# Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter

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**ANNOUNCEMENTS AND NEWS**

## The Hong Kierkegaard Library Moves to a New Home

Extra! Extra! The Hong Kierkegaard Library now has its own building! In November of 2021 the Hong Kierkegaard Library (HKL) moved into the newly renovated Steensland Hall. The structure, built in 1902, is appropriately nestled between Old Main, home to the Religion Department, and Holland Hall, which houses the Philosophy Department.

Steensland served as the first library at St. Olaf College until 1942 when the Rolvaag Library was built. In the years to follow, it hosted an impressive array of programs and events, including: a naval pre-flight school for WWII training, an auditorium for recitals, lectures, and plays, work space for student publications, an art gallery, academic offices, and classrooms for courses of various disciplines.

The Howard and Edna Hong connection to the Library now in Steensland dates back to April 1939, when the lead article in the Manitou Messenger, announced, "Library Gets Set Of Works of Kierkegaard." The article stated, "A limited edition of the journals and papers of Soren Kierkegaard, famous Danish Christian philosopher, has been given to the St. Olaf library by Howard Hong, graduate of St. Olaf who is doing graduate work in philosophy in the University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Several years later, in February 1947 a reporter from the Messenger, wrote: "Dr. Howard Hong, chairman of the Department of Philosophy, will be the speaker for the Spotlighting Cultural Values lecture series on Feb. 17 at 6:30 pm in Steensland Hall. His subject will be Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher. In presenting his subject, Dr. Hong will outline the biography of Kierkegaard."

This is a thrilling time in the history of HKL. In its rich academic tradition, the new home of the HKL will continue in its old ways of hosting scholars, students, and anyone interested in the works of Søren Kierkegaard. Such was the vision of our generous benefactors the Hongs, who insisted that the Library be open to and meet the needs not only of elite researchers but also of those just beginning a serious study of the Danish firebrand.

In addition to maintaining our ongoing programs and sustaining the community that has blossomed around the Library, we are also looking forward to new endeavors. So please stay tuned!

Congrats to our Assistant Curator Eileen Shimota who has entered the ranks as an author with her recently published children's book entitled, "Your Friend Elsie." The story introduces Elsie, a young girl full of questions and emotions who is trying to figure out 'life.' The book is meant to initiate a discussion about thoughts and feelings with the reader and child and encourage a sense of security in knowing they always have a friend in Elsie. For more information and to order a copy email: YourFriendElsie@gmail.com
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Your-Friend-Elsie-107821791656185

Good news! The Kierkegaard House Foundation announces that its earlier statement about not being able to accept Fellowship applications for the 2022-23 academic year has been changed: we are now in a position to accept applications. Do notice the change in the usual time-line. We announced earlier that The COVID19 crisis and its effects require us to postpone our Fellowship program for another year. However we are pleased to announce that **we are now in a position to accept applications for the 2022-23 Fellowship, though *the application deadline is changed to May 1, 2022.* We will announce awards before June 1, 2022.** If you have any questions, please contact Edward Langerak, President of the KHF, langerak@stolaf.edu.

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**Silence, Obedience, and Joy: A Reconsideration of the Politics of the Lily and the Bird**

**Darren Surman, The University of Alabama**

***Father in Heaven! That which we in the company of other people, especially in the throng of humanity, have such difficulty learning, and which, if we have learned it elsewhere, is so easily forgotten in the company of other people – what it is to be a human being and what, from a godly standpoint, is the requirement for being a human being – would that we might learn it, or, it if has been forgotten, that we might learn it anew from the lily and the bird; would that we might learn it, if not all at once, then learn at least something of it, little by little – would that on this occasion we might from the lily and bird learn silence, obedience, joy! – Soren Kierkegaard***

## Introduction

In this essay, I would like to tell a story. It is the story of one of my greatest struggles with the work, and ideas, of Kierkegaard. It is also the story of how I came to reconsider the very source of that struggle, and in the process, gained a new perspective on the problem of what it means to be a human being in the world. For a period, I felt that I had discovered a place that I could not travel to with Kierkegaard, intellectually or politically. A pandemic, however, as well as various perspectives that I would lump together into something called *insurrectionary mindsets*, forced me to revisit and reconsider where my dialogue with Kierkegaard had broken down. Such reconsideration, however, was not merely intellectual, it was necessary and existential. It was a reconsideration that was born out of despair and feelings of helplessness. Thus, the story told is a personal one, but it is intended to explore, in the process, the political margins and possibilities that surround Kierkegaard's work. In unpacking from my personal struggle with Kierkegaard, I would like to offer a political, theoretical reading of Kierkegaard's work as well. Starting from the personal is, as I was taught, the most potent place from which to do political theory in the first place.

I will, first, outline the intellectual struggle that I encountered in the work of Kierkegaard, as well as how that struggle subsequently informed my efforts to articulate a political theory of love. Then, I will discuss how recent events forced a reconsideration of my previous position and, in the process, opened up new spaces within which to theorize Kierkegaard's writings in relation to love and the political.

