sin than it is to explain Adam and Eve's sin—because after all, before they

actually sinned there wasn't any tendency toward sin, no "sinfulness" that would make it easier for them to sin. In short, there wasn't any basis for temptation in them before the sin.

But that would be wrong. That would be to confuse the quantitative with the qualitative, which we know from the Introduction is a mistake. See p. 38:

It might also appear that it would be easier to explain how a subsequent person lost innocence. But this is only apparent. The greatest degree of quantitative determinability no more explains the leap than does the least degree; if I can explain the guilt in a subsequent person, I can explain it in Adam as well.

Now this sinfulness is what we inherit from Adam and Eve, not actual sin. So, hereditary sin or original sin, in the sense of what we get from Adam and Eve, is not really a sin at all and does not make us guilty; we do that on our own. On the other hand, original sin in the sense of what Adam and Eve did themselves likewise doesn't make us guilty at all, although it made them guilty.

### **The individual and the race**

There's another theme I want to highlight for you, and I'm not very sure how it is supposed to be consistent with the notions we've just been developing. On pp. 28–29, we get the important claim:

At every moment, the individual is both himself and the race. This is man's perfection viewed as a state. It is also a contradiction, but a contradiction is always the expression of a task, and a task is movement, but a movement that as a task is the same as that to which the task is directed is an historical movement. Hence the individual has a history. [Compare the Judge on "history."]

That last part sounds to me like complete hocus pocus. But the important claim here is that the individual is both himself and the race. ('Race' here means the human race, the human species, not "race" in the sense of "racism.")

Again (p. 28):

man is *individuum* and as such simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race.

Then he goes on to add in a footnote that this is quite different from the relation between species and individual in the case of brute animals.

The importance of this odd view is that Kierkegaard seems to think it's the basis for our sharing in Adam's sin. Even if we're not exactly guilty of it—since after all, we didn't do

it, he did—nevertheless, we are compromised by it, lessened by it, we are shamed by it. Furthermore (and this is the really interesting thing), we don't feel there's anything wrong with that, except perhaps when we begin to philosophize about it too much. That is, we all recognize that if Adam sinned, we should be compromised by it, we should be shamed by it.

This has always been the conceptually hard part of the doctrine of original sin, why there should be some kind of collective penalty or punishment even where there really isn't any collective guilt (since it was only Adam and Eve who did it).

Well, what does SK say about this? He says (p. 29):

Every individual is essentially interested in the history of all other individuals, and just as essentially as in his own.

Take an analogy. Consider what the U.S. government did to the Japanese-Americans on the West Coast during World War II—rounding them up and carting them off to internment camps. Isn't that just scandalous? Doesn't it make you ashamed to be an American? (Pick your own example if that one doesn't work for you, but pick one that does produce that effect.)

Now think about that. Why should it? After all, it has nothing to do with anything you did personally. And yet you feel lessened by it, and furthermore that you should feel lessened by it. There would be something wrong with you if you didn't feel lessened by it.

Or suppose someone in your family is caught doing something really, really terrible. (They've been buying and selling slaves. And furthermore, it turns out it's really true and it's been going on for a long time.) This is the kind of thing families traditionally try to hush up. Why? Because they feel collectively shamed by it. (Perhaps I've misidentified the emotion here, and it's not shame or a sense of guilt. Nevertheless, you don't gossip about it.)

You may object: Why should we? There's no reason we need to feel compromised by other people's deeds.

Perhaps not, but that's irrelevant. This isn't an argument. It may very well be that there's no good reason to feel this sense of corporate guilt. **BUT WE DO ANYWAY, DON'T WE?** And furthermore, good reason or no good reason, we all feel that's perfectly appropriate.

If you don't, if you don't feel that the behavior of your family members reflects on you as well as on them, then to that extent you have in a sense severed your ties with the family, you're not really part of it any more.

So too, the only way to avoid being tainted by Adam's sin, and for that matter by the sins of one another, is to cut ourselves off from the human race—to be quite literally inhuman.

Note how Hegelian all this sounds.

## Anxiety

I said when I began talking about *Anxiety* that I would not have much to say about the actual psychological emotion “anxiety.” But I do want to say a bit about it. And I want to warn you that from here on in our discussion of *Anxiety*, things are going to get very crazy.

We talked early on in the course about how “anxiety” accompanies free choice, and that’s right. Anxiety is a kind of fear of what I might do.

But let’s look at what Vigilius Haufniensis himself says about “anxiety.” Look at p. 41 (Part I, § 5: “The Concept of Anxiety”):

Innocence is ignorance. [NB: Therefore, knowledge → guilt!] In innocence, man is not qualified as spirit but is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition.

That’s a mouthful, and we don’t need to worry about all of it for now. But notice what he’s talking about: he’s talking about the state of innocence, which is to say the state before that first individual sin.

And he says here that in that condition, a human being is “not qualified as spirit” but rather “psychically.” ‘Psychically’ here refers to the “psyche,” the soul or mind. So we have a contrast here between mind and “spirit.”

What is spirit? There’s going to be a long story about that in *Sickness unto Death*. But for the present, let’s just look at what Alastair Hannay says about “spirit” in his “Introduction” to *Sickness* (p. 4):

‘Spirit’ for Kierkegaard is what sets a human being apart from and above its simply human nature—apart from and above it in a way that leaves the individual without a given or natural identity, and forced to acknowledge or construct another. In *The Sickness unto Death* spirit is identified as the ‘self’, and we find that the increased levels of awareness which form the main topic of the ‘exposition’ [Anti-Climacus describes *Sickness unto Death* as “A Christian Psychological EXPOSITION for Edification and Awakening”] are levels of an increasing *self-awareness*. [I.e., awareness, sense of self. Recall *Either/Or* II.]

That seems to me to be perfectly correct as far as it goes, and to apply to *Anxiety* as much as to *Sickness* (except that *Anxiety* doesn’t do any real “taxonomy” of levels of self-awareness such as we find in *Sickness*). So, what do we have?

The passage in *Anxiety*, therefore, says that in this prelapsarian state of innocence, we are not yet qualified as spirit. That is, in this early stage of our development, we don’t yet really have any sense of “who we are,” any real sense of self-identity.



In short, we're not yet fully human. We have a human nature, to be sure, which means in part that we have a "psyche" or mind, but it's not fully developed. We are "psychically qualified in immediate unity with" our "natural condition," as the passage says. In effect, we're children, and fairly young children at that, without any real sense of self. We've not yet reached "the age of reason," as it's sometimes put.

The passage goes on (p. 41):

The spirit of man is dreaming [in this early stage]. This view is in full accord with that of the Bible, which by denying that man in his innocence has knowledge of the difference between good and evil [which comes only after eating the fruit of our own "tree of the knowledge of good and evil"] denounces all the phantasmagoria of Catholic meritoriousness.

I'm not sure what that last part means exactly. But notice the part about "the spirit of man is dreaming." There is a similar discussion in the Don Giovanni passage from *Either/Or*, where A describes the character of the "page boy" in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* as in effect a child in whom "desire" is dreaming.

And for that matter, recall how in our discussion of the Don Giovanni passage from *Either/Or*, we said that Don Giovanni is described as a force of nature, and so as not fully human. There's an important sense, then, in which Don Giovanni too is a childish character, not really qualified by spirit. He's not yet a moral agent, any more than thunder is.

Let's go on a bit (p. 41):

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, ...

OK, so what we have here then is a picture of the child—before original sin (and remember, we each commit our own personal "original sin")—as in this kind of dreamy state where we don't even have a good sense of self-identity. And yet all is not well in that dreamy state. There's a kind of bubbling latent turmoil, which he's here calling anxiety.

Our text goes on (p. 42):

The concept of anxiety is almost never treated in psychology. Therefore, I must point out that it is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility. For this reason, anxiety is not found in the beast, precisely because by nature the beast is not qualified as spirit.

Now, you might say, wait a minute! I thought we just said that in this state of innocence we're now talking about, we do have anxiety ("This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety"—p. 41) and yet "In innocence, man is not qualified as spirit" (p. 41). So what about it? Does anxiety require being qualified as spirit or not? Are we basically not distinct from beasts in that state of innocence?

Well, listen to what he says on p. 43:

In innocence, man is not merely animal, for if he were at any moment of his life merely animal, he would never become a man. So spirit is present, but as immediate, as dreaming.

So, spirit is present in a way, but in a way not. It's all potential, latent. So too, we're not really beasts, but we're not fully human yet either—we're children.

I want to call your attention to one other passage at this point. It's on p. 42, and is a famous definition of anxiety:

Anxiety is a *sympathetic antipathy* and an *antipathetic sympathy*.

That is, we're simultaneously attracted to and repelled by what we might do! (Recall the story of the graduate student who was drying dishes in the kitchen with his wife, and began to have weird thoughts about the knife in his hand. There was something attractive about the idea of what he might do. Not that he wanted to. But the thought was attractive enough that he nevertheless toyed with the idea for a while. At the same time, it was a scary thought—and its being scary was in fact part of what made it attractive!)

There's an awful lot else going on in these early sections of *Anxiety*. For example, on p. 44, we get a discussion of God's prohibition in the Garden of Eden, when he tells Adam not to eat of the tree. To begin with, Adam has only this vague, unsettled, undefined anxiety, without object. "The spirit is dreaming," it's not fully alert. But then God tells him not to eat the fruit of the tree. Here's what Vigilius says (p. 44):

Innocence still is, but only a word is required and then ignorance is concentrated. [Recall p. 41: "Innocence is ignorance."] Innocence naturally cannot understand this word, but at that moment anxiety has, as it were, caught its first prey. Instead of nothing, it now has an enigmatic word. When it is stated in Genesis that God said to Adam, "Only from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat," it follows as a matter of course that Adam really has not understood this word, for how could he understand the difference between good and evil when this distinction would follow as a consequence of the enjoyment of the fruit?

He goes on (p. 44) to remark that, at this stage at any rate, the notion that prohibition produces desire—that as soon as you tell people they can't have something, that's exactly what they want—isn't quite right. Prohibition doesn't produce desire, it awakens anxiety (p. 44):

The prohibition induces in him anxiety [even though we said *in a sense* it was there even before], for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility. What passed by innocence as the nothing of anxiety has now entered into Adam, and here again it is a nothing—the anxious possibility of *being able*. He has no conception of what he is able to do; otherwise—and this is what usually happens [i. e., this is the way the story is usually told—that which comes later, the difference between good and evil, would have to presupposed. Only the possibility of being able is present as a higher form of ignorance ...

He goes on (p. 45) to observe that after God tells Adam not to eat the fruit, he adds that if he does, "he shall certainly die." But of course Adam has no more knowledge of what it means to die at this stage than he has of the difference between good and evil. (Does this mean that nothing died in the Garden of Eden—not even brute animals? Maybe. There's the Greek notion of the Fall as a cosmic event. SK alludes to this on p. 56 in his discussion of "objective anxiety.")

So Adam does not really understand what it is he's being forbidden to do! And he doesn't understand what the punishment is if he does do it. What kind of sense does that make?

Note a possible objection here: Adam doesn't really have to know what "the difference between good and evil" means in order to know he's not supposed to eat the fruit of that tree. But (reply) Kierkegaard (Vigilius Haufniensis) seems to be interpreting the story allegorically (as is certainly legitimate and traditional), in such a way that God is not really forbidding a certain diet but rather saying "Don't learn about the difference between good and evil!" The figure of the tree and its fruit is simply a literary way of making that point. In other words, "Stay ignorant, stay at the childish stage—don't grow up!"

So, what do we do about this problem—Adam really has no way of knowing what he's being forbidden to do, and no way of knowing what the penalty is for doing so?

Well, now things begin to get pretty free-wheeling! He says (p. 45):

Here, in the conclusion, I have adhered to the Biblical narrative. I have assumed the prohibition and the voice of punishment as coming from without. Of course, this is something that has troubled many thinkers. [I'm not sure who he is thinking of here. But remember the Epistle of James and the claim that we are tempted only by ourselves.] But the difficulty is merely one to smile at. Innocence can indeed speak, inasmuch as in language it possesses the expression for everything spiritual. Accordingly, one need merely assume that Adam talked to himself. The imperfection in the story, namely, that another [= God] spoke to Adam about what he did not understand, is thus eliminated. From the fact that Adam was able to talk, it does not follow in a deeper sense that he was able to understand what was said.

I'm not sure this really solves anything, but notice what he's doing here. He's saying, yes, the Biblical narrative says one thing. But we'll reinterpret it some other way. It wasn't God who spoke to Adam; it was Adam talking to himself! And that reinterpretation will eliminate the "imperfection in the story" and so improve on the Bible itself!

It gets even weirder. On p. 47, we learn that anxiety belongs more to women than to men! This isn't a typical example of "male chauvinism" (as it used to be called not long ago<sup>16</sup>), because as a footnote on the same page makes clear, "anxiety is by no means a sign of imperfection." On the contrary, as we know, it's a precondition for being fully human.

On the same page (p. 47), we also get the observation:

The imperfection in the narrative—how it could have occurred to anyone to say to Adam what he essentially could not understand—is eliminated if we bear in mind that the speaker is language, and also that it is Adam himself who speaks.

We've seen that before.

So are we supposed to interpret Adam as a kind of symbol for language in general? Or what?

On p. 48, we get the candid admission that the author doesn't know what to do with the serpent in the story:

Instead, I freely admit my inability to connect any definite thought with the serpent.

The problem, as he goes on to explain, is this (*ibid.*):

Furthermore, the difficulty with the serpent is something quite different, namely, that of regarding the temptation as coming from without [and not just the prohibition as coming from without]. This is simply contrary to the teaching of the Bible, contrary to the well-known classical passage in James, which says that God tempts no man and is not tempted by anyone, but each person is tempted by himself.

The passage is one I've quoted to you before (James 1:13–15):

No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.

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<sup>16</sup> Chauvinism was originally a French nationalist movement (Bonapartism).

The problem, of course, is that when Vigilius says “This is simply contrary to the teaching of the Bible,” the response is that it may very well be contrary to the Epistle of James, which Luther had had trouble with anyway, but it’d definitely not contrary to Genesis! It is Genesis!

What’s going on in all of this?

I confess I don’t know, but I have a troubling suspicion. Isn’t this exactly the kind of thing Kierkegaard was criticizing the Hegelians for doing? Taking a central theological doctrine and explaining it away? Recall how Hegel insisted he was not denying theological doctrine, but simply giving a philosophical account of what it really meant? Talk about God was really talk about some kind of universal spirit, which is basically human spirit. Talk about the Incarnation was really a mythological and primitive way of recognizing the fact that this universal spirit is present in all of us.

So too perhaps SK: in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, Adam turns out to be simply a personification of language, and the serpent is just written off as an embarrassment.

For that matter, the whole traditional notion that we somehow inherit guilt from Adam is rejected. Adam didn’t pass anything on to us, except perhaps a tendency to sin (“sinfulness”), which is not to be confused with actual sin.

Isn’t this exactly the kind of “explaining things away” the Hegelians were guilty of, and that Kierkegaard—I thought—doesn’t like?

Well, I don’t know.

### **The demonic**

In Chap. IV of *Anxiety*, we get a number of very interesting developments. First of all, there’s the almost impenetrable footnote on pp. 111–12, where Vigilius Haufniensis makes a big point of saying that freedom is never in abstracto, but always *in concreto*. This seems to mean that we never in practice find ourselves in a situation where we are in some neutral state and have to choose between good and evil. No, in every choice we are already either on the side of the good or on the side of evil, and the question is what we’re going to do in that situation. This doesn’t mean we have to stay on whichever side we start in, but only that we are never in a position of choosing from a neutral standpoint. So the kinds of choices we’re talking about here are not to be thought of as “pick a number, any number,” or “call heads or tails.” That’s not the right model.

This claim obviously raises all sorts of theoretical questions. If, as we’ve seen, we all start off in a state of innocence—which doesn’t seem to mean merely an absence of guilt but not yet being a real moral agent—then how do we get into a state of exercising freedom, which now seems to presuppose that we already are moral agents, siding either with good or with evil? Well, I don’t know the answer to that, but this is part of what Vigilius Haufniensis means by a “qualitative leap,” a notion that keeps coming up throughout the book. Freedom is not a matter of quantitative build-up, of approximation. As we discussed earlier, we don’t start off innocent, for instance, and then become almost

guilty, and then really, really close to guilty, and then finally guilty. No, it's an all-at-once leap, and then—presto!—we're guilty. As he frequently says, sin presupposes itself (see p. 112, also p. 62). And presumably the same holds for siding with the good. (Recall Judge William in *Either/Or* II.)

Notice also that there is absolutely nothing here to support Anderson's view that Kierkegaard doesn't believe in absolute values, that it's basically just a matter of choosing your priorities and doing what you feel is "right for you." Of course you have to choose your priorities, but that doesn't mean there's nothing absolute about good and evil. There is, for Vigilius Haufniensis, for Anti-Climacus (a "higher" pseudonym), and—I dare say—for Kierkegaard himself.

Now normally, we tend to think of anxiety—the fear of our own freedom, of what I might do—as closely allied to temptation. That is, often what I'm afraid of is that I might do something bad, might deliberately do something bad, and this makes me anxious (or rather this is anxiety).

And no doubt this is exactly right in a lot of cases. It's what in Chap. IV § 1 (pp. 113–18), Vigilius calls "anxiety about evil."

But there's another kind of anxiety he discusses too, beginning in Chap. IV § 2 on p. 118: Anxiety about the Good. This is what he subtitles "The Demonic." Here what you're afraid of is not that you might deliberately do something bad, but on the contrary, that you might deliberately do something good!

What does he have in mind? Well, he talks about the various passages in the Gospels where certain people are described as possessed by demons. (They are "demonic.")

Vigilius doesn't think these passages are to be thought of as being literally about being "possessed" by a kind of invasion force from outside. On the contrary, this is not a matter of external forces, but a kind of self-generated pathology. We're the perpetrators as well as the victims of what's going on here. (Recall James' epistle again.)

This notion of the demonic comes up again in *Sickness*, and is one of the most striking points of continuity between the two texts. (And it also comes up in that strange story of "Agnete and the Mermaid" in *Problema III of Fear and Trembling*. I have absolutely no idea what's going on there.)

What is he talking about?

Well, what he's got in mind is a kind of willful stubbornness, based in the end on pride. We're in a state of sin, we've sided with evil—at least to start off. We recognize that our "spirit" is in a state of imbalance. (We'll talk more about that when we come to *Sickness*.) We recognize that we need help in order to set things right. (Recall, no Pelagianism.)

But—dammit!—we're not going to have any of it! Rather than turn our psychic and spiritual health over to someone else (God), we're going to insist on doing things our own way, even if we're miserable as a result!

In *Sickness*, pp. 73–74, SK talks about the situation of someone who owns a beautiful home, a mansion really, with many stories and levels, and rooms decorated and maintained in the most comfortable and luxurious manner, with everything one could possibly want—but who nevertheless insists on living in the cellar, because “after all, it is his house!”

Notice that, in a sense, the fellow is right. It is his house, and he can live in whatever part of it he wants! But still, there’s something obviously pathetic—or perhaps comic—about one who, simply in order to maintain the principle that he’s in charge here, insists on living in the cellar rather than doing the obvious thing.

The analogy is perhaps not perhaps not perfect. The man, after all, can move upstairs to the more comfortable quarters under his own power, any time he wants. But when we’re in a state of sin, we cannot correct things under own power. (That would be Pelagianism.)

But never mind. We still have the picture of someone who stubbornly insists on being in charge—even if it’s only being in charge of his own misery. There are passages where SK talks about the demonic as saying, in effect, “Leave me alone in my misery!”—as if he’d rather be miserable than suffer the indignity of being helped and thereby give up control of his own destiny, even if he recognizes that he needs help! (Think of people who are “too proud to accept charity.” We often put this in terms of “self-respect.” But self-respect can turn out to be just another form of the demonic!)

I think this is deep psychological stuff, and not discussed by philosophers nearly as often as it should be. I make no claim to having it all figured out.

