

# Kierkegaard on the Transformative Power of Art

Antony Aumann  
Northern Michigan University  
aaumann@nmu.edu

## 1 Kierkegaard's Therapeutic Project

Kierkegaard's project is first and foremost a therapeutic one. Although he makes theological points and defends philosophical theses, he is not primarily a theologian or philosopher. Instead, he is a "physician of the soul."<sup>1</sup> He aims to help us get better, existentially speaking—to cure us of our spiritual ills. And what he thinks we need to overcome our anxiety and despair is a transformation. In particular, we have to turn our backs on the goal of self-gratification. We must devote our lives to God or the Good rather than ourselves. In sum, Kierkegaard's prescription for our existential ailments is that we leave behind "the aesthetic life" and head in an ethical or religious direction.<sup>2</sup>

The central question facing Kierkegaard is thus a practical one. How can he inspire such transformations? How can he get his readers to change who they are at a fundamental level? Following Ryan Kemp and others, I will argue that reason is not the proper tool for the task.<sup>3</sup> No mere argument, even if cogent or sound, can move people in the way Kierkegaard wants to move them. Yet, I will maintain that where reason fails, art can succeed. Indeed, to the degree that Kierkegaard ever inspires transformations, it is in virtue of the beauty of his words and the aesthetic appeal of his stories rather than the force of his logic.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Transformational Change

To appreciate the challenge facing Kierkegaard, we need to understand the kind of change he wants to effect. His goal is to inspire "qualitative changes" that are as dramatic as "changing water into wine":

There is no analogy to a human being's metamorphosis of development insofar as he undergoes the highest development: to subject himself to the absolute qualification of spirit. The plant as a seedling is essentially what it becomes as a developed plant, and so it is also with an animal, but not with a child.... [T]he metamorphosis is such a qualitative change that it cannot be explained by the little-by-little of a direct development.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> SUD 23.

<sup>2</sup> PV 5-11. The idea that the ethical and religious ways of life are higher than aesthetic ways of life is also suggested by Climacus (CUP 1:571-72).

<sup>3</sup> Ryan S. Kemp, "Kierkegaard's 'A,' the Aesthete: Aestheticism and the Limits of Philosophy," in *Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms*, ed. Katarina Nun and Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 17 (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1–25; Ryan S. Kemp, "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation," *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 100, no. 2 (2018): 202–231; see also Rob Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); John Lippitt, "Getting the Story Straight: Kierkegaard, MacIntyre and Some Problems with Narrative," *Inquiry* 50, no. 1 (2007): 34–69; Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 339–55.

<sup>4</sup> In broad strokes, this is similar to the claim defended by Walter Weitzke in "The Single Individual and the Normative Question," *The European Legacy* 18, no. 7 (2013): 896–911.

<sup>5</sup> CUP 1:553-54/SKS 7:503. For other references to the transition between stages of existence as a "qualitative change," "qualitative leap," "qualitative decision," or something similar, see JP 1.32, 1.34, 1.110, 1.352, 3.22, 3.199, 3.416-17, 3.725; CUP VII 3, 17, 76, 83, 231, 293, 330, 333, 337, 379, 385, 436, 483n, 490, 528; WA 92; BA 134; PF 73-76.

Christianity changes water into wine; it denies man the earthly, but gives him the eternal; he must die to the world, but then he becomes spirit. Is not the change of animal-creation to “spirit” the same as changing water into wine?<sup>6</sup>

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus describes the change we must undergo in equally dramatic terms. He says we have to become “a different person...a person of a different quality or, as we can also call it, a new person.”<sup>7</sup>

Philosophers today refer to these changes as “transformations.” On Laurie Paul’s influential account, transformations have two parts.<sup>8</sup> First, they involve a shift in our desires, preferences, and values. In a transformation, we come to care about things we did not care about before. Second, transformations involve a shift in our epistemic standpoint. In a transformation, we enter a new way of seeing the world, one we did not and could not have understood beforehand. Classic examples of transformations include getting married, deciding to become a parent, starting a new career, or enlisting in the military. But Paul claims that religious conversions are paradigm cases as well.<sup>9</sup> I will return to this point in a moment.

Many of the changes we make in our lives have obvious justifications. They serve goals we already embrace or provide benefits we already desire. We might give up social work to become a lawyer, for instance, because we want to make enough money to buy our dream house. Or we might start volunteering at the local food pantry because we want to impress college admissions committees.

Transformations are different in this regard; they defy easy or obvious rational justifications. There are two reasons why. First, because transformational changes involve a shift in our epistemic standpoint, we do not know what we are getting ourselves into prior to making them. The world will look different on the other side of the change. We will see details and make connections that we currently cannot. We will also recognize and engage with values that are opaque to us at present. As a result, it is impossible to know what it will look like and feel like for us to embody this new way of life. Thus, it is impossible to know whether it will appeal to us. I will call this *the cognitive hurdle* to motivating transformational changes.

Second, suppose we could see what life would be like for us on the other side of the transformation. Suppose we could identify the benefits the new way of life had to offer. This is still not enough to motivate us to change our lives. For, in addition to knowing what the benefits of the new way of life are, we have to care about these benefits. They have to matter to us or gain traction with us as we are currently constituted. In other words, they have to speak to the concerns and desires we possess prior to making the change. This does not happen in the case of transformations.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to transformations, the benefits of the new way of life speak to cares and desires that we do not yet possess.

---

<sup>6</sup> JP 1:32/SKS 25:421.

<sup>7</sup> PF 18; emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Ann Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10–18; “Transformative Experience: Replies to Pettigrew, Barnes and Campbell,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91, no. 3 (2015): 801; see also Agnes Callard, “Proleptic Reasons,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 11 (2016): 129–154; Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Paul, *Transformative Experience*, 2014, 16.

<sup>10</sup> In this paper, I focus on cases where the new way of life we are considering speaks to values we do not accept at present but that we might come to accept if we actually adopt it. Paul raises the possibility of another set of cases. She observes that sometimes the prospective way of life *does* speak to our current values and the problem is that pursuing the new way of life may change our values such that they cease to align with what the new way of life has to offer. More generally, Paul claims, we often cannot predict how transformative experiences will affect our values. We cannot know ahead of time what we will come to care about—or stop caring about (ibid., 17). For the sake of simplicity, I set aside these important complications.

