Kierkegaard on Selfhood and Our Need for Others

1. Kierkegaard in a Secular Age

Scholars have devoted much attention lately to Kierkegaard’s views on personal identity and, in particular, to his account of selfhood. Central to this account is the idea that a self is not something we automatically are. It is rather something we must become. Thus, selfhood is a goal to realize or a project to undertake. To put the point another way, while we may already be selves in some sense, we have to work to become real, true, or “authentic” selves.

The idea that authentic selfhood is a project is not unique to Kierkegaard. It is common fare in modern philosophy. Yet Kierkegaard distances himself from popular ways of thinking about the matter. He denies the view inherited from Rousseau that we can discover our true selves by consulting our innermost feelings, beliefs, and desires. He also rejects the idea developed by the German Romantics that we can invent our true selves in a burst of artistic or poetic creativity. In fact, according to Kierkegaard, becoming an authentic self is not something we can do on our own. If we are to succeed at the project, we must look beyond ourselves for assistance. In particular, Kierkegaard thinks, we must rely on God. For God alone can provide us with the content of our real identities.

A longstanding concern about Kierkegaard arises at this point. His account of authentic selfhood, like his accounts of so many concepts, is religious. It presupposes not

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only that God exists but that he has a specific plan for each of our lives. In Patrick Stokes’s words, Kierkegaard offers us “an ontology of the self from within a framework that assumes an orthodox creation theology…the Kierkegaardian self is always a created self, a self that finds God as the ultimate ‘criterion’ for its own self-actualization.”

Thus, we must ask how much Kierkegaard has to offer the modern, secular reader. Are there insights we can take on board if we do not share his theological starting points? Or, as Arnold Come worries, “are Kierkegaard’s anthropology and theology really inseparable?”

This paper aims to establish the secular relevance of Kierkegaard’s writings on authentic selfhood. To do so, I will defend three theses. First, I will argue that secular readers can accept Kierkegaard’s criticisms of popular models of authenticity. Second, I will show that they can embrace the core insight of his own model, namely that becoming an authentic self requires relying on others. What secular readers cannot take on board, of course, is the idea that the specific other we must depend on is God. Nevertheless, third, I will explain how human others can perform many of the roles Kierkegaard assigns to God. In particular, by turning to our friends and engaging them in dialogue about the stories of our lives, we can gain much of the support and guidance Kierkegaard thinks we need.

2. Alienation, Irony, and the Problem of Selfhood

For many of us, the starting point for our interest in authenticity is a practical problem. Trying to take part in modern society makes us feel alienated from ourselves. To get along with others, we find we must put on masks. We must pretend to believe, feel, and think things we do not. We must construct our lives such that the inner is not the outer

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6 Come, Kierkegaard as Humanist, 12.
and the outer is not the inner, as Kierkegaard puts it in the opening lines of *Either/Or*. Such game playing tends not to sit well with us. It strikes us as dishonest. It gives rise to the uncomfortable thought that we are not being true to ourselves or to who we really are.  

Displeasure at public phoniness makes some people withdraw from everyday social life or what Kierkegaard calls “actuality.” A few do so by moving to isolated areas, creating physical distance between themselves and society. Others, taking perhaps the more common route, withdraw inwardly. They continue to adhere to popular conventions, but they do so with an ironic attitude. In the privacy of their own minds, they do not take the conventions seriously or regard them as meaningful. They refuse to identify with the roles, projects, and values they have inherited from society. They tell themselves that such things do not really define who they are.  

Kierkegaard often has critical things to say about ironic withdrawal. But there is an aspect of it he endorses. He thinks the ironist is right to question the identity he or she has inherited from society. Indeed, all of us ought to have a moment when we cast a skeptical eye on society’s expectations and when we challenge society’s way of defining us. These are necessary steps in the process of figuring out who we really are. This is what Kierkegaard means when he says irony is “the absolute beginning of personal life” and “a life that may be called human begins with irony.”  

Yet, Kierkegaard thinks, we cannot end with irony. We cannot go through life just being ironic. For an ironic attitude as he sees it is purely negative. It involves saying “no” to social guidelines and recommendations without offering a positive alternative. Most of us will find it hard to live this way. We have a desire for a positive lifeview, as

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14 Ibid., 6.  
15 Ibid., 6, 259, 261.
Judge William says, a sense of who we actually are and what really matters.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, once we jettison our socially given identities, we want to replace them with something else.\textsuperscript{17}

In sum, Kierkegaard believes we must move beyond the stage of ironic withdrawal. We must find new identities. But where might we find identities that are not phony or dishonest? Do we even have “true” or “real” selves? If so, what do they look like? Such are the questions that models of authenticity seek to answer.

