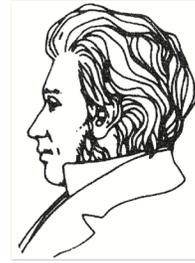


Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter

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ANNOUNCEMENTS AND NEWS

Utech Lecture

Professor Patrick Stokes of Deakin University gave the Utech Lecture on July 5 and 6 from 1:00 to 2:00. His lecture entitled "Consciousness, Reflection, and Subjectivity," considered how Kierkegaard's tripartite structure of consciousness operates and how this structure ramifies through his account of reflection, subjectivity, and higher immediacy, in ways that connect it with both earlier work in German Idealism and with key themes in contemporary phenomenology.

Julia Watkin Memorial Lecture Series

Our Julia Watkin Lecturer on November 9, 2017 will be Rev. Ronald Marshall of First Lutheran Church of West Seattle. His lecture is entitled "The Confused Name of the Century: Luther's Thought as the Matrix for Kierkegaard's Writings."

International Kierkegaard Conference

The Library will host the Eighth International Kierkegaard Conference from June 13 to June 16, 2018. The Conference will be centered on the questions, "What life wisdom have you drawn from studying Kierkegaard? How has he impacted your life? How might Kierkegaard positively sculpt the lives of those who spend years scrutinizing his works?" Dr. Richard Purkharthofer will give the plenary lecture.

For more information from the Hong Kierkegaard Library and other news from Kierkegaard scholars and related groups around the world, see the Hong Kierkegaard Library website at <http://wp.stolaf.edu/kierkegaard/>.

Wrenching Open the Lock of Self-Love: Kierkegaard on Narcissism

Sergia Hay, Pacific Lutheran University

Julia Watkin Memorial Lecture, St. Olaf College, Nov. 3, 2016

This lecture memorializes Julia Watkin. Unfortunately for me, I didn't have the opportunity to meet her personally, but I know that she set a tone of generosity and hospitality in the Kierkegaard community and that all those who came into contact with her were glad for it. I'm grateful for her scholarly work and also for her spirit of kindness and embodied works of love that continue to trickle down through the generations of Kierkegaard scholars because of her example. I hope my lecture will honor her memory.

The microcosm of early 19th century Copenhagen was enough of a human laboratory for Kierkegaard to be able to identify the attitudes and delusions we tend to have about what it means to be a human being. Kierkegaard skillfully pulled off the protective layers of the human psyche to describe and assess it with forceful language and strategic technique. If you read him carefully, it's hard to escape the feeling that he is writing to you from the distance of almost 200 years.

Of all of the many Kierkegaardian themes that reveal his uncanny skill of knowing us, I've chosen to speak about self-love.

It is the theme of our historical moment in the year 2016, abundantly examined in the popular press, enabled and enhanced by current technologies and social networking apps. We routinely diagnose others, like celebrities and politicians, as having too much of it. Excessive self-love, the “toxic self-absorption” called narcissism is “the new American disease” (Tolentino). This disease, or technically this personality disorder, is described in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as an impairment in personality and interpersonal functioning that is paired with feelings of grandiosity and attention seeking. Before I proceed, it's important to say this: rather than discussing narcissism as a psychological condition that belongs to a few, I wish to discuss it in the way that Kierkegaard did, as a theological concept that applies to all. This is important because some readers of Kierkegaard entangle themselves in questions like “isn't there a right amount of self-love?” and “aren't there some people who would benefit from more self-love?” Although these are interesting and important questions in another context, I think they arise from a misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's theological meaning of self-love.

Let's begin by considering two images: the first from a painting and the second from a Latin phrase.

SLIDE 1: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/69599494@No7/6329375692/>

This painting by the contemporary Scottish artist Jody Kelly recalls the original story of Narcissus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus receives a foreboding prophecy as a baby, and later, cursed by the goddess Nemesis because he spurned Echo, discovers his image in a clear pool. He falls in love with his own reflection and then dies – or, in some readings, commits suicide. Ovid wrote:

By his own flames consum'd the lover lyes,
And gives himself the wound by which he dies.
To the cold water oft he joins his lips,
Oft catching at the beauteous shade he dips
His arms, as often from himself he slips...
Mindless of sleep, and negligent of food;
still viewed his face, and languish'd as he view'd.

He asks the trees around the pool, “Tell me, if e'er within your shades did lye / A youth so tortur'd, so perplex'd as I?” (Ovid)

Here is Narcissus joining his lips to the cold water. The blinded and fused double-head of the man and the reflection shuts out all else, even the very air needed to survive.

The second image comes from this phrase introduced by Augustine and developed by Luther: *incurvatus in se* or *homo incurvatus in se* which literally means “humanity curved in on itself.” In his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther used this phrase to describe the nature of sin and human moral failure. He contrasted his view with the views of Aristotle and Aquinas who understand humans as having a general or universal understanding of the good, but not always holding a solid grasp on what to do in a particular situation. Conversely, Luther thought we know what the good is in particular, but not in general, because we don't know the good for all—we just know the good for ourself.

It is said that human nature has a general notion of knowing and willing good, but that it goes wrong in particulars. It would be better to say that it knows and wills the good in particular things, but in general neither knows nor wills the good. This is so because it knows

only its own good or what is good, honorable, and useful for itself, but not what is good for God and for others. Therefore it knows and wills mainly a good that is a particular good, indeed, that is good only for the individual self.

And this is in agreement with the Scripture, which describes man as curved in upon himself to such an extent that he bends not only physical but also spiritual goods toward himself, seeking himself in all things (218-9).

This is a conception of sin not as simple as disobedience to laws or commands, but rather as sin as a turning away from God and inward onto oneself. It is a conception of sin as closing oneself off from relationship. The systematic theologian Matt Jenson writes that according to this view, “sin...is not *merely* pride, but the willful re-direction of attention and love from God to the human self apart from God which results in alienation from God and the fracturing of human society” (3). The harm caused by this curving inward is therefore two-fold. One harm is to human society and therefore is highly visible. Think of all of the perversions of our relationships that come from obsessive self-focus: environmental degradation from anthropocentrism; economic disparity from the pursuit of unfettered financial self-interest; all forms of discrimination like sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, xenophobia, and so on that comes from the exclusive orientation “of attention and love...to the self.” It’s worth noting that some secular moral theories, like Hobbes’s social contract and Ayn Rand’s Egoism, take self-interest as a first principle that most accurately describes who we are once we strip away all the rules, institutions and social conditioning that hold this impulse in check. In addition to the first harm caused to society, the second harm caused is to one’s own self. This harm is less visible, but as Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus warns in *The Sickness Unto Death* it is no less dangerous. This book catalogues the various forms of despair as ways in which we relate improperly to ourselves and to what has created us. The deepest form of despair comes from a refusal to recognize oneself as created by God and the corresponding insistence on self-creation. The Lutheran understanding of this alienation from God is that it ultimately shuts out the possibility of love. The inward curving of the self blinds us from help that could be offered from the outside. Think again of the image of Narcissus that cannot see anything but his own image. Luther goes on to say in his *Lectures on Romans*,

Now this curvedness is natural; it is a natural defect and a natural evil. Hence, man gets no help from the powers of his nature, but he is in need of some more effective help from the outside. And this is love. (219)

Self-love therefore is contrasted with another kind of love, one that moves outward and away from the self. In his book *Agape and Eros*, Anders Nygren defined love as “a relation between a subject who loves and an object that is loved” (211) and went on to explain different forms it can take. He included self-love and stated “we might well have doubts about describing it as a relation, since the loving subject and the loved object coincide.” He wrote,

Christianity does not recognise self-love as a legitimate form of love. Christian love moves in two directions, towards God and towards its neighbor: and in self-love it finds its chief adversary, which must be fought and conquered. It is self-love that alienates man from God, preventing him from sincerely giving himself up to God, and it is self-love that shuts up a man’s heart against his neighbor (Nygren 217).