They appeal to a value system that we have not yet embraced. This is *the conative hurdle* to motivating transformational change. It requires caring about things we do not already care about.

To illustrate the problem, consider the case of Marge, a music appreciation teacher who wants to inspire her students to love classical music.<sup>11</sup> At present, she is frustrated. Most of her students do not do their homework. Or, if they do, it is for the wrong reasons. They complete their lessons to earn good grades and not because they care about the music for its own sake. Part of the problem is that classical music is complicated. It takes a lot of training to understand the subtleties of counterpoint. Thus, Marge can talk about how rewarding it is to listen to classical music, but novices, such as her students, are not in position to perceive these rewards for themselves. The other part of the problem is that the preferences of her students point in the wrong direction. Because of their upbringing or the influence of their friends, they only like rock or rap. So, even if Marge could teach her students to hear what is enjoyable about classical music, it would not appeal to them as they are currently constituted. Making clear the value of classical music would not be enough to get them to do their homework for its own sake.

### 3 The Transition between Spheres of Existence

The transition between Kierkegaard's spheres of existence—especially the movement from the aesthetic to the ethical or religious life—has the structure of a transformation.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, it has both of the features that Paul attributes to transformations. First, it involves a radical shift in our core desires, preferences, and values. Entering into the ethical or religious life is a matter of coming to care about God and the Good rather than ourselves.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is a matter of coming to care about God and the Good for their own sake and not just for the instrumental benefits they have to offer us.<sup>14</sup>

Second, the transition to the ethical or religious life involves embracing a new point of view, one that is inaccessible to us beforehand. This reflects an important truth about human existence for Kierkegaard: only someone who has embraced a given perspective can comprehend it. Like is understood only by like, as he repeatedly says:

Like is understood only by like, and that old sentence, whatever is known is known in the mode of the knower, must indeed be amplified in such a way that there is also a mode in which the knower knows nothing whatever or that his knowing amounts to a delusion. With reference to a kind of observation in which it is of importance

---

<sup>11</sup> I adapt this example from Callard, "Proleptic Reasons," 129–30.

<sup>12</sup> For further defense of the idea that the transition between spheres of existence or "qualitative changes" have the structure of transformations, see M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 147; Kemp, "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation"; Ryan Kemp, "Kierkegaard on the Transformative Significance of Aesthetic Depression" (n.d.); Walter Wietzke, "Practical Reason and the Imagination," *Res Philosophica* 90, no. 4 (2013): 525–44.

<sup>13</sup> On one interpretation, Kierkegaard's spheres of existence are differentiated by what each one identifies as the highest good. The aesthetic life is defined by the pursuit of one's own personal desires. The ethical life is defined by pursuit of the Good. Finally, the religious life is devoted to pursuit of God. For a discussion of this account, see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1983), 33–36; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chaps. 4–6.

<sup>14</sup> UDVS 36–37. The notion that God or the Good, which Kierkegaard sometimes identifies with each other, must be willed for its own sake also comes out in the pseudonymous texts as well as the unpublished journals (CUP 1:394; JP 4:234). For further defense of this interpretation, see Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good: Virtue, Happiness, and the Kingdom of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 82, 96, 106, 113, 218.

that the observer be in a definite state, it holds true that when he is not in that state he does not know anything whatever.<sup>15</sup>

Kierkegaard emphasizes this point when it comes to religion. He writes in his journals that things look different through the eyes of faith. The believer sees and understands things that others cannot.<sup>16</sup> In *For Self-Examination*, he adds that the Christian's worldview is incomprehensible to outsiders.<sup>17</sup>

It follows that Kierkegaard faces the same obstacles as Marge. For simplicity, we can focus on the religious side of his therapeutic project. Because Kierkegaard's readers are not yet religious, they do not know what it would be like to be religious. Kierkegaard can sing the praises of the God-relationship all he wants. He can talk about how knights of faith experience peace and comfort in their ability to find God everywhere.<sup>18</sup> But Kierkegaard's readers are not in a position to see these purported benefits for themselves. Thus, they cannot say whether they would find the religious life as appealing as Kierkegaard does if they experienced it first-hand. This is the *cognitive hurdle* to motivating religious conversions.

In addition, even if Kierkegaard could get his readers to see for themselves the value of the religious life, it would not be enough to motivate them to become religious. For, at present, they do not have an affinity for spiritual goods. Their tastes are rather for earthly pleasures. In other words, as Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms often attest, their problem is not just a lack of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> It is not just that they do not know what they are missing. It is also that their desires or preferences are not oriented in the right way; they do not want what the religious life has to offer. Kierkegaard's way of putting this point is to say that people lack the relevant kind of passion, inwardness, or subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> This is the *conative hurdle* to motivating religious conversions.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> CUP 1:52/SKS 7:56. See also JP 1:18/SKS 19:397; CUP 371–72/SKS 7:337–39; CD 223–24/SKS 10:231–32; WL 16/SKS 9:24; PF 25/SKS 4:232. For discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood*, pp. 92–95.

<sup>16</sup> “To understand that for reason [the content of faith] is the absurd, to talk about it in this way quite calmly to a third party, granting that it is the absurd, maintaining the stress that the other must regard it as the absurd—and then still believe it. At the same time it naturally follows that for the believer it is not the absurd.” (JP 1:5–6/SKS 23:176–77)

<sup>17</sup> “But then is the poor Christian indeed rich? Yes, he certainly is rich, and in fact you will recognize him by this: he does not want to speak about his earthly poverty but rather about his heavenly wealth. Therefore at times his words sound very strange. While everything around him reminds of his poverty, he speaks about his wealth—ah, and this is why no one but a Christian can understand him.” (CD 17/SKS 10:29; see also CD 31/SKS 10:42)

<sup>18</sup> CD 13–91/SKS 10:25–98. See Sharon Krishek and Rick Anthony Furtak, “A Cure for Worry? Kierkegaardian Faith and the Insecurity of Human Existence,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72, no. 3 (2012): 157–75.

<sup>19</sup> The idea that our problem is not a lack of knowledge or understanding is a theme throughout Kierkegaard's pseudonymous and signed writings (CUP 1:22, 242, 249–50, 568, 606–7; TDIO 99–101; TA 77, 104–5).

<sup>20</sup> For support, see TA 68, 77, 104–5; JP 3:428/SKS 20:119; CUP 1:22, 33, 199–201, 242, 249–50, 568, 606–7; TDIO 99–101.