On p. 123, we begin to get a discussion of something called “inclosing reserve” (*det Indesluttede*).<sup>17</sup> This too is a notion that comes up big-time in *Sickness*, and in other places as well (e.g., in *Stages*). Here again, we get the notion of stubbornly refusing to deal with any outside factors, of being in complete charge of oneself. “Inclosing reserve” is a refusal to communicate, of simply “shutting the door.” (Recall the question in *Problema III of Fear and Trembling*, about why Abraham kept silent and didn’t tell Sarah what he was doing.) It won’t work in the end, of course, and in extreme cases the individual might even recognize that it doesn’t work and that he’s engaging in a self-defeating enterprise. But never mind! He’s going to be in charge, even if it’s only being in charge of his own misery!

### **Sin and sexuality**

Here’s another theme that I absolutely don’t know what to do with in this text. On pp. 48 ff., we get the claim that sin has something crucial to do with sexuality. And I assume he’s not talking about “sexuality” in the sense of biology but in the sense of psychology. Here’s what he says (p. 48):

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<sup>17</sup> Ordinary Danish uses the word this word to mean “reserved” (Hanny, *Sickness*, n. 43 [to p. 49]). But it also has overtones of “barricading oneself in,” or “shutting oneself in.”

The consequence [of original sin] is a double one, that sin came into the world and that sexuality was posited; the one is to be inseparable from the other.

This is a rather odd thing to find SK saying. After all, this is the same guy who wrote the rapturous discussion of *Don Giovanni* in *Either/Or*, not to mention *Diary of a Seducer* or Judge William's praise of marriage! On the whole, Kierkegaard is no prude; he doesn't think of sex as bad, or that it has any connection at all with sin (although there's some reason to think he does later on, near the end of his life).

In any case, he goes on to say (*ibid.*):

We shall ... simply assume the presence of the sexual difference before the fall, except that as yet it was not, because in ignorance it is not. In this respect we have support in the Scriptures.

I'm not sure what Scriptural passage he has in mind here. But I recall that my former colleague David Brakke in the Religious Studies Department once reported that in the early Church the view was often that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had sex, yes, but there was nothing passionate about it. It was more like—as Brakke put it—“shaking hands.”

Here's another intriguing passage (p. 49):

So sinfulness is by no means sensuousness [the Hongs mean “sensuality”], but without sin there is no sexuality, and without sexuality, no history. A perfect spirit has neither the one nor the other, and therefore an angel has no history.

The point comes up again on p. 79, where we read that if Adam had not sinned in the first place, human beings would have no sexual drive, and that angels and human beings after the resurrection will have no sexual drive. (Note: This is one of the few places where Kierkegaard actually mentions the resurrection. In this case it's the “resurrection” of everyone at the end of the world, not the resurrection of Jesus in particular, but never mind.)

I have absolutely no idea what's going on there, but I want to call your attention to it.

### **The role of anxiety in faith**

In the last Chapter of the text, Chapter v “Anxiety as Saving through Faith,” we get a discussion of the role of anxiety in salvation. Plainly, anxiety turns out not to be a bad thing, although of course it's dangerous. On the contrary, anxiety is a precondition of being saved at all.

Earlier, on p. 53, we get the suggestion that anxiety is always with us. He says:



Only in the moment that salvation is actually posited is this anxiety overcome ... When salvation is posited, anxiety, together with possibility, is left behind. This does not mean that anxiety is annihilated, but when rightly used it plays another role ...

And then there's a reference to Chapter v.

Again, I have no idea what all this means, but this is the text where Kierkegaard suggests that—unlike despair—anxiety is a permanent feature of human consciousness, one that goes along with freedom.

### **How are we to read all this?**

It's time to step back for a moment from all of this and to ask ourselves what on earth we're to make of it. Anyone trained in recent North American philosophy has got to come away thinking "This isn't philosophy as I've been trained to think of it."

In fact, it's not clear just what it is. It seems to be this odd mish-mash of very suggestive thoughts, psychological insights, theological assumptions, exasperatingly imprecise terminology, and who knows what else! Is there really some secret meaning behind all this, or are we all just reading tea-leaves, so that we can speculate any way we want? If there is some secret meaning, is it worth it in the end, or does it just boil down to trivialities?

In short, just how much of this abuse are we willing to put up with?

I confess that I have exactly this reaction sometimes. And yet I find that I continue to read Kierkegaard, and find it profitable to continue reading him.

And that's what intrigues me. What is it about this guy that is attractive, despite all the frustration? Part of it is that he's fun, of course. But is there anything more serious than that?

After long reading, I've come away with the conclusion that Kierkegaard is what might be called a mad genius. Both parts of that description are important. He was a genius, no doubt about it. But he was also mad—perhaps even clinically mad.

I've known other people like this. Perhaps not as brilliant as Kierkegaard, but still in the same ballpark. They were way too smart for their own good, obviously pathological cases who were cursed by too much cleverness and perhaps by too much self-knowledge they didn't quite know what to do with. The ones I've known have without exception burnt themselves out in short order. (Recall that SK himself died at the relatively early age of 42.)

So what does this mean for us? I think it means that we just have to get what we can out of it. Kierkegaard, for instance, is not always at all consistent in his terminology or even in his claims. But we just have to deal with it. Look behind the actual words. What is it this guy is concerned about? Often you get the sense that Kierkegaard is more or less

writing on autopilot, that he's just "going with the flow" and not worrying over-much about whether what he's saying is consistent with what he said earlier.

Sometimes we may just have to dismiss certain passages as hyperbole, exaggeration, or not well thought out. But we should do that only carefully.

My point is that this kind of writer requires an entirely different "skill set" than what we're ordinarily familiar with in reading a philosophical author. And that's what I find intriguing.

## The Sickness unto Death

OK, let's turn now to the last main work we're going to consider, *The Sickness unto Death*.

When I started talking about *Concept of Anxiety*, I remarked that it seems, at least, that there is a close connection between *Anxiety* and *Sickness*. Here is some further information along those lines. It comes from Walter Lowrie's<sup>18</sup> magisterial biography of SK, called simply *Kierkegaard*, originally published in two volumes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), and reprinted in a paperback edition, 1962.<sup>19</sup> I recently acquired a copy of a reprint of that 1962 reprint. Here in part is what Lowrie says (vol. II, Part V, Chap. 2, pp. 409–10):

*The Sickness unto Death* was the first work produced in 1848 [N.B.: but it wasn't published until the following year], and S. K. was justified in regarding it as the greatest of his religious works. It shows how profoundly he was influenced by Luther at this time. Luther had dwelt upon the dreadfulness of the sin of doubting the forgiveness of sin. Essentially it [= *Sickness*] is not a pseudonymous work, in spite of the fact that when it came to be published it was ascribed to Anti-Climacus. Clearly it is S. K. who is speaking in his own person all the way through ... One may not at first realize the importance of the problems it handles. The first impression is baffling because there is nothing in the literature of the world with which it can be compared. To this one exception must be made. This later work of S. K.'s [*i. e.*, *Sickness*] is essentially so like his earlier work on *The Concept of Dread* that it might almost be regarded as a very much expanded edition of it—understanding that the expansion is in the direction of depth as well as of breadth. Both books are properly described in the title as 'psychological' studies [the subtitle of *Sickness* is: "A Christian PSYCHOLOGICAL Exposition for Edification and Awakening."]

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Lowrie was one of the first people in North America to study Kierkegaard seriously. He translated many of Kierkegaard's works, and those translations form the starting point for all subsequent English translations of SK.

<sup>19</sup> This isn't the same as Lowrie's *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, which is much sketchier.

and we've already talked about the subtitle of *Anxiety*] and both deal (essentially, if not formally [this is an acknowledgement that *Anxiety* explicitly says it is *not* written from the standpoint of "dogmatics"—i. e., theology—and so is *not* talking about sin]) with the same subjects: sin and faith. And yet in a sense they are like concentric circles which touch one another at no point, or rather they are like two ellipses described from the same foci, sin and faith ...

Despite the rather forced simile there at the end, I quote this both in order to support my earlier suggestion that *Anxiety* and *Sickness* are closely related and to call your attention to the fact that Walter Lowrie too regards *Sickness* as in effect a "direct" work, even though it is published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus.

If that's right, and if *Sickness* and *Anxiety* are as closely related in content as Lowrie suggests, then it would seem to follow that *Anxiety* is in effect a "direct" work too, even though it is under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis.

We've talked about all this before, and I don't want to make too big a deal out of it, but I do want to emphasize that there are good reasons for thinking that in these two works SK is pretty much speaking for himself and not being particularly "indirect" or subtle. In short, he's not playing games in these books.

That's too bad, because these two books are probably the most difficult and obscure of all the things SK wrote. And, if there is to be a competition, no doubt *Sickness* would win hands down as the most difficult of them all—although *Anxiety* is possibly more  baffling.

Probably the biggest difficulty in reading this work is that it is so dreadfully abstract. If you'll recall the intense lyrical quality of *Fear and Trembling*, then *Sickness* stands at the absolute opposite end of the spectrum.

SK recognized this himself. The draft of *Sickness* was completed sometime in early 1848. In a journal entry dated May 13, 1848, SK worries about the book (*JP* VI 6136):

There is one difficulty with this book: it is too dialectical and stringent for the proper use of the rhetorical, the soul-stirring, the gripping. The title itself seems to indicate that it should be discourses—the title is lyrical.

Perhaps it cannot be used at all, but in any case it is enriched with an excellent plan which always can be used, but less explicitly, in discourses.

The point is that before I really can begin using the rhetorical I always must have the dialectical thoroughly fluent, must have gone through it many times. That was not the case here.

Then in the margin of his journal entry (*JP* VI 6137), he added in part:

But the point is that the task is much too great for a rhetorical arrangement, since in that case every single individual would also have to be depicted poetically.

I take it this refers to the fact that in *Sickness* we get a very nuanced taxonomy of various forms and levels of despair (the “sickness unto death”). And there are a lot of them, so that the “poetical”—or “rhetorical”—depiction of all of them—as, for example, the “poetical” description of the “Knight of Infinite Resignation” in *Fear and Trembling* in terms of the young man who loved a fair maiden—would simply become too cumbersome. Finally, he says (*ibid.*):

The dialectical algebra works better.

In short, this is another one of the so called “algebraic” works, along with *Fragments* and *Anxiety*. The word for ‘algebra’ SK uses here is ‘*Bogstavregning*’ = literally, “character reckoning” or “letter reckoning.”<sup>20</sup> This refers to the fact that algebra uses variables that in a sense “have no content,” can stand for any number, no matter which.

And that tells us one of the things we’ve already seen about these so called “algebraic” works: they don’t use a lot of examples. It’s almost all unrelenting theory, with very little in the way of concrete illustrations. (There are some, but not many, and not where you need them most. The most successful one is perhaps in *Fragments*, the example of the king who loved a fair maiden who was a commoner.)

Although SK had finished the draft of *Sickness* in early 1848, it was not brought to the printer until June, 1849, and did not finally appear until July 30, 1849. Let’s step back a moment, and look at where we are in SK’s “authorship.”

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* was published in 1846, scarcely three years after what SK regarded as his “authorship” had begun with *Either/Or* in 1843. As its title suggests, the *Concluding Postscript* was intended to be the end of the “authorship.” (There’s also a suggestion of “concluding” the system, even though *Fragments* emphatically does not give a “system.”) After *Postscript*, he intended to stop writing, become a rural pastor somewhere, and live out the rest of his life in peace. (In 1846, SK was 33 years, and recall that he had a kind of superstitious belief that he would not live to be 34—and so outlive Jesus. So his “retirement” would be short-lived. He wouldn’t last until the following May!)

Well, it didn’t work. (And I don’t just mean he didn’t die.) Even while he worked on getting a pastoral appointment—although it’s not clear to me just how hard he worked at this—he continued to write. In 1847, he published the signed *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (which includes the famous “Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing”) and the likewise signed *Works of Love* (containing the so called “second ethics”).

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<sup>20</sup> *Stav*, *en*, *-er* = “stave”; *stav*, *-en*, *-e* = “stick.” But this is based on *bogstavet*, the participle from the verb *stave*, vt., vi. = “to spell.” Recall that the Runic script consists basically of “stick-characters.”

In 1848, he published the signed *Christian Discourses* (in effect, some more “upbuilding” discourses),<sup>21</sup> and the rather slight pseudonymous *The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (by the pseudonymous “Inter et inter”). We’ve also seen that he drafted *Sickness unto Death* early that year, and by November he records in his *Journals* that *Point of View* was “as good as finished,” although he ended up never publishing that at all. (Note: There’s no pretense of the “two-track” pattern of publishing any longer.)

Even in *Point of View*, however, he gives every indication that he is still planning to be done with his writing, and that *Postscript* represents a kind of crucial turning point. After *Postscript*, we get what is sometimes called SK’s “second authorship,” in contrast to his initial “authorship” up to that point.

By 1849, SK’s first work in the whole “authorship,” *Either/Or*, was scheduled to come out in a second edition (which it did on May 14). This was SK’s most successful work by far, in terms of sales, and he seems to have regarded its being republished as an occasion that called for some kind of decisive step on his part.

He considered publishing *Point of View*, but eventually decided against it. But five days after the second edition of *Either/Or* appeared, he did publish *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* (pseudonymously, under the name “H. H.”)—on May 19. On the same day *Either/Or* was republished (May 14), he also published a (signed) upbuilding discourse *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*.

So he obviously wasn’t quite ready to let go, but was still thinking the time had come to end his authorship. At one point, he intended to publish “all the completed manuscripts” [that is, perhaps, all the unpublished completed manuscripts, which at the time he wrote this would have included *Sickness*, parts of *Practice*, *Point of View*, *Armed Neutrality* (which we’ve not talked about), and *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*], “all under my name—and then to make a clean break.” (*JP* VI 6517.)

So the picture we get here (and there’s a lot more to the story) is of a person in a state of mental turmoil about what to do with his writings.

Even after he decided to publish *Sickness unto Death*, there remained the question who was to be listed as its nominal “author.” At first he was going to make it a signed work: *The Sickness unto Death*, by S. Kierkegaard. Then he decided to make it pseudonymous, and changed “S. Kierkegaard” to “Anticlimacus” (no hyphen). Finally, he changed it to “Anti-Climacus” (with the hyphen), but “edited by S. Kierkegaard.”

In short, here we have a man obsessed. The impartial reader might very well wonder just what difference it would make whether one included the hyphen or not. But SK seems to have blown these matters up to cosmic proportions; he had to be sure he was not interfering with divine providence. It had to be done exactly the way God was leading him to do it.

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<sup>21</sup> At one point, he explains that the upbuilding discourses don’t presuppose any peculiarly Christian categories, whereas the Christian discourses do; neither, of course, consists of sermons. I’m not sure this distinction really works, but that’s what he says.

Again, the impartial reader might very well ask, “He certainly does think he’s important, doesn’t he?” As though a misplaced hyphen would wreck God’s whole plan for the universe! And yes, it must be granted that there is a strong dose of megalomania here, even while SK is at the same time protesting about how insignificant he is, and how everything is all up to providence. This is the kind of thing I meant when, some time back, I described SK as a mad genius.

Setting all SK’s own worries aside, what are we to make out of this pseudonym “Anti-Climacus” (with or without the hyphen)?

Well, obviously, “Johannes Climacus” (the “author” of *Fragments* and *Postscript*) and “Anti-Climacus” (*Sickness* and *Practice in Christianity*) are supposed to be connected in some way. The name “Anti-Climacus” is not to be taken in the sense of “against Johannes Climacus” but in the sense of “before Johannes Climacus”—that is “prior to,” “above,” “superior.” (We likewise have this sense of ‘anti-’ as “before” preserved in English in the word ‘anticipate’—or, for that matter, in ‘anti-climax’.)

And that’s exactly the way Anti-Climacus describes himself in an unpublished journal entry from 1849, probably from before June of that year (*JP* VI 6349):

Climacus and Anticlimacus [no hyphen]  
A Dialectical Discovery  
by  
Anticlimacus [again no hyphen]  
Postscript<sup>22</sup>

I, Anticlimachus [note the spelling—no hyphen, but with an extra ‘h’], who wrote this little book (a poor, simple, mere man just like most everybody else) was born in Copenhagen and am just about, yes, exactly, the same age as Johannes Climachus [again, note the spelling], with whom I in one sense have very much, have everything in common, but from whom in another sense I am utterly different. He [i.e., Johannes Climacus] explicitly says of himself that he is not a Christian; this is infuriating. I, too, have been so infuriated about it that I—if anyone could somehow trick me into saying it—say just the opposite ... I say, in fact, that I am an extraordinary Christian such as there has never been, but, please note, I am that in hidden inwardness.

There are other passages like this. When *Sickness* was published, SK sent a copy of it to his friend and one-time protégé Rasmus Nielsen (1809–84), saying (*JP* VI 6434):

I am sending along a new book. Presumably you will have no difficulty in discovering why this pseudonym is called Anti-Climacus, in which respect he is quite different from Johannes Climacus, with whom he certainly does

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<sup>22</sup> I take it this means this fragment was drafted as a “Postscript” to *Sickness*.

have something in common (as they do also share parts of a name), but from whom he differs very essentially in that J. Cl. humorously denies that he himself is Christian and, in consequence, can only make indirect attacks, and, in consequence, as a humorist must take it all back [recall the “revocation” at the end of *Postscript*]—while Anti-Climacus is very far from denying that he himself is Christian, which is evident in the direct attack.

Again (*JP* VI 6433):

I [i. e., Kierkegaard himself] would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus.

Again (*JP* VI 6431):

The pseudonym is Johannes Anticlimacus [!] in contrast to Climacus, who said he was not a Christian. Anticlimacus is the opposite extreme: a Christian on an extraordinary level—but I myself manage to be only a very simple Christian.

Note that in both these passages, SK is placing himself between Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus. Note also that, oddly, in the last passage, he does claim to be a Christian, but only a “very simple” one. Generally we see him declining to make even that minimal claim, even in the “signed” works.

One more (*JP* VI 6442):

If I have represented a person so low that he even denied being a Christian [that’s Johannes Climacus], then the opposite also ought to be represented [that will be Anti-Climacus]. And Christendom does indeed greatly need to hear the voice of such a judge [i. e., an authority]—but I will not pass myself off as the judge, and therefore he also judges me, which is easy enough and quite appropriate, for anyone who cannot present ideality so high that he is judged by it himself must have a poor understanding of it.

So SK himself claims he has such an understanding of this “ideality,” even though he himself doesn’t live up to it; he is judged by it. In other words, he is cognitively in agreement with Anti-Climacus (and not with Johannes Climacus), even though is only striving to live up to the ideal standard Anti-Climacus represents.

So we have, as you will recall, two kinds of works from SK: pseudonymous and signed. The pseudonymous works, it now turns out, come in two kinds: the “lower” pseudonyms and the “higher” pseudonym Anti-Climacus. (The Hongs suggest that “H. H.” in *Two Ethical-Religious Essays* is also a “higher pseudonym,” but I can find no basis whatever for that claim.)

SK himself presumably occupies the position represented in the signed works, since they have his own name on them. He disavows BOTH the lower and the higher pseudonyms, although for opposite reasons. He rejects the lower pseudonyms because he regards himself as above them; he disavows Anti-Climacus because he regards him as above himself. But he agrees cognitively with what Anti-Climacus is saying.

### **Contents of *Sickness unto Death***

With that, let's turn to the actual contents of *Sickness*.

One way to look at this work is to say its topic is to analyze the notion of despair, which the book explicitly identifies as the “sickness unto death” (Part One, p. 41, and again on p. 43). Or again, as an analysis of sin, which Part II of the book explicitly identifies with despair (p. 107). But another way to look at it is to say that what we get in this book is SK's most sustained discussion of the ontology of the self. In short, the book can also be legitimately viewed as a book of metaphysics.

One of the themes that unites the disparate writings in SK's “authorship” is, what is it to be a self. This doesn't come up in all his writings (for example, not really in *Fragments*, and not really in *Fear and Trembling*), but it's definitely a recurring theme in a number of works.