3. The Inner Sense Model

One popular approach to authentic selfhood, which has its roots in the writings of Rousseau, says we can discover our true selves by turning inward. All we have to do is push past our socially conditioned ways of thinking and uncover what lies beneath. The natural and spontaneous desires, feelings, and attitudes we find constitute the true us. They make up who we really are. The task is thus to get in touch with our innermost thoughts and express them outwardly. We can lay claim to being authentic selves once we do so. Another way to put this idea is to say each of us has an inner voice or an inner sense of what is right and good. The problem is just that the cacophony of voices resounding from the media and mass society tends to drown it out. So, we have to sort through the noise. We have to identify our inner voice and act in accordance with it. We become authentic once we do\textsuperscript{18}

Kierkegaard finds much to like about the inner sense model.\textsuperscript{19} He thinks it is good for us to develop a conception of who we are that is distinct from society’s view. It is important for us to figure out what we think and feel apart from the influences of culture and tradition. This is the point of passages in \textit{The Present Age} and \textit{The Point of View} that criticize following the crowd and extol becoming a “single individual.”\textsuperscript{20} It is also


\textsuperscript{18} Guignon, \textit{On Being Authentic}, 57–58.


part of what Climacus is getting at in Postscript when he encourages us to develop “subjectivity” and “inwardness.”

Even so, we find in Kierkegaard’s writings grounds for several criticisms of the inner sense model. Two in particular are telling. The first I will refer to as the morality problem. The root of the morality problem is that the inner sense model presupposes an optimistic view about our inner worlds. It assumes our natural thoughts and desires are morally good. In fact, the German Romantics emphasized this point. They associated uncovering our natural desires with accessing an innocent childlike state or even the divine aspects of our personalities.

Kierkegaard rejects this optimistic assumption. He believes our natural or spontaneous thoughts and desires tend to be harmful and cruel. He bases his view partly on the Christian doctrine of original sin. But, as C. Stephen Evans argues, he need not do so. Secular thinkers such as Nietzsche and Freud have defended the notion that we are instinctively cruel. Moreover, the fact that society encourages us to suppress our innermost feelings and desires suggests they are potentially harmful to society. Thus, pursuing the inner sense model is morally dubious. It might provide us with an authentic self, but not necessarily a good or virtuous one. In other words, it might give us a self we should reject.

Kierkegaard’s second concern about the inner sense model is what I will call the continuity problem. The issue here is that, just as our natural and spontaneous desires tend not to be pro-social, so too they tend not to be stable and coherent. They change unexpectedly.

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22 Hölderlin connects the process of uncovering our natural drives with that of getting in touch with our original childlike state. Herder and, more recently, Rilke associate it with getting in touch with the divine aspects of ourselves. See Guignon, On Being Authentic, x–xi, 53, 57–58; Söderquist, The Isolated Self, 205; Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27–29.
23 Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers, secs. 1493, 2419, 4690. Matters here are complicated by the fact that Kierkegaard defends the possibility of a second or “higher immediacy” that is oriented to the Good (ibid., sec. 6135). For discussion, see Patrick Stokes, “The Problem of Spontaneous Goodness: From Kierkegaard to Logstrup (via Zhuangzi and Eckhart),” Continental Philosophy Review 49, no. 2 (2016): 139–59.
26 Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity, 65; Guignon, On Being Authentic, 76.
pectedly and push in competing directions. Thus, people who make their day-to-day lives conform to their spontaneous desires end up flitting from task to task. They seldom stick with any project for long, and each new project rarely connects in any deep way to the one that came before. For this reason, A, the pseudonymous author of Part I of *Either/Or*, recommends we not make firm commitments to anyone or anything. If we want to preserve our ability to follow our desires, we should not get married, have a career, or form deep friendships. Such entanglements will only inhibit us from doing what we feel like doing.

Kierkegaard objects to the life A recommends on the grounds that it lacks the right kind of inner unity. Of course, people who follow the vicissitudes of their inner voice will experience some kind of inner unity. As John Davenport notes, they will experience continuity of consciousness from one moment to the next. But they will not exhibit the deeper unity that comes with having a personality or character. Possessing a personality or character requires a stable set of beliefs, dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors. It also requires that these beliefs etc. be woven together into a coherent whole. Judge William captures what is at stake here with the following lines:

> Or can you think of anything more appalling than having it all end with the disintegration of your essence into a multiplicity, so that you actually become several, just as that unhappy demoniac became a legion, and thus you would have lost what is the most inward and holy in a human being, the binding power of the personality?

The judge’s concern is that if we do not have a personality, we do not really have a sense of identity. We do not really have a take on who we are. More pointedly, we do not really have a self. In sum, the second problem with the inner sense model is that it does not help us acquire our true selves because it does not help us acquire a self at all.

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4. The Constitution Model

Partly for the reasons just discussed, many early advocates of authenticity abandoned the inner sense model. They rejected the idea that our true selves are things we can discover by looking within. Instead, they saw our true selves as things we must create or “constitute.”

The constitution model takes a variety of forms. One version developed by the German Romantics and later embraced by Sartre relies on artistic and literary metaphors. Our selves are like works of art we must shape and mold; they are like stories we must tell. We count as authentic to the degree we are the author of our own stories.

Being the author of the narrative of our lives is a complicated process. It requires moving beyond passive acceptance of our spontaneous feelings, thoughts, and desires. We must sort through and discriminate between them. Some we must select as worthy of endorsement. Others we must discard as undeserving. Next, we have to bring our value judgments into harmony with each other. To iron out the conflicts, we need to identify some values as more important to us than others. To express our core values gives our life its narrative structure. It is the project that ties together the various aspects of our lives into a single, cohesive story. This story is who we really are on the constitution model. It is our true identity, our authentic self.