The painting and phrase now give us context for a particular understanding of self-love as both universally part of our nature and destructive of relationships and selves. It is this specifically Lutheran understanding that must serve necessarily as a backdrop for Kierkegaard’s discussion of the Christian imperative to love the neighbor in *Works of Love*. In this book, Kierkegaard writes that this imperative demands Christian love (*Kjerlighed*) rather than indirect forms of self-love such as romantic love and friendship.

Since “it is Christianity’s intention to wrest self-love away from us human-beings” (*WOL* 17), the commandment to love the neighbor “as with a pick, wrenches open the lock of self-love and wrests it away from a person” (*WOL* 17). Christianity presupposes the ease and allure of self-love in contrast to the difficulty of extending love to others without a promise of reciprocation or reward. Thus, Christian love is set forth as a *task* whose beneficiary is “the neighbor” who is not the specific lover, friend, enemy, nor stranger, but is representative of all people, regardless of their relation to the self.

Now after this background context, I wish to say something about what I take to be Kierkegaard's three unique contributions on the subject of self-love: 1) He draws our attention to how pervasive it is. He shows that what we normally call love for others -like for our spouse or friend- is usually, in fact, self-love. 2) He shows the strenuousness required of love that actively works to mirror the equality of God's love. This involves pulling ourselves down in status and drawing others up. 3) He emphasizes that proper self-knowledge is required before we can love others properly.

I. Self-love's pervasiveness

Kierkegaard considered all love, with the exception of Christian love, to be forms of preferential love, and therefore also self-love. These forms of love, of which he specifically mentions erotic love and friendship, are characterized by exclusivity, selectivity, and natural inclination.

...erotic love and friendship are the very peak of self-esteem, the *I* intoxicated in the *other I*. The more securely one *I* and another *I* join to become one *I*, the more this united *I* selfishly cuts itself off from everyone else. At the peak of erotic love and friendship, the two actually do become one self, one *I*. This is explainable only because in preferential love there is a natural determinant (drive, inclination) and self-love, which selfishly can unite the two in a new selfish self. (*WOL* 56)

Preferential love thus focuses attention only on a specific, self-concerned *I*. Kierkegaard termed worldly self-concern “sagacity;” “Acting sagaciously is... whereby one undeniably gets furthest ahead in the world, wins the world’s good and advantages and the world’s honor” (*WOL* 261). Sagacity names the activity of identifying and seeking out one’s own preferences in order to gain advantage. It is therefore counter-productive to the duty of Christian love which disregards, and frequently contradicts, preference.

Acting sagaciously is, actually, a *halfway approach*, whereby one undeniably gets furthest ahead in the world, wins the world’s goods and advantages and the world’s honor, because, in the eternal sense, the world and the world’s advantages are half-measures. But neither the eternal nor Holy Scripture has taught anyone to aspire to get ahead or furthest ahead in the world; on the contrary, it warns against getting too far ahead in the world in order, if possible, to keep oneself unstained by the defilement of the world. But if this is so, then aspiring to get ahead or furthest ahead in the world does not seem commendable. (*WOL* 261)

Kierkegaard’s application of the pietistic terminology of self-denial and humility to Christian love sharply contrasts it with the sagacity of preferential love; “Wherever the essentially Christian is, there also is self-denial, which is Christianity’s essential form” (*WOL* 56) and, “The one who loves humbles himself before the good... the one who loves hides himself” (*WOL* 340). Christian love seeks to shift the focus away from the specific, self-concerned *I* and thereby make possible the extension of one’s concern beyond the self. Expressions of self-denial and humility are ultimately expressions of love for the neighbor since they halt the absorbing and exclusive activity of preferential love. Kierkegaard insisted that in order for one’s actions of self-denial and humility to carry ethical weight, those actions cannot be motivated, even in small part, by

sagacity; he wrote that the denial is not to be half-hearted, but decisive.¹ He also wrote that this decisiveness is private and cannot be expressed to others.

...self-denial is required *inwardly* and self-sacrificing unselfishness *outwardly*. If, then, someone... is asked whether it is actually out of love on his part that he does it, the answer must be: 'No one else can decide this for certain; it is possible that it is vanity, pride – in short, something bad, but it is also possible that it is love' (WOL 374).

II. Equality in humility and upbuilding

Christian love's movement away from the self's preferences is simultaneously an extension of concern toward the neighbor. This new object of concern is, by its very definition, equality: "The neighbor is the one who is equal" (WOL 60). Whereas preferential love is determined by people's dissimilarities,² Christian love commands equality in love that mirrors humanity's "eternal equality before God" (WOL 68). Genuine Christian love equalizes.

Love for the neighbor is therefore the eternal equality in loving, but the eternal equality is the opposite of preference. This needs no elaborate development. Equality is simply not to make distinctions, and eternal equality is unconditionally not to make the slightest distinction, unqualifiedly not to make the slightest distinction. Preference, on the other hand, is to make distinctions; passionate preference is unqualifiedly to make distinctions. (WOL 58)

One of the ways this equalizing can take place is through our use of language. Equality is not merely something we are to conceptualize, but something to realize through our actions – and this includes realizing it in the ways in which we speak to each other. We can use language to pull ourselves down and push others up. This is done not only in what we choose to say, but also sometimes more importantly in what we choose to not say. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard gives three specific examples of silence that perform the function of equalizing: 1) silence can diminish the natural activity of comparison, 2) silence can hide the neighbor's sin, and 3) silence can humble the self. Let's look at these examples briefly.

In Part II of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* titled "What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air," Kierkegaard began by discussing worry in the lesson to be learned from the lilies and the birds concerning "To Be Contented With Being a Human Being." Kierkegaard illustrated the lesson by means of a parable about a lily, who in comparing itself to a more beautiful and better situated lilies became worried, "preoccupied with itself and the condition of its life – all the day long" (UDVS 168). The parable is, of course, allegorical since "the lily is the human being" (UDVS 169). The parable's purpose is to

¹ Kierkegaard wrote,

A person makes Christian humility and self-denial empty when he indeed denies himself in one respect but does not have the courage to do it decisively, and therefore he takes care to be understood in his humility and his self-denial; and then he becomes honored and esteemed for his humility and self-denial – which certainly is not self-denial. (WOL 374)

² Kierkegaard wrote,

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. (WOL 56)

show the corruption of comparison and how it induces worry³ by “putting the human being in someone else’s place or putting someone else in his place” (*UDVS* 169). Yet to speak of one’s “place” in order to judge its superiority or inferiority in relation to someone else’s “place” may be sagacious, it is also antithetical to the work of Christian love. The perceived distinctions between people created through comparison prevent the necessary equality of Christian love. The lilies and the birds exemplify this equality by living without comparison and worry. The lesson to be learned from the lilies and the birds is succinctly stated in another of Kierkegaard’s books that discussed the same topic: “From the lily and the bird as teachers, let us learn *silence*, or learn to *be silent*” (*WA* 10).

Kierkegaard wrote that comparison unavoidably happens in conversation:

All misapprehension, after all, stems from speech, more specifically from a comparison that is implicit in talking, especially in conversation. For example, when the happy person says to one who is worried: Be glad, the remark also implies: as I am glad; and when the strong person says: Be strong, it is tacitly understood, as I am strong (*UDVS* 160-161).

Although silence does not totally remove the possibility of human comparison, which Kierkegaard believed inevitably exists when two people are present to each other, silence does diminish comparison just by halting conversation.⁴

Comparison only ceases altogether in the pure silence that exists when one is alone, or the equivalent, which, according to Kierkegaard, is being in nature or with children.⁵ Therefore, choosing to be silent in the presence of someone else can be, in a sense, an attempt to make oneself invisible to the other in order to diminish comparison. Silence produced out of “solicitude” (*UDVS* 160) and “respect” (*UDVS* 161) for the other is a form of purposeful concealment of the self. This concealment functions as an equalizer through not mentioning, and thereby deemphasizing, the distinctions between the self and the neighbor.

Another way in which silence contributes to the equality of the neighbor is by hiding the neighbor’s sin.⁶ According to Kierkegaard, love does not “discover sins” (*WOL* 282). Rather the one who loves “expresses the apostolic injunction to be a child in evil” (*WOL* 285) and therefore lives in a certain state of innocence, of willful naivety in relation to the existence of other people’s sin. However, there are times that the one who loves “cannot avoid seeing or hearing” (*WOL* 289) the sins of others, and in these cases, the one who loves is not to ignore the sins, or to broadcast them to other people, but is to take the sins seriously and hide them.