We've already seen, for instance, how *The Concept of Anxiety* talks about the development of personality, of consciousness, of the “spirit” or “self” in terms of increasing levels of anxiety, about how even in the state of innocence there is a kind of potential spirit there that is dreaming.

I mentioned also how, in the Don Giovanni discussion in *Either/Or*, one of things he talks about is again this development of the self. (In the page boy in *Figaro*, for instance, desire isn't yet fully formed, but is only dreaming.)

Likewise, recall how the Judge in the second half of *Either/Or* diagnosed the aesthetic life as one of despair. The aesthete defines himself, gets his whole “self” or sense of identity in terms of some finite and immediate value beyond his control, and that despair consisted in the fact that he was deceiving himself about what he was doing. The problem with A, recall, was—according to the Judge—just that he had seen through all this, had seen the futility of trying to build any kind of self-identity that way (and to that extent was “to a certain degree beyond the aesthetic territory”), but had not yet acquired the will to move on to some other way to build a self.

We haven't talked about it much, but in *Purity of Heart is To Will One Thing*, we get a discussion about how not willing “one thing”—that is, something that is genuinely one thing, not just mistakenly regarded as being one thing—is to have a divided will and therefore a fractured self.

In *Works of Love*, we get a very subtle discussion of how the usual kinds of human love, including friendship, are not just love of the other person, but simultaneously a form of self-love. Love of this kind is a kind of transactional love, a love one engages in for the



sake of mutual benefit. Of course, to say “mutual benefit” is to say I get something out of it too. So if I’m doing it for the sake of this mutual benefit, then I’m doing it in part for myself. In terms of *Purity of Heart*, this means the usual kind of love is not “willing one thing,” and therefore once again to have a fractured self.

Digression: There are two words in Danish that get translated ‘love’: *Elskov* and *Kærlighed* (old spelling: *Kjærlighed*). They correspond roughly to the distinction between Greek *eros* and *agape* that we find in the New Testament. *Eros* is, of course, the source of our term ‘erotic’. But in Greek—and in Danish *Elskov*—this doesn’t just mean sexual love. It means any kind of love based on a drive or inclination. In Plato, for instance, one can have *eros* for the Form of the Beautiful, or for Wisdom. (See Plato’s *Symposium*, for instance.)

Hong/Hong frequently, but not always, translate *Elskov* as ‘erotic love’, in order to signal which Danish term is being used. But as a result their translations sometimes sound far more risqué than the Danish does.

*Kærlighed*, on the other hand, can be translated as “charity,” in the sense of the Christian virtue. It is not based on any kind of psychological urge or drive; it is not “transactional.” The Hongs, however, don’t usually translate it as ‘charity’, but just as ‘love’. Sometimes it’s not clear just which word they’re translating. But that’s probably OK, because the distinction doesn’t seem to be all that precise in Danish.

One further complication. Although Danish has these two nouns for ‘love’, it has only one verb: *elske*. There is no verb-form going with *Kærlighed*, any more than there is a verb-form of ‘charity’ in English.<sup>23</sup> So the command to “*elske* one’s neighbor” doesn’t have to be read in terms of *Elskov*. End of digression.

My point (before the digression) was just that this notion of a “self,” what it is to have a “self,” how one develops a “self,” a healthy “self”—is a recurring theme in lots of SK’s writings, both signed and pseudonymous.

Now the central text in which what it is to have a self is worked out in greatest detail is *Sickness unto Death*. So what then, is it to have a “self”? Well, let’s listen (*Sickness*, p. 43)<sup>24</sup>:

The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or [in the sense of “or more precisely”] that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation’s relating to itself. A human being is a

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<sup>23</sup> Perhaps “cherish” is close.

<sup>24</sup> With this entire discussion, see Erik Lindland, *Kierkegaard on Self-Deception*, Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2004, UMI Number: 3162279, available from [ProQuest](#). Depending on how you access ProQuest, you may be able to get a copy of this for free. I was privileged to be the director of this fine dissertation.

synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two terms. Looked at in this way a human being is not yet a self.

It's probably only fair to say that this is not completely clear!

To begin with, note what appears to be a blatant contradiction in it. We start off with the claim that the human being is spirit, and that spirit is the self—from which it would seem to follow that the human being is the self. But at the end of the paragraph, we read that a human being is not yet a self.

So which is it? Is a human being a spirit, and therefore a self? Or is a human being not yet a self? Well, the answer is both, although obviously something more has to be said.

What we have, I think, is the picture of the self as a kind of goal to be achieved, a task to be accomplished. Insofar as the task is assigned, insofar as the goal is set, we can be said to have (or be) a self all along, in some sort of teleological sense. But insofar as we haven't accomplished the task, haven't reached the goal, we can still say we are not yet a self.

Whatever ontological picture this might imply, we all at least recognize that there's some sense in talking this way. How often have you heard the advice, "Just be yourself," "Be who you really are," etc. On the one hand, that sounds like the easiest thing in the world to do—of course I'm going to be myself! Who else would I be? But in another sense, we also all recognize that, whether this advice is good advice or not, there is something it's advising us to do; there is a task being talked about.

Now I don't mean to suggest that SK is thinking in terms of the popular psychological notion of a real you as opposed to the public you. We've all heard the talk about how there's the public "me" that I present to others and perhaps even present to myself. But deep down inside me there's another "me," the real me. The public me is just a kind of mask that hides the deeper self, the real me. And the task is to identify myself with that real me, to throw off the superficial, public me and let the true, real me shine forth in all its glory.

SK is not doing anything as superficial as that, to be sure. But there's something along the same lines going on here. (And there are passages where SK talks about "the deep self.")

Earlier, when we were talking about *The Concept of Anxiety*, I referred you to a passage on p. 4 of Hannay's "Introduction" to *Sickness*, where he tries to explain what 'spirit' means for SK. And we saw then that "spirit" can be thought of, to a first approximation, as a sense of self-identity, of who I am. Notice I said "self-identity." Here once again there is this close link-up between spirit and self.

Now I think SK wants to say two things:

- (1) On the one hand, this self, this "who I am," is something I construct. That is, I give myself an identity by giving myself a sense of my identity. My self and

my sense of self are, if not exactly the same thing, at any rate closely connected. Those of you who've had my Sartre course will recognize that this is very much Sartre's view, when—for instance—he says “Man makes himself.”

(2) On the other hand, SK certainly doesn't think it follows from this that whatever I think about myself is automatically right, so that thinking so makes it so. No, my self-interpretation can be totally off the mark, and in fact almost always is. (That's despair, that's the sickness unto death.)

How to reconcile these two things is not at once clear. But let's go on.

Spirit, then, is a sense of self-identity. In other words, it's the story I tell myself about myself. To push this a little, we might say then that spirit is my self-NARRATIVE.

In short, one of the things that happens as I acquire a sense of who I am is that all the random little events of my life get organized into an overall picture, so that they make sense. The mere chronicle of events in my life, a kind of meaningless succession of happenings, gets transformed and becomes a history.

This notion of history is something that keeps coming up in odd places in SK's writing. And I'm not talking now about history at large, world history, but an individual history.

Back in *Anxiety*, for instance, in that strange discussion about how the individual is simultaneously both himself and the race, we get the following remark (pp. 28–29):

At every moment, the individual is both himself and the race. This is man's perfection viewed as a state. It is also a contradiction, but a contradiction is always the expression of a task, and a task is movement, but a movement that as a task is the same as that to which the task is directed is an historical movement. Hence the individual has a history.

And in *Either/Or*, Part II, Judge William keeps talking about how only in marriage does a human's life acquire a history. That is, only then is it a coherent life-story. And the Judge's complaint about A is just that A doesn't have a coherent life-story, he doesn't have any sense-of-self, he doesn't know who he is. In an important sense, A has not yet acquired a self, he has no spirit. He really isn't anybody.

Look again at that opening paragraph on p. 43 of *Sickness*. About half-way through the paragraph, we get a description of a human being as a synthesis involving three pairs of terms:

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity.

In effect what he's talking about here is the traditional picture of a human being as a combination of body and soul, or body and mind. And in fact the three pairs of terms he talks about here line themselves up nicely under these traditional headings:

<b>Body</b>	<b>Soul</b>
finite	infinite (don't read this in the mathematical sense)
temporal	eternal (doesn't necessarily mean <u>timeless</u> )
necessity (bodily limitations, etc.)	freedom (later on he calls this <u>possibility</u> )

He goes on (p. 43):

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two terms [in this case, body and soul]. Looked at in this way, a human being is not yet a self.

That is, if we don't look any further than the relation between body and mind, we don't yet have a self. Not until that composite of body and mind begins to interpret itself, tell itself who it is, do we have a self.

With that in mind, let's now go back and look at the beginning of that opening paragraph of *Sickness* again. There is still a lot of this we are not in a position to understand, and this is going to be pretty free-wheeling. But we have to start somewhere, so let's go—I'm going to insert some explanatory comments as we go along:

The human being is [at least implicitly] spirit. [That is, the human being is a life-story.] But what is spirit? [What kind of life-story?] Spirit is the self. [The story of a self, a self-interpretation The life-story, then, is not just a biography but an autobiography.] But what is the self? The self is a relation [between soul and body] which relates to itself [through self-consciousness, through a self-interpretation], or [since that's not quite right—the self is not just a certain kind of body-soul relation, one that does a certain thing] that *in* the relation [of body and soul] which is its relating to itself [in other words, the self is not just the body-soul composite that engages in this self-interpreting process, is not the thing that engages in this process, but rather the process itself]. The self is not the relation [of soul and body] but the relation's relating to itself. [In effect, this just repeats the point at the end of the preceding sentence.]

And then we get the business about how a human being is a synthesis of those three pairs, and how if we don't look any further than that, we don't yet have a self.

Now the whole emphasis here is going to be on this self-relating process, how we view the balance between body and soul in ourselves, the relation between necessity and freedom or possibility in our lives, etc.

This process of self-interpretation can of course take many general forms. (a) One form is a kind of passive self-interpretation, shaped by events and the things that happen to us. This is the kind of situation where we're not really in charge of our own story, where we view the process as simply a matter of discovering who we are. (b) Another is a more active process, where we take charge and actively supervise the story. And each these will admit of all sorts of variations.

This I think is basically what is going on in the second paragraph on p. 43, where Anti-Climacus distinguishes this self-relating process in the form of what he calls a "negative unity" from what he calls a "positive third"—the more "take charge" kind of self-interpreting process.

### **Three forms of despair**

OK, now before we go any further in trying to unravel these opening paragraphs, let's pause. Anti-Climacus is going to maintain that this active or passive "self-relating" process (what we are thinking of in terms of "self-interpretation") can—and almost always does—go wrong. This "going wrong" is what he calls despair, and "despair is the sickness unto death." (See the section title at the top of p. 43.)

Right below that heading, we get a subsection heading (confusingly, both the main section and the subsection are labeled "A." But the main section heading has a period after it, whereas the heading for the subsection does not). Here's what he says:

Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self [notice how he's using these terms virtually interchangeably here], and so can have three forms: being unconscious in despair of having a self (inauthentic despair), not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself.

The first form—what he's here calling "inauthentic despair"—is what he has in mind in the first part of the second paragraph when he talks about "a negative unity." As I said a moment ago, this is a situation where we're not really supervising our own self-interpretation, but are just passively getting our sense of self from whatever happens to us. This is a primitive state, and the despair is not really full-grown yet; that's why he calls it "inauthentic despair." There isn't much of a self yet, "spirit" is pretty much still just a suggestion.

By contrast, the other two forms of despair he calls "authentic despair"—i. e., the real thing. Cf. the bottom of p. 43:

That is why there can be two forms of authentic despair.

Setting "inauthentic despair" aside for the moment, look at the other two forms: (b) not wanting in despair to be oneself, and (c) wanting in despair to be oneself.

Now you might look at that and say—well, since we either do or don't want to be ourselves (that's the Law of Excluded Middle), it looks as if we're stuck in despair no matter what we do.

But no, that doesn't follow. The three forms are not merely:

- (a) being unconscious of having a self,
- (b) not wanting to be oneself,
- (c) wanting to be oneself,

but rather:

- (a') being unconscious in despair of having a self,
- (b') not wanting in despair to be oneself, and
- (c') wanting in despair to be oneself.

So there may be a way out after all: there's nothing that says we have to do all these things in despair. And in fact Anti-Climacus thinks there is a way out.

Look at the last paragraph of section A, on p. 44:

This then is the formula which describes the state of the self when despair is completely eradicated: in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it.

We'll look at this in a moment, but for now just notice the way out is described as a form of wanting to be oneself. So, once we have got rid of sin (which we know is identified with despair, as I've already told you — cf. p. 107), once we are healed, once we are saved—we will want to be ourselves, only we'll want that in the right way, not in despair.

Now, let's try to fill out that formula a little more. Look back to the end of paragraph 2 on p. 43, where Anti-Climacus talks about "the positive third." This, we said, is the kind of "self-interpretation" where we are more actively in charge, where we're supervising the story. This is the kind of situation where the two forms of "authentic" despair might arise—but don't have to, of course. And this is the kind of situation where we have a real "self," rather than the purely germinal, latent "self" we can loosely talk about in the case of "inauthentic" despair.

He goes on in the next paragraph (paragraph 3) on p. 43:

Such a relation [i. e., this "supervised" relation, the "positive third"], which relates to itself, a self, must either have established itself or been established by something else.

Well, that at least seems clear enough. It's got to be either the one or the other.

Here is what Woody Allen says about this sentence (using a different translation of *Sickness*)<sup>25</sup>:

“Such a relation which relates itself to its own self (that is to say, a self) must either have constituted itself or have been constituted by another.”  
The concept brought tears to my eyes. My word, I thought, to be that clever! (I’m a man who has trouble writing two meaningful sentences on “My Day at the Zoo.”) True, the passage was totally incomprehensible to me, but what of it as long as Kierkegaard was having fun?

Still, joking aside, all he’s saying is that our active self-interpretation (the “positive third,” as distinct from the “inauthentic despair” where we just passively let events shape our own view of ourselves) must either be one we just make up for ourselves, or else one we actively adopt or accept on the basis of what has been given or assigned to us.

Of course, who is there who could give us or assign us a life-story, a history, a “self”? Obviously, Kierkegaard thinks, only God. And that of course is exactly the alternative SK is going to adopt. See paragraph 5, starting at the bottom of p. 43:

Such a derived, established relation is the human self, a relation which relates to itself, and in relating to itself, relates to something else [= to God].

That is, my own active self-interpretation is simultaneously an interpretation of my relation to God. Am I going to accept the self I was assigned by God, or am I going to insist on doing it my way?

Note that, for Kierkegaard, you don’t have to believe in God in order for your own view of yourself to be simultaneously a view about your relation to God. If you don’t believe in God (whether or not you call him “God”), then your view of yourself will be a view that relates to God by denying him, or perhaps by just ignoring him and not raising the issue at all.

Of course if you’re an atheist, you’re going to say that’s just silly. But we’re not talking about your theory; we’re talking about Anti-Climacus’s theory (or SK’s theory), and he believes in God, so that he’s going to say that if you’re an atheist, you’re just wrong, and your self-interpretation is simultaneously a relating yourself to God, whether you think that’s what you’re doing or not.

This raises an interesting question: just how much of SK’s theory can a non-believer accept? I don’t want to pursue the question now, but I suspect the answer is: more than one might think.

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<sup>25</sup> Woody Allen, “My Philosophy,” in his *Getting Even*, (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 27–33, at pp. 27–28. Originally published in *The New Yorker*.

OK, so we've got the picture then that this "self," this self-interpreting relation, either establishes itself or else is established by something else—call it God—and that Anti-Climacus accepts the second alternative.

Now look back again at paragraph 5, starting at the bottom of p. 43. We've already talked about the first sentence of that paragraph. Let's go on:

... That is why there can be two forms of authentic despair. If the human self were self-established [i. e., if atheism were true, or if God did not have a providential plan for each of us], there would only be a question of one form [of authentic despair]: not wanting to be itself [i. e., the *second* of the three forms listed in the section heading at the top of the page]. There could be no question of wanting in (p. 44) despair to be oneself [i. e., the *third* form of despair listed at the top of p. 43]. [That is, you could presumably *want to be yourself*, but you couldn't *despairingly* do that. Why not? He goes on:] For this latter formula [i. e., wanting *in despair* to be oneself] is the expression for the relation's (the self's) total dependence, the expression of the fact that the self cannot by itself arrive at or remain in equilibrium and rest, but only, in relating to itself, by relating to that which has established the whole relation [i. e., God]. [So, if there were no God, this last alternative could not arise; it wouldn't be a form of *despair*.]

By now, all this should begin to sound familiar. By itself, the self cannot get or remain in a state of equilibrium and rest. By itself, it's always going to be out of balance, sick—in fact, sick unto death. By itself, the self is always going to be in despair. And we know Anti-Climacus is going to identify that with sin.

In short, this third form of despair (the second form of authentic despair, which insists on doing this all by itself—without relying on God) is in effect PELAGIANISM.

We'll return to these themes in a little while. But for now, let's skip ahead and look once again at the last paragraph (paragraph 6) in this first section, on p. 44:

This then is the formula which describes the state of the self when despair is completely eradicated: in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it.

In short, not being in despair—being saved—amounts to wanting to construct a self, but wanting to do it in coordination with the self God has providentially planned for me, wanting to do it while accepting God's help and God's guidance. (Don't worry for now about what "grounded transparently" means, exactly. I'm not sure either.)

### **A link between *Sickness* and *Either/Or***

Let's summarize where we are so far. The picture in *Sickness* about what the self or spirit is was:



A more or less explicit process of telling ourselves who we are—a self-narrative—that involves a balancing of body and soul. Or, in other ways of putting the same contrast (p. 43)

- finite/infinite
- temporal/eternal
- necessity/freedom or possibility

Compare the same picture we get in *Anxiety*, but not as fully (*Anxiety*, p. 81)

In the two previous chapters, it was maintained continually that man is a synthesis of psyche and body [= soul and body] that is constituted and sustained by spirit.

And (*Anxiety*, p. 85):

Man, then, is a synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.

(There is no mention in *Anxiety* of the third pairing, necessity and freedom or possibility.)

This self-interpreting balancing act can and almost always does go wrong in one of three ways (these are the forms of despair):

- (a) Inauthentic despair: not quite seeing what the task is in the first place.

And then two form of authentic despair:

- (b) Seeing what the task is, but being unwilling to do it.

- (c) Seeing what the task is, but insisting on doing it my own way [= Pelagianism].

If there were no God—were no power that “established me” (established not only the general nature of the task but a fairly detailed version of how it is supposed to turn out for me)—then alternative (c) would be the right way to do it, it wouldn't be a form of despair, and there would turn out to be only two forms of despair (one form of authentic despair).

But there is a God, and therefore the correct balance is different (see *Sickness*, p. 44).

Now—a **BIG POINT**:

We've seen all three of these forms of despair before—and in fact, we've seen them all in *Either/Or*.

Recall how in *Either/Or*, we had first of all (a) the aesthete. Then we had (b) A, who could still be considered more or less an aesthete, but who, according to Judge William,

was already “to a certain degree beyond the aesthetic territory.” And finally, we had (c) Judge William.

The only full-length portrayal we ever got in *Either/Or* of a real aesthete who was not, like A, already “to a certain degree beyond the aesthetic territory” was the discussion of Don Giovanni, who we said was virtually subhuman, and who might be better thought of as a force of nature. (We also get the discussion of the “regular” aesthete the Judge describes in *Either/Or* II. But the “regular” aesthete never gets to speak for himself in *Either/Or*.)

OK, so we’ve got: (a) Don Giovanni, (b) A, and (c) Judge William.

- (a) Don Giovanni is in the first form of despair, inauthentic despair—not really being conscious of even having a self to despair of. So is the regular aesthete described by the Judge.
- (b) A is in the second form of despair, the first form of authentic despair—not wanting in despair to be oneself. Recall how Judge William’s diagnosis was that A had seen through the vanity of trying to interpret himself in terms of finite worldly goals and ends, but had not yet acquired the will to go beyond that. He was unwilling to take charge of his own self-definition, short of “taking charge” negatively and refusing to do it in terms of finite, worldly goals. In short, A does not want a self. The only kind of self he knows how to think in terms of is one he won’t accept, and he is unwilling to go any further.