As with the inner sense model, Kierkegaard endorses some aspects of the constitution model. He agrees being authentic requires more than passive acceptance of our spontaneous thoughts, feelings, and desires. We must shape and mold these things to some degree, as Anthony Rudd emphasizes. Kierkegaard also embraces the narrative conception of the self. He thinks the story of our lives defines who we are.

34 Stokes, The Naked Self, 172.
Yet, Kierkegaard has several reservations about the constitution model. One reservation, which I will call the guidance problem, is that the constitution model offers few concrete instructions about how to author the story of our lives.\textsuperscript{40} It does not tell us what feelings, thoughts, and desires to endorse. It does not specify which values to emphasize and which to downplay or reject. It simply tells us to author our own story, to choose for ourselves the values that structure our lives. The difficulty is that there is no end to what we could choose. We could to decide to find value in anything from counting blades of grass to helping the poor, from collecting pieces of lint to creating works of art.\textsuperscript{41} All these would fine as far as the constitution model goes. The resultant lives would be equally authentic provided we endorsed them sincerely.

What we need—and what the constitution model does not give us—is a principle to help us discriminate between our options. In other words, we need a criterion or standard for determining which options are better and which are worse.\textsuperscript{42} Without a criterion or standard, there is nothing left to do but follow our natural inclinations or choose arbitrarily. Neither of these paths is desirable. Following our inclinations brings us back to the inner sense model with it all its problems. But if our core values and projects are arbitrary, they are unlikely to gain traction with us. They are unlikely to sustain our interest over the long run. So, it is hard to see how they could provide the foundation for a stable sense of self. This is another reason why A finds himself in dire straits in \textit{Either/Or}. He knows his choice of projects and values is arbitrary. He celebrates this very point in “The Rotation of Crops.”\textsuperscript{43} But, as Judge William notes, the result is that he does not care about anything. He does not invest in any activities or relationships. He does not throw himself into anything at all for more than a moment.\textsuperscript{44} In the end, A’s arbitrariness leads him to “have no life view.”\textsuperscript{45} It causes him to lack a sense of identity.

The constitution model also suffers from a version of the morality problem. Since all that matters is choosing one’s values for oneself, there is nothing to rule out choosing morally dubious values. This is a real threat. People can and do decide for themselves to pursue evil paths. The constitution model does not necessarily disapprove of these paths. Indeed, from the perspective of the constitution model, Hitler’s way of living would be just as good as Mother Theresa’s provided both were sincerely chosen. In sum, if all we


\textsuperscript{43} Kierkegaard, \textit{Either/Or}, Part I, 299–300.

\textsuperscript{44} Kierkegaard, \textit{Either/Or}, Part II, 198–99.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 202.
do is follow the constitution model, we may not end up in a morally good place. We may acquire a real or authentic self, but not necessarily one we should embrace.46

Kierkegaard provides an example of this problem in “The Seducer’s Diary.” The diary contains the words of Johannes, a young man who appears to be authentic in the sense outlined by the constitution model.47 In accordance with Romantic ideals, Johannes does not follow conventions or conform to society’s rules. He chooses his values for himself; he does things his own way. The problem is that Johannes’s own way of doing things involves treating others horribly. This is most evident in his romantic pursuits. Unlike some, he is not out for “true love.” His goal is to have interesting experiences, and he will do whatever it takes to achieve this aim, including deceiving and manipulating others.48 His interactions with Cordelia are a case in point. He starts by maneuvering Cordelia’s current suitor, Edward, out of the picture by giving him bad advice.49 He then tricks Cordelia into falling in love with him. He sends her letters that do not reflect his true feelings, and he proposes to her even though he has no intention of going through with it.50 Once it becomes clear that Cordelia wants him, he discards her. The seduction is complete and he has no use for her any more. She has become dull and uninteresting to him.51

Finally, a version of the continuity problem afflicts the constitution model of authenticity. For, on the constitution model, there is nothing to stop us from constantly changing our minds about how we want our narrative to go. No matter how much we have invested in a particular way of thinking about ourselves, it is not binding on us. We can always choose to abandon it and pursue a different way. As Anti-Climacus puts the point, “the very moment when it seems that the self is closest to having the building completed, it can arbitrarily dissolve the whole thing into nothing.”52 Indeed, if all that matters is choosing for ourselves, we have the power to start over again as often and as arbitrarily as we please. Our identities are under constant threat of coup from our own

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46 See Calhoun, “Standing for Something”; Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 106. Some maintain that the ethical problem can be resolved. For example, a constructionist model of ethics might support the idea that valuing one’s own self-determination requires respecting that of others Rudd, Self, Value, and Narrative, 2012. Another option is to argue that a vicious life cannot be wholeheartedly chosen because we always will the Good in addition to whatever else we will. People who choose evil ends will always be somewhat double-minded about their project. Better account: There may be ways to get around this problem. For instance, one could argue that any attempt to construct a sense of self around one’s own will requires valuing the will. And consistency requires that if one values one’s own will one must also value the wills of others. And this can constrain the project to which one can be wholeheartedly committed.


50 Ibid., 367–68, 376. His declaration of sincerity (385) is too much to believe given how calculating he is in his dealings with Cordelia.

51 Ibid., 445.

52 Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, 70.
will. Once more in Anti-Climacus’s words, we are “subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment.”