<sup>21</sup> To clarify, the problem is not that there are no reasons to lead the religious life. There are reasons—and good ones. It is just that these reasons arrive “too late.” They are available and compelling only to those who have already made the leap of faith. Converts are able to talk about how they can feel God's presence everywhere, and the devoted can say that faith has been the remedy for their most fundamental spiritual concerns. But the religious outsider neither sees these values clearly enough nor cares about them deeply enough to find them motivating. This is what Rob Compaijen, Ryan Kemp, and Walter Weitzke mean when they say that at least some people who embrace the aesthetic life lack an “internal reason” to adopt the ethical or religious life. See Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View*; Kemp, “Kierkegaard's ‘A,’ the Aesthete: Aestheticism and the Limits of Philosophy”; Kemp, “The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation”; Wietzke, “Practical Reason and the Imagination.” For other discussions of the interpretation of Kierkegaard proposed here, see C. Stephen Evans, “The Epistemological Significance of Transformative Religious Experiences: A Kierkegaardian Exploration,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (1991): 180–192; C. Stephen Evans, “Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections,” *Faith and*

## 4 The Imagination Solution

Such considerations have led commentators in a couple of directions. One response has been to follow Alasdair MacIntyre and interpret Kierkegaard as saying that the transition to the religious sphere requires an irrational or a-rational leap.<sup>22</sup> Through sheer force of will, we must make ourselves believe what we lack reason to believe.

This reading of Kierkegaard is controversial, but there are texts that support it. In his journals, Kierkegaard states that all qualitative transitions involve “a leap.”<sup>23</sup> And in *Postscript*, we read that leaps are made “by virtue of the absurd.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is a theme in *Postscript* that religious conversion is a matter of passion rather than understanding.<sup>25</sup> Finally, there are journal entries where Kierkegaard says that an unconditional commitment to God cannot be based on reasons.<sup>26</sup>

An alternative to MacIntyre’s response has been to interpret Kierkegaard as a kind of Calvinist.<sup>27</sup> On this view, Kierkegaard holds that the religious life is not something we choose; it is something God chooses for us. We do not transform ourselves; we are transformed by his power. As such, we do not need to be given a rational justification for becoming religious. We do not need to be informed about the benefits of the religious life or persuaded to care about those benefits. Motivational tactics are completely irrelevant to the process of transformation.

This second interpretation also enjoys textual support. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus paints a picture of Christianity according to which God does absolutely everything for the believer.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the idea that we can do

---

*Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 241–53; K. Brian Söderquist, “On Faith and Reason(s): Kierkegaard’s Logic of Conviction,” in *The Kierkegaardian Mind*, ed. Adam Buben, Eleanor Helms, and Patrick Stokes (New York: Routledge, 2019), 227–38.

<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 36–50. MacIntyre’s position is extensively discussed and criticized in John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, eds., *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001). For more recent discussion of irrationalist readings of Kierkegaard, see Adam Buben, “Neither Irrationalist Nor Apologist: Revisiting Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard,” *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 3 (2013): 318–326.

<sup>23</sup> “How does a new quality emerge from an unbroken quantitative determinant? ... A leap.... Every quality consequently emerges with a leap” (JP 3.17). Howard and Edna Hong comment: “Based on this principle of the absolute difference between man and God, between immanence and transcendence, Kierkegaard clearly distinguishes between the various spheres of existence man can traverse in his spiritual development. In making these distinctions, Kierkegaard accordingly stresses that the transition from the one sphere to the other can take place by means of a leap” (JP 3.900).

<sup>24</sup> “[T]he leap is an act of isolation, since it is left to the single individual to decide whether he will by virtue of the absurd accept in faith that which cannot be thought” (CUP 1:100). Famously, *Fear and Trembling* also states that the movement of faith is made “by virtue of the absurd” (FT 35).

<sup>25</sup> For example, see CUP 1:33, 568.

<sup>26</sup> “Just as the statement must read: faith cannot be comprehended; the maximum is, it can be comprehended that it cannot be comprehended—so also: reasons cannot be given for an unconditioned [commitment]; the maximum is, reasons can be given for the impossibility of giving reasons for an unconditioned [commitment]” (JP 4:509).

<sup>27</sup> For defenses or partial defenses of this view, see C. Stephen Evans, “Does Kierkegaard Think Beliefs Can Be Directly Willed?,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 26, no. 3 (1989): 182; C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 140; Kemp, “The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard’s Account of Ethical Transformation”; Shannon Nason, “Contingency, Necessity, and Causation in Kierkegaard’s Theory of Change,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012): 141–162; Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism*, vol. 28 (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 83.

<sup>28</sup> PF 13-18.

nothing without God is a constant refrain in Kierkegaard's writings.<sup>29</sup> Thus, it is no surprise when we read in Kierkegaard's journals that spiritual changes in the human personality are miracles.<sup>30</sup>

I do not wish to dismiss either of these responses to the question of how Kierkegaard thinks transformations occur. Each of them captures an aspect of Kierkegaard's authorship—an authorship we may not be able to wrangle into a coherent system. Yet, neither addresses what I take to be the primary question facing Kierkegaard. Neither explains what Kierkegaard's role is supposed to be as our existential therapist. On the one hand, if God does everything, what is left for Kierkegaard to do? On the other hand, if the movement of faith is just an irrational leap, why does Kierkegaard have to write thousands of pages guiding us through the process?

Fortunately, a number of scholars have developed interpretations of Kierkegaard that avoid the extremes of Calvinism and MacIntyreanism. The most promising are those that assign a central role to the imagination.<sup>31</sup> It is easy to see the appeal of this approach. In *Sickness Unto Death*, we read that the function of our imaginations is to provide us with an image of our higher selves.<sup>32</sup> And it is natural to think that a vision of our higher selves might draw us to these selves. Seeing who we can become might motivate us to take the steps needed to actualize these higher possibilities. The role for Kierkegaard in this process is obvious. His task is to inspire our imaginations—to help us envision our higher, transformed selves. Indeed, this is what we find in Kierkegaard's writings. The characters he creates disclose ways we could live. They are mirrors that reflect back to us our possible future selves.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, how exactly is this story supposed to work? How can our imaginations—aided by Kierkegaard's literary art—do what reason cannot? How can they overcome the cognitive and conative hurdles that stand in the way of transformational change? In what follows, I will provide answers to these questions.