Note that this is Judge William’s diagnosis of A. And Judge William, we know, is a representative of the ethical stage, not of a full-fledged religious viewpoint. The fact that we’re seeing the same kind of diagnosis of one form of despair now, in the religious author Anti-Climacus, suggests perhaps that what Anti-Climacus is saying here is not something that depends in any essential way on his own religious viewpoint, or for that matter on the Judge’s own ethical viewpoint. What’s going on in A is something the Judge, Anti-Climacus—and for that matter A himself—might well be able to recognize. (Recall my earlier point about how much of SK’s view is available to a non-believer.)

In short, the point is one that doesn’t depend on a particular perspective or point of view; it doesn’t depend on what “existence sphere” one is in. In principle, anyone ought to be able to see what’s going on. A’s problem is not that he doesn’t see what his problem is. On the contrary, A seems very sharp about his own state of despair (recall the *Diapsalmata* at the beginning of *Either/Or*, for instance). The problem with A is not an intellectual matter; as the Judge recognizes, and as A himself might well recognize too, A is just not willing to move on! And, I think, Anti-Climacus himself would agree.

Notice what's happening here. The whole emphasis is getting shifted away from our intellectual faculties to the will. For all our talking about self-interpretation, our "view of ourselves," etc.—all of which sounds cognitive and a matter of our intellect—it turns out, as we delve deeper, that the real motor behind all this is not the intellect but the will.

Here is one point on which I think we can find some continuity between Kierkegaard, Reformation thought (Luther, etc.), and late medieval philosophy and theology in the Franciscan tradition. One of the things that happened in late medieval theology in the Franciscan tradition is a shift from an ethics and theology of salvation based on the intellect to one based on the will.

Does the intellect lead the will—so that the will chooses what the intellect presents to it as the best available choice? (Socrates.) Or does the will lead the intellect—so that what the intellect thinks is the best choice depends on the will's values, on what it is willing to do? (William of Ockham.) The Franciscan tradition—to oversimplify things enormously—sides with the second alternative. And so does much of Reformation thought, and so does Kierkegaard.

I don't want to develop that connection very much, because I can't. But I think it's undeniably there.

Back to the connection between *Sickness* and *Either/Or*.

So far we've seen that both the ordinary aesthete—Don Giovanni, and perhaps even a somewhat more reflective aesthete the Judge talks about (the "regular" aesthete—the pianist who identifies himself in terms of his performing ability, or the movie star who identifies himself or herself in terms of physical appearance, or the banker who identifies himself in terms of his financial success)—both they and A himself are in despair, although in different forms of it.

But we've already seen that claim made in *Either/Or* itself. Recall how Judge William had that curious argument that the aesthetic life inevitably involved despair—even the borderline sort of aesthetic life represented by A. Recall how the Judge claimed (*Either/Or*, Hong/Hong, II, p. 192—I read you this passage back when we were discussing *Either/Or*):

Thus it turns out that every aesthetic life-view is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether or not he knows it.

In general, I want to claim there is a very close connection between *Sickness unto Death* and *Either/Or*. Many of the same points are made again, and even some of the same arguments are made again. Once you're attuned to it, the convergence is actually quite striking and far more than minimal.

In this connection, I want to recall to your mind a passage in Alasdair MacIntyre's *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Kierkegaard, which we discussed briefly earlier in the semester (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. IV, pp. 336–37):

One device of Kierkegaard's must be given special attention: he issued several of his books under pseudonyms and used different pseudonyms so that he could, under one name, ostensibly attack his own work already published under some other name. His reason for doing this was precisely to avoid giving the appearance of attempting to construct a single, consistent, systematic edifice of thought. Systematic thought, especially the Hegelian system, was one of his principal targets.

I think we are now in a position to show that this view, if not outright false, is at best seriously misleading. Granted, Kierkegaard is not "systematic" in the sense that Euclid or even Hegel is systematic. But if the view is that it makes no sense to look for an overall coherent philosophy in Kierkegaard, an overarching theory, then I think we can now show that is false. It's not that he says the same things in all his writings. No, of course not. And it's not the case that Kierkegaard already had all the details fully worked out right at the beginning, so that his thought didn't develop. But there is a surprising consistency between *Either/Or*, the very first work in what Kierkegaard regarded as his "authorship," and *Sickness unto Death*, attributed to the very last pseudonym he ever used—and, for that matter, I would be willing to argue, throughout his authorship as a whole.

Let's look at some more details.

Remember Judge William's odd argument that if the aesthetic pianist [my example], for instance, who identifies himself in terms of his skills at the keyboard, suddenly loses the use of his hands and falls into despair as a result (i.e., comes to be consciously in despair), that shows he was in despair all along. Well, compare the following passage in *Sickness* (p. 54):

If at any time a physician is convinced that so and so is in good health, and then later that person becomes ill, then the physician may well be right about his *having been* well at the time but now being sick. Not so with despair. Once despair appears, what is apparent is that the person was in despair ... [Skipping a sentence.] For when whatever causes a person to despair occurs, it is immediately evident that he has been in despair his whole life.

This sounds a lot like what the Judge would say, doesn't it?

Again, recall how in *Either/Or*, we said that Don Giovanni was a kind of limiting case, a "pure" aesthete who was in some sense subhuman. Well, we get confirmation of that in *Sickness*. This kind of subhuman state can be regarded as an extrinsic limit, which can

never really be achieved in practice, but can approximated quite closely. Consider the following extended passage from *Sickness*, pp. 78–79:

How far being completely clear about oneself—about the fact that one is in despair—is compatible with actually being in despair, that is to say, whether the clarity of this knowledge and of self-knowledge cannot help but lift a person out of his despair, make him so appalled at himself that he ceases to be in despair, is not a question we will settle here ... Actual life is too complex to turn up contrasts as abstract as that between a despair that is completely ignorant of being despair [Don Giovanni] and one that is completely conscious of being so [the demonic]. [In short, Don Giovanni and the demonic are limiting cases.] One must assume that in most cases the state of the despairer is one of having only a dim idea, though again with countless nuances, of what that state is. He no doubt realizes in himself to some extent that he is in despair [whatever he himself calls it]; he is able to detect it in himself as one detects a sickness one goes about with in one's body, but he won't readily admit what the sickness is. At one moment he is almost clear that he is in despair, but then at another it is as though his indisposition had some other cause, something outside him, and if only that were changed he would no longer be in despair. Or perhaps he tries to keep his own condition in the dark by diversions and other means, for example, work and pressures of business, as ways of distracting attention, though again in such a way that he is not altogether clear that he is doing it to keep himself in the dark. Or perhaps he even realizes he is doing this in order to immerse the soul in darkness, does it with a certain perspicacity and shrewd calculation, with psychological insight, but in a deeper sense does not fully realize what he is doing, how despairing his behaviour actually is, etc.

There's a lot more along these lines. But notice the talk, in the later parts of that quotation, about diversions, about distracting attention, about doing things in order to keep oneself in the dark.

This supports a point I made much earlier in the semester, when we were talking about Judge William, when I said that, in this picture, despair is self-deception. The pianist who loses the use of his hands can't have been surprised to find out that his “self-identity,” what he based everything on, was contingent, risky and beyond his control. The despair is not in the risk (the Knight of Faith does that, after all) but in the self-deception.

We'll have to come back to this.

### **The Judge as in the third form of despair**

So far we've seen that the first form of despair mentioned in *Sickness*, “inauthentic despair” or what we might call unconscious despair that doesn't quite realize that there's a problem to solve or a task to be achieved, can be linked with the limiting case of Don

Giovanni in *Either/Or*—or perhaps with the less limiting case of the “normal” aesthete. (Again, we don’t get any real portrayal of the “normal” aesthete in *Either/Or*. At best, we get a description of him by the Judge.) Again, the second form of despair in *Sickness*, the first form of authentic despair, can be linked with A himself.

But there are three forms of despair in *Sickness*.

The Judge, I claim, is in the third form of despair (the second form of authentic despair). A while ago, we saw that this form of despair was in effect Pelagianism.

Now we saw when we were discussing *Either/Or* that there was something suspicious about the Judge, although it was hard to identify just what it was. (It was not a sense of guilt, as the “standard picture” would have led us to believe.) We sensed that all his glorification of the mediocre was in a way “protesting too much.”

Now I want to claim the Judge has a kind of blind spot. His own account of despair allows for an obvious exception. He doesn’t see it, but he should have seen it. And *Sickness* points it out.

Let’s go back to discuss a possible problem with the Judge’s analysis of the aesthetic life, a problem I gave you a handout on earlier (See the handout “They Can’t Take That Away from Me!”).

Here’s part of what I said there:

Consider, say, an accomplished musician [this is my example] who thinks of himself entirely in terms of his performing ability. Or consider an explorer whose whole sense of self-identity is that he discovered certain important rivers and geographical formations that were previously unknown. That’s “who he is, the one who did that.” (To avoid mixing the case, let’s stipulate that it’s not the fame the musician or explorer might enjoy that gives him his sense of self. He doesn’t care about that; it’s the fact of accomplishing those undeniably amazing deeds.)

The musician suddenly is paralyzed somehow, the explorer grows old and can scarcely get around his own house now. Neither one can any longer continue to pursue the things that gave him his sense of self. The “finite condition” has failed. But does he despair? Is he devastated? Is he shattered? [As the Judge suggests he will be?]

Not necessarily. It would seem just as likely that the person would begin to think of himself as “the one who did accomplish those things.” “I can’t do it any longer, but I did do it once, and that was really something. And no one can take that away from me.” [This is the notion I want to focus on now.]

.....

Now what’s the point? The point is: He doesn’t despair. [Or at least he isn’t conscious of any despair.] He hasn’t completely lost his identity. No

doubt his situation is sad, and he probably regrets his present circumstance. But he isn't totally shattered by it.

In fairness to the Judge, we have to admit that he doesn't really say the person would have to despair. He only says:

... here I merely insist that you admit that a very great many people would find it all right to despair.

But still, it seems likely that just as many would not, and the point of my objection when we were talking about the Judge is reinforced: How on earth is this supposed to show that the pianist or the explorer—whether he falls into despair (i.e., a consciousness of despair) or not—was in despair all along?

That's the problem we've seen already with the Judge. Now compare that problem with the following observations about *Sickness*.

In the later sections of Part I of *Sickness* ["The Forms of this Sickness (Despair)", beginning on p. 59], we get what I've called a kind of taxonomy of various forms this "sickness" (despair) can take. It's quite nuanced, and we won't be able to go through the whole hierarchy.

But one of the forms, fairly early on in the analysis, is what Anti-Climacus calls "Despair over the earthly or something earthly" (p. 80).

The wording may be confusing. "Despair over something earthly" is the kind of thing the Judge seems to have mainly in mind: the pianist's despair over losing the use of his hands (if he does despair), the explorer's despair over no longer being able to continue doing it.

But despair over the earthly—i.e., over the earthly in general—is something more subtle. Despair over the earthly is going to be represented by A from *Either/Or*. But let's sneak up on that claim gradually. Let's talk for now about an intermediary stage—not yet A, but someone who's a little beyond the paralyzed pianist whose sense of self is shattered by his paralysis. After all, the pianist who loses the use of his hands might nevertheless still become a great singer. The explorer who doesn't "get around much anymore" might nevertheless begin to exercise his intellectual talents and become a great linguist late in life—or whatever. Let's consider those cases.

We're not yet talking about the kind of case I mentioned a moment ago, where the pianist or the explorer decides to identify himself in terms of his past accomplishments ("which no one can take from him"). Rather, we're talking about an intermediate stage: a person who identifies himself in terms of one finite, worldly end or goal might very well substitute another one instead, if the first one proves to be no longer feasible—and therefore avoid despairing over "something earthly." He's lost the "something earthly" he originally thought of himself in terms of, but has avoided (obvious) despair by cleverly switching to thinking of himself in terms of some new "something earthly." In short, there's a fickleness here.

But the person who despairs over “the earthly” (in general)—e.g., A—has gone beyond that and recognized that a stable self-identity is not just a matter of substituting one finite end or goal for another, since the same problem can emerge for all of them. And in fact the realization that he can always substitute one finite end for another may even prevent him from forming a self-identity in the those terms. No, the person who despairs over the earthly comes to recognize the futility of all finite ends; it’s not just a matter of picking the right one or jumping around from one to another.

What’s the point of these observations? Well, consider the following passage in *Sickness* (p. 91):

But then is there no essential difference between the two hitherto identically used expressions: to despair over the earthly (the totality) and to despair over something earthly (the particular)? Indeed there is. When with infinite passion the self despairs in imagination over something earthly, the infinite passion makes of this particular, this something, the earthly *in toto* [as a whole] ...

For example, the pianist we’ve been talking about who loses the use of his hands and doesn’t take the opportunity to substitute some other self-identifying goal instead, but falls into outright conscious despair at his loss, builds up this “something earthly” until for him it’s the whole of the earthly; there’s nothing else, as far as he’s concerned.

On the other hand, despair over the earthly in general is importantly different. In the former case, the despair was triggered by the loss of the finite particularity in terms of which one was identifying oneself, and such (overt) despair could be avoided, we said, by switching to some other finite particularity instead, and, although in the long run it would be just as risky as the previous finite particularity, at least it hasn’t failed yet. But, as Anti-Climacus observes (p. 91):

It is impossible actually to lose or be deprived of everything earthly ...

As long as you’re alive, the earthly as a whole is going to be available to you.

In short, there’s an important difference between falling into despair over something earthly that has failed for you in this life and falling into despair over the earthly in general—which cannot fail you in this life. Despair over the earthly in other words—A—cannot be prompted by the loss of the particular condition in terms of which one is identifying oneself. It’s going to involve a higher degree of reflectiveness than that.

The point I want to make here is that here we have a case a little like what we were considering earlier with the pianist or the explorer who, once his powers failed him, nevertheless went on to get his sense of self-identity in terms of his past accomplishments—which no one can take away from them. And yet, Anti-Climacus is saying, we have a kind of despair even in this case. That is, even in a case where the despair cannot be prompted by the failure of the condition in terms of which one is identifying oneself, or even by the realization of its possible failure. It cannot fail.



And yet, Anti-Climacus says, the person is in despair.

Now I don't want to draw the connection too tightly here. But I do want to suggest that here's a case, in *Sickness*, where Anti-Climacus acknowledges that not all despair has to be prompted by the failure, or even the possible failure, of the condition in terms of which one is identifying oneself.

The Judge's argument in *Either/Or* does not seem to have foreseen such a possibility.

And yet he should have. We already know that the Judge thinks A has seen through the vanity of identifying himself with "something earthly," and yet is unable to go beyond the earthly in general to something further. And yet, the Judge insists, A IS in despair. In the terminology of *Sickness unto Death*, he is in despair over the earthly.

In short, the Judge has a blind spot. His own account of how one falls into despair (because one has put one's sense of self-identity in something "risky") doesn't seem to accommodate the case of someone he nevertheless admits is in despair!

### **The Judge as a Pelagian**

But the situation is worse than that. The Judge not only doesn't seem to have an altogether good account of A. He himself is in despair and doesn't realize it. The Judge is a Pelagian. And we said earlier that the third form of despair (the second form of "authentic" despair)—wanting in despair to be oneself—is in effect Pelagianism.

If you go back and think about what we said about the Judge earlier in the course, this makes sense. The Judge seems to be supremely confident that it's all just a matter of will, that what A lacks is simply the will to go further. There's no suggestion at all that, even with all the will there is, A couldn't possibly do it by himself. And there's even less suggestion in *Either/Or* that the Judge himself isn't in a position to work things out on his own. Oh, the Judge will occasionally talk about divine assistance, and so on. (There's one line, for instance, about the "self" you choose "or rather receive.") But he doesn't altogether take seriously the consequences of what he's saying. He's still pretty smug.

### **Despair is a disease, not the consciousness of the disease**

Despair, we've said, is a kind of imbalance in the psyche; it is a sickness. On pp. 52–53, we get a forceful discussion of how a person is not always the best judge of whether or not he is in despair, just as we're not always the best judge of whether or not we're medically healthy. We may think we're healthy when secretly there's some hidden disease ravaging away in there. So too, we may very well be in despair, even if we're not conscious of being in despair.

Now when Anti-Climacus talks about despairing or being in despair, he usually—but not always—means the illness, not the consciousness of the illness. The Judge is not so careful, however. We've already seen him say that when the aesthete despairs over the loss of his finite, earthly goal, that shows he was in despair all along. This can only be

read as: when the aesthete becomes conscious of his despair as the result of the loss of his finite, earthly goal, that shows was in despair all along.

Notice how Anti-Climacus puts essentially the same point more carefully (p. 54):

Once despair appears, what is apparent is that the person was in despair.

On the other hand, a few lines later on the same page, even Anti-Climacus puts it imprecisely, the way the Judge had:

For when whatever causes a person to despair [i.e., whatever causes one to become aware of despair] occurs, it is immediately evident that he has been in despair his whole life.

So we sometimes have to know how to read between the lines.

### **Is despair a bad thing or a good thing?**

Despair then is a kind of sickness, an imbalance, we've said. But it by no means follows that it's best not to have it. As Anti-Climacus says on p. 45:

The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's advantage over natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness.

Without being able to despair, we would be nothing more than a synthesis of body and soul, body and mind. And, as we know from the very first paragraph of the main text on p. 43:

Looked at in this way, a human being is not yet a self.

That is, without the possibility of despair, we are nothing more than rational animals. Perhaps the best model is children.

He goes on on p. 45:

Consequently it is an infinite merit<sup>26</sup> to be able to despair. And yet not only is it the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair; no, it is ruin.

Let's now consider three possible situations:

1. to be able to despair but never actually to be in despair
2. actually to be in despair but to get over it, to be cured of the sickness

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<sup>26</sup> Note that he says "merit" here. "Merit" means something especially deserving. It's a theologically loaded term. SK does not say it is an infinite benefit.

3. actually to be in despair and to stay in despair, not to get over it.

Now, in practice situation (1), although theoretically possible, is never actually realized. As Anti-Climacus says (p. 52):

Just as a physician might say there isn't a single human being who enjoys perfect health, so someone with a proper knowledge of man might say there is not a single human being who does not despair at least a little ...

Again (*ibid.*):

... there is no one and never has been anyone outside Christendom who isn't in despair; and no one in Christendom who is not a true Christian; and so far he is not wholly that, then he is still to some extent in despair.

That is, no one who is not a perfect Christian in the most ideal sense of the term (and of course no one but Jesus is that—since it's an ideal limit) is entirely free of despair. Hence no one who is not an ideally perfect Christian is in situation (1). Thus:

(1) → ideal Christian

Would an ideally perfect Christian be in situation (1)—recognizing of course that we're talking about an unreachable limiting case? That is, what about the other way around:

ideal Christian → (1)?

Not necessarily. The limiting case of the true Christian is without despair, but that might be because he had it and is cured of it rather than because he never had it at all. In short, the ideal Christian might be in situation (2) rather than in situation (1).

On the other hand, situation (1) has got to be possible, even if it never really happens. If it weren't, then despair—which we know is the same as sin—would be something we couldn't avoid. And we've seen already in *Anxiety* that SK doesn't believe that. Every human being starts off in a state of innocence, and becomes guilty of sin (which we know—see *Sickness*, p. 107) is the same as despair) through a leap we freely make on our own.

Anti-Climacus makes a similar point on pp. 45–46:

Despair is the imbalance in a relation of synthesis, in a relation which relates to itself. But the synthesis is not the imbalance, the synthesis is just the possibility [of the imbalance]; or, the possibility of the imbalance lies in the synthesis. If the synthesis were itself the imbalance, there would be no despair; it would be something that lay in human nature itself, that is, it would not be despair; it would be something that happened to a person, something he suffered, like a sickness he succumbs to, or like death, which is the fate of everyone. No, despair lies in the person himself. But if he were not a synthesis there would be no question of his despairing; nor

could he despair unless the synthesis were originally in the right relationship from the hand of God.