5. Kierkegaard’s Religious Model of Authenticity

One of Kierkegaard’s contributions to existentialism is that he diagnoses the underlying issue with the preceding models of authenticity. The reason they encounter problems is that they prescribe self-reliance. They recommend we base our identity or sense of self on resources found within ourselves. The inner sense model makes who we are a matter of our own natural thoughts, feelings, and desires. The constitution model makes it a matter of our own subjective will or our own creative powers. Kierkegaard sees that such self-reliance is not viable. When it comes to figuring out or determining who we really are, we cannot go it alone. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

It is easy to misinterpret Kierkegaard on this point. Several pieces of evidence suggest he actually embraces self-reliance or individualism. For instance, in an oft-quoted journal entry written during his early travels to Gilleleje, he writes, “the crucial thing is to find a truth that is a truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.” In addition, the most famous line from Postscript is Johannes Climacus’s assertion that “subjectivity is truth.” Finally, Kierkegaard dedicates many of his books to “the single individual.” He says his goal is “to prompt, if possible, to invite, to induce the many to press through this narrow pass, the single individual.”

Emphasizing such passages is not wrong. But they tell only part of the story. For Kierkegaard frequently qualifies what they say. Four pages after we hear “subjectivity is truth,” Climacus hedges by saying there is also a sense in which “subjectivity is untruth.” This idea fits the core message of Philosophical Fragments, the earlier book penned

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55 Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers, 5.5100.

56 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 1:203.

57 Kierkegaard, The Point of View, 118.

58 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 1:207.
under the Climacus pseudonym. There we learn that Socrates was wrong to think the truth lies within. A similar rejection of self-reliance lies behind the theme of “dying to oneself (afdøen).” As Adam Buben explains, dying to one self means “a disregarding, or hatred of the worldly self, which includes one’s selfishness, self-confidence, self-reliance.” Finally, the most prominent passage speaking out against independence and self-sufficiency comes from The Sickness Unto Death. In the opening pages, Anti-Climacus asserts the self is ultimately a “derived, established relation.” The goal is to get to a place where “the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”

An accurate interpretation of Kierkegaard must accommodate both ideas. It must reflect the fact that in some sense subjectivity is truth and another sense it is untruth. One option is to maintain that Kierkegaard is recommending a two-step movement here or what he often calls a “double movement.” The first step or the first part of the movement is to recede inward into ourselves. We must retreat from the crowd and leave behind the system of values we have inherited from society. We must get in touch with our innermost feelings, thoughts, desires, and values. But such inwardness is not the final resting spot or terminus. We cannot satisfy ourselves with uncovering our own inner world. We have to push beyond ourselves and take the second step.

It is at the point of the second step that Kierkegaard’s view becomes religious. We are not to push beyond ourselves in just any direction. We are not to “rest transparently” in just any power. We are to turn to and rely on a specific other, the transcendent other who created us, God. The direction for Kierkegaard is thus as it was for Augustine more than a millennium before: “inward and upward.” It is only by looking upward to God that we can find or, more accurately, receive our true selves. We are not to compose ourselves poetically but, as Kierkegaard says in The Concept of Irony, to let ourselves be poetically composed by God.

In a sense, Kierkegaard is drawing on both traditional models of authenticity. From the inner sense model, he takes the idea that we find answers when we look within. But it is not because we encounter our own true voice there. It is rather because that is where we encounter God. If we wish to discover God’s specific message for us, to learn

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62 Ibid., 14.

63 Ibid., 82; see also Come, Kierkegaard as Humanist, 12; Jothen, Kierkegaard, Aesthetics, and Selfhood, 48–49.


65 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Part II, 177, 216–17.

who he wants us to become, we must separate ourselves from the busyness of everyday life. We must block out the noise of the crowd and enter into quiet, solitary contemplation. We can do so in prayer at home or church, or by walking through the forest as Kierkegaard often did. Only then will we be able to hear God speak to us.  

From the constitution model, Kierkegaard takes the idea that we should think of our self as a narrative or story. The various parts of our story should be woven together around a set of fundamental goals or core values. The difference for Kierkegaard is that our goals and values are not to be of our own choosing. They are to be given to us by God. Moreover, Kierkegaard thinks, when we consult God in prayer, he will not just provide us with a set of rules, such as the Ten Commandments. He will assign us a vocation. He will give us a task that is unique to us and that cannot be derived from the circumstances of our lives.  

In this way, to use Joachim Garff’s words, God is “the true narrator” for Kierkegaard. He is “the transcendent narrator, who can endow human beings with identity.”

Does Kierkegaard’s religious model overcome the problems afflicting the alternative models he rejects? Most obviously, Kierkegaard’s approach provides a solution to the guidance problem. If God assigns us a vocation, then we do not face an indefinite number of paths between which we cannot discriminate. In other words, our options are not all equally good. There is a specific path that is right for us, the one God has chosen. Following this path makes us more authentic, more who we really are.

Kierkegaard’s model also provides solutions to the two other problems we have discussed. First, like most traditional theists, Kierkegaard believes God is perfectly good. Thus, if God is the author of our true selves, there is no danger that pursuit of authenticity will lead to immoral behavior. A perfectly good God will only assign us good

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vocations. Second, Kierkegaard follows the long Christian tradition of regarding God as unchangeable. We need not fear God will unexpectedly alter his plans and leave us with a disjointed life. Indeed, we have reason to hope everything will fit together in the end. Moreover, God is perfectly reliable on Kierkegaard’s view. There is no need to worry he might abandon us. Regardless of situation or circumstance, we can turn to him. In sum, for Kierkegaard, if we structure our lives around the vocation God assigns us, we will have stable and coherent identities. We will be free from “the pagan care of vacillation.”