But this is the way the one who loves conducts himself when he inadvertently, quite

³ Kierkegaard wrote,

All wordly worry has its basis I in a person’s unwillingness to be contented with being a human being, in his worried craving for distinction by way of comparison. (*UDVS* 171)

⁴ Kierkegaard writes, “No individual can be present, even though in silence, in such a way that his presence means nothing at all by way of comparison.” (*UDVS* 161)

⁵ Kierkegaard writes that when one is in nature or with children, one is in the silence of aloneness:

...out where the lily blooms so beautifully, in the field, up there where the bird is freely at home, in the heavens, if comfort is being sought- there is unbroken silence; no one is present there, and everything is sheer persuasion. (*UDVS* 161)

And,

How often has not a sufferer experienced and movingly sensed that when only a child is present there is still no one present. (*UDVS* 161)

⁶ Love’s connection to hiding sin has a Scriptural basis; Kierkegaard considered the text of I Peter 4:8: “Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins” (*Oxford Bible*. pp. 1477-8).

accidentally; never because he himself has sought an opportunity for it, becomes aware of a person's sin, his fault, of what he has committed or how he has been carried away by a weakness – the loving one keeps silent about it and hides a multitude of sins. (WOL 289)

Just as silence does not totally terminate comparison, silence also is not the most ideal response to the neighbor's sin. Kierkegaard wrote that a "mitigating explanation" (WOL 291) subtracts from the sin and that forgiveness removes sin;⁷ these two methods of addressing the other's sin are much more effective works of love. Although silence does not subtract from, or remove the neighbor's sin, Kierkegaard nevertheless considered silence an appropriate response to the neighbor's sin because it 1) indicates a proper seriousness in relation to the sin, and 2) it does not increase the sin. Silence combats one's natural "inclination to see his neighbor's faults" and his "even greater one to want to tell them" (WOL 290). The alternative to silence, chatter (*snakke*), not only reflects "light-minded[ness]" (WOL 289) in relation to the neighbor's sin, but it also incurs "guilt" (WOL 289).

The neighbor's fault is and ought to be too serious a matter; therefore to chatter inquisitively, frivolously, and enviously about it is a sign of corruption. But the one who by telling the neighbor's faults helps to corrupt people is of course increasing the multitude of sins. (WOL 290)

Silence concerning the neighbor's sin contributes to the equality of the neighbor. Rather than using the neighbor's weakness as an object for an "entertaining story" to "momentarily... obtain an attentive audience" (WOL 290), the one who loves regards the neighbor and his sin in all seriousness by remaining silent. Within the second ethics, the imperative to love confers ethical value to a consideration of who will receive benefit from particular statements and actions. When the neighbor does not benefit from a particular statement or action, as in the case of revealing the neighbor's sin, the imperative to love overrules the first ethics' demand of complete disclosure. Kierkegaard contends that the power of self-love is so great that it must be counteracted by the surrender of one's own personal benefit for the benefit of the neighbor; this surrender may entail the humble concealment of the self's strengths, as well as the merciful concealment of the neighbor's weaknesses. Silence, as the means of this purposeful concealment, takes benefit away from the self and gives it to the neighbor and thereby diminishes the disparity between the self and the neighbor.

The final way in which silence can help to equalize is by humbling oneself. It would be to our advantage to highlight the weakness of others; it would also be to our advantage to highlight our strengths. To remove this advantage in service of Christian equality, we should purposely conceal our strengths. Therefore, humility and sagacity are differentiated by *what* they hide; humility conceals that which sagacity leaves unhidden, and sagacity conceals that which humility leaves unhidden. Kierkegaard described the silence of humility in a way that unmistakably distinguishes it from sagacious silence:

In situations where my silence will make me seem worse than I am, I should be silent – for instance, giving alms in secret. Where my silence will make me seem better than I am, then I should speak – confession of sin. The good a man does he should, if possible, keep to himself; the evil he has done he should speak about. (J&P Vol 4 S-Z 99)

⁷ Kierkegaard writes,

Keeping silent does not actually take away anything from the generally known multitude of sins. The mitigating explanation wrests something away from the multitude by showing that this and that were not sin. Forgiveness removes what cannot be denied to be sin. Thus love strives in every way to hide a multitude of sins; but forgiveness is the most notable way. (WOL 294)

Take a moment to think of how counter-cultural this last passage really is; how it flies in the face of how we are encouraged to self-promote, particularly on social media. The lock of self-love, in our time most visible in the constant curation of selfies and posts, the number of likes that signify preference and personal identification, is so normal and obvious that it's almost hard to imagine an alternative to this way of being. Our culture encourages us to ask without hesitation: why wouldn't you broadcast something wonderful about yourself? Kierkegaard calls for us to hesitate, however, and check the motivation for our desire to do this.

III. Self-knowledge comes before love

The final point I want to make about Kierkegaard's views on love is that he believed it entails proper self-knowledge. In *Two Ages*, he wrote that “it is very doubtful... that the age will be saved by the idea of sociality, of association” (106) of people with each other, because “[i]n our age the principle of association (which at best can have validity with respect to material interest) is not affirmative but negative; it is an evasion, a dissipation, an illusion” (106). By crowding together under the pretext of coming together, we can hide from the difficulty of genuinely loving the neighbor. This crowding together to hide can be another form of self-love that allows us to avoid the difficulty of coming to grips with who we are and what we are to do. The imperative, “Know Thyself,” posted over the door of the ancient temple at Delphi, requires the destructive work of Socrates – the revealing and cutting away of falsehoods – before substantial and sturdy construction can begin. What I am begins with a clear sense of what I am not. Socrates was declared the wisest by the oracle and after his own investigation he confirmed the declaration; he discovered that his wisdom consisted in both his ability to distinguish between what he knew and what he did not know and his acknowledgment that what he did know was merely human rather than divine knowledge and therefore didn't amount to much. His wisdom consisted in his profession of ignorance. Socrates's philosophical humility is recapitulated in Kierkegaard's philosophy as religious humility. Kierkegaard imbued this imperative (to 'know thyself') with theological significance, since for him, self-knowledge means acknowledging our selves as other-created, rather than self-created. Only then after this “proper development of individuality...not until then can there be any question of genuinely uniting; otherwise it gets to be a union of people who separately are weak, a union as unbeautiful and depraved as a child-marriage” (TA 106). Christian ethics, then, requires individuals to have the kind of maturity forged through the recognition of the imperfection of our capacity to do anything alone – including our capacity to love.

This is not to say, as some critics of Kierkegaard have done, that Kierkegaard advocated for a rejection of the world in a way that Nietzsche attributes to Christianity, but rather Kierkegaard related Christian ethics to a particular sort of maturity in and with the world that can only be achieved by the “single individual.” In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard wrote “this matter of the single individual is the most decisive” (POV 114); whereas Kierkegaard argued that his age treats the “single individual” as a “triviality” (POV 114), his entire work is concerned with the maturation, the “upbringing,” of the “single individual.” The essence of this maturation is the shift in emphasis toward outward action and relation.

True self-knowledge is not something one comes to possess as an object of the intellect, but is a commitment of one's whole being; it is not enough to know conceptually or as a series of propositions we hold to be true about ourselves, but rather we have to act on them for them to be true. Paul Holmer described this well:

For while his [SK's] purpose was to explain and to resolve riddles of human life and reason, he chose not to do it in such a way that would increase the store of knowledge. Having diagnosed the evil of his day as a confusion of knowledge with life, he saw all kinds of illustrations. To be aware of the concepts of faith and love is not the same as the ability to use them; to be an expert on 'love' is not the same as being a great lover, and to be an expert on

'faith' is not the same as being faithful. (Holmer 139)

This all brings us back again to the very beginning when we considered Narcissus and Luther's concept of sin as inward curving. These images describe the one without self-knowledge, the one who takes the oneself as everything, as the source and end of everything.