Where then does despair come from? From the relation in which the synthesis relates to itself, from the fact that God, who made man in this relation, as it were lets go of it ...

This is the basis for my metaphor about the spinning top God lets go of.

So we need to preserve the possibility of situation (1) in theory, in order to ensure that human beings are responsible for their sins. But in practice we can ignore it, and situations (2) and (3) are the only ones we need consider.

Of situations (2) and (3), plainly it's far better to be in (2) than in (3). And it is (3), I suggest that is what Anti-Climacus means on p. 45:

... not only is it the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair; no, it is ruin.

(Plainly wouldn't be any ultimate ruin if you're saved from it, as in (2).)

What about situation (1) in theory? Again, would it be better to be in situation (1) than in situation (2)? That is, would it be better to be able to despair but never actually have done so, or instead to have been in despair but to be cured of it?

That's a difficult question.

I want to suggest that it is better to be in situation (2) than in situation (1). I can't find absolutely decisive evidence for this (although there may well be some, and I'll mention a passage in a moment), but I do have the support of Alastair Hannay ("Introduction," p. 5):

There may be illnesses that for various reasons are best left to run their course, but in general the ideal way to cope with an illness is to nip it in the bud. It is better still, of course, to take precautionary measures which prevent it occurring at all. But for Kierkegaard this analogy does not hold in the case of despair. Despair is not a disorder of the kind that should be rooted out or prevented. Indeed, from the point of view of spiritual development, there is something healthy about it.

Recall our discussion of *The Concept of Anxiety*. There we said each human being makes the leap from being innocent to being guilty—each one of us commits his own personal "original sin"—and that, although it's undeniably a sin and so a terrible thing, nevertheless in another sense it is a good thing, since without it we would never be a full-fledged human being. We would stay at the "dreamy," infantile level he describes in *Anxiety*.

So too, I suggest, in *Sickness*. To be capable of despair and yet never actually to despair would be to remain in a kind of infantile state, never to be a full human being.

This seems to be Alastair Hannay's picture as well.

What we have here the notion of "Felix culpa." This is a Latin phrase used in a very ancient hymn for the Catholic liturgy of the Easter Vigil, the so called *Exultet*. It's still used, always not always in Latin, in the Catholic liturgy, the Anglican church, the Scandinavian and Baltic Lutheran church (including SK's form of Lutheranism), and in other Western Christian churches. Now, understand: This is the Vigil of Easter—the most solemn time of the liturgical year. Here's how it starts:

*Exultet iam angelica turba caelorum,  
exultent divina mysteria,  
et pro tanti Regis victoria tuba insonet salutaris.*

Let the heavens' angelic throng rejoice.  
Let the divine mysteries rejoice.  
And let the trumpet of salvation sound for such a kingly victory.

So that's the overall tone—one of solemn exultation. And right in the middle of the hymn, there's the following verse:

*O certe necessarium Adae peccatum,  
quod Christi morte deletum est!  
O felix culpa  
quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!*

Oh certainly necessary sin of Adam,  
which was wiped out by the death of Christ!  
Oh happy sin,  
which deserved to have such and so great a Redeemer!

So think of it like this: Despair is a little like adolescence. Adolescence is certainly a disorder, a kind of imbalance in the personality—hardly a stable condition. And yet it's far better to go through it than not to go through it at all! Not to go through it means to remain a child. We have a name for that—we call it (1) the "Peter Pan Syndrome."

On the other hand, (3) to enter adolescence and not get over it is a really bad situation. The "Peter Pan Syndrome," after all, at least leaves you in a kind of blissful state of childish immaturity. The permanent adolescent is caught in a kind perpetual hell! It's "not only ... the greatest misfortune and misery ... no, it is ruin."

By far the best outcome is (2) to go through adolescence, come out the other side of it, and—hopefully—be basically OK as an adult. So too with despair.

Here's perhaps a piece of confirmation that this really is SK's view (*Sickness*, p. 56):

... despair is that sickness of which it is true that it is the greatest bad fortune never to have had it; it is truly providential [NB] to get it, even

though it is the most dangerous of all sicknesses if one does not want to be cured of it.

### **Anyone in despair is bringing it on himself**

The “sickness unto death” (despair), therefore, is unlike normal kinds of medical sicknesses insofar as it’s better to have had this sickness and recovered from it than never to have had it at all. So it’s unlike most normal diseases in that respect.

But there’s another sense in which this “sickness” is unusual too. Some diseases you just “catch” without actively doing anything to get them. You don’t have to do anything to get Parkinson’s Disease, for instance. For other diseases, you can do something that results in your getting them; you might engage in unsafe behavior and catch AIDS, for instance, or you might smoke and get lung cancer. But once you’ve got the disease, it will pretty much run its course without any further encouragement from you. In other words, you might be said to have “brought it on yourself,” but you can’t (usually) be said to be bringing it on yourself even while you’re suffering from it.

By contrast, despair is something you can only have while you’re bringing it on yourself. See pp. 46–47:

Note how one talks of someone bringing a sickness upon himself, through carelessness say. So the sickness sets in and from that moment it takes effect and is now something *actual*, and its origin becomes more and more *past*. It would be both cruel and inhuman to keep on saying, ‘You, the patient, are this very moment bringing sickness upon yourself’ ... It is true that he brought the disease upon himself, but he did that only once; the perseverance of the sickness is a simple consequence of the fact that that is what he once did; its progress is not to be referred every moment to him as its cause. He brought it upon himself, but one cannot say, ‘He is *bringing it upon himself*.’ Not so with despair ... every moment he despairs he *brings it upon himself*.

This highlights a point I’ve made before: Despair is a matter of the will. We saw this as early as our discussion of *Either/Or*, when we were talking about Judge William’s diagnosis of A. His view, recall, was not that A didn’t understand what he was doing; on the contrary, A seemed remarkably clear-headed about his own psychological situation, about the despair he was in. The Judge’s view was that what A was doing was refusing to do anything else; in short, a matter of the will.

### **Random observations**

Here are some additional random observations about *Sickness*. And then I want to come back to make an important point about the three forms of despair.

We’ve seen (*Sickness*, p. 43) that the self (spirit) is a synthesis of body and soul, or equivalently (keep track of these terms):

finite vs. infinite  
temporal vs. eternal  
necessity vs. freedom/possibility

Now look at the heading on p. 59: “C. The Forms of this Sickness (Despair)”<sup>27</sup>:

Heading “A.” was on p. 43—that despair is the sickness unto death.

Heading “B.” was on p. 52—the generality of this despair

Here, under heading “C.,” is where we start to get an elaborate taxonomy of despair. Here how section “C.” begins:

It must be possible to find out the forms of despair by reflecting on the factors which constitute the self as a synthesis. The self is made up of infinitude and finitude. But this synthesis is a relation, and a relation which, though derived, relates to itself, which is freedom. The self is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical element in the categories of possibility and necessity.

In the main, however, despair must be considered under the aspect of consciousness; it is whether or not despair is conscious that qualitatively distinguishes one form of despair from another ...

Here we get the self as a synthesis of infinitude and finitude. (He’s reversed the usual ordering here, but never mind.) And he goes on to mention possibility and necessity as well. Note that he does not here say freedom and necessity, as he did on p. 43, but possibility and necessity. Here it’s the self—presumably the whole synthesis—that’s identified with freedom (“the self is freedom”). So there’s a shift of terminology from that on p. 43.

Note that there’s no mention here of temporality and eternity! I don’t know that that’s significant, but there it is.

Throughout this section “C.,” there are two aspects being played off: (i) one is the factors that go into the synthesis, and (ii) the other is the degree of consciousness of “this sickness” (despair).

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<sup>27</sup> As a review, here’s the layout of Part One of *Sickness*: “The Sickness unto death is despair” (p. 41):

- A. That Despair is the Sickness unto Death (p. 43).
  - A Despair is a sickness ...
  - B The Possibility and Necessity of Despair (p. 44).
  - C Despair is “the sickness unto death” (p. 47).
- B. The Generality of this Sickness (Despair) (p. 52)
- C. The Forms of this Sickness (Despair) (p. 59)

Subsection “A” (no period—it gets confusing)—pp. 59–72—discusses (i) the factors that go into the synthesis. Subsection “B” (no period)—beginning on p. 72—discusses (ii) the degrees of consciousness.

The first subsection (pp. 59–72) confirms the same two pairs we’ve already seen: (a) p. 59 the infinite and the finite, and (b) p. 65 possibility and necessity.

Eternity, which we’ve not seen so far in this entire section “C.” (with the period) comes back into the picture in subsection “B” (no period), sub-subsection “(a)”—on p. 73, with the talk about having “an eternal self.”

Another distinction that gets made in this section “C.” is the distinction between despairing OVER and despairing OF.

We’ve already seen “despair over the earthly or something earthly” (p. 80). But now, on p. 91 (§ C.B(b)α.(2)—it’s very complicated by this point), we get:

Despair over the earthly or over something earthly is really also despair of the eternal and over oneself, in so far as it is despair, [p. 92] for this is indeed the formula for all despair.

Then comes an important footnote on p. 92n. One despairs over “what binds one in despair”—i.e., what explicitly prompts you consciously to despair. And this can be many different things—bad luck, loss of a fortune, even the earthly as a whole.

But what one despairs of is what would release one from despair: the eternal, one’s self [i.e., one’s true self], etc.

He goes on to say it’s easy to be clear about what you despair over, while it almost always escapes us what we despair of.

Then—the last line of p. 92n.:

... purely philosophically it could be a subtle question whether it is possible both to be in despair and to be quite clear about what one despairs of.

But wait a minute: Isn’t that just what the demonic is doing? Earlier, I read you a passage from pp. 78–79 about how:

Actual life is too complex to turn up contrasts as abstract as that between a despair that is completely ignorant of being in despair [Don Giovanni] and one that is completely conscious of being so [the demonic].

In actual practice, we deceive ourselves—we’re doing it in order to keep ourselves “in the dark” (p. 78), to distract ourselves (p. 79). To distract ourselves from what? From what would get us out of it—in short, from what we are despairing of.

Like Don Giovanni, then, the demonic is a kind of extrinsic limit.



But then what about the beginning of subsection “B” (no period) of section “C.” (with a period)—on p. 72:

It is the rising level of consciousness, or the degree to which it rises, that is the continual intensification of despair: the more consciousness the more intense the despair. One sees this everywhere, most clearly in the maximum and minimum of despair. The devil’s despair is the most intense despair, for the devil is pure spirit and to that extent absolute consciousness and transparency: in the devil there is no obscurity which might serve as a mitigating excuse; his despair is therefore the most absolute defiance. This is despair at its maximum ...

He goes on. In the paragraph as a whole, we get confirmation of the claim that both Don Giovanni and the demonic are extrinsic limits—strictly off the scale of consciousness.

This raises an important question: Does SK really believe in the devil?

Also, we’re told here that the devil is pure spirit. But we know spirit is a synthesis of body and soul. Does that mean the devil has a body?

Finally, let’s look briefly at Part Two of *Sickness*, beginning on p. 107: “Despair is sin.” In particular, section “B. The Continuation of Sin” (p. 138):

Being in a state of sin [i.e., not just committing the sin, but staying in it] is always new sin; or as it may be, and in the following will be, more precisely expressed: being in a state of sin is the new sin, it is the sin. The sinner may think this exaggerated: at most he acknowledges that every actual new sin is a new sin. But eternity, which keeps his account, must enter the state of sin as a new sin. There are only two columns and ‘whatsoever is not of faith, is sin’. Every unrepented sin is a new sin; and every moment it is unrepented is a new sin.

This looks like the way to an infinite regress. But the point is rather to shift us away from counting sins, and instead to focus on the general attitude of sin.

SK talks about this point earlier in “On the Occasion of a Confession,” from *Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. As here, the point there is not to worry about counting sins. But there he adds the observation that being concerned about sin is not just “signing a blank sheet of paper” either. We can’t just say, “Oh yes, it’s terrible I’m a sinner. But we’re not counting sins, so I might as well do it again!”

As in the problem of Pelagianism vs. grace, SK is here trying to balance two opposite factors without abandoning either of them.

### **Do the three forms of despair reduce to one another?**

We’ve already discussed the three forms of despair listed at the beginning of Part One (p. 43).

1. Inauthentic despair.
2. Authentic despair: not wanting to be oneself.
3. Authentic despair: wanting to be oneself.

I now want to call your attention to two striking and puzzling passages:

On p. 44, we read:

Indeed, so far from its being the case that this second form of despair (wanting in despair to be oneself) [that is, the second form of *authentic* despair, the *third* form in the full list of three] amounts to a special form on its own, all despair can in the end be resolved into or reduced to it.

In short, the first two forms of despair can in some sense be reduced to the third. What does that mean?

But it gets worse. On p. 50, we read:

To despair over oneself, in despair to want to be rid of oneself, is the formula for all despair. So that the second form of despair—wanting in despair to be oneself [again, the second form of *authentic* despair, the third form on the original list] can be traced back to the first—in despair not wanting to be oneself [the first *authentic* form, the second form on the original list]—rather as in the foregoing we resolved the form ‘in despair not wanting to be oneself’ into ‘wanting in despair to be oneself’.

So not only can the first two of the three forms of despair be “reduced” to the third, the third (and, he says, all despair) can be reduced to the second! And he explicitly acknowledges that he speaks both ways. What are we to make of this?

Sometimes in the secondary literature you will read that either the second or the third kind of despair is the most basic. Generally the authors are focusing on the one or the other of these two passages in making such claims.

But practically no one in the secondary literature seems to have paid sufficient attention to the fact that Anti-Climacus makes both claims: all forms of despair can be reduced to the second, and yet all forms can likewise be reduced to the third. Does this mean that the second and the third form of despair are secretly the same? But in that case why bother distinguishing them in the first place?

We don’t find any passage where Anti-Climacus comes right out and says all forms of despair can be reduced to the first form, *inauthentic* despair (“being unconscious in despair of having a self”). But it is not hard to make the point for him:

We’ve seen before how Anti-Climacus seems to use ‘spirit’ and ‘self’ pretty much interchangeably. For example, right at the very beginning, in the heading at the start of Part One, Section A, we read (p. 43):

Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self.

OK, so for practical purposes, spirit = self. But now look at p. 55, where we find:

But despair is exactly man's unconsciousness of being characterized as spirit.

Substituting identicals (or virtual identicals), therefore, we get: Despair is unconsciousness of being characterized as a "self."

And that is pretty much exactly how the first form of despair, inauthentic despair, is described: "being unconscious in despair of having a self" (p. 43).

(What does the phrase "in despair" add here? Perhaps all it does is rule out being in a coma, or asleep—or perhaps being a child.)

So it looks as if despair is exactly inauthentic despair.

What do we have? We have quite explicit statements that all forms of despair can be reduced to the second and to the third kinds, and at least a strong suggestion that they can all be reduced to the first kind as well.

Are there then really three forms of despair or only one?

I suggest the following: Ontologically or metaphysically, there is really only one process that is going on in all forms of despair—the process of self-deception. But psychologically, we may not be (and typically are not) clear about what we're doing. As a result, the self-interpretation we have, the story we tell about ourselves, about what we're doing, may not be the same type of story in all cases.

Don Giovanni, of course, is not really telling himself any story, and to that extent is more or less subhuman; he doesn't count. The ordinary aesthetes—the movie star and the financial wizard who identify themselves in terms of glamour and wealth, respectively—may not fully recognize that they are choosing to identify themselves in these terms, but they are. A's identity, the only identity he's aware of, is that he refuses—i.e., **chooses not**—to think of himself in terms of merely finite, immediate ends and goals, and yet also refuses—**chooses not**—to take the next step and think of himself in any other terms either. Judge William thinks of himself as acquiring a self as a result of his own will. The Judge is effectively a Pelagian, recall; he thinks he alone is in charge of writing his own story.

What all these people (except Don Giovanni) fail to come to terms with is that there is someone else (God) writing their story—so they do have a story—and that it's not the story they're writing for themselves (the ordinary aesthete—the movie star or the financial wizard—hasn't even come to terms with the fact that he is writing a story for himself). What none of them is willing to deal with is the fact that what they need to do is to choose to identify themselves with the story that has already been written for them. Recall the formula for avoiding despair, on p. 44 (the last paragraph of Section *A*).

The way they picture the situation to themselves instead varies, according to the three forms of despair described on p. 43.

## Conscience

In order to get this to work, we need to be able to say that God (or something that does the same job) does write a story for each of us, that we do have a kind of pre-planned self providentially assigned to us, that it's a fairly detailed story and not just as broad as an overall "human nature," and that it is our task to adopt that story. Furthermore, we need to make the case that we are all basically aware of this assigned self it is our task to identify ourselves with. After all, I can hardly be said to be avoiding the task, deceiving myself about it, if I don't somehow realize it's there.

But is that in fact true? How do I know what kind of person God wants me to be? (It won't do to say we can find it in the Bible, or something like that. The claim that we are all in despair—self-deception—is not confined to those with access to the Bible. The pagans are in despair too!

The answer, I think: We know it through the call of conscience.

Conscience isn't discussed much in *Sickness*, at least not under that name. But it does come up in a number of other late works of Kierkegaard, notably *Works of Love*.

This also addresses the point: How detailed is this pre-planned self I'm supposed to identify with? Does God intend for me to drive home via 3<sup>rd</sup> St., or is it OK if I take 2<sup>nd</sup> St. today? Answer: The plan is as detailed as matters of conscience are.

So, I'm being pulled in two different directions: the tug of conscience, and my own willfulness. And I'm deceiving myself about what's going on.

Problem: How to distinguish genuine conscience from mere social conditioning.

Some small points of terminology: self-deception = *Selfbedragelse*. 'Bedrage' comes from 'drage' = drag, draw = Latin traho. So 'bedrage' = betray.

The point is that the cognitive side is played down here. "Self-deception" in SK is not so much a matter of fooling yourself as of betraying yourself, swindling yourself. It's not a matter of intellect but of will. (Compare Sartre's notion of "bad faith.")

Again, despair = "*Fortivlelse, fortivle*" = to be doubled, "of two minds." Recall, purity of heart is to will ONE thing—not two. In Danish, *tvivle* = "doubt" (note the root in "double"). In German it's *Verzweiflung*.

This makes things theoretically simpler, perhaps. In modern analytic discussions of "self-deception," there are all kinds of problems about how we can deceive ourselves. And it's hard to see how I can have this state cognitively without introducing all sorts of complications into the psyche. But it's much more familiar to talk about willing two different things.

## ***Purity of Heart and Works of Love***

Fair Warning: This section is not as well worked out (or as clear) as other sections of these notes. But I didn't want to omit this material entirely. So—here it is, warts and all:

I want to talk a bit about two works we have not assigned this semester. First of all, *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*. This is the first of the *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, published on March 13, 1847—a little over a year after *Postscript*. Secondly, I also want to say some things at the same time about *Works of Love*, which was published about six months later, on September 29.

*Purity of Heart* is an upbuilding discourse, ostensibly designed for the occasion of a confession. That is, it is meant to be a kind of meditation you go through in preparation for going to confession.

Like most of the upbuilding discourses, it takes a Scripture text as its starting point. This time it is from SK's favorite Epistle, James 4:8:

Keep near to God, then he will keep near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

**Note:** Double-minded = *Tvesindedede*, and remember the etymological connection with *tvivle* = to doubt and *Fortvivelse* = despair, which we know = the sickness unto death and sin. To will one thing is not to be “double-minded,” to purify your heart, and at the same time to get out of despair and so out of sin. Hence the connection with the forgiveness of sins and confession. **Note also:** The double-mindedness here is not primarily a matter of believing two things. It's not mainly a cognitive matter; hence the connection with *tvivle* = to doubt is played down. Double-mindedness in *Purity* is primarily a matter of being double-willed, and so too is despair, as we saw in *Sickness*.