We might raise a number of concerns about Kierkegaard’s solutions. But perhaps the biggest one is that they are religious. Embracing them requires taking on board the idea that God exists. Moreover, it requires buying into the notion that God has a specific plan for each of us and that he communicates this plan to us. For many in the modern era, this path is not a live option. Even if faith would solve our existential problems, as Kierkegaard alleges, we find ourselves unable to take up the mantle. Our minds have become too deeply secular. Some might propose we should therefore leave Kierkegaard behind. I think that would be too hasty. Rather than discarding him as irrelevant, I wish to explore what happens if we try to remove the religious elements from his view. I wish to see if we can develop a secular alternative to his model of authentic selfhood that retains its benefits.

6. A Popular Secular Alternative

Many scholars have wondered about secular approaches to Kierkegaard. They have asked whether it is possible "to remove the gem of wisdom from the gangue of Kierkegaard’s pietistic faith,” as Gordon Marino puts the question. One noteworthy member of the skeptical camp is Jamie Turnbull. In a recent series of articles, Turnbull has argued that Kierkegaard has nothing to offer secular readers. Kierkegaard’s views ineluctably de-

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70 The Euthyphro problem lurks here. For a discussion of Kierkegaard’s response to it, see Evans, Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love.
74 For instance, even if we believe God is both good and unchangeable, it may be hard to tell whether what we hear is from God. Our uncertainty on this point may cause us great fear and trembling. See Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
75 Marino, “Despair and Depression,” 126.
76 Jamie Turnbull, “Kierkegaard’s Religious, and Our Methodological, Crisis,” in Kierkegaard and the Religious Crisis of the Nineteenth Century in Europe, ed. A. Burgess et al., Acta Kierkegaardiana 4 (Toronto and
pend on theological assumptions. This is especially true, Turnbull maintains, when it comes to Kierkegaard’s views on selfhood. If we remove or ignore the theological component here, nothing of interest remains. Secular approaches to Kierkegaardian selfhood are not viable.

There are a few reasons to challenge Turnbull’s position. First, secular readers could embrace Kierkegaard’s criticisms of the two traditional models of authenticity. The objection that the models are morally dubious does not depend on theological assumptions. Nor does the objection that they create instability, or that the constitution model in particular offers insufficient guidance. Second, secular readers could accept Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of the underlying cause of these problems. They could take on board his claim that the traditional models go astray because they prescribe self-reliance. Indeed, several secular discussions of authenticity appeal to this very point.77

Yet, Turnbull is right about something. There is a major obstacle facing secular approaches to Kierkegaard. Such approaches will have trouble handling his positive alternative to traditional models of authentic selfhood. There is no way around the fact that Kierkegaard’s positive account requires wholehearted commitment to God.

Commentators have tried various ways of handling this point. The most popular strategy has been the one pursued by Hubert Dreyfus and Jane Rubin.78 It focuses on the idea of wholehearted commitment. This focus is promising because wholeheartedness is a crucial part of Kierkegaard’s account of how to relate to God. It stands behind Johannes de Silentio’s praise of Abraham for being willing to give up everything for God.79 It also underlies Kierkegaard’s praise of Jesus for being obedient to God to the point of death.80 We find the idea in Postscript as well, where Climacus says a true believer will remain faithful even if it requires sacrificing his or her understanding.81 It is also present in Practice in Christianity. There, Anti-Climacus says the real Christian will hold fast to faith

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77 Calhoun, “Standing for Something”; Guignon, On Being Authentic, 151; Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity, 58; Williams, “From Sincerity to Authenticity.”
79 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 15–24.
80 Kierkegaard, Christian Discourses, 85; Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers, sec. 3020.
81 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 1:232.
in the face of persecution. Further, the idea of wholeheartedness is implied by lines in “Purity of Heart” and Christian Discourses that say we ought not to be of two minds about God. Finally, there are many passages where Kierkegaard explicitly endorses unconditional devotion to God.

Dreyfus and Rubin propose we untie the ideal of wholehearted commitment from its religious moorings and anchor it to secular ones instead. Rather than having the object of our commitment be God, we should have it be some secular object. Dreyfus himself suggests a political movement, a love relationship, or a vocation such as law or music. Our commitment to such secular projects could structure the story of our lives the way commitment to God does for the religious person.

I am skeptical of Dreyfus and Rubin’s proposal. There are two reasons why. First, their account amounts to a ramped up version of the constitution model. It too only offers us a formal criterion for selecting our fundamental values. But rather than the criterion being that the choice must be our own, Dreyfus and Rubin claim the choice must be wholehearted. This modification does not solve the problems plaguing the traditional constitution model. There is still no guidance about which value or project to select as the object of our commitment. Also, there is still no reason to eschew immoral projects. A wholehearted commitment to evil ends would be just as authentic as one made to good ends on the Dreyfus-Rubin model. Finally, the wholeheartedness rule does not solve the stability problem. We may be less likely to flit between projects of deep devotion, as Dreyfus claims. And even if we do change our minds, our past commitments may constrain us to some degree. But there are no guarantees here. People change their minds about their deepest and most passionate commitments. They leave their marriages. They change their political affiliations. As long as we make our new choices wholeheartedly, there is nothing stopping us from moving on whenever we please. The threat of rebellion from within, as Kierkegaard puts it, is still possible at any moment.