**Wrestling with Kierkegaard and the Political**

In 2018, I presented a paper at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association in San Diego, CA. I took the opportunity while presenting that paper to rail against, and argue with, Kierkegaard more than I had ever done before in my scholarship of his work. Prior to that presentation, I had traveled with Kierkegaard's thought quite sympathetically. I am a political theorist who wrote my dissertation on Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. I have long been interested in what Kierkegaard's writings can offer our attempts to think about love and the political together. I am fully situated within a long tradition of scholarship that was outlined perfectly by James Martel when he wrote,

> Love is generally thought of as an emotion, a state of surrender, something that we write songs about, but rarely is it linked in common parlance to questions of politics. Indeed, the term "politics of love" sounds funny to one's ears, seeking to link two unrelatable terms. And yet, the relationship between love and politics is quite well established. *Politics is after all the study of human arrangements, how we treat and deal with each other, and love, in all of its romantic, filial, paternal, and social senses, is concerned with precisely the same thing.* A study of the role of love in political theory reveals that it is quite difficult to parse these seemingly separate notions apart. (Martel, 2001, pg. 2) (emphases added)

Indeed, in my own research, I have experienced the same difficulty of parsing such notions apart that Martel identified. I have arrived, over the years, to the realization that it is not possible to do; they simply cannot be separated. To think about the political, is to think about love, and vice versa. Thus, as a political theorist interested in the role of love within the human arrangements that we *build* for ourselves, that we *agree* upon for ourselves, and that we *impose* on ourselves, Kierkegaard, despite not being any sort of canonical figure within political theory, held untapped promise for me intellectually. I say untapped because I sensed a great paucity of attention within the tradition of political theory when it came to Kierkegaard relative to other, similar thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, et. al. The relative absence of conversation, within political theory at least, regarding Kierkegaard's work inspired me to explore what he could offer to the long conversation on the relationship between love and the political, a conversation that stretched from Plato's *Symposium* to the current work of thinkers such as Cornel West and bell hooks.

I found Kierkegaard's writings on love and the neighbor to be insightful, powerful, and full of political possibility, and of course, I still do. How Kierkegaard's ever-present individual is oriented to love of self, love of God, and love of neighbor is, as Martel pointed out above, essentially bound to larger questions regarding the political and human arrangements. My readings of Kierkegaard's work on the topic of love, along with the work completed by some of my favorite scholars who were also interested in Kierkegaard's writings on love, (Dooley, 2001; Ferreira, 2001; Perez-Alvarez, 2009; Backhouse, 2011; Ryan, 2014), helped elucidate Kierkegaardian statements such as, "Love is a revolution," and "Love is sheer action," (Kierkegaard, 1995, pgs. 265-266, 98). I want to repeat those statements: "Love is a revolution." and "Love is sheer action." These statements occur quite frequently throughout *Works of Love*, and political they are! Revolution and action! One does not encounter a great chasm between such notions and those held later by Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Gandhi, etc. There is easy dialogue to be had, and traditions to be contextualized across such ideas. Thus, Kierkegaard became a reliable, and insightful, anchor for me within a sea of ideas that existed across time, ideas that sought to illuminate the social and political roles of love and the neighbor.

Then, I encountered a book from Kierkegaard that I struggled with more than any of his other works. The struggle was strange as I was not unfamiliar with the content or imagery that it explored, but there was something about the manner in which Kierkegaard set about exploring it that I found unsettling. Reading it was a kind of shattering experience for me, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and politically. The text seemed to take some of the more difficult passages of *Works of Love*, those that I had willingly glossed over and ignored, (while hoping in desperation that a more esteemed Kierkegaard scholar could provide an *answer* to them for me), and it raised them up even higher. It took problematic ideas and imagery, those that had inspired the wrath of the likes of Adorno and Lukacs, and elevated them even more. There was a boldness here. There was no indirectness in the language, no evasiveness. It was not, after all, a pseudonymous work. The inwardness that had been so skewered by Adorno et.al, an inwardness that, it was often argued, seemed to undermine any concrete, political action in the world, an inwardness that seemed even to be lacking in the discontent that Thomas Hobbes identified as one of the fundamental sources of revolution, was now bound together with the authority of the word *shall*! The text I am referring to here is, of course, Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. This text, more than any other from Kierkegaard, became a stumbling block for me, and one that I was forced to contend with in ways that were different from my other encounters with his work. How could such a little book cause such big problems?

In *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, Kierkegaard explores what we, each of us, *shall* learn from the lily and the bird. The primary lessons are silence, obedience, and joy. The manner in which Kierkegaard unpacks the original parable, and weaves its component parts together, is fascinating. The lily and the bird both, respectively, offer metaphors for what is required for each of us to be a human being in the world. For Kierkegaard, not only do we learn from the lily and the bird how to be silent, but we also learn that their silence is a precondition for their unconditional obedience. Silence is the ground of obedience. Kierkegaard is very specific about this. He is not interested in *conditional* obedience, but *unconditional* obedience. Kierkegaard writes,

> Thus in the silence with the lily and the bird there is an either/or, either God…and understood as follows: either love him or – hate him, either hold fast to him or – despise him…He requires obedience, unconditional obedience; if you are not obedient in everything, unconditionally, then you do not love him, and if you do not love him, then – you hate him. This unconditional obedience – that if one does not love God, one hates him, that if one does not hold fast to him unconditionally and in everything…you can learn from the…lily and the bird… But this silence – or what we strove to learn from it, to become silent – is the first condition for truly being able to obey (Kierkegaard, 2016, pgs. 45-46)