## 5 The Cognitive Obstacle

I said before that Kierkegaard posits a qualitative divide between the spheres of existence. This seems to entail that only someone who occupies a given sphere can know what it is like to occupy that sphere. Only the Christian can know what it is like to be a Christian and *mutatis mutandis* for every stage on life's way. Climacus writes:

---

<sup>29</sup> "Insofar as a person does not know himself in such a way that he knows that he himself is capable of nothing at all, he does not actually become conscious in the deeper sense that God is.... The person who himself is capable of nothing at all cannot undertake the least thing without God's help" (EUD 321-22). See also CUP 461-71; CD 63-65, 298-300/SKS 10:72-74, 323-25.

<sup>30</sup> "We may think that this miracle [of changing an individual person] is much easier [than feeding the five thousand], but it is not so. Every qualitative change [in the personality], every infinite change in quality, is genuinely a miracle" (JP 3.199). For Howard and Edna Hong's discussion of this passage, see JP 3.819.

<sup>31</sup> For versions of this position, see Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*; M. Jamie Ferreira, "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 207-34; David J. Gouwens, "Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1982, 204-220; Kemp, "Kierkegaard's 'A,' the Aesthete: Aestheticism and the Limits of Philosophy"; Kemp, "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation"; Wietzke, "Practical Reason and the Imagination"; Anna Strelis, "The Intimacy between Reason and Emotion: Kierkegaard's 'Simultaneity of Factors,'" *Res Philosophica* 90, no. 4 (2013): 461-80; Anna Strelis Söderquist, *Kierkegaard on Dialogical Education: Vulnerable Freedom* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016). For a recent discussion of Kierkegaard's view of imagination, see Eleanor Helms, "Imagination and Belief," in *The Kierkegaardian Mind*, ed. Adam Buben, Eleanor Helms, and Patrick Stokes (New York: Routledge, 2019), 293-304.

<sup>32</sup> "[T]he imagination is...the rendition of the self as the self's possibility" (SUD 31).

<sup>33</sup> See FSE 25-26, 40-4/SKS 13:53-54, 66-70; SLW 8/SKS 6:16. Many scholars have commented on this point. Yet, usually the idea that Kierkegaard's writings serve as mirrors is taken to mean that they show us our current selves or who we are at present. This much is true and worth emphasizing. But what I am proposing now is that Kierkegaard's writings also reflect back to us alternative versions of ourselves. They show us ways we *could* live or *could* be.

That one can know what Christianity is without being a Christian must, then, be answered in the affirmative. Whether one can know what it is to be a Christian without being one is something else, and it must be answered in the negative.<sup>34</sup>

Taken at face value, this point spells disaster for Kierkegaard's project. If I cannot know what it would be like for me to be religious prior to becoming religious, then I cannot know what I am getting myself into by choosing the religious life. And if I cannot know what I am getting myself into by choosing the religious life, then I cannot take ownership over this choice. I cannot self-consciously endorse it as reflecting my own subjective values and beliefs.<sup>35</sup> This is what Anti-Climacus is getting at in his famous account of imagination in *Sickness Unto Death*:

As a rule, imagination...is the capacity for all capacities. When all is said and done, whatever of...willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, we are capable of willing something in the sense of deliberately choosing it only if we are capable of imagining it. Anti-Climacus reaffirms this point in *Practice in Christianity*:

Every human possess the imagination, which is the first condition for what becomes of a person, for the will is the second and in the ultimate sense the decisive condition.<sup>37</sup>

It follows that if Kierkegaard thinks the religious life is something we can deliberately choose, then he must allow that we can imagine it.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, to say we can imagine what it would be like for us to be religious prior to becoming religious is not to say we can do so either perfectly or without assistance. This is how we can accommodate Kierkegaard's claim that there is a qualitative divide between the spheres of existence. We can read him as holding that, if we are not religious ourselves, we need help from the other side.<sup>39</sup> We need someone who already embraces the religious life to describe it for us—God to reveal it to us.<sup>40</sup> In addition, even with outside assistance, we can at best see the religious life "as through a glass darkly."<sup>41</sup> The clarity of a face-to-face vision comes only with actual conversion. Thus, even though it is wrong to say "like is understood only by like," it is right to say that "like is *fully* understood only by like."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> CUP 372/SKS 7:337–39.

<sup>35</sup> For a recent philosophical defense of this point, see Paul, "Transformative Experience," 2015, 806–13.

<sup>36</sup> SUD 30-31/SKS 11:146-47.

<sup>37</sup> PC 186/SKS 12:186. See also Kemp, "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation," 211.

<sup>38</sup> For further discussion, see Antony Aumann, *Art and Selfhood: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 91–95. Another famous problem lurks here. If only a religious person can know what it is like to be a Christian, and if Climacus is not a Christian by his own admission (CUP 1:466/SKS 7:424), then Climacus cannot tell us what it is like to be a Christian. A similar problem arises for Johannes de Silentio, who claims not to have faith (FT 36-37) but nonetheless tries to describe what faith is like in *Fear and Trembling*. For discussion, see James Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors," in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario Von der Ruhr (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 248–331; Paul Muench, "Understanding Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus in the 'Postscript': Mirror of the Reader's Faults or Socratic Exemplar?," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2008), 424–440.

<sup>39</sup> Kemp also defends a version of this interpretive claim; see "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation," 209.

<sup>40</sup> In the language of *Philosophical Fragments*, the truth does not already lie within us. It must come to us from the outside. See PF 13, 15/SKS 4:222, 224.

<sup>41</sup> I Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>42</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood: A Kierkegaardian Account*, 91–95.