There is a second shortcoming to Dreyfus and Rubin’s approach to secularizing Kierkegaard. It does not reflect Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of the underlying problem with the traditional models. Kierkegaard thinks these models go astray because they tell us to be self-sufficient. They tell us to fill out our identities by drawing on resources internal

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86 See Rudd, “Kierkegaard’s Plutonic Teleology,” 55.
87 Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 108.
to ourselves, be they our own natural feelings and desires (the inner sense model) or our own creative powers (the constitution model). Kierkegaard recommends turning to God in part because he thinks self-reliance does not work. We need to look to something beyond ourselves when trying to determine who we are. Thus, for Kierkegaard, God is not just an object of care and devotion. He is the source of our identities. In other words, relating to God is not just some project we undertake. Relating to God is how we figure out what our projects should be. A secular version of Kierkegaard’s account must replace God with something that serves the same role. It must find something that can be the source of our identities—that can tell us who we are and who we should become. This does not happen if we plug in devotion to music or law for devotion to God. In these cases, to use Garff’s words, the I is not shaped and formed by the not-I.88

We can develop a better secular alternative by having human others play the role Kierkegaard assigns to God. They can be the external power that shapes and conditions our identities. Not just any human others will do, of course. Placing no restrictions here would bring back into play a mindless deference to the crowd. It would permit the mass mentality Kierkegaard thinks we must avoid. Any plausible account of authenticity has to rule out this possibility.89 Thus, I suggest the human others on whom we depend be intimate and virtuous friends. As friends, they should be people who care about us and want to promote our well-being. As intimate friends, they must be people who know us well. They must understand our abilities, limitations, past histories, and present circumstances. Finally, as virtuous friends, they must be wise people with integrity. They must be capable of insight into our lives and deserving of our respect. In the next section, I will describe what it looks like to develop our identity by relying on intimate and virtuous friends. I will also explain how such an approach avoids the problems plaguing traditional secular models of authentic selfhood.90

7. The Dialogical Model of Authenticity

There are several ways our friends might help us with the project of selfhood. What I have in mind is working out our identities in an ongoing dialogue with them. This dialogue will involve sharing our vision of ourselves and adjusting it in light of their

89 Ibid., 279–270.
feedback. Importantly, we will not just defer to our friends’ judgments. Nor will we always accept their criticisms and suggestions. Rather, we will seek a kind of “reflective equilibrium” between their views and our own. (More on this in a bit.) The result will be a sense of self that is not just a product of our own intuition or will. It will be a sense of self that is also formed by and checked against the insights of those who know and care about us.

These conversations with our friends may take a variety of forms. They may begin with our sharing our current take on our life story. We may talk about where we see ourselves coming from and where we see ourselves going. We may say how we think our past connects with our present and future. Alternatively, we may trace the outlines of the foundational projects of our lives, or point to the core values that lie behind them. Rarely will we share our existing vision of ourselves all at once. Our story will come out piecemeal, in fits and starts. Moreover, because our story is ongoing, it will tend not to form a seamless whole. It will be fragmented or disjointed. Its direction and shape will be tentative or vague. Finally, we typically will not speak with our friends about our sense of self when all is well. We will approach them when we have questions, hesitations, and concerns. We will bring up our identity when we are having trouble fitting together disparate projects, struggling to reconcile competing values, or wrestling with how to interpret some troubling event.

What our friends will provide when at their best is an external perspective on our life story. They will tell us how things look from their point of view. This input will include indicating where they believe we go aright and where we go astray. For instance, they may note where our narrative fits the bare facts as they see them, and where it does not. They may also speak to whether our projects reflect our own underlying values. Finally, they may tell us whether they think our values are worth accepting in the first place. Ideally, our friends will not just give us a thumbs up or down regarding our projects, values, and narratives. They will assist with the process of working through the problems that arise along the way. This assistance will involve suggesting and helping us decide between alternative possibilities—alternative projects to pursue, values to embrace, or even frameworks to use for interpreting our lives.

Two points about this model deserve emphasis. First, we are not merely to seek recognition and validation of our existing beliefs from our friends. (This is what Hegel recommends on some readings of the Phenomenology of Spirit.) Sincere affirmation can be a great thing when it comes, of course. It can bolster our confidence during periods of self-doubt. It can stabilize us during times of psychological upheaval. We probably need it more than we acknowledge. But affirmation is only part of what we need to get from our friends on the dialogical model of selfhood. We also need to know when our friends disagree with us and have insights we have overlooked. We may even gain more from those who look at our lives from a different point of view. Contrary to what Judge William says, the best friends may not be those who share our worldview.91

91 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Part II, 319–21.
Second, the dialogical model does not recommend treating our friends as absolute authorities. We are not to use their judgment as the standard against which to measure our own. That is, we ought not to embrace a project or value just because our friends recommend it. Nor ought we to abandon one we hold dear just because our friends object to it. Our friends’ assent should be neither necessary nor sufficient for our own. (That is how Kierkegaard seems to view the proposal in *The Sickness Unto Death* and why he takes a dim view of it.)