Some recent scholarship on Kierkegaard's views of love, most notably John Lippett's 2015 *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*, has wrestled with what it means to love oneself in the right way. Kierkegaard wrote at the beginning of *Works of Love* that there is a perfect correspondence (21) between the commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" and the imperative "You shall love yourself in the right way" (22). He continued by saying,

When the Law's *as yourself* has wrested from you the self-love that Christianity sadly enough must presuppose to be in every human being, then you have actually learned to love yourself. The Law is therefore: You shall love yourself in the same way as you love your neighbor when you love him as yourself (22-23).

This proper form of self-love is transposed into Christian love that is outwardly rather than inwardly directed. It's no longer self-love, but just love.

So what does this mean in summary?

The "wrenching open of the lock of self-love" begins with the imperative to love the neighbor, the inevitable failure of our ability to do this in a complete and satisfactory way, the subsequent humiliation of the self that leads to self-knowledge, and then the possibility of love that comes from the joint workings of self-denial and grace.

But this isn't a solution or curative measure to self-love yet. Because even the mere description of what is entailed sets the mind off on a whole another series of questions to be answered:

Isn't this path of imperative, failure, humiliation, self-knowledge and self-denial too extreme and hard? Can it even be done? What guarantees grace? What easier routes can be taken? How do I know I'm not self-created? Isn't preferential love better than nothing? Aren't my preferences justified? And so on.

These questions are what Kierkegaard called the "protracted and terrible and involved" battle of self-love "to defend itself" (*WOL* 18). The lock of self-love intends to remain locked. So then, as usual for Kierkegaard, we, his readers, are left with the challenge and a choice. To me, this is what makes Kierkegaard so persistent in relevance and rewarding to read: his work is not addressed to the nameless public, but directed to the single individual – you and me – the person who is continually in the process of developing and choosing a self. In this process, we must each decide whether the choice is urgent and the challenge worth it. Thank you.

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The Unhappiest Man: The Aesthete in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*

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I. Introduction

Including the preface, the first volume of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* consists of nine sections. The preface is followed by the *Diapsalmata*, then the essays *The Immediate Erotic Stages*, *The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama*, *Silhouettes*, *The Unhappiest One*, *The First Love*, *Rotation of Crops*, and ends with *The Seducer's Diary*. Karsten Harries has noted that the subject matter of the essays moves from sensuality and immediacy to the highly reflective, beginning with Don Giovanni in *The Immediate Erotic Stages*, and ending with the seducer in *The Seducer's Diary*; he also observes that the relationship of the author of each essay to its respective subject matter moves in the reverse direction: the aesthete's essay on Don Giovanni is a more impersonal and reflective essay, while the seducer's notes in his diary are deeply personal thoughts about his project (Harries 25).

The three essays that make up the central part of volume 1 are *The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama*, *Silhouettes*, and *The Unhappiest One*. On one level these essays are clearly

connected: they are each read at meetings of a society calling itself “Fellowship of the Dead.” In the first of these essays the aesthete contrasts the notions of tragedy and the tragic hero in ancient drama, using Antigone as a case study, with their modern understandings. In the second essay *Silhouettes*, he examines three cases of “reflective sorrow” (*EOI* 172), that of Marie Beaumarchais in Goethe’s *Clavigo*, Donna Elvira from *Don Giovanni*, and Margarete from Goethe’s *Faust*. The third essay *The Unhappiest One* is a meditation on who is most deserving of the label of The Unhappiest One, whether it be Niobe, Oedipus and Antigone, Job, the father of the prodigal son, a Christ-like person, among others (Harries 73). In fact, the essay provides a compelling account of the nature of unhappiness, and the thought-process of unhappy individuals. As Harries has observed, these central essays (considered as a unit) reflect *one*¹ of the two movements mentioned above that emerge when all the essays in the first volume are considered, i.e., the order of these three essays show a shift in *subject matter* “from immediacy to reflection, from the unreflective sorrow of the Greeks to the unhappiness of the most reflective man” (Harries 53). In this paper, we will do a close reading of the aesthete’s speech to isolate the characteristics that (by the aesthete’s account) determine the unhappiest individual. We will then examine the *Diapsalmata* in *Either/Or* and use the aesthete’s descriptions of himself to argue that he himself is the unhappiest one that is being described in the speech on the subject. Thus, the aesthete’s insights into the psychological and spiritual makeup of “the unhappiest one” are in fact a description of his own subjectivity. Thus, the second movement, concerning the relationship of an essay’s author to his subject matter, from the more impersonal to the deeply personal, that bookend the essays in the first volume, is also nicely mirrored in these three central essays delivered to the “Fellowship of the Dead:” the shift from the more impersonal to the deeply personal.

John Hare has argued that the characters of Don Giovanni and Johannes the Seducer express opposing ends of the aesthetic way of life in that Don Giovanni represents the “immediate” type of seducer while Johann represents the “reflective” type of seducer (Hare 92). He further argues that the unhappiest individual, whom the aesthete identifies as a man (*EOI* 229), and possibly young (*EOI* 230), is best understood as representing “the prototype of the aesthetic life” in that he is unable to achieve satisfaction through either of the extremes (i.e., the lifestyle of immediacy or that of reflective distraction) (Hare 96). For the unhappiest man is reflective enough that he does not possess the power of immediacy of a Don Giovanni, and he is insightful enough to recognize the tragic path and lifestyle of Johannes the Seducer.

In his essay on the notion of reflective irony, Andrew Cross argues that when one attempts to “ground their life on meaningful experiences”, whether it be immediate sense experiences or more reflective experiences, if one regards the self as a given (with the accompanying “inclinations, talents, dispositions”) as opposed to something that he has the responsibility to construct, then his attempts at finding or constructing meaning in his life will inevitably fail; he will reach the position of the “defeated aesthete” (Cross 145-146). According to Cross, the final position which a reflective aesthete who has been “defeated” finds himself in is represented in A’s essay *The Unhappiest One* and in his *Diapsalmata* (Cross 145). But Cross does not provide an explicit description of how these two essays are connected; in particular, given that *The Unhappiest One* is an essay authored by A about an abstract individual (i.e., the unhappiest one) while the *Diapsalmata* is a piece both by A and (to a large extent) *about* A himself, we are still left with the question of whether Cross is right that A’s situation is that of the unhappiest one.

In this essay, we underline Hare’s claims by arguing in addition that the aesthete’s unhappiest one, the (possibly young) man referred to in the essay (*EOI* 229), is a self-referential figure, i.e., the aesthete is describing himself. We will do this by examining the aesthete’s self-reflections in the opening chapter of *Either/Or*, the *Diapsalmata*. In this way, our account will also justify Cross’s claim that the two papers (i.e.,

¹ Harries does not mention the second movement in this context.

The Unhappiest One and the *Diapsalmata*) are of a piece. We begin by laying out the characteristics of the unhappiest one that the aesthete outlines in his essay on the subject.