*Unconditional* silence is the ground of *unconditional* obedience. Not surprisingly, this section of Kierkegaard's discourse falls under a title that recalls the observation that a person cannot *serve* two masters. Kierkegaard interprets Christ's parable in a particular way here. Christ said that a person cannot serve two masters, that their devotion to one would preclude any devotion to the other. This is immediately followed by the parable of the lily and the bird. Christ said to *look at them*, and *consider them*. They do not worry, so why do you? As Kierkegaard understands it, to be obedient to God, is accomplished by *not serving* mammon, to not be *obedient* to it. Thus, to *not* be silent about one's conditional existence, to vocalize that one is suffering, is to be disobedient; it is *serving* mammon, and is wholly unlike the teachings of the lily and the bird. Kierkegaard cuts right to the heart of these relationships with the following passages,

> Let us, then, observe the lily and the bird more closely, and from a human perspective, in order to learn obedience. The lily and the bird are unconditionally obedient to God. They are masters at this. As befits teachers, they have a masterful understanding of how to encounter the unconditioned – something that, alas, most people surely miss and at which they fail. For there is one thing that the lily and bird unconditionally do not understand, that, alas, most people understand best: half-measures. *That a minor bit of disobedience would not be unconditional disobedience* is something the lily and the bird cannot and

> do not want to understand. *That the least little bit of disobedience would truly have any name other than contempt for God* is something the lily and the bird cannot and do not want to understand. (Kierkegaard, 2016, pg. 50) (emphases added)
>
> If the place assigned to the lily is really as unfortunate a possible, so that it can be easily foreseen that it will be totally superfluous all its life, not be noticed by a single person who might find joy in it; if the place and the surroundings are – yes, I had forgotten it was the lily of which we are speaking – are so "desperately" unfortunate, that not only is it not visited, but is avoided: *the obedient lily obediently submits to its circumstances and burst forth in all its loveliness*. We human beings – or rather, a human being in the lily's situation – would say: "It is hard, it is unendurable, when one is a lily and is as lovely as a lily, then to be assigned a place in such a location, to have to bloom there, in surroundings that are as unfavorable as possible, that are as if calculated to annihilate the impression of one's loveliness…But the lily thinks differently, it thinks as follows: "Of course, *I myself cannot determine the location and the circumstances; this is thus not my affair in the least way; that I stand where I stand is God's will*." (Kierkegaard, 2016, pgs. 51-52) (emphases added)

Kierkegaard is quite clear here, to say the least. What is required is a complete silence, passivity, and obedience. Achieving those will allow for a destruction of the will. To enact their opposites, in any way, is to show contempt for God, to be disrespectful, rebellious, and unfaithful. Silence is where one learns to obey. Obedience is how one practices not making themselves more important than they are. Kierkegaard writes,

> When the bird comes into contact with the harshness of this life, when it is tried with difficulties and opposition, when, every morning, day after day, it finds that its nest has been disturbed: every day, the obedient bird begins its work all over again with the same joy and meticulousness it displayed the first time…the obedient bird submits unconditionally to everything. (56-57)

Recall the quoted prayer that began this essay, and which began the discourse that Kierkegaard offered on the lily and the bird; Kierkegaard prayed that we might come to the knowledge of what it is to be a human being, and to know what is *required* to be a human being. It becomes clear, as one reads the discourse, that what is required is the complete desubjugation of the individual. Kierkegaard's ideas of desubjugation, however, are not same as those espoused by thinkers such as Michel Foucault or Judith Butler. The individual that Kierkegaard describes, *commanded* as they are to be like the lily and the bird, are to desubjugate themselves not for the later purpose of *reasserting* their subjectivity over and against the conditions of their existence, but to simply annihilate it, (Kierkegaard, 2016, pg. 34). To assert such subjectivity, to allow it to be so informed by its conditions, is to be obedient to something other than God. But then, what is the quality of such a life? What is the quality of a life that finds itself in horrible circumstances and faces it with nothing more than submission? For Kierkegaard, the quality of such a life can be defined by joy. Kierkegaard understands that lilies may happen to grow just as easily in unfortunate circumstances as they do in fortunate ones, and he understands that the bird's nest may be disturbed, but such contingencies of life should, in no way, make one less joyous about where they find themselves. Let us look at how Kierkegaard completes his discourse. He writes,

> For example, the person whose joy is dependent upon certain conditions is not himself joy; his joy, after all, is that of the conditions and is conditional upon them. But a person who is joy itself is unconditionally joyful, just as, conversely, the person who is unconditionally joyful is joy itself…And so it is in the case of the lily and the bird. But their instruction in joy, which is in turn expressed by their lives, is quite briefly as follows: There is a today; it *is*. There is a today – and there is no worry, absolutely none, about tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. This is not foolishness on the part of the lily and the bird, but is the joy of silence and obedience…there exists no tomorrow, that unfortunate day that is the invention of garrulousness and disobedience…rebelliousness. (Kierkegaard, 2016, pgs. 76, 80)

With these ideas, these modes of being in the world (silent, obedient, joyful), Kierkegaard completes his exegesis of the parable of the lily and the bird. From those ten verses in the sixth chapter of Matthew, Kierkegaard developed a set of relationships that define what he saw as the necessary requirements to be a human being in the world.