Kierkegaard often emphasizes God's role here, playing up humanity's need for a revelation.<sup>43</sup> But this does not preclude a role for Kierkegaard himself. Not that he ever received a divine revelation. He denies this, repeatedly saying that he lacks the authority of someone who has received a revelation.<sup>44</sup> Instead, his writings convey the revelation already found in the Bible. They are another expression of the same way of life described in that "old familiar text."<sup>45</sup> Climacus elaborates on this point by saying that Kierkegaard's writings give us additional pictures of religious inwardness.<sup>46</sup> They provide us with further accounts of what it looks and feels like to occupy the religious sphere.<sup>47</sup> This is part of what makes *Fear and Trembling* so valuable. Reading it affords us a glimpse into the mental life of Abraham, the father of faith, as he struggles to fulfill God's commands.<sup>48</sup>

## 6 The Conative Obstacle

It is sometimes tempting to think that overcoming the cognitive hurdle to transformational change should be enough. If only Kierkegaard could provide his readers with an accurate vision of the higher life—if only he could get them to see the religious life for what it is—they would want to pursue it. On this view, Kierkegaard's therapeutic task is just a clarificatory one. All he does and all he needs to do is to make our possibilities clear to us.<sup>49</sup>

I readily admit that Kierkegaard's task is *partly* a matter of clearing things up for us.<sup>50</sup> But this cannot be the whole story. Kierkegaard's task cannot *just* be a clarificatory one. For he rejects the Socratic view that what holds us back is mere ignorance.<sup>51</sup> Our problem is not just a lack of knowledge. Indeed, we can have all the knowledge we need and still come up short.

---

<sup>43</sup> For example, Climacus writes, "The individual is therefore unable to gain the consciousness of sin by himself.... The consciousness of sin...is a change of the subject himself, which shows that outside the individual there must be the power that makes clear to him that he has become a person other than he was by coming into existence, that he became a sinner. This power is the god in time" (CUP 1:584).

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard repeatedly asserts that he writes "without authority" (WA 99n/SKS 11:103n; FSE 3/SKS 13:33; PV 6n, 12/SKS 13:12n, 19; JP 6:62/Pap. X-6 B 41). In this regard, Kierkegaard distances himself from his contemporary, Adolph Peter Adler, who claimed to have had a divine revelation that inspired his works (BA xi). Of course, Kierkegaard does claim that the direction of his authorship was shaped by divine guidance or "Governance" (PV 71-90).

<sup>45</sup> CUP 1:629-30; WA 165.

<sup>46</sup> CUP 1:251-300.

<sup>47</sup> Evans also defends this account of the purpose of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous literature; see *Kierkegaard*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Much the same holds true of *Either/Or*. Its value lies in showing us other possible ways of life from the inside. As Climacus puts it, the book's significance "consist[s] in the existence-inwardness of the different stages variously elucidated in passion, irony, pathos, humor, dialectic" (CUP 1:299).

<sup>49</sup> For example, see Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together"; Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 290.

<sup>50</sup> Climacus writes, "If the particular spheres [of existence] are not kept decisively separate from one another, everything is confused" (CUP 1:325). Thus, "the point [of the religious address] is continually to keep the spheres sharply separate from each other by means of the qualitative dialectic, lest everything become one" (CUP 1:436).

<sup>51</sup> "Socrates says it is impossible for a person really to have understood, grasped, perceived the good and then do the evil—for the proof that one has actually comprehended the good is precisely this, that understanding exercises such power over a person that he does it; otherwise the fact that a person does not do the good demonstrates that he has not understood it. This is pure intellectuality, from which Socrates does not emerge; he does not make room for the will, or room within which the will can stir and move" (JP 3.466/X.1 A 392). For other places where Kierkegaard or one of his pseudonyms discusses the Socratic view, see JP 2.537/X.1 A 577; JP 4.220/XI.1 A 334; SUD 87-96.



In our day, it is thought that knowledge determines the issue and that if one just comes to know the truth, the more concisely and quickly the better, one is helped. But existing is something quite different from knowing.<sup>52</sup>

Every person always understands the truth a good deal farther out than he expresses it existentially.... This is something quite different, you see, from that talk about wanting so much to know the truth, along with the notion that if one only understood the truth he would certainly act accordingly.<sup>53</sup>

What do we need in addition to knowledge? Kierkegaard's answer is that we need passion. Climacus writes, "existing...cannot be done without passion."<sup>54</sup> In fact, passion rather than knowledge is what tends to be in short supply. Kierkegaard repeatedly complains in *Two Ages* that people are "devoid of passion."<sup>55</sup> And he adds in his journals, "what our age needs is pathos (just as scurvy needs green vegetables)."<sup>56</sup>

C. Stephen Evans points out that what Kierkegaard means by "passion" is what we ordinarily mean by "care" or "desire."<sup>57</sup> Thus, another way to express Kierkegaard's point is to say that what holds us back—what keeps us from making the transformational changes we need to make in our lives—is that our cares and desires are out of whack. We do not want the right kind of things. In particular, we are not favorably disposed to the religious life. The benefits it has to offer do not appeal to us as we are currently constituted. Thus, if Kierkegaard wants to inspire us to become religious, he has to do more than give us an accurate vision of the religious life. He also has to get us to care about or cultivate a passion for the religious life.

In sum, as I said before, Kierkegaard is in the same situation as Marge. Because Marge's students do not already care about the value of classical music, showing them the value of classical music is not enough to get them to do their homework. Marge has to do something more; she has to bring something else into play. Agnes Callard addresses this problem in her writings on transformations, and her conclusion is that only something extrinsic to classical music will do the trick.<sup>58</sup> Only the promise of some reward (such as good grades) or the fear of some punishment (such as verbal criticism) will move the students to do their homework. Moreover, the extrinsic motivation must speak to the students' current cares and desires. It cannot presuppose more developed tastes than they actually possess.

Yet, introducing extrinsic motivations is still not enough. By themselves, they will not carry the students all the way through the transformation. They will not bring the students all the way to the endpoint of caring about classical music for its own sake. Thus, Callard argues that the extrinsic motivations must have a provisional status.<sup>59</sup> Their purpose must be to get the students to engage with classical music long enough and seriously enough that they start to appreciate it for its own sake. In other words, the teacher must hope that actually listening to classical music—even if for the wrong reasons—will have a transformative effect on her students. It will change their preferences so they align with what classical music has to offer.

---

<sup>52</sup> CUP 1:297/SKS 7:271.

<sup>53</sup> JP 2:537/SKS 24:324.

<sup>54</sup> CUP 1:311.

<sup>55</sup> TA 53, 68, 97, 104.

<sup>56</sup> JP 3:428. The idea that our problem is a lack of passion rather than a lack of knowledge is a persistent theme throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. See TA 68, 77, 104-5; JP 3:428/SKS 20:119; CUP 1:22, 33, 199-201, 242, 249-50, 568, 606-7; TDIO 99-101. For further discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood: A Kierkegaardian Account*, 118-22.