There are all sorts of thematic connections among all these texts: *Sickness*, *Purity* and *Works of Love*. The most sustained discussions of self-deception in the entire authorship are found in the *Purity* and *Works of Love*. In *Purity*, the reader is invited to reflect on his relations to other people and to ask if he relates to them without “divisiveness,” a discussion echoed by the one in *Works of Love* about loving the neighbor. Here's what he says in *Purity*:

*And what is your frame of mind toward others? Are you in harmony with everyone—by willing one thing? ... Alas, there is something in the world called an alliance; it is a dangerous thing, because all alliances are divisiveness. [Purity, 144—my quotations will be from the Hong/Hong translation.]*

In *Works of Love* there several pages devoted to having a “pure heart” (*Works of Love*, pp. 147-150), as well as a locution that clearly hearkens back to *Purity*:

Remember that the person who in order truly to will one thing chose to will the good in truth has this blessed comfort: one suffers only once but is victorious eternally” (*Works of Love*, p. 89).

The talk about “willing one thing” by choosing to “will the good in truth” is straight out of *Purity*.

There’s another connection between *Purity* and *Works of Love* that’s not obvious at first. Although SK never comes right out and says it in *Works of Love*, “erotic love” (= *Elskov*) is a conspicuous instance of the double-mindedness diagnosed in *Purity*.

- (a) *Purity*. Of course, the ruthless aesthetic pursuit of power and wealth that serves as the defining factor of many people’s lives has had many detractors (not least, Judge William himself). The greed, selfishness, and emptiness involved in such lives are frequently pointed out. And in *Purity*, SK takes such lives to task, arguing that people who follow these paths are creating a division in their very being and choosing to submerge themselves in delusion and self-deception.
- (b) *Works of Love*. The selfless surrender of oneself to a single beloved through the bond of everlasting love is a goal, realized or unrealized, in terms of which many people define themselves and their highest aspirations. You’d be hard pressed to find a psychologist or poet who would deny the importance and beauty of such an expression of self-denial. But in *Works of Love* SK’s assessment of selflessly committing to a single beloved is grimmer than his assessment of the ruthless pursuit of power and wealth. He views all these pursuits as forms of double-mindedness predicated on self-deception. But, the self-deception involved in erotic love (*Elskov*) is more radical.

There are at least three structural features SK detects in the pursuit of the worldly aims described in *Purity* that are also structural features of *Elskov* described in *Works of Love*. Both involve:

1. Unrealizability: willing an end that cannot be realized;
2. Multiplicity: willing a purported unity that is actually a multiplicity; and
3. Opposites: seeming to will a goal, while actually willing just the opposite.

As we saw in *Sickness* when we were talking about the distinction between the story I tell myself about who I am and the real “self” assigned by God, in despair the self is divided from itself, or perhaps we should say divided within itself, since we’re talking about a divided will. This state can go unrecognized (“inauthentic despair”), or at least unacknowledged. Individuals who do recognize this split in themselves may seek to find some way to integrate and heal the division, some way of unifying both the volitional and cognitive (“story telling”) aspects of the self internally and with respect to one another. SK describes this integrating task as one of identifying an end that one can will as a unity. As with most human pursuits, there will be ways of achieving this goal successfully, and other ways that are inherently doomed to failure.

In *Purity* SK claims there is actually only one end that, when willed properly, has this effect: “the good” (He doesn’t explicitly identify “the good” with God in *Purity*, but it’s not hard to make that identification.) To will anything else but the good is automatically to will a multiplicity, so that the volitional side of the self cannot be integrated in that case. Insofar as the individual who’s willing a multiplicity interprets himself as willing one thing instead, he’s engaging in self-deception.

The person who wills one thing that is not the good is actually not willing one thing; it is an illusion, a semblance, a deception, a self-deception that he wills only one thing—because in his innermost being he is, he must be, double-minded” (*Purity*, p. 25).

Why does SK think you can’t will pleasure, honor, wealth, fame, power, etc. with a unified self? Can’t we easily think of people who, with a single mind and will, pursue as much wealth or power as possible? Couldn’t they honestly report that their goal in life is to do this at any cost? SK’s point isn’t that such striving is evil (though that may also be true), but that it is inherently fractured and indicates a fractured state of existence. Why does he think this?

SK’s reasoning here (*Purity*, pp. 26–30) is far from systematic. But his fundamental observation seems to be that these candidates for the object of a unified will ultimately fail because they involve change. Since change involves multiplicity, willing worldly ends necessarily involves willing a multiplicity, whether you realize it or not.

How does this work? SK discusses three ways change is involved in the pursuit of a finite goal and results in a divided will. And now I want to focus on *Purity* (not *Works of Love*) for the moment.

1. Unrealizability. It is a structural fact about the single-minded pursuit of any worldly goal that one can only have degrees of success. Willing any of these ends to completion, he thinks, is impossible. Instead, only temporary goals can be willed. When they are reached, the bar is raised, and the goal is changed. For example, the single-minded pursuit of wealth may very well involve setting an initial benchmark (you will be satisfied when you’ve become a millionaire). But on reaching that goal, you have to set a new threshold to overcome. Otherwise, you will no longer be single-mindedly pursuing the goal of wealth.

This structural fact about the pursuit of wealth—and power, pleasure, fame, etc.—works itself into the psychology of people who define themselves in terms of such pursuits. As SK puts the matter, the worldly goal “insinuates itself searchingly into a person’s inner being” (*Purity*, p. 26). No matter how high you climb up the ladder of wealth, there will always be someone with more than you, someone who’s outdone you in this relentless pursuit. Or in any case there will always be more to get, and if you’ve got it all, then the world should just produce more wealth, so you can get it too. More, more, more! The trap of comparison like this continually turns the satisfaction gained from the realization of the temporary threshold into a new craving. As he says (*Purity*, p. 28):

So too with honor and wealth and power, for in the prime of life, when he aspired to honor, did he really find some limit, or was it not the ambitious one's restless preoccupation to climb higher and higher; did he find some rest in his sleepless effort to capture honor and hold it fast; did he find some refreshment in the cold fire of his passion!

2. Multiplicity. Even if, for the sake of argument, we grant that this upper limit could be reached, there is still a problem. The unity of each of these various ends is an illusion, "as when a swarm of insects in the distance seems to the eye like one body" (*Purity*, p. 28). 'Honor', 'power' and 'fame' are just blanket terms for gaining the "respect" (or submission) of many people, that is, not for willing one thing, but for willing many things—and the more honor you want the more your will is dispersed and divided.

[I]t was just the unanimity of these thousands that he wanted ... Is this wanting to count, then, willing one thing—to count and count until there are enough... is this willing one thing? Therefore, whoever wants this honor or fears this contempt, even if he is said to will one thing, is nevertheless in his innermost being not merely double-minded but thousand minded and divided. (*Purity*, p. 28)

Again, 'wealth' is a blanket term for property, money, stocks, etc.—and the fact that the mental health of people who will this end is often indexed to the health of particular stocks reveals the multiplicity willed in cases like this. 'Pleasure' is a blanket term for willed objects so varied and diverse as to be uncountable. (Remember, the last thing you want if you're an aesthete is to be bored. Recall "The Rotation Method" in the first half of *Either/Or*.)

3. Opposites. The last change SK discusses is the transformation of a worldly end into its opposite. Given the world and how it operates, the single-minded pursuit of power, wealth, fame, etc. typically involves forced choices that undermine the realization of the goal in practice.

Thus, a person who wills a finite end changes from being an individual pursuing the goal that he esteems into a person who wills the end he despises.

For example, it is not unusual for individuals at the pinnacle of success in achieving wealth to realize how utterly empty and spiritually poor their lives have become. The willing of wealth has been transformed into a willing of poverty. The example SK gives in *Purity* is honor's changing to contempt.

And so in his life when he must grovel—in order to attain honor; when he must flatter his enemy—in order to attain honor; when he must court the favor of the one he despises—in order to attain honor; when he must betray the person he esteems—in order to attain honor, in order to attain



honor, that is, in order to have contempt for himself at the pinnacle of honor ..." (*Purity*, p. 28)

This is the only example SK gives, but it's clear that he intends it to apply to worldly ends in general.

The individual who's attempting to unify himself by willing "one" thing when it's not "the good" is actually willing at least four things, two pairs of opposites. He's willing a unity as an end (he's trying to "unify" himself, after all) but also willing a multiplicity as an end. Again, he's willing a goal he esteems but also willing a goal he despises. SK's name for this state of the self is "double-mindedness."

SK's discussion of "erotic love" (*Elskov*) in *Works of Love* gives us a more nuanced and psychologically compelling account of double-mindedness than we find in *Purity*. But, without the general discussion of the structure of double-mindedness in *Purity*, it would be difficult to recognize that *Elskov* is a form of double-mindedness. Taking the two texts together us to see this clearly.

This is perhaps useful since the pursuit of *Elskov* or "erotic love" (perhaps better here, "preferential love"), unlike the relatively rare single-minded pursuit of the worldly ends discussed so far, is an experience almost everyone is familiar with. Thus, thinking through what's involved in double-mindedness and self-deception is perhaps more accessible, because more familiar, even if it's also more subtle.

While it's true that erotic love (*Elskov*) is a form of double-mindedness, and so, in terms of assessing the state of the self, is qualitatively equivalent to the pursuit of the worldly ends discussed in *Purity*, nevertheless we should expect there to be at least one difference between the two cases. The pursuit of the ends discussed in *Purity* does not necessarily involve any alleged moral dimension. There are exceptions, of course. The single-minded pursuit of power, for example, is going to involve a certain amount of ruthlessness. On the other hand, people in love necessarily interpret themselves as giving themselves wholly over to the other truthfully and in full faith. If it's true that they are actually willing the opposite of this, the self-deception involved is going to be pretty radical.

In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard sharply distinguishes two kinds of love we discussed earlier. On the one hand there is Christian love for God and neighbor (*Kjærlighed*). On the other hand we have "erotic love" (*Elskov*), which in this context also includes not only romantic love but things like friendship (*Venskab*), so that it's perhaps better to translate it "preferential love"

SK's assessment of *Elskov* is really grim. His analysis indicates that romantic love, for example, involves a dramatic display of self-deception.

He understands this romantic form of *Elskov* pretty rigorously: "[T]here is but one and only one beloved in the whole world, and this one and only one time of erotic love is love, is everything: the second time is nothing" (*Works of Love*, p. 49). He goes on to say that any description of romantic love that proposes one can "love many times" is a

watered down, false version of it (*Works of Love*, p. 50). (Note: To this extent, he's siding with the Judge and against A.)

But if SK is right, the very relation to another that's supposed to embody mutual self-sacrifice and surrender is really the expression of a hidden self-love. So the implication then, is that all the poets, artists, psychologists, who praise this form of love, and all the people who define a large part of themselves and their lives in terms of it, are praising a delusion, defining themselves in terms of a lie.

The first point Kierkegaard makes about romantic love is that it is divisive. It requires the lover to single out one person from the rest of humanity to love on the basis of personal preference. In this way, this type of love stands in stark contrast to Christian love (*Kjærlighed*), which commands us to love all people equally, irrespective of and indeed in the face of any personal preference.

The same holds true of friendship as of erotic love, inasmuch as this, too, is based on preference: to love this one person above all others, to love him in contrast to all others. 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. (*Works of Love*, p. 19)

You might think that friendship, at least, is not as exclusive as SK claims romantic love is. After all, you might have lots of friends. But still, the element of preference is there. You're not friends with absolutely everyone, after all, and probably couldn't be. But the Christian commandment is to love everyone.

The second point Kierkegaard makes about *Elksov* is that it's selfish. It masquerades as other-regarding, but in fact it's just a disguised form of self-love. "[I]n his impetuous, unlimited devotion the lover is actually relating himself to himself in self-love" (*Works of Love*, p. 55). Again:

Just as self-love selfishly embraces this one and only *self* that makes it self-love, so also erotic love's passionate preference encircles this one and only beloved, and friendship's passionate preference encircles this one and only friend. [Make the adjustments for friendship, if you want.] For this reason the beloved and the friend are called, remarkably and profoundly, to be sure, the *other self*, the *other I* ... [Latin: "alter ego."] But where does self-love reside? It resides in the *I*, in the *self*. Would not self-love then also start loving the *other I*, the *other self*? (*Works of Love*, p. 53)

Romantic love then involves jealously choosing, for oneself, which individual is deserving of the love. The beloved is viewed through the lens formed by the preferences deemed worthy by the lover. It is this discrimination based on one's own determinations

(motivated by whatever reason or reasons—fear, desire, lust, laziness, etc.) that is one component in erotic love’s selfishness. It wants what it wants.

Self-love’s preference is easy to see in the friendships as well. Typically, you become friends with someone based on a shared interest, cultural background, socio-economic status, etc.

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). (*Works of Love*, p. 56)

The more intense your self-love is in preference, the more you need to see the other in terms of the preferences you’ve chosen, and the more limited your ability to perceive the other objectively. It may just be the imaginative projection of your desire to see the other in a way that conforms with your picture of what’s worthy of love that you actually fall in love with. Christian love resists this.

When it is a duty in loving to love the people we see [as SK thinks Kjærlighed requires], then in loving the actual individual person it is important that one does not substitute an imaginary idea of how we think or could wish that this person should be. The one who does this does not love the person he sees but again something unseen, his own idea or something similar. (*Works of Love*, p. 164)

By choosing to love others in accordance with our view of what’s lovable and what isn’t, we’re in effect playing God and, SK thinks, deceiving ourselves about what we’re doing. Only through the sobriety gained by obeying the commandment to love others equally and without preference can we come to a clearer view of ourselves.

This raises a serious question: What happens to marriage if “preferential” love is abolished? What happens to friendship and romantic love? Is SK really insisting that we are commanded to be completely affectless? The answer to this isn’t clear, and there is unfortunately a lot of nonsense written about it in the secondary literature. Many authors—apparently thinking they have to defend SK no matter what, and yet remaining unwilling to accept what SK seems to be saying—try to argue that marriage and friendships are OK for SK once they’ve been “Christianized,” although it’s not clear how that’s supposed to change what he says.

The third point Kierkegaard makes is that erotic love is not qualitatively different from barter. In the optimal transaction, you will get equal or greater payoff for what you’ve doled out, and in a less than optimal transaction you’ll get anything from less than what you gave to nothing at all. Determining what’s worthy of love based on your own

preferences, combined with the expectation of a payoff for selecting the other based on those preferences, specifies the self-love involved in *Elskov*.

What makes this form of bartering tricky is that, unlike the exchange of physical goods, labor, or money, it's difficult to verify whether the trade has taken place equitably, if at all. SK, rightly or wrongly, thinks it's this unacknowledged "transaction"-model of love that lies at the heart of romantic love.

There is a lower view of love, therefore a lower love that has no view of love in itself. This view regards loving as a demand (reciprocal love is the demand) and being loved (reciprocal love) as an earthly good, as temporal—and yet, alas, as the highest bliss. Yes, when this is the case, the deception is clearly able to play the master, just as in the commercial world. A person pays out money in order to purchase some convenience; he has paid out the money, but he did not get the convenience—well, then he has been duped. He makes a love deal; he barter his love, but he did not receive the reciprocal exchange—well then he has been deceived. (*Works of Love*, p. 237)

Furthermore, the possibility that you're being "cheated" haunts *Elskov* and can account for some of its expressions.

However joyous, however happy, however indescribably confident instinctive and inclinational love, spontaneous love, can be itself, precisely in its most beautiful moment it still feels a need to bind itself, if possible, even more securely. Therefore the two swear an oath, swear fidelity or friendship to each other. (*Works of Love*, p. 29)

If the love here were truly confident, this need for further "confirmation" would be superfluous. A hidden anxiety lies at the basis of *Elskov*, anxiety about the status of the hidden transactions.

The point here is not that the problem of other minds, or the possibility of certain kinds of people with suspicious mindsets, can frustrate the process of developing mutual trust and faith. Rather, SK is pointing out that even in the best case scenario lovers find it necessary to engage in these actions as a form of reassurance.

The exchanging of rings between lovers is regarded as a very expressive symbol of erotic love; it is truly very expressive, but a poor symbol of love—it is, after all, an exchange" (*Works of Love*, p. 267).

If this model is accurate, then we've got a very unstable phenomenon. This "giving" is, if SK is correct, best viewed as a transaction driven by selfishness. Mix this with the fact that this transaction can always be doubted, and the result is a very volatile brew.

Spontaneous love can be changed within itself; it can be changed into its opposite, into hate. Hate is a love that has become its opposite, a love that has perished. Down in the ground the love is continually aflame, but it is the flame of hate; not until the love has burned out is the flame of hate burned out. (*Works of Love*, p. 34)

Hatred is here the manifestation of an *Elskov* that is still alive. SK's point here is that the fuel firing the hate is the fuel that had been firing the love.

There are undoubtedly many ways romantic love can be transformed into hate. There are also many ways unacknowledged transactions can take place in romantic love. Despite this variability on the surface, SK is committed to the view that all erotic love is hate, whether this becomes manifest or not. Consider this:

Would any more revolting combination be possible than loving—and falsity? But it is, of course, an impossibility, because to love falsely is to hate. This holds true not only for falsity, but it is impossible to join the slightest lack of honesty with loving. As soon as there is any lack of honesty, there is also something concealed, but selfish self-love hides in this concealment, and insofar as this is present in a person, he does not love. (*Works of Love*, p. 151)

To sum up, the lover in *Elskov* is not admitting to the beloved that his love is a form of self-love predicated on a jealous vision of what's lovable and on the expected outcome of a selfish transaction, and he's not admitting this to himself. So all erotic love is loving falsely, that is, hatred. In other words, if it's true that all erotic love is haunted by the hidden anxiety that the transaction it's based on isn't taking place, this betrays the need for suspicion and withholding trust at the core of a false love.

Earlier, we said that the first structural feature identified in *Purity* is that the end the double-minded person is trying to fulfill can never be fulfilled, for structural reasons. That is, you can never have enough power, wealth, pleasure, honor, fame, etc., if you're attempting single-mindedly to attain it. The same is true of *Elskov*, but in a different way. The person in *Elskov* cannot admit to himself that his goal is personal gain, so we shouldn't expect him to be as clear about the change that results from resetting temporary thresholds in the context of a transactional framework as is the individual pursuing other worldly, aesthetic goals.

But such transactions are continually taking place. The way to show it is this: in the presence of the beloved, treat a random person with as much preference and care as you show the beloved and watch his or her reaction.

Test it, place as the middle term between the lover and the beloved the neighbor, whom one shall love, place as a middle term between two friends the neighbor, whom one shall love, and you will immediately see

jealousy ... [T]he devotion with which the lover gives himself to this one and only, indeed, clutches the beloved, is self-love. (*Works of Love*, p. 54)

The individual in a case of *Elskov* is structurally barred from willing his love to completion, just as the individual willing a worldly end is. The reason is that there's no definite sign that the beloved is reciprocating. There's no transaction that could erase the anxiety that bars the lover from giving to the beloved the trust and faith that's the precondition for a fully realized *Elskov*.

The second structural feature of double-mindedness identified in *Purity* is that although it claims to will a unity, it actually wills a multiplicity. The unity it wills is an illusion. In the discussion of finite ends, 'honor', for example, was the blanket term for the respect of individual people. The same is true of *Elskov*. '*Elskov*', a unity one says one is willing, is actually the blanket term for a series of disguised, ongoing transactions. The only difference here from the earlier forms of double-mindedness is that you're not only not acknowledging that you're willing a multiplicity, but also not acknowledging that you're willing a series of transactions.

The third structural feature of double-mindedness was that it's predicated on the contradiction of willing both what one esteems and what one despises. In *Purity*, this was put in terms of an ideal's manifesting itself as its opposite in practice. In *Works of Love* the *Elskov*'s contradictory nature is there from the start. In willing a supposedly selfless erotic love, you are simultaneously willing its opposite—self-love. We've seen that this in part explains the volatility of *Elskov* and its ability to be transformed into its opposite.