It was there, in Bruce Kirmmse's beautiful, 2016 translation of *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* that I found that the 'charwoman' of *Works of Love* had been set on an even higher pedestal. Of course, I mean this metaphorically. The charwoman is not discussed in any way in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. And yet, her presence is still felt, the trace of her situation and life; and Kierkegaard's admonishments to her in *Works of Love* offer a kind of hidden discourse residing under the natural imagery, as Kirmmse identified it, in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. Recall what Kierkegaard wrote in relation to the charwoman in *Works of Love*,

> Christianity's divine meaning is to say in confidence to every human being, "*Do not busy yourself with changing the shape of the world or your situation*, as if you (to stay with the example), instead of being a poor charwoman, perhaps could manage to be called 'Madame.' No, make Christianity your own, and it will show you a point outside the world, and by means of this you will move heaven and earth; yes, you will do something even more wonderful, you will move heaven and earth so quietly, so lightly, that no one notices it. (Kierkegaard, 1995, pg. 136) (emphases added)

This was one of those passages of *Works of Love* that I chose not to deal with to any degree of substantiveness during my dissertation, I am sorry to say. *Works of Love* held so much promise for me in terms of political rhetoric at the time, that I pushed such difficult language away so that I could point to the larger preponderance of what I felt was liberatory, revolutionary rhetoric that seemed pregnant with political agency and the ideals that could inspire it. I also looked to other scholars to explain the charwoman for me, *or to explain her away* for me. And yet, such passages remained.

The irony was deafening as I labored to write a dissertation at The University of Alabama in political theory, an institution where George Wallace once stood "in the schoolhouse door" and declared "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!". I either needed to deal with such passages, or find as Kierkegaard would call it, an *escape* to dealing with them. I chose the escape. So, what seemed to be a small, yet troubling part of the vastness of thought that was *Works of Love* then, became larger, more direct, more systematic, and more defended in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. Here was the source of my confused struggle: spiritually, I could understand Kierkegaard's exegesis of the lily and the bird (or did I?), but politically, I didn't know what to do with it. My admission here is that my confusion manifested existentially in at least three ways; *spiritually* (How, exactly, *did* I understand the parable of the lilies and birds? What did I think it was telling me to do?); *intellectually* (How could I square the epistemology, and the arguments, regarding obedience and disobedience in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* with those of *Works of Love?*); *politically* (What did all of this offer for how we create concrete, human arrangements with, and for, each other?). I had arrived at my clearest understanding of what Kierkegaard wrote about when he discussed the gaps between knowledge and action. As Kierkegaard wrote in *Works of Love*,

> …the measure of a person's disposition is this: how far is he from what he understands to what he does, how great is the distance between his understanding and his actions. Basically we all understand the highest. A child, the simplest person, and the wisest all understand the highest and all understand the same thing, because it is, if I dare to say so, one lesson we are all assigned. But what makes the difference is whether we understand it at a distance – so that we do not act accordingly, or close at hand – so that we act accordingly and "cannot do otherwise"… (Kierkegaard, 1995, pg. 78)

As a political theorist, then, I initially could not find much use for this discourse of Kierkegaard's. I could not reconcile it, its ideas and its arguments, and particularly its use of the authority of the word *shall*, to the larger meaning of the doorway that I passed every day at work; the doorway in which the *busyness* of so many to change their worlds and situations resulted in the very University that I attended, and work at today. I could not reconcile such spiritual ideas and political realities/legacies. I did not, however, simply reject *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* out of hand completely. Instead, I looked for a way to re-conceptualize love's relation to the political out of it. What I came to argue was that Kierkegaard had, in his *theological* discourse, *inadvertently* offered a concise, phenomenological, *political* discourse of love as well, *but only if one proceeded from the opposites of his categories*. The very categories that he mentioned in his opening prayer to the book, which I quoted above, (silence, obedience, and joy), were, if looked at differently, the very flip sides of a robust political theory of love. *Underneath* Kierkegaard's categories of *silence, obedience, and joy* were, as I saw them, the categories of *anxiety, critique, action, and most importantly, disobedience*. The very things that Kierkegaard suggested that the lily and the bird taught us to avoid, I felt, must be rescued. I believed that one could derive a fundamental political theory of love from those categories that Kierkegaard dismissed, seemingly, all-too-easily.

Kierkegaard spent a fair amount of time in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* emphasizing that the type of love he is talking about is a properly obedient one. There is much emphasis on authority in the discourse. It is not just God's authority either, the authority of the *given* is there as well. When Kierkegaard talked about the circumstances of the given being the direct result of the will of God, then we are to infer the inherited authority of the given, of our circumstances. With such an emphasis, I felt that Kierkegaard went too far in his critique of critical attitudes in the face of unfortunate circumstances; thus, undercutting positions he maintained in *Works of Love* that made his argument so strong there. I struggled to reconcile Kierkegaard's *disobedient* Samaritan in *Works of Love* with that of the lily and the bird. By disobedient Samaritan, I mean that Kierkegaard's Samaritan did not seem any different from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Samaritan, which was animated, as he said, by a dangerous, excessive, and universal altruism (King, 2010). It appeared to me that by rescuing, and recontextualizing categories such as anxiety, critique, action, and disobedience, we are not left simply with rebellion and mammon-obsessed disobedience as Kierkegaard suggested in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. Rather, we are left with the very character traits that Kierkegaard admired in the Samaritan. It is not, merely, that the Samaritan had a love that abides, hopes all things, sees possibility, is merciful, etc.; no, it was that the Samaritan's love had those qualities and also had a love that was also anxiety-ridden (over the circumstances of another), critical (of the unjust circumstances of another), willing to take action to change (the unjust circumstances of another), and disobedient to any authority that the *given* may have offered. In a manner of speaking, the story of the Samaritan is not a story of faith, of God, of prayer, of salvation, etc. None of those are mentioned in the parable. It is a story of sheer action alone; actions that one person undertook on behalf of another. Where would such a person have gained such boldness, such an inspiration? According to *Works of Love*, if that person understood themselves, had an appropriate self-knowledge, then they always already knew how to love their neighbor, which was simply *as themselves*. Self-love was the foundation of neighbor-love.