II. Characteristics of the Unhappiest One

The aesthete's speech on the unhappiest one discursively unfolds the nature of the latter with the following sequence of claims:

1. An individual is truly unhappy only if he or she considers life to be a greater disaster than death (*EOI* 220).
2. An unhappy individual necessarily feels estranged/alienated from his life. He goes through life feeling as if he is not living his "ideal" life, or living out his "essential nature"; these lie "outside himself". The unhappy individual is thus always "absent from himself" (*EOI* 222).
3. When an individual is not "present to himself" (*Ibid*), his thoughts project him either into the past or into the future. An individual who spends most of his time recollecting or living in the past cannot be said to be truly unhappy, or at least not the unhappiest, for he is present to himself only in the past. Similarly, an individual who spends most of his time imagining the future is present to himself only in the future, it is during these mental voyages that he is not feeling estranged from himself (*EOI* 223).
4. True unhappiness comes from feeling continually outside oneself. This occurs when an individual does not live primarily in their past, present, or future, but is alternatively shifting between these worlds. A sense of alienation from one's existence is sustained when, for instance, one projects oneself into the future with a sense of hope, but then loses hope and falls back into the present, and then hopes again, and so on; in this situation, the individual is unable to live in the present or in the future, leading to a constant sense of displacement. In such a state, an individual always feels like he is moving, but not getting anywhere. The case of the individual who is unable to be present to himself in the past is similar (*Ibid*).
5. The aesthete then argues that in some individuals, these two forms of unhappiness (from hoping, or recollecting) can combine (*EOI* 225). Someone caught up in this pattern of thinking will feel a spiritual paralysis. The aesthete describes this state as follows:

[It is] one in which it is recollection that prevents him from becoming present in his hope and it is hope that prevents him from becoming present in his recollection. This is due, on the one hand, to his continually hoping for that which should be recollected; his hope is continually being disappointed, but he discovers that this disappointment occurs not because his objective is pushed further ahead but because he is past his goal, because it has already been experienced or should have been experienced and thus has passed over into recollection. On the other hand, he is continually recollecting that for which he should hope, because he has already encompassed the future in thought, has already experienced it in thought, and he recollects what he has experienced instead of hoping for it. Thus, what he is hoping for lies behind him; what he recollects lies ahead of him (*EOI* 225).

A similar state of unhappiness can afflict even those individuals who tend to achieve the goals that they set out for themselves; attainment of a goal does not lead to the sense of contentment that they'd expected. The aesthete describes this state as follows:

[H]e then discovers that what is making him unhappy now, because he has it or because he is this way, is precisely what would have made him happy a few years ago if he had had it, whereas he became unhappy because he did not have it. His life is ... meaningless ... His life knows no repose and has no content (EOI 226).

Thus, according to the aesthete, the unhappiest individual is the one who suffers from the combination of the illnesses that characterize the unhappy *hoping* individual (who is unable to be present in the hope of a better future) and the unhappy *recollecting* individual (who is unable to be present in a meaningful past); indeed, "what he is hoping for lies behind him; what he recollects lies ahead of him," (EOI 225) there is "no past he can long for, because his past has not yet come, no future he can hope for, because his future is already past."² The final ingredient to his unhappiness is that of being misunderstood by others.

As characterized by the aesthete the unhappiest individual who is suffering in this state of angst-ridden paralysis does not think he can share his thoughts and feelings with others, for "he knows [or, more accurately, believes] that if he were to explain to a single person how it really is with him, he would be declared insane" (EOI 226). Indeed, such a person would actually prefer to go insane, but he does not; rather, he remains in sufficient control of his faculties to go through the motions in life and thereby present as sane to the world, and "this is precisely his trouble" (EOI 225). Thus he "stands alone in the wide world; he [perceives that he] has no contemporaries to whom he can attach himself," (EOI 226) he suffers in silence and isolation.

The aesthete's description of the unhappiest man is striking in its Hegelian language, yet it presents the reader with a result that is rather different than the one obtained through Hegelian dialectic, for the conflicts within the unhappiest man do not ultimately resolve themselves in positive self-transcendence, unity, and rationality, but instead descend into disillusionment and disharmony. The unhappiest man is alienated from himself, for he cannot be present in himself; he is "confused in his recollection by the light of hope, [yet] frustrated in his hope by the ghosts of recollection" (EOI 229) In addition,

he hates the world only because he loves it; he has no passion, not because he lacks it, but because at the same moment he has the opposite passion...he is powerless, not because he lacks energy, but because his own energy makes him powerless (EOI 226).

Kierkegaard's account of the unhappiest man, as described by the aesthete in *Either/Or*, is the physical instantiation of how concepts and the negations that they call forth do not necessarily undergo sublation: in the life of an existing individual, the notions of peace/conflict, motion/stillness, flux/order, harmony/chaos, hope/regret, and other such dualisms do not come together neatly, and by no means easily; indeed whether

² It is worth reemphasizing here that our account is not aiming to provide a comprehensive account of what Kierkegaard sees as going wrong with the aesthetic way of life. Rather, we are seeking to understand the aesthete's claims in his essay *The Unhappiest One* in order to see how it connects with his outlook in the *Diapsalmata*. A comprehensive analysis of the aesthetic way of life would have to include an examination of Judge William's and Johannes Climacus' criticisms of how the aesthete, whether seeking meaning in immediacy or in reflection, is refusing to acknowledge that even his most fundamental self is the product of his agency; and that even the reflective aesthete keeps from assuming responsibility for his life (in its past, present, and future), by using thinking as a means of self-deception. See Cross' essay for details.

they even do so depends on (at the very least) each individual; the unhappiest man is one in whom they fail to achieve any genuine unity of value.³

It is worth noting that the unhappiest individual does not necessarily get into these negative circular patterns of thinking (i.e., hoping for the past whilst recollecting the future) because of failures to realize only major life goals. Rather, such an individual might well have developed these patterns of thinking with respect to other issues in his past, possibly even going all the way back to his childhood. As the aesthete describes him, the “unhappy one is the person who in one way or another has his ideal, the substance of his life, the plenitude of his consciousness, his essential nature, outside himself” (*EOI* 222). The phrases “substance of his life,” “the plenitude of his consciousness,” and “his essential nature” suggest a fundamental disposition that characterizes the unhappy individual: rather than any single goal, most of his dreams, aspirations, and hopes are “outside himself” in the sense that they may lie beyond his ability to achieve them. In addition, they might also be “outside himself” in that his goals that ones that are realized *out there*, that is, outside himself, rather than within himself, e.g., a spiritual or religious transformation. Thus, such an individual is likely to bring in this confused (hope-recollection) pattern of thinking to many areas of his life; in this manner, his hopes are “continually being disappointed” (*EOI* 225).

Based on our discussion above, we can conclude that, according to the aesthete, the unhappiest man is characterized by:

- 1) A belief that life is worse than death (*EOI* 220).
- 2) A sense of estrangement from his life (*EOI* 222).
- 3) An inability to be present to himself in any sustained way (i.e., present to his past (via recollection), his present, or his future (through hope) (*EOI* 222-223).
- 4) A feeling of being stuck in place as life passes him by; this paralysis is because he is always “hoping for that which should be recollected” and “recollecting that for which he should hope” when in fact “what he is hoping for lies behind him; what he recollects lies ahead of him” (*EOI* 225).
- 5) A feeling that life is meaningless. (*EOI* 226).
- 6) A soul that is in turmoil, yet feels empty (“life has no repose and no content”) (*Ibid*).
- 7) A sense of being alone in the world, and of being misunderstood, or at least not being understood, by everyone (*Ibid*).
- 8) A dualism of emotions that does not reside harmoniously in him.⁴

³ This point is also made by Hare in a more general form in his essay, when he observes that the “unhappiness of the unhappiest man is the product of this discrepancy [between his ideal and the actual experiences of his life] and it is not ‘taken up’ (in Hegelian language) into a greater happiness” (Hare 104).

⁴ See the quotations from p. 226 and p. 229 above.

III. The Aesthete as the Unhappiest Man

We will now show, based on a close reading of the aesthete's aphorisms in the *Diapsalmata* that the aesthete is in fact an exemplar of the class of unhappiest men. We do this by arguing that the eight characteristics derived in the previous section are present in the aesthete.

A belief that life is worse than death, and a sense of estrangement from life (Characteristics 1 and 2): The aesthete frequently expresses the attitude that life is worse than death when he claims that “[t]his life is turned around and dreadful, not to be endured” (*EO1* 24), that he prefers to stay in bed than do anything else (*EO1* 26). Indeed, he finds it “strange” that people “cling to this life”, for he himself has at times “considered taking a decisive step” (*EO1* 37). For A, even “[i]f a stone fell down and killed [him], that would still be a way out” (*Ibid*). The aesthete's estrangement from life is suggested by the fact that he is unable to make sense of life from his observations (*EO1* 24), and that he wonders whether there is any meaning to life at all (*EO1* 31). His future “is continually an empty space, and [he] is propelled by a consequence that lies behind [him]” (*EO1* 24), suggesting that he does not feel a sense of control over his life but that life pushes him in an undetermined direction based on the past. Also, while thinking is a passion of his, and he can channel it to formulate interesting questions and problems for others, he takes no pleasure in tackling these questions himself; he is “just like the Lüneburger swine” that provides truffles for others by digging them up (*EO1* 36).