The goal is to balance our friends’ points of view against our own. There are several ways to cash out this ideal. One way is to count it as a serious but defeasible mark in favor of an idea if our friends endorse it and then to count it as a serious but defeasible mark against an idea if our friends oppose it. In other words, we should treat our friends’ judgments as important but not all-swamping pieces of evidence to accommodate. This approach does not rule out departing from what our friends think if we believe they are mistaken. In Kierkegaard’s language, the path of the single individual that swings off from the way of others remains open. But it is a path we must take tentatively and only upon reflection. We must continue to acknowledge the possibility that our friends are right after all.

As these points makes clear, there are differences between the dialogical account of selfhood and Kierkegaard’s religious account. Relying on our friends is unlike relying on God. We do not treat our friends as absolute authorities. Nor do we use their views as the criterion against which to measure our own. We also do not receive from them final answers about who we are or who we should become. Thus, strictly speaking, our friends are not a “power that establishes [us].” We do not “transparently rest” in them, as Anti-Climacus says we should rest in God.

It is appropriate to ask at this point about the cost of my departures from Kierkegaard’s view. Kierkegaard himself, we know, will not approve of them. He takes a dim view of using human others to develop our sense of self. He places it a bit above trying to gain recognition from one’s cattle and far below trying to become a self before God. But the most important test is whether the dialogical model retains the benefits of Kierkegaard’s approach. That is, does it enable us to overcome the problems plaguing the traditional models of authenticity? If the dialogical model is to serve as a viable alternative to Kierkegaard’s religious model, it must do so. It cannot just throw us back into the situation he wanted to avoid. Let us consider the matter carefully.

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95 Ibid., 14, 48, 131.
To begin with, the dialogical model is like the constitution model in that it does not tell us exactly who we are. It does not say what ingredients make up our true self, as the inner sense model helpfully does. Nor does it place restrictions on the kind of values or projects we could make central to our identity. Thus, the dialogical model appears to suffer from a version of the guidance problem. It seems to leave us with too many options and no good way to sort between them.

But this is not quite right. The dialogical model does not leave us empty handed. It offers us a procedure for sorting between our options and distinguishing between better and worse ways to go. First, we are to consult our own initial intuitions, instincts and judgments. Then, we are to run these past our friends. We are to ask our friends to consult their intuitions and to offer us their advice, criticisms, and suggestions. Finally, we are to embrace the projects, values, and interpretations of our lives that emerge from these discussions. The process here may not be as simple as doing whatever God says. It also may not lead to the same kind of clear-cut answers about who we really are. But it does give us a non-random way to sort through and rank the paths before us. Thus, it does not leave us with the guidance problem.

We might worry about the fact that the dialogical model asks us to rely on our intuitions. As noted before, our intuitions can go astray. They can lead in immoral directions. Of course, the dialogical model installs a buffer against the vicious tendencies of our intuitions. It requires us to run them by our friends. But if our intuitions can go astray, so too can our friends’ intuitions. History supplies no shortage of examples of groups led by honest conscience to do terrible things. Thus, the dialogical model might seem to suffer from a version of the moral problem.

In response, I concede that the dialogical model assumes our instincts and intuitions are not wholly unreliable. To some degree they track what is right and good, both for us and in general. But the dialogical model also assumes our intuitions and judgments are not wholly reliable. Indeed, without this assumption, we would not need other people. We would be fine with the inner sense model or any other model that leaves us to our own resources.

This moderate position reflects Kierkegaard’s own attitude. He is most well known for his negative comments on the topic. For instance, in Fragments, Johannes Climacus rejects the Socratic thesis that the truth lies within. We are naturally “outside the truth” or “polemical against the truth,” Climacus says. A skeptical view also pervades Postscript and Christian Discourses. Both texts contain the refrain that we cannot do

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97 The dialogical model is also not a substantive model in the sense that it does not say what a self is in general. This is on purpose. I intend the model to be agnostic about the metaphysics. It will fit with Kierkegaard’s view that selves are stories. But it does not require a commitment to this idea. In addition, the dialogical model is consistent with Anthony Rudd’s position that there is a fact of the matter about who we are (Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach [Oxford University Press, 2012], 79–99). But it also something an anti-realist such as Sartre could take on board. Dialoguing with our friends could either be a way of uncovering the truth about our identity, or a way of creating our identity.

anything good—or get anything right—without God’s help. Yet, as Anthony Rudd argues, these are not Kierkegaard’s final words on the matter. He often makes remarks that suggest a more optimistic attitude. In *Fragments*, for example, we have the ability to recognize God when he arrives. We would not have this power if we were completely hopeless. In *Sickness Unto Death*, we learn how the human problem is not ignorance of the good as Socrates claimed. It is rather a failure to will the good. But our wills could not be set against the good if we lacked awareness of the good. Kierkegaard makes a similar point in his *Journals and Papers*. He says, “The ethical presupposes that every person knows what the ethical is, and why? Because the ethical demands that every man shall realize it at every moment, but then he surely has to know it.” Thus, following Rudd, I find it best to interpret Kierkegaard as holding a moderate view. He thinks our instincts and intuitions are somewhat but not entirely reliable.