The categories, or modes of being that I attempted to explore, simply named the self-knowledge that accompanied such self-love. The movement of such categories of being are available to any of us, all of the time. They simply name the *movement of discontent* (see pgs. 26-27 of *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*). I disagreed, strongly, that such discontent should be lumped so easily together with rebellion, disrespect, faithlessness towards God, or sin. Instead, it seemed clear to me that they help us define a politics of love that is always, already in operation. There is no need to *bring love in*, and it is impossible to *keep love out*, of the political. We cannot escape ourselves, nor each other, so easily. We are thrown into the world with love for ourselves, as Kierkegaard understood, and we have to learn how to extend a similar love to each other. We know what the other needs when we know how, and what, we need. Love is political when we consider ourselves (feel discontent over ourselves), and love is political when we consider others (feel discontent on behalf of others). No matter how far the consideration extends, even if it went out towards a whole population that was suffering in the world, the

consideration would move along the same modes of being/love as they do at the level of the individual: anxiety, critique, action, disobedience.

With that, I tried to work my way to the politics of *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. On the face of it, the book offered something beautiful theologically, but that is not enough. Kierkegaard admonished his reader to not be like the poet and only *wish* to be able to imitate the lily and the bird. It had to be something *lived*, in actuality, it had to be concrete; for me, those same expectations demand what I understand to be *the political*. So, I attempted to excavate some sense of the *social*, from a discourse that was laden with emphases on inwardness. My position on Kierkegaard's discourse, however, was soon to change.

**Reconsidering My Critique**

I have often been reminded during the last five years of a question that was posed to me on my comprehensive exams during my doctoral studies. The question, echoing the title of Chinua Achebe's great book, simply asked, "Does political theory begin when things fall apart? Discuss." Things have certainly been falling apart, and I am sure that my answer to that question today would be very different from what I wrote as a graduate student all those years ago. I also, often, recall from my undergraduate days a sociology professor who enjoyed discussing the topic of civility; what a strange word for these days. At so many moments during the last five years, it has felt as if we were all standing on the side of the road, looking on at the aftermath of a terrible accident. As we watch the myriad of events unfold before us, we are *helpless* to really do *anything*. Despite the feelings of helplessness, some of us want to help, some of us are indifferent, and some of us believe that it was not even an actual accident that occurred, but that we are watching an act put on by very skillful actors. With such an analogy, I want to suggest that the word that best captures my feelings over the last five years is: *helpless*. The combination of a pandemic that has taken so many from us, and what I earlier called insurrectionary mindsets, has cultivated this feeling of helplessness like nothing I have ever experienced before. I feel helpless to change my own situation, and I feel helpless to even talk about the situation with others effectively at times. Helplessness, and a feeling of being so small, seem to be common, affective responses as the strident tides of political anger, resentment, and certainty, combined with the tides of sickness, death, and recalcitrance in the face of it all, crash over us violently day after day. What is one to do under the weight of all the tides? And, we *all* seem to feel this helplessness, no matter our particular, political persuasions.

I often say to my Political Theories of Love classes, "Think about your holidays with family. Think about how our current realities have permeated your abilities to simply *be with* each other. Has your mother or father or other family member ever implored, 'Don't talk about politics with your uncle or your sister, etc. You know how they get! Let's just have a nice day today.'" And, they all shake their heads in agreement because, of course, they have this within their circles of family and friends. They all have experienced the crystallization of opinions around politics and the pandemic that are so strong that not only do family members and friends have to *avoid* talking to each other, but we have arrived at the point where we often don't even *want* to talk to each other. Paul Tillich once famously said that the first duty of love is to listen, and that the ontological nature of love is to drive everything *that is* towards *everything else that is*, i.e., to create unity (Tillich, 1960). The assaults on such Tillichian love at the hands of politics has been escapable as it has permeated into the most private of relationships for all of us. I then ask my students, "How much longer do you think we can go on like this together as a society? Twenty more years? Fifty more years? What do you think such strident commitments to certainty, being right, and lack of dialogue will produce for us? Can we use it as a foundation to build the social together?" For the last question, it is apparent from their answers, and their faces, that they feel the obvious answer inside of them just as I do. The answer is no. But then, that simply begs another question: What kind of politics do we need then?

While unpacking from such realities with my students, and as we have attempted to theorize the political possibilities of love for our world together, I could not help but make my way back to another text which, similar to *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, I did not like at all after my first reading of it. That text is Martha Nussbaum's *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. When I first read it, I read it as political theorist

who was only interested in talking about love one way, i.e., love as sheer action and love as revolution. I was interested in what each of us, as individuals, are required to do, required to sacrifice, in order to be disobedient enough to our given order that we can shake it up, change it, alter it, subvert it, and in the process create a more just world. Nussbaum, with her stated emphasis on the nation as her primary unit of analysis, and her desire to articulate the roles of political culture and rituals in creating more just societies, seemed woefully inadequate to me. In fact, it offended my Kierkegaardian sensibilities. "Where is the individual in her analysis?! Where is the individual who seeks escapes from loving their neighbor?! What good will this talk of political culture and a focus on the nation do?!" These were my initial responses to her work.