<sup>57</sup> Evans, *Kierkegaard*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> Callard, "Proleptic Reasons," 129-33; Callard, *Aspiration*, 68-73.

<sup>59</sup> Callard, "Proleptic Reasons," 129-33; Callard, *Aspiration*, 68-73.

How is this transformation supposed to occur? How are the students supposed to shift from caring about classical music for extrinsic reasons such as grades to caring about it for its own sake? Satisfying answers here are elusive. But it helps to see that the puzzle is neither new nor unique to the cases under discussion. What is at stake is the question of how habituation works. We know our brains are hardwired to like what we repeatedly do. The more we engage in a behavior, the more we tend to enjoy it. What remains unclear is how and why this happens. There are a number of scientific theories on offer, of course. But I will save the adjudication of them for another time. For now, it will have to suffice to say that the phenomenon occurs regularly in a variety of areas of life. Thus, we should not feel embarrassed to rely on it here.

## 7 Kierkegaard on Extrinsic Motivation

On my view, Kierkegaard accepts a version of Callard's theory. Yet, this might seem wrongheaded. For Callard's theory relies on extrinsic motivations, something Kierkegaard often finds objectionable. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, he accuses the person who wills the Good for the sake of the reward of "double-mindedness."<sup>60</sup> In *Christian Discourses*, he criticizes those who obey God because of what they will get out of it. He says that such people violate the Biblical injunction against serving two masters.<sup>61</sup> Finally, Kierkegaard states in his journals that extrinsic considerations cannot get us to make the transition to the religious life.

Thus there is but one view left, but it is adequate—it is that a person says to himself: As far as venturing everything is concerned, I have no "Why" at all.... That is to say: with the intellectual awareness which a more eminent individual may have these days, no consideration of ends-in-view can get him actually to venture everything.... In the unconditioned all teleology vanishes.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, these passages tell only one side of the story. Other texts tout the extrinsic benefits of morality, religion, or Christianity in particular.<sup>63</sup> In *Either/Or*, Judge William praises the ethical life because it provides a way to avoid despair.<sup>64</sup> Anti-Climacus makes a similar claim about religion in *Sickness Unto Death*. Only by turning to God, he says, can we avoid the torments of self-loathing and lead a psychologically healthy life.<sup>65</sup> In addition, both Climacus and Kierkegaard speak about Christianity's promise of eternal salvation in a way that is reminiscent of Pascal. Climacus even suggests that a desire for eternal happiness is what attracts people to Christianity in the first place.<sup>66</sup> Finally, in *Christian*

---

<sup>60</sup> "If a person is really to will one thing in truth, he must will the good in truth. If a person is to will the good in truth, he must make up his mind to will to renounce all double-mindedness.... [T]he person who wills the good for the sake of reward does not will one thing but is double-minded. The good is one thing; the reward is something else" (UDVS 36-37).

<sup>61</sup> At one point in the discourse against serving two masters, Kierkegaard writes, "God is not something one buys in the shop, or like a piece of property that one, after having sagaciously and circumspectly examined, measures, and calculated for a long time, decides is worth buying" (CD 88).

<sup>62</sup> JP 4:514/SKS 25:66.

<sup>63</sup> For recent discussion of Kierkegaard's views on this topic, see Roe Fremstedal, "Søren Kierkegaard (on Eudaimonism and Autonomy)," in *Perfektionismus Der Autonomie*, ed. Douglas Moggach, Nadine Mooren, and Michael Quante (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2018); Carson Webb, "Kierkegaard's Critique of Eudaimonism: A Reassessment," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no. 3 (2017): 437–462.

<sup>64</sup> EO 2:155-334

<sup>65</sup> "[T]he formula for the state in which there is no despair at all: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith" (SUD 131/SKS 11:242).

<sup>66</sup> CUP 1:16. Robert Adams notes the parallel between Pascal and Kierkegaard on this point. See "Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion," *The Monist* 60, no. 2 (1977): 228–243.

*Discourses*, Kierkegaard asserts that loving God for his own sake is too lofty for human beings. The proper way to relate to God is to cling to him because one needs what he has to offer:

If a person in the most solemn and strongest terms asserted that he loved God, that God, God alone, was his love, his only, his first love, and this person, when asked why, answered, "Because God is the highest, the holiest, the most perfect being"; and if this person, when asked whether he had loved God for any other reason, whether he did not sometimes love God for another reason, answered no—we might well be suspicious of him, that he was a fanatic.... The simple and humble way is to love God because one needs him.... [T]he fundamental and primary basis for a person's love of God is completely to understand that one needs God, loves him simply because one needs him.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Kierkegaard seems to be of two minds about extrinsic motivations. Sometimes he seems for them; other times he seems against them. We can resolve this tension by attributing to him a version of Callard's position. On the one hand, Kierkegaard regards extrinsic motivations as crucial for jump-starting the transformation process. They attract the attention of people who do not already care about God or the Good, getting them to take such things seriously and to engage with them in a preliminary way.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, Kierkegaard believes we have to move beyond extrinsic motivations. They are a ladder we are to climb up but eventually kick away.<sup>69</sup> That is to say, extrinsic motivations get us to engage with God and the Good long enough and intimately enough that we come to care about them for their own sake. This is why Kierkegaard chastises those who pursue God or the Good only for the sake of a reward. Such people have not completed the transformation. They have become stuck at a preliminary stage.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> CD 188/SKS 10:198-99. A similar point is made in the journals. SK claims that "virtue is to be desired for its own sake" but then adds that this is impossible for us sinful human beings. And thus the ideal is actually just approximating this ideal. (JP 4.234)

<sup>68</sup> Rick Furtak has drawn my attention to the following passage where Kierkegaard notes the importance of extrinsic motivations in his own life: "Imagination is what providence uses to take men captive in actuality, in existence. . . . Johannes V. Müller says that there are two great powers around which all revolves: ideas and women. This is entirely correct and is consistent with what I say here about the significance of imagination. Women or ideas are what beckon men out into existence. Naturally there is the great difference that for the thousands who run after a skirt there is not always one who is moved by ideas. As far as I am concerned, it was so difficult to get me out and into an interest in ideas that a girl was used as a middle term against me in a very unusual way." (SKS 2.314; Papirer XI 1 A 288; NB10: 207.)