In that love which has only existence [I'm not sure how to interpret this], however confident it is, there is still an anxiety, an anxiety about the possibility of change. Such love does not understand that this is anxiety any more than the poet does, because the anxiety is hidden, and the only expression is the flaming craving, whereby it is known that the anxiety is hidden underneath. Otherwise why is it that spontaneous love is so inclined to, indeed, so infatuated with, making a test of the love? ... The testing undoubtedly has its basis in love, but this violently flaming desire to test, this craving desire to be put to the test, denotes that the love itself is unconsciously uncertain. (*Works of Love*, pp. 32-33)

SK goes so far as to say that romantic love is actually hate, even if it's unrecognized. He also says the finite ends in *Purity* are inherently contradictory, even though this typically isn't recognized until the height of their realization (that the single-minded pursuit of wealth is willing an internal poverty, power is based on dependence).

In short, both *Purity* and *Works of Love* describe cases of (1) willing an earthly end that cannot in principle be realized, (2) willing a purported unity that is really a multiplicity, and (3) willing an avowed goal while actually willing its opposite.

The double-mindedness of *Elskov* involves dislocations in the self. As a first dislocation, within the will, the self wills the unity of *Elskov*, and it wills a series of continual

transactions. The self wills the selfless surrender of itself to another human being, and it wills its jealous vision of what is to count as being worthy of love, a vision based in self-love.

There's a second dislocation between cognition and volition as well. The self interprets itself only along the favorable dimensions of the will—that it wills a unity and is engaged in the project of surrender to another—and masks the unfavorable dimensions of volition from itself, thereby cutting self-interpretation off from the actual state of the will. The masking of the transactional context in which the self is operating shows up in “love’s very strange gesticulations and mysterious signs” (*Stages*, p. 39)—the “exchange of rings,” that betray the hidden anxiety that the transaction may be failing, or is threatening to fail. In the end, the pursuit of *Elskov* is not qualitatively distinct from the pursuit of worldly goods in *Purity*.

This ends the section that I gave you a “fair warning” about above.

### ***The Moment***

As a sort of grand finale to this course, I want to spend some time discussing SK’s last years. And they were pretty remarkable.

First of all, I want to introduce you to two figures:

- Jakob Peter Mynster, bishop of Sjælland (= Zealand, the main island part of Denmark, on which Copenhagen sits). He was head of the Danish Church (the “Primate of Denmark”—sort of like the Archbishop of Canterbury) during most of SK’s life. Before he rose to this post, had been the pastor for SK’s father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, and was something of a friend of the family.
- Hans Lassen Martensen, Mynster’s successor as Primate of Denmark, and at one time SK’s teacher at the University of Copenhagen. He was one of the important intellectual figures of the day.

During his “second authorship” (after *Postscript*), SK delayed the publication of several already completed works (*Sickness, Practice, Armed Neutrality*) because he was hoping for some kind of decisive action on Mynster’s part. (But he nevertheless did publish many of them eventually.)

What exactly did he want Mynster to do? To confess and admit that he had accommodated Christianity to the “demands of the times.” In short, that he had watered it down. SK wanted Mynster to admit publically that “Christendom” ≠ “Christianity” in the New Testament sense.

It’s not really clear why SK delayed publishing at this point or for this reason. But SK’s relationship to Mynster was very complex. He admired the old man, but thought he had toned down Christianity. Furthermore, SK thought that Mynster privately agreed with him, and that it was a failure of nerve that prevented him from admitting what he had done.

In any case, SK continued to publish occasionally from 1846–51 (for five years), although not with nearly the frequency he had earlier. But after the publication of *For Self-Examination* on September 10, 1851, he fell silent for over three years, until December of 1854. (This was as long as the time between *Either/Or* and *Postscript*—the entire first authorship!)

At that point, December 1854, he began a series of vitriolic attacks on the established Church of Denmark, first in a series of articles in a Copenhagen newspaper called *Fædrelandet* (= “Fatherland”) and elsewhere, and then in a series of self-published pamphlets he called *The Moment* (*Øjeblikket*)—the same word used in *Fragments*. Less than a year after this final flurry of writing began, he died (Nov. 11, 1855).

What prompted him to break his silence in this final blast? To begin with, Mynster died (January 30, 1854). On February 5, 1854, Hans Lassen Martensen delivered a eulogy for Mynster, in which he described the old bishop as an “authentic truth-witness,” one of “the whole succession of truth-witnesses that like a holy chain stretches through the ages from the days of the Apostles to our own day” (*Moment*, p. 359). He calls upon us to imitate Bishop Mynster’s faith, whose message remains the same even though the times change.

This enraged SK, who thought this was precisely not the case with Mynster. According to SK, Mynster had diluted the true message of Christianity, accommodated it to the “demands of the times,” and furthermore Mynster himself knew better.

But still, this was in February, and SK did not fire his first shot until December. Why wait? Well, when Martensen delivered his eulogy, it wasn’t clear where his own future lay. But, as the year 1854 progressed without a Primate of Denmark, it became clear that Martensen was going to be named Mynster’s successor as the Primate. He was so designated on April 15, 1854, although he wasn’t actually consecrated Bishop of Sjælland until December 26, 1854, the day after Christmas. A few days earlier (December 18), SK published his first article in the series. He had written this article as early as February, shortly after Martensen had delivered his eulogy, but had held it back until Martensen was just about to take up the primacy.

The article, some five pages in length, has SK’s own name on it (as all this last material does), and is entitled, “Was Bishop Mynster a ‘Truth-Witness,’ One of ‘the Authentic Truth-Witnesses’—Is *This the Truth?*” (Referring to Martensen’s eulogy of Mynster.) SK’s answer is no.

By this time, there was a major change in SK’s views on faith. There’s no more of this “hidden inwardness” stuff that we had in *Postscript*. No more “Knight of Faith”—who is indistinguishable from anyone else and looks just like a tax-collector. (It’s unclear just why SK changed his mind on this.)

No, by this time, SK had become fairly clear in his view that becoming a true Christian meant suffering. If you really do love thy neighbor as you’re supposed to, if you really do seek FIRST the kingdom of God rather than seeking first a secure job, a family, respectability in the community—and only then, perhaps, the kingdom of God—people are going to hate you. They’re going to think you’re crazy, an extremist, and in the end



dangerous. After all, look what they did to Jesus! Now Jesus, after all, is supposed to be the prototype of Christian life, and anyone who imitates that prototype is going to be treated the same way.

That's not what we find, SK thinks, in the case of Mynster. After all, Mynster wore exquisite episcopal gowns and lived in conspicuous luxury and ease.

Here is part of what SK says (*Moment*, p. 5):

Bishop Mynster a truth-witness? You who read this, you certainly do know what is Christianly understood by a truth-witness, but let me remind you of it, that it unconditionally requires suffering for the doctrine. And when it is said more pointedly: one of “the authentic” truth-witnesses, then the word must accordingly be taken in the strictest sense. In order to make it vivid to you, let me try in a few strokes to suggest what must be understood by this.

... A truth-witness is a person who (6) in poverty witnesses for the truth, in poverty, in lowliness and abasement, is so unappreciated, hated, detested, so mocked, insulted, laughed to scorn—so poor that he perhaps has not always had daily bread, but he received the daily bread of persecution in abundance every day. For him there was never advancement and promotion except in reverse, step by step downward. A truth-witness, one of the authentic truth-witnesses, is a person who is flogged, mistreated, dragged from one prison to another, then finally—the last advancement, by which he is admitted to the first class in the *Christian* order of precedence among the authentic truth-witnesses—then finally, for this is indeed one of the authentic truth-witnesses Prof. Martensen talks about, then he is crucified or beheaded or burned or broiled on a grill, his lifeless body thrown away by the assistant executioner into a remote place, unburied—this is how a truth-witness is buried!—or burned to ashes and cast to the winds so that every trace of this “refuse,” as the apostle says he has become, might be obliterated.

Obviously, SK thinks Bishop Mynster wasn't like that at all, and that it is a travesty to suggest he was (p. 6):

Truly, there is something that is more against Christianity and the essence of Christianity than any heresy, any schism, more against it than all heresies and schisms together, and it is this: to play at Christianity. But (entirely, entirely in the same sense as the child plays at being a soldier) it is playing at Christianity: to remove all the dangers ..., to replace them with power ..., goods, advantages, abundant enjoyment of even the most select refinements ...

So this is the opening shot.

Martensen was foolish enough to reply to this. On December 28, 1854, ten days after SK published his article and only two days after he himself had become Bishop of Sjælland, Martensen published a reply in the *Berlingske Tidene* (= “Berling Times”, a Danish newspaper that is still publishing).

Basically, he argues that SK has so narrowed the notion of “truth-witness” that it becomes restricted to those who are literal martyrs (p. 360). (That’s actually not such an arbitrary restriction. After all, ‘martyr’ comes from Greek for “witness.”)

If we have to adhere to that restricted use of the word, Martensen goes on, then by calling Mynster a “truth-witness” (p. 361):

I surely would have made myself guilty, if not of a crying-to-heaven untruth and other offenses against the sacred ... then at least of an erroneous use of words.

But, he says (p. 361):

... whatever can it be that justifies his [SK’s] restricting the concept in such an arbitrary way, contrary to all ecclesiastical usage, a restriction according to which the apostle John—who ... was neither beheaded nor crucified, nor after death slung aside by the assistant executioner, but buried by his congregation—must be excluded from the number of truth-witnesses.

It seems to me Martensen has a valid point here.

But there’s more. Martensen goes on to offer some observations about SK’s own version of Christianity, which after all had by this time become pretty well known through SK’s own publications. He says (p. 362) that SK’s Christianity is “without Church and without history,” that he “seeks Christ only in the ‘desert’ and in ‘private rooms’”—and, by implication, not in any kind of institutionalized Church. (Note: This seems to be a perfectly correct observation about SK.)

He says Kierkegaard’s (p. 364):

Christianity is not at all the faith of a community but solely and simply a private religion, a Christianity in which the Christian Church and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian Church are left out ...

Again, this seems to be a quite correct interpretation of what SK was saying.

SK’s original article was pretty strong, pointed and direct. But Martensen’s reply, at least to me, seems positively bitter and directed against SK personally. He refers, for instance, to SK’s article as “slovenly” (p. 364).

After this initial reply, Martensen publishes nothing further in this exchange, although SK certainly did publish. Martensen seems to have learned his lesson that it's best just to let SK rant and rave, and not try to argue with him.

But if Martensen kept quiet, other people did not. It seems a Danish pastor named Jens Paluden-Müller published a pamphlet in which he writes (p. 624 n. 38):

I challenge Dr. S. Kierkegaard, with the New Testament alongside, to establish his above-mentioned allegation [that Mynster was not a truth-witness] in any way worth discussing; I shall then take it upon myself to show that the allegation is altogether without warrant.

In other words, let's look at the New Testament, look closely at Mynster's life, and see if they really are so different after all.

On January 12, 1855, SK published another article in *Fædrelandet*, in which he picks up on Paluden-Müller's challenge to establish his point "in any way worth discussing." SK says the question was whether Mynster was a "truth-witness." Now there is a danger of turning it into a scholarly argument with learned quotations! (p. 17.) (On the other hand, it was SK himself who brought up the NT in his first article.)

SK agrees with the others that Mynster was not a "preacher of repentance," but a "preacher of peace." But peace is exactly what you don't get on SK's version of Christianity, so that Mynster's preaching amounts to "malpractice" (p. 18).

Notice what has happened here. The issue is no longer about Mynster, really; the issue is now about the proper interpretation of Christianity.

Well, the publications go on. On January 29, 1855, he suggests in *Fædrelandet* that perhaps it is providential that Martensen has succeeded Mynster, because while Mynster had a gift for hiding the weaknesses in the established order of the Church, Martensen has a "gift" for exposing those weaknesses almost whatever he does! Perhaps divine providence intends for the established Church to fall now that Mynster is gone! (p. 25.) And it's clear that SK thinks that would be a good thing. He really does want a private religion.

In some drafts SK didn't publish, he raises Martensen's point about how SK has "only a Christianity without Church and without history." "Fine, I would reply, if only I do not have a Christianity without the New Testament" (p. 501).

In another draft, he refers to "These buildings [he had originally written "pest holes" and then crossed it out], which no one leaves without being infected, I mean the churches ..." (p. 547).

There were several other publications during this last hurrah. I only want to highlight a few of them.

On March 22, 1855, SK published an article he had written the preceding year, in which he says (p. 34):

But an end, an end must be made to the official—well-intentioned—  
untruth.

Here he's actually calling for abolishing the established Church. Earlier he sounded as if he were hoping for a reform of the Church, that if only Bishop Mynster had honestly admitted that they were falling short of the New Testament ideal, perhaps things could be put back on the right track. But he's no longer talking that way.

By now the articles are coming out every few days. On March 26, he writes (p. 35) "Christianity does not exist at all." That is, what we have in Christendom is not Christianity.

On March 28, he notes that Luther had 95 theses, but he has only one: Christianity does not exist at all (p. 39). Therefore, there is nothing to reform. On March 30, Protestantism is a falsehood. The fundamental confusion of both Protestantism and Catholicism is in the concept of "Church," or "Christendom." What goes on in the Churches is a travesty of true Christianity (p. 43):

Abominable; even humanity's most prodigal dregs still have the merit that their crimes are not hailed and honored, almost worshipped and adored as Christian virtues.

On March 31, he publishes a short article called "What Do I Want?" And the answer is that he wants—very simply—honesty.

He argues that even if "official Christianity"—by which he means Christendom—is compatible with the New Testament (NB, different from, but at least compatible with it), still it is not compatible with the New Testament to hide and cover over the differences between the two.

Notice: As far as this goes, it sounds as if SK would be perfectly happy if someone replied—as in fact "official Christianity" might very well reply: "Fine, let's do be clear and honest about the situation. We 'official Christians' are not Christians in the New Testament sense—and good for us, because the times are not New Testament times! Things have changed, and we've changed with them. But we are still doing—or striving to do—what is necessary for our salvation."

But SK goes on to make clear that he's not going to allow that. Accommodating to "the times" amounts to a compromise—a distortion—of the "Christian requirement." In other words, the only way to be a Christian is to be a Christian in the original New Testament sense. (So they're not compatible after all.)

Toward the end of this essay, he even says he would be willing to "go along" with an honest rebellion against Christianity—Note: he says 'Christianity', not 'Christendom'—as long as it is really honest. Here's what he says (p. 48):

Let me venture the most extreme in order, if possible, to be understood with regard to what I want.

I want honesty. If this, then, is what the generation of the contemporaries want, if they want straightforwardly, honestly, candidly, openly, directly to rebel against Christianity and say to God, “We cannot, we will not submit to this power”—but, please note, this is to be done straightforwardly, honestly, candidly, openly, directly—well, then strange as it might seem, I go along with it, because I want honesty. Wherever there is honesty, I am able to go along with it; an honest rebellion against Christianity can be made only if one honestly acknowledges what Christianity is and how one relates oneself to it.

By the very end of this essay, he seems to be virtually inviting out and out martyrdom for himself (p. 49):

If the official Christianity in this country wants to take the occasion to use force against me because of what is said here, I am prepared, because I want honesty.

For this honesty I am willing to venture. However, I am not saying that it is for Christianity that I venture. Suppose, just suppose that I become quite literally a sacrifice—I would still not become a sacrifice for Christianity but because I wanted honesty.

Recall how, early on in this semester when we were talking about *Fear and Trembling*, we saw Johannes de silentio saying that he, at least, has the courage to think a thought whole, to think a thought through—in other words, honestly. Here, at the very end of SK’s career, we see him insisting on the very same thing.

Well, the barrage goes on. SK continues to publish these screeds against the established Church, and occasionally someone will dare to publish something in reply—perhaps even in a spirit of compromise, trying to put this whole embarrassing development to rest. That of course, just prompts SK to go on.

On May 15, we get an article with a curious claim that may be important for understanding SK (p. 66):

Meanwhile, in the books by me or by pseudonymous authors, I have thoroughly, as I always work, expressed and described the different stages before reaching where I am at present. Thus one will find, especially in the pseudonymous Johannes Climacus [*i.e.*, in *Philosophical Fragments* and in *Postscript*], what approximately may be said in defense of the kind of Christianity that is closest to that of the established order, and will find it described in such a way that I would like to see whether any of my contemporaries here in the country can do it better.

It’s not clear exactly what passages in the Climacus-writings he has in mind here. (Perhaps the distinction between Religion A and Religion B in *Postscript*?)

On May 24, 1855, SK publishes an actual volume (i.e., not an article in *Fædrelandet* or elsewhere, but a slim book of its own) entitled, *This Must Be Said; So Let It Be Said*. And what is it that “must be said”? This (p. 73):

Whoever you are, whatever your life is otherwise, my friend—by ceasing to participate (if you usually do participate) in the public divine service as it now is (professing to be the Christianity of the New Testament), you always have one and a great guilt less—you are not participating in making a fool of God by calling something New Testament Christianity that is not New Testament Christianity.

In short, he’s telling people, Stop going to church, and you’ll have at least one less sin you’re guilty of.

Note: This in effect confirms Martensen’s observation that SK’s Christianity is a Christianity without a Church.

Then SK goes back to publishing in the magazines.

Eventually, SK gives up carrying on this polemic in the Copenhagen newspapers and magazines, and starts publishing a series of pamphlets on his own (i.e., he’s the one paying for their publication), called *The Moment*. There were nine of these pamphlets that came out during SK’s lifetime—beginning on May 24, 1855, less than six months before his death, and a tenth was prepared, but only came out after his death.

The pamphlets contain a series of essays with titles like this: “Is It Defensible for the State—the Christian State—to Make, If Possible, Christianity Impossible?” (Because that’s what the state is doing!) SK’s answer, of course, is no, it is not defensible.

Some of them are hilarious. One of them, with the title “If We [i.e., “official” Christians] Actually Are Christians—What Then Is God?,” he says:

He is the most ludicrous being that has ever lived, his Word the most ludicrous book that has ever come to light: to set heaven and earth in motion (as he indeed does in his Word), to threaten with hell, with eternal punishment—in order to attain to what we understand by being a Christian (and, after all, we are true Christians)—no, something that ludicrous has never happened! Imagine that a man confronted a person with a loaded pistol and said to him, “I am going to shoot you down,” or suppose something still more dreadful, that he said, “I am going to seize you and torture you to death in the most horrible way if you do not (pay attention now, here it comes!), if you do not make your life here on earth as profitable and enjoyable as you possibly can”—this certainly is the most ridiculous talk, because to bring this about one really does not need to threaten with a loaded pistol and the most agonizing death penalty; perhaps neither the loaded pistol nor the most agonizing death penalty would be able to prevent it. And so it is also, to want, through a fear of

eternal punishment (fearful threat!), through the hope of eternal happiness, to bring about—yes, to bring about what we are (for what we call Christian is, after all, what it means to be a Christian), that is, to want to bring about what we are: that we live just as we please—since to abstain from civil crimes is, of course, merely ordinary sagacity. (*Moment* II.8, p. 121.)

This raises an interesting question: Why should SK be so opposed to “official Christianity’s” making it so impossible to be a real Christian, when he himself wants to make it so difficult—and, in fact, being a real Christian becomes a kind of ideal, and therefore impossible, limit?

It’s clear that he does want to make it very difficult. Even early on in the controversy (p. 41), he seems to be saying that it would be a bad thing if everyone were a Christian. He wants there to be only a few Christians; it’s good that there are only a few, and it would be even better if there were fewer! After all, Christianity requires persecution. If everyone were Christian, who would do the persecuting?

The same theme is picked up later on. Cf. *Moment* V (p. 181):

Thus in three and a half years he [Jesus] won only eleven [Judas didn’t count], whereas one apostle in one day [he’s referring to St. Peter in Acts], I dare say in one hour, wins three thousand followers for Christ. Either the follower is here greater than the Master, or the truth is that the apostle is a bit too hasty in striking a bargain, a bit too hasty about propagation; thus the dubiousness already begins here.

In short, even St. Peter wasn’t pure enough for SK!

In some of the other installments of *The Moment*, he goes on to argue against infant baptism, on the grounds that it makes no sense. Baptism, insofar as it is what makes one a Christian—or even insofar as it is what makes one start trying to be a Christian—is not something you can undertake before you are in a position to answer for yourself.