A moderate position is also defensible from a philosophical perspective. Complete skepticism about our instincts and intuitions would be paralyzing. We would have trouble deciding what to do most of the time. Complete skepticism would also be psychologically impossible. We cannot help but take ourselves as getting things right sometimes and to some degree. On the other hand, complete trust in ourselves would be unreasonable. Our minds are finite. We cannot attend to everything. We are always missing or neglecting some important considerations. In addition, our minds are fallible. We never reason perfectly well or think with perfect accuracy about the considerations we do grasp. We are prone to mistakes of interpretation and inference.

We might wonder at this point how our friends are supposed to help us. Their minds will not be any better than our minds. They too will suffer from blind spots and be prone to mistakes. What I wish to emphasize is that our friends need not be perfect in order to benefit us. They do not even need to be wiser or more insightful than we are. Our friends help us primarily because their minds are different from ours. They see different considerations, make different connections, and imagine different possibilities. Thus, they can fill in the gaps in our thinking. In addition, our friends are unlikely to make exactly the same errors in reasoning. So, they can supply an independent check on our calculations, judgments, and interpretations. They can catch our mistakes. In these respects, two or three fallible minds are better than one. There is no guarantee of suc-

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cess, of course. The fact that wise friends support our ways does not entail with logical certainty that we are headed in the right direction. Even groups of wise friends can go astray. But with friends by our side we are less likely to make mistakes, including moral ones.

The dialogical model also guards against the moral problem in a second way. It requires us to respect our friends and care about them. We must treat them with moral regard, eschewing projects that harm or endanger them. More positively, we must include among our projects the promotion of the good of our friends. The reasoning here is straightforward. If we do not care about our friends, they are unlikely to help us. They are unlikely to invest the time and energy required to talk with us about our identities. Note that our motivational structure here cannot be purely egoistic. We cannot care about our friends only because they benefit us. We must care about them for their own sake. Friends who feel they are of merely instrumental value tend to back away.

Of course, there is more to morality than loving our friends. Requiring us to treat our friends well says nothing about how we ought to treat strangers and acquaintances let alone enemies. Moreover, it is possible to do well by one’s friends but otherwise be a vicious person. Still, saying we must love at least some others in order to succeed at the problem of selfhood is an important step in the direction of morality. It is certainly a step beyond what we find in either the inner sense or the constitution model.

Finally, let us turn to the third problem with traditional models of authenticity, the continuity problem. The benefits of friendship are most obvious here. Supporting words from friends can sustain us during moments of doubt. Their affirmation can shore up our commitment to our values when it wavers. It can also keep us going when we start to worry about the merits of our projects. This point is especially clear when we think about periods of depression and sorrow. We often cannot recognize the worthiness of our goals during such times. We cannot see for ourselves why they matter. If all we had to go on was our own judgment, we would abandon our goals. There would be nothing left to buoy us. The same is not true if we work out our goals in dialogue with our friends. For then our goals are not just the product of our own judgments. They are also underwritten by the judgments of others. This outside support gives us reason to continue even when we have our own personal doubts.

Friendships also help with continuity in a subtler way. As Bernard Williams argues, friendships condition us to develop stable and coherent identities.106 How so? Well, for friends to be worth having, we must be able to count on them. We must be able to get their help and advice when we need it. But we have a hard time counting on our friends if they are erratic. If their behavior is all over the map, they may not be there when we need them. If their values are unpredictable, their help may not be beneficial when it does come. Thus, Williams thinks, to get what we need, we pressure our friends to develop stable and coherent identities. Of course, they do the same to us. Indeed, they are most likely to become dependable for us only if we return the favor. Now we need

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not make our lives perfectly stable and coherent to win good friends. Some amount of unpredictability will not ward off others. It may even attract them. But if we are perpetually and dramatically changing the structure and direction of our lives, we are unlikely to acquire the kind of friends we need for meaningful dialogue.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to develop a secular alternative to Kierkegaard’s model of authentic selfhood. I have maintained that we can hold on to the motivating insight behind his view. We can take on board the idea that we will fail at the project of selfhood if we try to go it alone. We must rely on others if we want to figure out who we are and who we should become. The difficulty with Kierkegaard’s account has to do with the specific other on whom we are to depend. He thinks we must turn to God and receive our identities from him. This is not a live option for many people in our modern, secular age. They no longer believe in God. Or, they no longer believe in a God who has a plan for their lives and communicates this plan to them. In response, I have pointed out that God is not the only other who can help us in the ways we need. Human others can provide assistance as well. Indeed, if we dialogue with our friends about our identities, we can gain many of the benefits God is supposed to provide.

Of course, friends are not a perfect substitute for God. They will not do everything God does on Kierkegaard’s framework. Most notably, they will not provide clear-cut answers to questions about what we should do with our lives or what type of person we should become. But our friends can provide meaningful guidance here. They can offer suggestions about how to proceed with our lives. They can propose projects for us to adopt and offer interpretations of our life stories for us to consider. Moreover, our friends can help us see when we are going astray. They can call attention to the ways our view of ourselves does not fit the facts and point out when our goals rest on dubious assumptions. Finally, the friendship model addresses the other two problems facing traditional models of authenticity. It eases the worry that our projects will become indifferent or antagonistic toward other people. And it reduces the chance that we will end up with a fragmentary or unstable identity.