<sup>69</sup> There has been a lot written about Kierkegaard's approach to "kicking the ladder" strategies. Much of the discussion has to do with the famous passage at the end of *Postscript* in which Climacus revokes the entire book. What I describe here captures one aspect of what Climacus has in mind. The point of the book he has written is to bring us to a place where we no longer need the book. The philosophical issues at stake in the revocation go well beyond this one point, however. For a helpful overview, see Alastair Hannay, "Johannes Climacus' Revocation," in *Kierkegaard's "Concluding Unscientific Postscript": A Critical Guide*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45–63.

<sup>70</sup> This raises once again the question of how we move beyond the preliminary stage. How do we transition *from* caring about God or the Good for the sake of the reward *to* caring about such things for their own sake? Previously, I said that one possible answer is Aristotelian habituation. Yet, we might worry about attributing this solution to Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard often regards habit as a problem rather than a solution. It is something we need to pull ourselves out of rather than something we need to cultivate. (See, e.g., UDVS VIII 161-62; JP 1.216/X.4 A 212.) Yet, Kierkegaard also appears to embrace the idea that there is a good kind of religious habit. He refers to it as a "higher immediacy" in which one spontaneously performs virtuous activities (SLW 64; JP 2.12). (For discussion of this, see Patrick Stokes, "The Problem of Spontaneous Goodness: From Kierkegaard to Løgstrup (via Zhuangzi and Eckhart)," *Continental Philosophy Review* 49, no. 2 (2016): 139–59.) In addition, Kierkegaard's emphasis on repetition and taking up the burden of faith anew each day seems to support the notion that he thinks there is a good kind of habit.

Nevertheless, it remains something of a mystery how exactly habituation might transform us from caring about God or the Good for the sake of the reward to caring about God or the Good for its own sake. It is perhaps on account of this mystery that supernatural explanations have been popular in religious circles. It is Catholic doctrine, for instance, that, as we move start to move towards God, he transforms us (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [New York: Double Day, 2003], secs. 1987–2005). In

## 8 Art as Inspiration

What does this have to do with art? I said earlier that art could give us a vision of our existential possibilities. It could help us see what it would be like to live differently than we do. But art can also help draw us to these possibilities. It can inspire us to leave behind old versions of ourselves and take up new ones. In sum, art can help us overcome the conative hurdle to transformational change.

One way art inspires us is by giving us aesthetically appealing images of our possibilities. An artist may describe some new way of life with beautiful words or depict it with striking visual forms. Alternatively, he or she may embed it in a gripping narrative or have it embodied by a charming character. The result is that we feel pleasure upon viewing, hearing, or reading about the possibility. This pleasure draws us in. It captivates our hearts and minds, pulling us towards the new way of life in such a way that we find ourselves wanting to embody it.<sup>71</sup> This is beauty's great power over us: it makes us want to repeat what we see.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, when it comes to transformations, the hope is that we will eventually stop needing the pull of beauty. We will engage with the new way of life long enough and deeply enough that we come to care about it for its own sake. In other words, the hope is that the aesthetic pleasure we experience when perceiving the beautiful representation of the new way of life will function like rewards, punishments, and other extrinsic motivations. It will be a ladder we climb up but ultimately kick away.

## 9 Kierkegaard's Use of Art

I believe Kierkegaard wants to use art this way—as a means to inspire transformation. Initial evidence is easy to come by. In *Point of View*, Kierkegaard notes that he must begin where his readers are. When trying to motivate them to change their lives, he cannot assume they have cares that they lack. He must speak to desires that they actually possess.

*If One Is Truly to Succeed in Leading a Person to a Specific Place, One Must First and Foremost take Care to Find Him Where **He** Is and Begin There.* This is the secret in the entire art of helping. Anyone who cannot do this is himself under a delusion if he thinks he is able to help someone else.<sup>73</sup>

Kierkegaard also observes that his target audience has aesthetic interests. They live their lives in aesthetic categories and in pursuit of aesthetic ends. Thus, if he wants to reach them, his writing style must appeal to their aesthetic interests.<sup>74</sup> Dry, didactic lectures will not work. He must give them something beautiful and brilliant.

Therefore the religious author first of all must try to establish rapport with people. That is, he must begin with an esthetic piece. This is the earnest money. The more brilliant the piece is, the better it is for him.<sup>75</sup>

---

response to our initial faltering steps of faith, God enters the human heart and repairs our wills so that they are capable of aiming in the proper direction. In sum, on the Catholic view, a supernatural infusion of divine grace enables us to do for the right reasons what we initially did for the wrong ones. I believe something like this story appeals to Kierkegaard. We are responsible for taking steps in the right direction, but a complete transformation of our cares and desires is possible only with divine assistance. Hence Kierkegaard's assertion that "[e]very qualitative change, every infinite change in quality, is genuinely a miracle" (JP 3.199).

<sup>71</sup> Anti-Climacus describes this process in *Practice in Christianity* (PC 186-89). He claims that the image of the ideal not only draws us to it but also makes us want to resemble it. See also JP 1.413; FT 63; SLW 26-27. For discussion and defense of this interpretation of Kierkegaard, see Kemp, "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation," 222–23.

<sup>72</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4–7.

<sup>73</sup> PV 45/SKS 16:27; emphasis in original.

<sup>74</sup> PV 51.

<sup>75</sup> PV 44/SKS 16:26.

[I]f you are able to do so, portray the esthetic with all its bewitching charm, if possible to captivate the other person, portray it with the kind of passionateness whereby it appeals particularly to him, hilariously to the hilarious, sadly to the sad, wittily to the witty, etc.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, Kierkegaard goes on to place a limit on the use of aesthetics. It is permissible, he says, to rely on the power of beauty to capture people's attention and make them aware of their possibilities. But it is unacceptable to use aesthetics to push or pull them towards any option in particular.