He goes on to argue against the sacrament of Confirmation, on the grounds that it’s just a substitute for what baptism was originally supposed to be. Confirmation comes later, presumably after one has reached the “age or reason.” But even there, there is a tendency to push the age of confirmation back earlier and earlier, and so to make it meaningless.

In *The Moment* VII, he all but says marriage is a mistake! He seems to be saying it’s OK only for someone who got married before becoming a Christian.

He goes on to say it’s more acceptable to be married by a blacksmith than by a pastor! (p. 247) What does he say then about the story of the Marriage at Cana, where Jesus worked his first public miracle? In effect, he says it was Mary’s idea, not Jesus’s!

Again (pp. 250–51), having children is anything but pleasing to God. But wouldn’t the human race then die out? Yes, and that would be a good thing!

And so on. In short, he's gone around the bend!

But note: Not a single thing in any of this goes beyond what we see in one or another recognized Protestant sect, generally of an evangelical variety. So, in that sense, SK is still well within the recognized tradition, or at least certain parts of the recognized tradition, and is just being very loud about it! And—at least in his own terms—very consistent about it.

There's a problem of interpretation: A lot of the SK secondary literature wants not only to understand what SK is saying, but to be able to agree with it. In other words, they want to be followers.

As a result, certain interpretations of SK are dismissed, or downplayed, because they depart too obviously from what one wants to believe about SK if one is going to defend him.

A case in point: Marriage. In *Works of Love*, he seems to be rejecting the notion of “preferential love” (*Ekskov*) in favor of *Kjærlighed*. But it would be hard to keep the institution of marriage without some notion of “preferential love”—after all, you're married to one spouse to the exclusion of (preference over) everyone else.

The result, according to the followers: SK isn't really rejecting preferential love in *Works of Love*. What he's saying is that it is perfectly OK, as long as it is “purified” in some way by Christian charity. (And therefore marriage really is OK after all.) (See Jamie Ferrera's book on *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Works of Love*.)

But these very late writings suggest that this is not the direction SK is in fact going.

In short, what happens in a lot of the recent literature is a case-study in “offense,” in “accommodation.”

The best way to approach SK is not as someone we have to defend no matter what, but as someone we first have to understand.

### ***Kierkegaard on cannibalism***

Now I want to talk about an odd little essay in *The Moment* IX. It's entitled “That the Pastors Are Cannibals, and in the Most Abominable Way.” (If you can possibly find a copy of this, I strongly urge you to do so!)

First of all, note that *The Moment* IX was the very last thing Kierkegaard published during his lifetime—on September 25, 1855 (which, coincidentally, was also the date of the last entry in the *Journals*), one week to the day before he was admitted to the hospital on October 2, and less than two months before his death on November 11. Apparently he had collapsed on the street a few days before October 2, was taken home, and later went to the hospital. I've been unable to determine exactly when he collapsed.

He did have a tenth volume of *The Moment* finished and ready to go, but it didn't come out until after his death.



There are several other essays in *The Moment* IX as well, but this is the one I want to focus on.

I think it's fair to say that when you read this essay, it strikes you at first as shedding more heat than light. It reads like nothing but shrill hyperbole, based primarily on a metaphor chosen for its shock-value. Not only are the pastors "cannibals," he says, but particularly egregious ones at that!

First of all, let me assure you that the charge of cannibalism is a metaphor. The pastors do not literally eat other people's flesh, and Kierkegaard doesn't claim they do. So what is the basis for Kierkegaard's rant? Let's make several passes over it.

First: The Christianity of the New Testament, he says, is "suffering." First of all, Jesus himself suffered—he not only suffered death but suffered throughout his whole life, according to Kierkegaard. But it's more than Jesus: any subsequent "apostle" or genuine "truth-witness" (a term that we've seen has a particular significance in the history of his late polemical attack on the established church)—suffered too.

But what do the pastors do? They preach about this suffering, "depict" it, proclaim the teaching of these "glorious ones" as "doctrine"—and then live comfortably off the proceeds (p. 321):

“... Cannot this be done [he rhetorically asks in words attributed to the pastors] and in such a way that it would yield enough so that a man who wishes to enjoy life could live on it, marry on it, beget children who are fed on it?” In other words, is it not possible to turn the glorious ones into money, or to eat them, to live with wife and children by eating them?

With this somewhat strained analogy, Kierkegaard triumphantly concludes, “See, there you have it: cannibals, that the pastors are cannibals!” (p. 321 bottom). At first glance, therefore, the complaint seems to be that the pastors are profiting—indeed profiting handsomely—from the sufferings of these “glorious ones.”

But if that's all that's going on in this essay, it just doesn't work. Arguably, we all live off the “sufferings” of others. We all have to struggle through life “by the sweat of our brow,” and we rely on one another just to “get by.” As long as we live together in any kind of society, we derive mutual benefit from one another's toil—a kind of “suffering.” So are we all “cannibals” then? Why single out the pastors?

Second pass: But we can perhaps make SK's point more strongly than that. Let's say we're not talking about “suffering” in the loose sense, we're not just talking about the universal struggle through life—mere discomfort or inconvenience—but about much more extreme suffering. After all, Jesus was crucified, the early Christians were persecuted, and we've already seen what he thinks happens to the true truth-witnesses: they are

flogged, mistreated, dragged from one prison to another, then finally ... crucified or beheaded or burned or broiled on a grill, [etc.].

Perhaps then the complaint is that the pastors are benefiting from the “sufferings” of others in this much stronger sense—more than just inconvenience and the normal tribulations of life.

But that still doesn’t work. Note the consequences: it is not only the pastors who benefit from this, but also the apostles and truth-witnesses themselves and indeed ALL TRUE CHRISTIANS who follow them (as distinct from the cannibalistic pastors, who apparently do not). In fact, the true Christians benefit far more than the “cannibalistic” pastors do. The pastors gain only a living in this life, whereas the others gain salvation and eternal life. If this were the only issue, if it were simply a matter of deriving benefit from the sufferings of the “glorious ones,” then true Christians would seem to end up being much worse offenders than even the pastors! So, once again, why single out the pastors?

In terms of the “cannibalism” metaphor itself, it doesn’t do any good to respond that the true Christians suffer in their turn, unlike the comfortable pastors, as if that somehow meant that true Christians aren’t cannibals. It doesn’t change things at all. After all, a cannibal is no less a cannibal if he ends up being eaten himself, or even if he’s willing to be eaten!

No, it seems that simply deriving benefit from the suffering and death of others, no matter how extreme, is no real basis for the charge of cannibalism, even metaphorically, in the way SK seems to be talking about it. A hit-man, an executioner, a torturer-for-hire all make a living in this way. But, however reprehensible we may think those professions are, we don’t call them “cannibals”—much less cannibals “in the most abominable way.” And we do not call them any the more “cannibals” if they’re unwilling to be themselves “targets,” i.e., executed or tortured.

Consider a tour-guide at a former Nazi concentration camp, or at the slave-quarters of an old American plantation that’s now a tourist attraction. Such a person plainly benefits—literally makes a living, perhaps even a comfortable living—from the sufferings and even the death of others. We may be a little uneasy and squeamish about such jobs, but not necessarily. After all, perhaps the guide is fully conscious of the evils of Nazism and slavery, and in fact regards it as part of his or her job to highlight those evils, call our attention to them and warn us against them. An attitude like that would probably lessen our moral qualms about the tour-guide’s job, not increase our inclination to call him or her a “cannibal,” as Kierkegaard does the pastors. And yet, how does their job differ from the pastors’ turning the sufferings of the “glorious ones” into “doctrine” and making a comfortable living off them, one of the bases for his complaint against them?

Third pass: Well, perhaps there’s a difference after all. The sufferings of Nazi prisoners, or of slaves in the American South, do not, after all, demand that we imitate them. On the contrary, insofar as we find a moral imperative at all in their sufferings, it’s probably an imperative to eliminate the conditions under which it was necessary for them to suffer and die in the first place, and therefore to eliminate the very opportunity for us to imitate them—to eliminate racist prejudice. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, the “glorious ones” do demand that we imitate their sufferings. And in fact, he makes it quite plain throughout his late writings, beginning with *Practice in Christianity*, that he thinks the

need for such suffering is not something we should avoid or even try to eliminate, but should rather wholeheartedly embrace. Jesus is supposed to be prototype to be imitated, not just some model to be admired. Yet the pastors do try to avoid such suffering; they want to live as comfortably as possible. Is this then the basis for Kierkegaard's calling them "cannibals"—that they don't fulfill the demand for imitation?

OK, then let's consider not a tour-guide at a death camp or a plantation, but guides at the Christian catacombs in Rome, or, heaven help us, at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Golgotha outside Jerusalem. Here we are dealing, let's say, with sufferings that demand imitation. Yet the guides, let's suppose, are in it purely for the pay. Are they "cannibals" in Kierkegaard's sense? Would they be subject to the particular kind of abuse Kierkegaard heaps on the "pastors"?

Reply: I don't think so. So far, all we've seen is the accusation that the pastors—or for that matter, the tour guides—are not fulfilling the demands made by the people on the basis of whose sufferings they are making a living.

But in fact, I think there is something much more going on here. What's going on is something that isn't entirely explicit in the Danish, and certainly not clear in the Hong's translation.

Notice how the Hongs start off their translation:

What is meant by cannibals [*Menneske-Ædere* = literally, "man-eaters"] everyone certainly knows; indeed the word says it.

In fact, there are two words at play in this essay, and the Hongs ignore the distinction entirely. One is in effect "man-eater" (*Menneske-Æder*, plural *Mennekse-Ædere*, or in the abstract *Menneske-Æderie* = "man-eatery"), which we've just seen, and the other is straightforwardly "*Canibalen*" (or "*Kanibalen*") = "the cannibal."

The word *Canibalen* first appears in our essay on p. 322, where SK gives a list beginning with "1. The cannibal is a savage ..." and then goes to list a total of three items. In the previous paragraph, where he says "This is cannibalism, and it is cannibalism in its most abominable form, which I shall now show"—it is *Menneske-Æderie* = "man-eatery."

The Hongs are not the only or even the first people to overlook the difference between these words in this passage. In 1944, Walter Lowrie published a selection of material from these late writings, which he called *Attack upon Christendom* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1944, reprinted with a new introduction 1968, and still readily available). Here's how Lowrie translates the beginning of our passage (p. 268—compare the beginning of the Hong's translation):

*The priests are cannibals, and that in the most odious way*

Everyone understands what cannibals are, they are man-eaters.

But in fact the literal translation of the Danish would go:

*The priests [or pastors—the Hongs] are man-eaters, and in the most odious [or abominable—the Hongs] way*

What one understand by “man-eaters” everyone knows; it is said with the word. [That is, it is built into the word itself.]

And later on, when Kierkegaard begins listing the differences, Lowrie, like the Hongs, obliterates the distinction (p. 269):

This is cannibalism, and it is the most odious form of it, as I shall now show.

1. The cannibal is a savage ...

As I pointed out a moment ago, the first term there is literally “man-eater,” while the second is literally “cannibal.”

OK—so what’s the big deal? What’s the difference?

Well, if you think about it, there is a difference between a “cannibal” and a “man-eater.” A cannibal is someone or something that eats its own kind. Certain beetles, for instance, sometimes devour their young, and are in that sense “cannibalistic.” A “man-eater,” by contrast, is something that eats human beings—but not necessarily a human being who eats human beings. After all, we speak of a “man-eating tiger,” although we don’t call it a cannibal.

This suggests an interesting possibility, therefore. Is it the case perhaps that by the terminological distinction between “man-eaters” and “cannibals,” Kierkegaard is suggesting that the man-eating pastors are not really human beings at all, that they are subhuman?

But isn’t this just being too fancy? Is this just straining at terminological gnats?

Well, let’s see. Let’s go through Kierkegaard’s works, and see just where he uses “cannibal” (or forms of it), and where he uses “man-eater” (or forms of it), and see whether it really makes any difference.

I’ve done just that, and I’ve come to the conclusion that it does make a difference, and a difference that I don’t think has ever been pointed out before. (Handout “Cannibals and Man-Eaters.”)

I’ve given you a handout of some other passages I’ve found in Kierkegaard’s writings where he talks about either “cannibalism” or “man-eating.” And I’ve inserted the relevant Danish words in square brackets. (There are more such passages, but these will do to make my point today.)

First of all, it must be admitted that there are some throw-away passages, where it doesn’t seem Kierkegaard is making any fine-grained distinction at all. For instance, in the pseudonymous *The Crisis* (1848), he uses the phrase “cannibalistic taste for human

sacrifices” in a way I don’t really have a good sense of. (Passage (1).) It’s not clear to me exactly what he’s saying in this passage.

Again (passage (2)) as early as his dissertation *The Concept of Irony* (1841), he says Socrates was a “man-eater” (oddly, the Hongs translate this as “an ogre” here) in his relation with his interlocutors.

Again, in passage (3), a Journal entry from 1852 about Pascal, we get the complaint that the pastors’ and the professors’ appeal to Pascal’s thoughts but do not imitate his personal qualities. And here he says that what they are doing is cannibalism (*Canibalisme*); he doesn’t say “man-eater” (*Menneske-Æderie*).

I confess there doesn’t seem to be anything terminologically subtle going on in those passages.

But look at passage (4) on the handout, a Journal entry from 1854. This passage is a fairly close parallel to parts of our essay in *The Moment*. But here SK draws an explicit distinction between the metaphorical “man-eating” of the pastors—interestingly, he here broadens his charge to include the professors (compare also passage (3))—and literal cannibalism.

Two out of the three contrasts he draws in *The Moment* (pp. 322–33) show up here as well: **(a)** “the cannibals kill a man and eat him—then it is done” (passage (4)). But the pastors and the professors make a career out of it (compare point 3 in *The Moment*, p. 323); and **(b)** “The cannibal ... does not claim to be the best and truest friend of those he slays and eats. But the minister, the professor, also enjoys the honor and esteem of being the true friend and the follower of the noble ones” (passage (4)—compare point 2 in *The Moment*, p. 322).

Finally, SK says (end of passage (4)), “I also say that the cannibals shall enter the kingdom of God before the clergy and the professors.”

Apart from being a wonderful passage, note the distinction it’s drawing. If the literal cannibals will get to heaven before the man-eating pastors and professors do, they’ve got to be two distinct groups.

So we’ve got a distinction being drawn between cannibalism and man-eating. But so far, we’ve seen nothing to indicate that being subhuman is part of the issue here against the “man-eating” pastors (professors). Nevertheless, there are other passages.

Remember the “Attunement” passages from *Fear and Trembling*? And remember the first one (Hannay, pp. 45–46) where, as he raises the knife, Abraham turns his head away for a moment, and then turns back with his face transformed into a fiend’s, and says:

“Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God’s command? No, it is my own desire.” ... But below his breath Abraham said to himself: “Lord in heaven I thank Thee; it is after all better [p. 46] that he believe I am a monster than that he lose faith in Thee.”

The word translated “monster” here is literally *Umenneske* = “un-man,” “inhuman.”

Now you may well object, “Well fine, but there’s nothing at all about cannibalism or man-eating here.” But aaahhh—

Look at passage (5). This is from the *Journals and Papers*, an 1843 unpublished draft of the first “Attunement” passage. There are other interesting differences of detail here, but the one I want to call your attention to is this: Instead of the first part of passage I just quoted, he says in the draft:

You thought I was going to do this because of God, but you are wrong, I am an idolater, and this passion has again stirred in my soul—I want to murder you, this is my desire; I am worse than a cannibal [*Menneskeæder* = “man-eater”]. Despair, you foolish boy who fancied that I was your father; I am your murderer, and this is my desire.

And then, as in the final version, he goes on say it is better that Isaac think he is a “monster” = *Umenneske*, “unman.” There is no mention of literal cannibalism in this entire passage.

Here then we get, and get quite early on in the authorship, a link between man-eating—which, remember, doesn’t necessarily mean eating your own kind—and being inhuman.

Still, you might quibble, being inhuman doesn’t necessarily mean being subhuman; it just means being different from humans.

OK, look then at passage (6), a Journal entry from 1854. Here he’s not talking about cannibalism or man-eating in so many words. But he does talk about the “assistant professor” [*Docenten*, it doesn’t have the sense “assistant professor” has in the American academic world], and says:

Actually, “The assistant professor” is a nonhuman [*U-Menneske*]; I could almost be tempted to call him a nonanimal [*U-Dyr*], inasmuch as in reason, intellectuality, etc. he stands far above the animal, who excusably lacks all such things and cannot be charged with sophistication—perhaps he can be properly called a nothing [*U-Ting*].

Here the point is more or less explicit. The “assistant professor” is not just different from a human being, but inferior to a human being. And the inferiority does not come from any lack of essential characteristics, since in those respects—in reason and intellectuality, he says—the “assistant professor” stands far above your run-of-the-mill animal. Rather, his inferiority seems to be a moral inferiority and to come precisely from the fact that the assistant professor fails to make good use of these natural advantages. For that matter, he fails to make good use of his non-essential advantages too, his culture and education. (Note the use of the word “sophistication” in the passage I just read you.) The latter is a point we find brought out in our passage from *The Moment*. There, recall, the first of the list of the three points on which SK contrasts the literal cannibal with the “man-eating” pastors is (p. 322):

The cannibal is a savage; “the pastor” is a cultured, university-educated man, which makes the abomination much more shocking.

As a result, the pastors, and in passage (6) the assistant professors (and we’ve already seen the pastors and the professors linked in passages (3)–(4)) are morally inferior both to literal savage cannibals and to sheer brute animals, who don’t know any better than to behave the way they do. In fact, in passage (6) SK suggests that this abuse of his advantages, whether natural or cultural, puts the assistant professor at the absolute bottom of the moral hierarchy. Not only is he a non-human, he is a non-animal, and even perhaps a non-thing!

Still, what is it that the natural or cultural advantages of the professors or pastors enables them to do that makes them so abhorrent in SK’s eyes, and that sets them apart from the primitive savage or the brute animal?

I suggest it’s hypocrisy. The pastors and the professors (depending on the passage) are hypocrites, and this is what sets SK off. Brute animals, mere things, don’t engage in hypocrisy, and—to hear him tell it—the honest, simple cannibal doesn’t either. As we’ve seen him say elsewhere in the period of *The Moment*, what he really wants is simple honesty.

Danish has two ways of talking about hypocrisy. One is a word I don’t know the etymology of: hykleri, with associated cognate forms hykler = “hypocrite” and hyklerisk = “hypocritical.” The other is a circumlocution: skinhellighed, which comes from skin = German *Schein* = “appearance” (we get “shine” from it), and hellig = “holy.” The suffix -hed is just the English suffix “-hood.” So, put all together, it means apparent holiness. It might also be translated “sanctimonious.”

Take a look now at passage (7) on the handout. This is, again, a Journal entry from 1854. Here he’s talking about cannibalism only; he doesn’t draw any distinction here between cannibalism and man-eating.

Nevertheless, he talks in the second paragraph about “the other kind of cannibalism,” suggesting that he’s drawing at least some kind of distinction. It’s a “loathsome” thought, he says, to imagine one is eaten by literal cannibals, and then goes to heaven and has to live for all eternity with the very people who ate you. “Shocking!,” he says.

And then he says,

Yet the other kind of cannibalism [*Kanibalisme*] is still more abominable, especially because of its hypocrisy [*hykkelske Skin* = literally, “hypocritical appearance”].

The entire passage is linked up with the “assistant professors” in a way that is by now familiar.

So I suggest that SK’s real complaint throughout this entire cluster of texts is against the hypocrisy of the pastors and, in some passages, of the professors or assistant professors.

(In passage (8), which I'm not going to discuss at length, he goes on to include novelists, writers of romance, and minor authors. It's the same complaint, I think.)

It's the hypocrisy, I think, that is the real basis for SK's diatribe against the pastors in our passage from *The Moment*. And this was the basis for his complaint against Bishop Mynster from the very beginning of this late period—that Mynster knew better, and just wouldn't come out and admit it. It was his “apparent holiness” (= hypocrisy) that leads us to think he's really worthy of, as SK says, a “a silver cruet-stand, a knight's cross, a complete set of embroidered armchairs” (*Moment*, p. 322).