It was a terribly misguided first reading on my part. If anything, what the last five years have shown me is that we are completely lacking in a political *culture* in the sense of something shared. We merely live *next* to each other rather than living *for* each other, or *on behalf* of each other. We are not even close to what King called *beloved community*. We are lacking in a culture in which we practice building together, have shared visions of a future, and, to use Nussbaum's favorite word, *aspire* to things together. Nussbaum ended her book by writing,

> It will be said, and frequently too, that the demand for love made in this book is a tall order, and unrealistic given the present state of politics in more or less every country. But think what this objection really says. The objector thinks that nations need technical calculation: economic thought, military thought, good use of computer science and technology. So, nations need those things, but they do not need the heart? They need expertise, but do not need the sort of daily emotions, the sympathy, tears, and laughter, that we require of ourselves as parents, lovers, and friends, or the wonder with which we contemplate beauty? If that's what nations are like, one might well want to love elsewhere…Speaking of his imaginary republic, as yet not fully realized, Walt Whitman wrote that "America is only you and me." We should aspire to nothing less. (Nussbaum, 2013, pg. 396-397)

Thus, as the falling-apart-of-things inspired me to contemplate our absent, shared culture, I was led back to Nussbaum's book and what struck me immediately upon re-reading it was not simply her focus on the nation and culture, but rather, her focus on the necessity of a type of individual that I had ignored before. The shape of the individual that Nussbaum articulated, referencing characters such as Mozart's Cherubino and the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Rabindranath Tagore, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., among others, was an individual that was animated by humility, an individual that was not seeking, competitively, to always conquer and master, to preserve one's status and honor, but to build together despite the inevitable imperfections of the world (Nussbaum, 2013, pgs. 50-51). In exploring the comportments of such individuals, as presented by Nussbaum, I could see more clearly how such humility, or more precisely the *capability* of such humility, was the very *basis* of Nussbaum's political culture for societies that aspire to justice. In exploring this, she provided a spectrum that connected the individual to the social. This, I had underestimated. Such humility also reminded me of something else I had previously maligned, i.e., Kierkegaard's lily of the field and the bird of the air. Increasingly, as of late, I have found Kierkegaard and Nussbaum to be companions of sorts with regards to *political subjectivity*.

My first reading of Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* was dominated by my focus on the roles of obedience/disobedience/authority. I had not read it adequately enough in terms of humility. I had made the same mistake with Kierkegaard that I did with Nussbaum. However, my affective experiences of the world were throwing me back upon previous texts that explored humility; my feelings of helplessness demanded it. Kierkegaard's exploration of the lily and the bird became something like a salve for me. It comforted me, whereas before it was simply an invitation to an *intellectual disagreement* for me within the realm of political theory. Silence, obedience, and joy, however, appeared differently in the light of our new realities. I *needed*, now, to be silent because my anger and resentments over current circumstances were overtaking my abilities to think, productively, about what is required to build the political. In terms of obedience, I could do nothing other than allow myself to be at the mercy of the crashing tides around me. There was no changing the political minds of

those around me, no amount of discussion was successful, and as much as I wanted to wish the pandemic away, I could not. I could do nothing but submit to, and obey, the existence of my conditions! This quieting, and this resignation did, however, begin to allow for a space of joy to reemerge. Discontent, and critique, did not evaporate, but, I had to find ways to live with them differently. Rather than having them serve as the *foundations* of a political theory of love, I had to find a way for love to be bound up with them in a way that I had not previously conceived. In doing so, I began to see how the inwardness that Kierkegaard was discussing in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, the inwardness that I was rejecting as being apolitical, was precisely the inwardness that was needed to sustain Nussbaum's political love. Thus, it became difficult for me to read Kierkegaard and Nussbaum separately in this sense, or as Martel suggested earlier, to be able to parse these notions of love and the political apart.

In all of this reconsideration, I came to see both Kierkegaard and Nussbaum differently. I was thrust into a situation, like everyone else, where I needed more than intellectual positions to sustain me. They were, simply, not enough. The world was crushing in its daily realities. All I could do was ask, along with Kierkegaard, what I could learn from the lily that, in all of its beauty, finds itself existing in unendurable circumstances, or from the bird who, despite all of its efforts, continually finds its nest disturbed. In a section of Nussbaum's book appropriately entitled, "Transcending the Everyday?", in which she discusses the conclusion of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, she writes about a pivotal moment for the character of the Countess. She states,

> What, in this silence, might the Countess be thinking before she says yes?...So, when she says that "yes,", she is agreeing to love, and even trust, in a world of inconstancy and imperfection – an affirmation requiring more courage than any of the battlefield exploits mentioned by Figaro…What she agrees to here is also what the ensemble agrees to. The new public world is a world of happiness *in that way*. (Nussbaum, 2013, pg. 50)

Here, we have the Kierkegaardian categories of silence, obedience, and joy, but in a different context. They are placed, by Nussbaum, in a *political* context rather than a philosophical or theological one. The Countess, in her silence, obeys the fact of a world of inconstancy and imperfection, and yet, embodies a happiness and joy that points to a better future. And here, as well, we are able to hear Kierkegaard's emphases on silence, obedience, and joy resonate differently.