An inability to be present to himself in his past, present, or future (Characteristic 3): Our discussion of the aesthete's essay on “The Unhappiest Man” showed that these features form the psychological and spiritual core of the unhappiest man. In the *Diapsalmata*, the aesthete repeatedly professes attitudes that indicate the presence of these features within him. Just as the unhappiest man is unable to be present to himself, neither can the individual who is prone to doubting everything. The aesthete describes such a “doubter” as akin to a “spinning top,” for the top may stay on point (as the doubter may be present to himself) “for a shorter or longer period” of time, but eventually just as the top “cannot remain on point,” nor can the doubter (*EO1* 24). But the aesthete *is* such a doubter, for he believes he possesses “the courage to doubt anything” (*EO1* 23). The aesthete has an impatient nature (*EO1* 25), and this exacerbates his difficulty with being present to himself. He resigned his position as a school teacher because he was fully competent to do that job well, and hence he thinks that as a teacher, he could only get worse at it, not better— “If I had continued in my job, I would have had everything to lose, nothing to gain” (*EO1* 33). This way of thinking can indicate a general discomfort with routine, for it is in routine that we are forced to be present to our thoughts. The aesthete does not like to dream when he sleeps (*EO1* 28), and in his desire to escape routine, he applied for a job with “a traveling theatre company,” a position for which he “had no talent and consequently had everything to gain” (*EO1* 33).

A feeling of paralysis caused by confusing hope and recollection (Characteristic 4): The aesthete is fully aware of the importance of recollection in one's life. He notes that “[t]o live in recollection is the most perfect life imaginable; recollection is more richly satisfying than all actuality, and it has a security that no actuality possesses” (*EO1* 32). Thus the aesthete recognizes that recollection can be a joyful activity; it allows one to be present to one's past. But he also perceives it as perilous: “For me, nothing is more dangerous than to recollect. As soon as I have recollected a life relationship, that relationship has ceased to exist” (*Ibid*). This speaks to the tension between hope and recollection, even outside the cases of life relationships. The discussion of “The Unhappiest Man” indicated that this tension can be pernicious. Certain forms of recollection force one to acknowledge that their goals or desires can no longer be achieved, as the time for realizing them is past. In this way, recollection can kill hope. Conversely, when we live out in our minds the realization of certain hopes, and do so repeatedly and vividly, these imagined scenarios can imprint themselves into our memory; then we are doomed to only recollect these scenarios, rather than view them as something that we are hoping for and therefore need to work towards achieving. The aesthete

acknowledges being plagued by this twisted form of the hope-recollection tension. For he says: "I can describe hope so vividly that every hoping individual will recognize my description as his own; and yet it is a forgery, for even as I am describing it I am thinking of recollection" (EO1 36), and "...I call to mind my youth and my first love when I was filled with longing; now I long only for my first longing. What is youth? A dream. What is love? The content of the dream" (EO1 42). The later quote vividly illustrates the aesthete's problem: instead of hoping for love and then looking to find it, he is seeking it in the past by recollecting what the "longing" of love was like. Indeed, he does not know how to live into the future, for his "soul has lost possibility. If [he] were to wish for something, [he] would wish not for wealth or power, but for the passion of possibility" (EO1 41). Thus, he feels stuck; while for some people "life is a stream", this is not his experience (EO1 26). Rather, he feels paralyzed: "time stands still, and so do I. All the plans I project fly straight back at me; when I want to spit, I spit in my own face" (Ibid). The pain that accompanies this paralysis is described by A in stark terms: "In vain do I seek to abandon myself in joy's infinitude; it cannot lift me, or, rather, I cannot lift myself" (EO1 41). This despair naturally leads to the aesthete's view that life is meaningless, which we will examine next.

A feeling that life is meaningless, and possessing a soul that is both tormented and empty (Characteristics 5 and 6): The aesthete questions whether life has any meaning at all (EO1 31). He says that the point of life can't be to work, for work merely enables one to have the means to live; the point of life also can't be to die, as that would be a contradiction. His purpose is for him a riddle that he can't solve: "God knows what our Lord actually intended with me or what he wants to make of me" (EO1 26). He is not motivated to do anything (EO1 20). He claims to "feel best in the evening" when he has just turned off the lights and has settled under the covers of his bed (EO1 260). He believes that sleeping (as opposed to dreaming) is the "height of genius" (EO1 28). On his view, regret is "the quintessence of all of the wisdom of life" (EO1 38-39). His inability to see meaning in life is indicated both by his inability to answer the question on a theoretical level, and (more importantly) his discomfort in engaging in the praxis of living.

The aesthete's soul is in turmoil, yet he is unable to make sense of what it is that plagues; his afflictions are "pale, bloodless, tenacious-of-life, nocturnal forms" (EO1 23). He does not triumph, even temporarily, in his battle with these forms; this (spiritual) war is one from which he has no respite or escape:

I ... am bound ... by a chain formed of gloomy fancies, of alarming dreams, of troubled thoughts, of fearful presentiments, of inexplicable anxieties. This chain is "very flexible, soft as silk, yields to the most powerful strain, and cannot be torn apart" (EO1 34).

These spiritual battles leave his soul exhausted, it is "so heavy that no thought can carry it any longer" (EO1 29). He lives on and moves in "emptiness" (EO1 37). His soul's power to doubt "consumes everything" (Ibid).

A sense of isolation, and of not being understood (Characteristic 7): The aesthete's separation from other members of society is driven by both an inability and an unwillingness to express his inner thoughts to others. Concerning his inability, he writes:

Will the tongue ligament of my spirit never be loosened; will I always jabber? What I need is a voice as piercing as the glance of Lynceus, as terrifying as the groan of the giants, as sustained as a sound of nature ... That is what I need in order to breathe, to give voice to what is on my mind, to have the viscera of both anger and sympathy shaken. -But my voice is only hoarse like the scream of a gull or moribund like the blessing on the lips of the mute (EO1 24).

About his unwillingness to confide his thoughts, he does not want to stifle the joy of others by expressing his own sentiments about the meaninglessness of life. Of the unhappiest man, the aesthete says that such a

man “has a sympathetic nature, and he hates the world only because he loves it” (EO1 226). This characteristic is also in the aesthete, who writes in *Diapsalmata*:

Should I then communicate my sorrow to the world, make one more contribution to prove how pitiable and wretched everything is, perhaps discover a new, hitherto undetected stain in human life? ... I still prefer to remain silent (EO1 35).

Thus, the aesthete is not well understood by others, who view him as a passive individual. When he does act, he surprises even those close to him; the action is perceived as “a tremendous leap, to the horror of all those to whom [he is] bound by the tender ties of kinship and friendship” (EO1 38).

A Chaotic Dualism of Emotions (Characteristic 8): Recall that the emotional makeup of the unhappiest man consists of dueling passions that don’t ever settle into any stable state (EO1 226, 229). This is also the case with the aesthete. He notes that he “has never been joyful” but he’d always felt that “joy was his constant companion”; he never desired to be unjust to anyone and yet he always gave the impression that he would harm anyone who came close to him. His “heart has never been hardened towards anyone;” yet even when he was “touched most deeply,” he acted as if his “heart were closed and alien to every feeling” (EO1 40). His conception of eternity is highlighted by two very different and opposite images: that of an insane accountant who unceasingly repeats the same phrase (a “symbol of eternity” for the aesthete), and that of “a lush harem beauty, reclining on a couch in all her charm and unconcerned about anything in the world” (a “symbol for eternity”) (EO1 32). The aesthete believes that he is “destined to have to suffer through all possible moods, to be required to have experiences of all kinds” (EO1 31). But these moods and experiences do not cohere for him in any way, they fail to achieve any unity of value, and always leave his emotions in a state of flux. He describes this experience as being like a child who lays in the middle of an ocean and is supposed to learn to swim; despite having a “swimming belt around [his] waist” he does not “see the support that is supposed to hold [him] up” (EO1 31-32). Equanimity is never present within him, only outside himself.