A person may have the good fortune of doing a great deal for another...may have the good fortune of helping that person to become a Christian. But this is not in my power; it depends upon very many things and above all upon whether he himself is willing. Compel a person to an opinion, a conviction, a belief—in all eternity, that I cannot do.<sup>77</sup>

We find the same restriction in *Postscript*. Climacus allows the use of aesthetics to attract people's attention and awaken them to their choices. But, beyond that, people must be allowed "to go their own way."<sup>78</sup> Pressuring them to make a particular choice is not permissible. Climacus is explicit about this point when it comes to using aesthetics or rhetoric to get people to become religious:

[T]herefore all those who in that way want to give a rhetorical push in order to bring one into Christianity or even help one into it by a thrashing—they are all deceivers—no, they know not what they do.<sup>79</sup>

The point is continually to keep the spheres sharply separate from each other...the poet certainly becomes a bungler when he wants to dabble in a little of the religious, and the religious speaker becomes a deceiver who delays the listeners by wanting to dabble in the esthetic.<sup>80</sup>

What stands behind Kierkegaard's rule against using art to influence or persuade people to become religious? In part, it is the fear that people will turn to religion for "the wrong reasons."<sup>81</sup> They will adopt a religious way of life because they have been enchanted by a beautiful representation of it rather than because they actually want a relationship with God. Moreover, Kierkegaard worries that people will get stuck at this point. Their hearts will never change from an aesthetic orientation to a religious one. They will never come to care about God most of all—more than beauty or anything else.

We can detect the depth of Kierkegaard's worries about aesthetic appeals in his striking suggestion that Jesus had to be ugly. Not only did the Son of God have to lack money, power, and prestige. He had to become "absolutely the equal of the lowliest human beings."<sup>82</sup> This includes lacking physical beauty too:

Christianity does not at all emphasize the idea of earthly beauty, which was everything to the Greeks.... It is a real problem: to what extent should Christ be portrayed as an ideal of human beauty—and strangely enough,

---

<sup>76</sup> PV 46/SKS 16:28; see also CD 235. For further discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood: A Kierkegaardian Account*, 165–68.

<sup>77</sup> PV 50/SKS 16:32.

<sup>78</sup> CUP 1:263, 277. See also PC 153. For further discussion, see Aumann, *Art and Selfhood: A Kierkegaardian Account*, 163–65; Kemp, "The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard's Account of Ethical Transformation," 212–15.

<sup>79</sup> CUP 1:49/SKS 7:54.

<sup>80</sup> CUP 1:436/SKS 7:397.

<sup>81</sup> CUP 1:247-49; BA 168-69.

<sup>82</sup> PF 32-33.

although many other kinds of similarities have been discerned between Christ and Socrates, no one has thought at all about this aspect, for Socrates was, as is well known, uglier than original sin.<sup>83</sup>

Kierkegaard extends this line of thinking to preachers, pastors, and apostles. To make sure people do not come to Christianity for “the wrong reasons,” those who spread the gospel must make themselves look repugnant.<sup>84</sup> They must forego finely tailored clothing and handsome appearances. Ideally, they will not even have sonorous voices or be particularly eloquent.<sup>85</sup>

In sum, Kierkegaard wants things set up so people become religious for “the right reasons”—or not at all. This insistence on motivational purity is misguided on my view. Think again about Marge. If she removes all possible “wrong reasons” from the table to ensure her students only do their homework for the “right reasons,” the result will be that they do not do their homework at all. Marge’s students do not yet care enough about classical music to do their homework for its own sake. Prior to taking her class, they are not interested in whatever intrinsic value classical music might possess. Thus, her students need some “wrong reasons” to get started. They need some reward, punishment, or other extrinsic consideration to drive them forward. In fact, demanding that they have pure motivations at the outset would be to violate Kierkegaard’s rule about beginning where people are. It would be to expect something from them that they cannot supply.

There is a part of Kierkegaard that would appreciate this point. Not only does it fit his rule about beginning where people are but it also reflects his actual practice. His descriptions of the religious life are not ugly or aesthetically repugnant. They are beautiful, striking, witty, and humorous. In *Fear and Trembling*, the lyrical brilliance of Silentio’s speech in praise of Abraham mirrors his unbridled admiration for the father of faith. Something similar holds for the famous discourses on the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. The language Kierkegaard uses to fill out these two metaphors for the religious life possesses a sublime elegance. His words and phrasing reflect the simplicity and serenity that the lilies and birds are said to have. Finally, think of *Works of Love*. Along with *Fear and Trembling*, it may be the text that has inspired the greatest number of readers. What draws people to *Works of Love*, however, is not just *what* it says but *how* it says it.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the aesthetic appeal of Kierkegaard’s literary style may be the primary engine of this work’s transformative power.<sup>87</sup>

## 10 Conclusion

On my account, art stands at the center of Kierkegaard’s therapeutic project. It is the means by which he motivates us to make the transformational changes that will cure us of our existential ailments. The stories he tells offer us preliminary glimpses of the ethical and religious modes of existence, and the aesthetic appeal of his writing draws us towards these lifestyles.

Of course, Kierkegaard’s strategy raises several moral concerns. Most notably, it seems manipulative to use aesthetic appeals rather than reason to get people to do something. This is part of what we find troublesome about advertising and marketing campaigns. Yet, I am unsure whether this objection would bother Kierkegaard. It is true that he talks

---

<sup>83</sup> JP 1:368/SKS 27:213; see also PC 36-38. For discussion of the importance of Socrates’s ugliness, see CI 148, 212n; CUP 1:248-49; JP 1:64, 1:368, 4:205-6.

<sup>84</sup> BA 168-169; JP 3.597.

<sup>85</sup> CUP 1:248. See also JP 3:592-93; PC 38. Against eloquence in the proclamation of Christianity, see JP 1.319, 373, 376, 464.

<sup>86</sup> Here I make a different point than the one we find in Kierkegaard’s writings. Kierkegaard often privileges “how” something is said over “what” is said. But he consistently adds that he is not talking about the importance of aesthetic or rhetoric. Rather, he is talking about the importance of whether the speaker lives in accordance with what he says or fails to do so. See CUP 202-3; JP 1:317-18.

<sup>87</sup> For a similar claim, see Kemp, “The Role of Imagination in Kierkegaard’s Account of Ethical Transformation,” 229.

about the importance of autonomy and letting people go their own way. But he also claims it is permissible to “deceive people into the truth” in certain situations.<sup>88</sup> I have written about Kierkegaard’s views on the morality of deception before. But applying those ideas to the present topic will have to wait for another time.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> PV 7, 53; BA 171; JP 1:288; PC 190; WL 276-77. In his journals, Kierkegaard also speaks about God’s deceiving him into the truth (JP 4:9, 505-6).

<sup>89</sup> Antony Aumann, “A Moral Problem for Difficult Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 4 (2016): 117–27; Aumann, *Art and Selfhood: A Kierkegaardian Account*, 161–82.