The dialogue between Kierkegaard and Nussbaum that came into view for me here allowed me to reconsider the politics of Kierkegaard's *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. What I had previously argued against so vehemently, and contended with so stridently in terms of its uses of obedience and authority, became something entirely different for me once the world itself became entirely different for me. I would not say, prior to the pandemic and the last five years of insurrectionary mindsets, that I *needed* Kierkegaard. He had always been more of a fellow traveler amongst ideas. I *applied* his work to politics. More recently though, as I have tried to discuss in this essay, I have had to attempt to *live* what he described, out of necessity, and derive a sense of the political from there. Instead of abstract ideas of the political, I believe I have come to a greater understanding of the difficult role of humility in creating an education of both the heart and the mind; an education which is foundational to sustaining a political culture that may hope to aspire to anything like a beloved community in the future. In my helplessness, I have had to let go of many things. I have had to become a different kind of person, one who is not constantly busy with changing the world or my situation. After all, how could I be? Instead, I had to submit. Is that *apolitical*? A few years ago, I would have answered, yes. Now, however, I think such a disposition is anything but apolitical. Rather, it is the antithesis of the very tides that are enveloping us every day.

Silence, obedience, and joy offer a vision for a different future, a vision that is, potentially, better able to adequately respond to, and love, those around us. The first duty of love is to, indeed, listen as Paul Tillich said. But, we must first quiet ourselves to listen, which is why I think that Kierkegaard began with the importance of silence. The lily and the bird know how to listen well, as Kierkegaard showed, and we in turn must learn to listen

to them. After all, the future fate of democracy itself may ride upon our abilities to become silent, humble, accepting of the inconstancy and imperfection of our circumstances, and yet, joyful in spite of it all. Do the lily and the bird provide a future vision of the possibilities of democracy? In the midst of so much screaming, resentment, one-upmanship, and recalcitrance in the face of public health, they just might. Silence, obedience, and joy are not as apolitical as I once thought, and they are not mutually exclusive from *change*. Rather, they offer a vision of the political that I had simply discounted before. I could not *hear* their lessons until our circumstances changed so drastically. Now, it seems apparent that we must *rescue* such comportments if we are to have any future *together* whatsoever.

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## "In God's Name Do So": The Single Individual in the World

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> …Are you now living in such a way that you are aware of being a single individual and thereby aware of your eternal responsibility before God; are you living in such a way that this awareness can acquire the time and stillness and liberty of action to penetrate your life relationships? You are not asked to withdraw from life, from an honorable occupation, from a happy domestic life – on the contrary, that awareness will support and transfigure and illuminate your conduct in the relationships of life. You are not to withdraw and sit brooding over your eternal accounting…
>
> (*UDVS* 137)

### Introduction[1]

On January 28th, 1919, Max Weber held at the University of Munich a lecture entitled "Politics as Vocation." A few months later, this lecture was published in the form of an extended essay which eventually became a classic in political science and philosophy. Most of the fame of this essay comes from the opening pages and Weber's attempt to define the state. However, in my short offering I would like to redirect attention to the final portion of the essay in which Weber discusses the figure of the politician as one centered on the tension between ethics and politics. According to Weber, "all ethically oriented action can be guided by either of two fundamentally different, irredeemably incompatible maxims: it can be guided by an 'ethics of conviction' or an 'ethics of responsibility'" (83). Conviction is not free from responsibility and responsibility does not necessarily lack conviction. In fact, the task of a good politician is to find a balance between what she defends in terms of principle and what she does in a specific concrete situation. Nevertheless, conviction and responsibility remain two different sources of action. Thus, Weber affirms, "there is a profound abyss between acting in accordance with the maxim governing an ethics of conviction and acting in tune with an ethics of responsibility. In the former case this means, to put it in religious terms: 'A Christian does what is right and leaves the outcome to God,' while in the latter you must answer for the (foreseeable) *consequences* of your actions" (83. Weber's emphasis).

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Apropos of this distinction, it seems that Kierkegaard's "single individual" acts in accordance with the maxims of an ethics of conviction. Where eternal salvation is concerned, the means and ends of the world do not play any role. The believer answers only to God's scrutiny; inward determination is the key, regardless of its concrete impacts. In a variety of his works, Kierkegaard emphasizes this Christian indifference toward external circumstances. The aim of this paper is to contrast this indifference with possibilities, opened by Kierkegaard himself, for the Christian to care about and constructively intervene in the world. This contrast will be supported by the notion of moral conscience as Kierkegaard develops it between 1847 and 1851.

The paper has three parts. First, I quote some of Kierkegaard's remarks defending Christianity's indifference in respect of earthly conditions. Second, I will examine Kierkegaard's understanding of moral conscience by highlighting his limited use of terms such as material situation, constraint, and questions of conscience. Finally, I will focus on his description of love as a matter of conscience in *Works of Love*.