Thus, we see that the aesthete is characterized by all the features that, by his own account in his essay *The Unhappiest One*, are present in the unhappiest man. The unhappiest man is not just an abstraction for the aesthete, despite the academic tone of his essay—it is him through and through.

IV. Impact on our reading of *Either/Or*

We conclude by stating how our claim, that the unhappiest one is the aesthete himself, impacts the reading of *Either/Or*. In volume 2 of *Either/Or*, Judge William provides a long discussion of how “every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this, and you certainly do know it, then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement” (EO2 192). Judge William raises this point earlier as well: “as I shall show later, you do lie somewhat beyond the aesthetic realm” (EO2 180). Thus, Judge William asserts that A is in a state beyond the aesthetic: while A’s views are the most sophisticated form of the aesthetic way of life, his awareness that this view is despair puts him beyond the aesthetic, indeed the move to the ethical life-view is an “imperative requirement” (EO2 192). If A is beyond the aesthetic but not yet in the ethical realm,⁵ then our claim that A is the unhappiest one entails that, contra John Hare, the unhappiest man is not “the prototype of the aesthetic life, brought to its greatest pitch of self-awareness” (Hare 96), for it is precisely at this “greatest pitch of self-awareness,” i.e., that one is in despair, that one moves beyond the aesthetic realm. Hare rightly

⁵ We know A is not yet at the ethical, for, as Judge William notes, “it must be disagreeable [for A] to share a life-view with every toper or *Jagtliebhaber*.” (EO2 180).

argues that the unhappiest man is neither an immediate aesthete nor a reflective aesthete. But when the aesthetic life reaches this high “pitch of self-awareness,” the resulting state of being the unhappiest one, what Judge William describes as “despair in thought” (EO2 194), indicates that the individual has moved beyond the aesthetic. Thus, by recognizing the author of *Diapsalmata* as the unhappiest one, and by recognizing the unhappiest one as “somewhat beyond the aesthetic realm” (EO2 180), we see that (the first volume of) *Either/Or* commences from beyond the aesthetic.

V. Acknowledgments

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Paul Sponheim’s *Existing Before God: Søren Kierkegaard and the Human Venture* is one of nine planned volumes in Fortress Press’s “Mapping the Tradition” series. Each volume focuses on a particular prominent Christian thinker or group of related thinkers, sketching their lives and times, providing close commentary on primary text and finally surveying the legacy – the “effectual history” (Gadamer’s *Wirkungsgeschichte*) – bequeathed by the thinker(s). This third element distinguishes this series and this volume on Kierkegaard from most introductory guides. It is common practice in such texts to sketch the life of the thinker in question and then to focus on the thought and writings. Sponheim does both in this volume, but he then moves on to devote almost half of his book to the theological reception of Kierkegaard’s writings. Behind this choice lies an awareness of Kierkegaard as living voice in an ongoing Christian intellectual and spiritual tradition. Sponheim writes, “I will write as a Christian theologian seeking to receive accurately and pertinently the offerings of Kierkegaard as an earlier laborer in the theological task.” (133) This framing of this project aligns it with the *Kierkegaard as Christian Thinker Series* that Stephen Evans and Paul Martens are publishing through Eerdmans. Evans and Martens state the program of their series as seeking “to promote and enrich an understanding of Søren Kierkegaard as a Christian thinker who, despite his many critiques of Christendom, self-consciously worked within the Christian tradition and in the service of Christianity.”

Sponheim's project of reading Kierkegaard as a Christian theologian guides his choice of *Sickness Unto Death* as his textual focus, a most counter-intuitive choice given that this book is billed as a "concise and lucid introduction" to Kierkegaard. It is a brave interpreter, indeed, who introduces readers to Kierkegaard's texts directly with the notoriously impenetrable opening paragraph of Part One of *Sickness Unto Death*!

Why this choice? Sponheim argues for a special status for the Anti-Climacus writings, and particularly *SUD*, by placing them within the arc of SK's authorship. He briefly surveys SK's pseudonymous literature and the theory of indirect communication on which it is based, but argues that lack of success led SK to move toward much more direct expression in the "second literature," counting on the paradoxical character of the Christian message to maintain indirectness. "But as that message [of the pseudonymous literature] seemed to be ignored, he found it necessary to speak more directly formally, while still preserving and even sharpening the challenging material otherness of his message, which still represents indirect communication" (xxviii). But the Anti-Climacus texts are still pseudonymous, so why elevate *SUD* above the veronymous texts? As have others, Sponheim sees the Anti-Climacus pseudonym as fundamentally different from all others: where SK uses other pseudonyms in order to write from a position outside of Christianity, he uses Anti-Climacus to write from a decisively Christian viewpoint, one that SK didn't feel qualified to take himself. As Sponheim puts it, "*SUD* arguably represents the clearest statement of Kierkegaard's 'take' on Christianity" because it is "written from within the faith" and advances "decisive Christian claims" (xxx-xxxi).

There are, of course, two Anti-Climacus texts, *Practice in Christianity* as well as *SUD*, so why the focus on the latter? In a short book, one has to make choices and the short, direct, and highly architectonic character of *SUD* make it more suited to succinct treatment. Taking a term from SK's journals, Sponheim refers to *SUD* as "thetical." Other reasons guide Sponheim's choice as well. As a systematic theologian, Sponheim is attracted to *SUD*. He highlights in particular the trinitarian organization of Part Two, where despair is defined progressively as sin before God, before Christ and finally against the Holy Spirit. But I sense a further motivation guiding Sponheim: a commitment to reading Kierkegaard especially as a Lutheran theologian. In contrast to most discussions of *SUD* that bog down in the technical complications of Part One, Sponheim moves quickly through Part One (in 20 pages) and then devotes twice as much space to his reading of Part Two that identifies despair as sin. He argues persuasively that SK's analysis of sin as having its own continuity is very Lutheran, talking about it as a "bondage of the will" (54). But there is little direct reference to Luther in *SUD* and SK spoke rather ambivalently about Luther on many occasions. Sponheim acknowledges that, but he writes, "We have not found Anti-Climacus in *SUD* naming Luther as such, but his sin/grace dialectic reeks of the German reformer of the church" (60). He then approvingly quotes Merold Westphal's assertion that, "Kierkegaard is in many respects simply a good Lutheran" (60n). This commitment to reading Kierkegaard in an emphatically Lutheran manner is the guiding thought of the book and is manifest in the title, *Existing Before God*. The idea of humans as existing *Coram Deo* is central to the Lutheran theological tradition, and Sponheim sees in this idea the crux of not only *SUD* but Kierkegaard's thought as a whole. As he reads him, Kierkegaard's thought and writings are centered on the situation of the created human standing before her creator, separated by the "infinite qualitative difference" between the two. But where a Reformed thinker, such as Karl Barth, stresses that difference in an unqualified way, Sponheim sees SK as a Lutheran thinker keeping discontinuity (because of sin) and continuity (because of creation) in dialectical tension. In bringing his book to a close, Sponheim zeroes in on this central vision: "Existing before God: Søren Kierkegaard and the Human Venture'. I'm arguing in this book that those nine words carry much of the theological energy in *The Sickness Unto Death*." (134) He unpacks this by saying that existentialist appropriations of SK got his focus on passionate choice right, but they failed to emphasize properly that, for SK, such choice is emphatically before God.

Sponheim's project of placing SK in the Lutheran theological tradition sets the stage well for the second part of this book, "The Theological Reception and Legacy." Just as he wants to place SK in the context of his

theological predecessors, specifically Luther, he moves on to discuss SK as a presence in the thought of later theologians. Having been actively involved in the study of SK for almost seventy years, Sponheim is exceptionally well qualified to speak to the evolving shape of SK's theological reception. He started his study of SK at Concordia College under Reidar Thomte in 1949, went to Denmark on a Fulbright 1953-54, and continued his theological education at University of Chicago through the latter half of the 1950s, leading up to his publication of *Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence* in 1968. This places Sponheim's studies and early career in the midst of the 55 years that he describes as the "theological high water mark" of SK reception, the years from the second edition of Barth's Commentary on Romans to the death of Rudolf Bultmann in 1976. He writes with familiarity of the debates among European and American theologians over how to read SK in those years, and he also had a ringside seat for the rise of Existentialism as a major philosophical movement that offered varying readings of its purported "father." Sponheim devotes significant attention to the earliest periods of Kierkegaard reception in Scandinavia, before he emerged on the German and English language scenes in the 20th century. While Brandes, Høffding, and a variety of Lutheran pietists who were the first to take up SK fell well before his time, they were a living presence in Kierkegaard studies at least at Concordia. (I know this because Reidar Thomte bequeathed me his library of Kierkegaard materials, and well-annotated volumes of these figures abound in it.) So, Sponheim writes about these earlier interpreters from an experience of them as participants in the scholarly scene. He then takes a stab at sketching the broad profiles of Kierkegaard studies over the forty years since end of Neo-orthodox appropriation, identifying a significant number of main interpretive approaches and naming a wide variety of significant scholars. His survey is a reminder of how Kierkegaard studies have burgeoned in recent decades, but the sheer number of books and trends makes impossible the fuller treatment he was able to give earlier trends in SK reception.

In a short closing chapter, Sponheim peers ahead, seeking to make out the ways SK will figure in our attempts to wrestle with contemporary life. Following Jason Mahn, he sees contemporary secularity as parallel in many ways to the Christendom that SK decried. He also highlights recent attempts to use SK to think through challenges presented by religious diversity in a world where intolerance and religious violence are too common. Appreciatively citing Andrew Burgess, Sponheim closes as SK himself closed his writings with a plea for honesty: if resting transparently in God (*SUD's* formula for faith) means anything, it surely means steering clear of the "lies and mendacity" that seem so ubiquitous in our unfortunate present.

Stephen Backhouse. *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016

Reviewed by Troy Wellington Smith, University of California, Berkeley

Have you ever wondered how to introduce a friend or loved one to your strange Uncle Søren? Since his writings can quickly become unnavigable without the proper context, you might do best to give him or her a Kierkegaard biography first. But which one? Walter Lowrie has written two worthy biographies, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford UP 1938) and *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Princeton UP 1942, rpt. 2013), the latter of which is intended as an introduction to Kierkegaard and is still in print, although it has long since begun to show its age with its hagiographic approach. More recently, Alastair Hannay has written his *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Cambridge UP 2001), but this work is clearly designed with the academic philosopher in mind. With the scale and psychological extremities of a Dostoyevskian novel, Joakim Garff's *Kierkegaard: A Biography* (English trans. Princeton UP 2005) is a great read; most novices, however, will probably be

overwhelmed by its abundance of historical detail stretching over more than 800 pages. Until last year, it would seem, there was not a contemporary Kierkegaard biography aimed at the general reader.

Enter Stephen Backhouse and his *Kierkegaard: A Single Life*. Lecturer in Social and Political Theology at St. Mellitus College, London, Backhouse has written an excellent scholarly monograph, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism* (Oxford UP 2011), a work steeped in Kierkegaard and his milieu of Golden Age Denmark. In his *Kierkegaard*, Backhouse culls from this wealth of knowledge to offer "something for educated nonspecialists" (12): an eminently readable narrative of Kierkegaard's life in some two hundred pages. With the summary commentary on Kierkegaard's individual works reserved for an appendix, Backhouse's *Kierkegaard* has the tight structure and dynamic pacing of a good novel. Since there are neither foot – nor endnotes, one might even fail to see that there is a robust citational apparatus discretely located in the back of the book. This, and a detailed index, would both suggest that this book might be of use to the Kierkegaard scholar, as well. And while there is indeed much in this biography that the academic or enthusiast may already know, there is also plenty that will come as a surprise. The tenth and final chapter, which explores Kierkegaard's posthumous reception up to 2015, is worth the price of the book alone for its many fascinating pieces of historical miscellany on Kierkegaard readers such as Henrik Ibsen, Karl Jaspers, Franz Kafka, Karl Barth, Hannah Arendt, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, T. S. Eliot, Charles Williams, Thomas Merton, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Henry Miller, Richard Wright, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Cornel West, Hideaki Anno, Mike Tyson, Win Butler, Donald Glover, and Simon Munnery. These anecdotes speak to Kierkegaard's central position in the intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and point towards his continued relevance in that of the twenty-first.

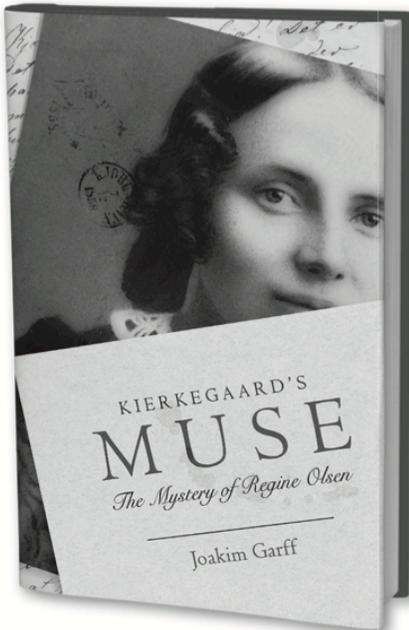
The first nine chapters chronicling Kierkegaard's life are written with a verve and love of language that will draw in even the most skeptical reader. By beginning with the tumult surrounding Kierkegaard's funeral, Backhouse imbues his subject with an aura of fame (or notoriety), and underscores the primary paradoxes and tensions in Kierkegaard's life and works; for the experienced scholar initiating the tyro, the end proves to be the best place to begin when it comes to Kierkegaard. Lovers of Kierkegaard will also enjoy Backhouse's narrative not only for the sheer fun of it, but by learning something new, as well. As an introductory study, this biography is by necessity brief, but that does not prevent Backhouse from sometimes interlacing the general arc of his story with rarified details, e.g., "another Regine, Miss Regine Reinhard," whom Kierkegaard visited at her inn as a respite from his attack on the State Church (179).

In its depiction of its subject, Backhouse's *Kierkegaard* is to be commended for its balance. Lowrie's two biographies, as I have mentioned, all too frequently make Kierkegaard out to be a sort of saint. Garff's *Kierkegaard* is quite different: not wicked, exactly, but rather pathological. Garff does not give us Kierkegaard the man so much as Kierkegaard the symptom, a bundle of neuroses and physiological quirks all contributing to the prodigious production. With Hannay, one finds Kierkegaard the "author-function," a ghostly figure at a historical remove from the massive extant corpus. In his preface, Backhouse conveys an anecdote about the time he lent Lincoln Harvey, an Anglican priest and theologian, a Kierkegaard biography to read while he was on vacation. Backhouse tactfully omits the biography's title and author, since Harvey "confessed he had not been able to get through the first chapter. The Kierkegaard he met seemed dense, distant, and unappealing" (11). (One could less tactfully speculate that the words *dense* and *distant* might easily describe Hannay's Kierkegaard, while *unappealing* certainly applies to Garff's.) Hence the need for Backhouse's book: "I knew then that if a disciple of Karl Barth and minister in the established Church of England had thought Kierkegaard was irrelevant to him, then something indeed had gone spectacularly wrong" (11).

Nonetheless, Hannay has given the professional or would-be professional scholar one of the best guides to Kierkegaard's oeuvre, and Garff's book, by digging under the gilded veneer of Golden Age Copenhagen,

serves as a necessary corrective to the ethereal Kierkegaard of Lowrie. Like all correctives, however, Garff's *Kierkegaard* veers towards an extreme, one that few neophytes will feel compelled to follow to its conclusion. Backhouse successfully pilots the shoals between Garff and Lowrie, giving us a Kierkegaard who in all of his complexity is immediately recognizable as the author of his beloved works, works that combine both earnestness and irony; the confessional and the theatrical; the angelic and the demonic; the hermetic and the gregarious; and the sacred and the profane. Backhouse's *Kierkegaard* is a slim volume, but his Søren—as he is lovingly referred to throughout the text—contains multitudes.

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