**Christian Indifference Toward The External**

*Works of Love* is a good starting point for addressing Christian indifference to worldly matters. Despite the undeniable beauty of this text, it is replete with disturbing and sometimes even infuriating passages, for example, take those lines in which Kierkegaard accentuates Christianity's indifference to socio-economic conditions and the need for social changes.[2]

In the final pages of the seventh deliberation of Part II, Kierkegaard rhetorically wonders "when is inwardness more clear than when there is nothing external at all, or when the external by its very lowliness and insignificance is rather like an opposition and from a sensate point of view is actually a hindrance to seeing the inwardness?" (*WOL* 330). This separation between inwardness and externalities makes it possible for mercy to express itself as "a work of love even if it has nothing to give and is able to do nothing" (Ibid). A few pages before this passage, Kierkegaard clearly states that this discourse is addressed, "to you, you wretched one who are able to do nothing at all" and asks her to exercise mercy (*WOL* 325). Thus far, there is nothing particularly repugnant, but then the author goes further and bids the wretched individual to be merciful "to us more fortunate ones" (*WOL* 326). The wretched one, with her life filled with tribulations, represents an objection to the loving Governance and has the power to produce anxiety over others. So, if she is truly a loving Christian, she will not disturb the joy and happiness of her more fortunate neighbors by showing them her sorrows. "Which of these two loves more: the fortunate one who has sympathy for the suffering of others, or the unfortunate one who has true sympathy for the joy and happiness of others?" (*WOL* 326), asks Kierkegaard.

According to Kierkegaard, Christianity has not dissolved "the dissimilarity of earthly life" (*WOL* 70). On his reading, dissimilarity is a constitutive part of temporality and the indifference to it functions as a guarantee for the believer's authenticity. Kierkegaard insists, "there is no temporal dissimilarity, neither the lowest nor the most acceptable in the eyes of the world, with which Christianity sides in partiality" (*WOL* 71). In this sense, "to love the neighbor is, while remaining in the earthly dissimilarity allotted to one, essentially to will to exist equally for unconditionally every human being" (*WOL* 84). Here the tone becomes even more severe. Kierkegaard underscores the belief that Christianity shares a secret message with every human being: "Do not busy yourself with changing the shape of the world or your situation, as if you..., instead of being a poor charwoman, perhaps

[2] For an extensive and helpful account on this topic, see Barrett. Most of the fragments I cite are present in Barrett's paper.

could manage to be called 'Madame'" (*WOL* 136). The Christian promise is that the believer will move heaven and earth "so quietly, so lightly, that no one notices it" (Ibid). Imagine moving that much on an empty stomach.

In the *Papers*, the scenario is more or less the same. In journal NB5, begun on May 15th, 1848, Kierkegaard observes that Christ came to the world "to remake men in such a way that all these human sufferings (poverty, wretchedness, sickness, loss of status, etc.) would become childishness to be reckoned as nothing" (*J&P* 483 [IX A 147, 1848; NB5:143]). A year later and in the same vein, Kierkegaard explained that, from a human perspective, earthly life has many sorrows and misfortunes, such as sickness and poverty. Then adds: "Let us help one another as well as we are able; honor and praise to anyone who hits upon new means and methods – and then comes Christianity and brings only a new occasion for need and wretchedness: the truth – to be obliged to suffer for the truth" (*J&P* 501 [X 1 A 438, 1849; NB11:138).[3] Neither privilege nor misery are ends or guarantees of faith in themselves.

Nonetheless, voluntary material sacrifice can contribute to inwardness' focus on the absolutely important. Kierkegaard stresses this in journal entry NB24, penned on April 20th, 1851. When life is understood from a worldly point of view, it is natural to enjoy financial means and do things to obtain them in great numbers. However, the situation changes when God enters the picture. Kierkegaard presses, whether you are rich or poor, "is it not like swindling God when you too quickly and too energetically arrange your life so as to serve finite goals and thereby your own convenience, your own enjoyment of life [?]" (*J&P* 2771 [X 4 A 263, 1851; NB24:23]).

Kierkegaard admits that Christianity is too serious to romanticize pure humanity. Christianity is not a fairytale that forgets "the dissimilarity of earthly life that belongs to every human being in particular by birth, by position, by circumstances, by education etc." (*WOL* 70). But as mentioned, Christian virtue requires resisting the temptations of temporality.

**Kierkegaard On Moral Conscience**

After the *Corsair* affair in 1846, Kierkegaard's work took an increasingly polemical tone. Determined by literary and above all political and religious conflicts, the controversy reached a peak on the last day of January, 1851. On that day, Kierkegaard published an open letter in *Fædrelandet* addressed to A. G. Rudelbach. Rudelbach, a theologian and fan of N. F. S. Grundtvig's ideas, had the audacity to include Kierkegaard among the prominent Danish thinkers who fought for the separation of Church and State. Kierkegaard responded defiantly to be included in this club. He wrote, "I…promise a reward to anyone who can point out in these numerous books a single proposal for external change" (*COR* 53). Kierkegaard is adamant that his sole task has always been that of placing the single individual at the center of Christianity. Nevertheless, at the very same time that he is talking about Christianity as inward deepening, Kierkegaard opens a door onto the external world: "If at a given time the forms under which one has to live are not the most perfect, if they can be improved, in God's name do so" (Ibid). Still, this effort at making material improvements must come at the behest of Christian moral resolution.

Kierkegaard employs three concepts in unpacking this idea of inner resolution, namely, matter of conscience (*Samvittighedssag*), constraint of conscience (*Samvittighedstvang*), and questions of conscience

[3] See Mark 14:7: "For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always."

(*Samvittighedsspørgsmaal*).[4] With the exception of a minor reference in 1854, Kierkegaard only utilizes these concepts in the years 1847-1851. In his published works, we find these notions in *Works of Love* (1847), *Christian Discourses* (1848), and the aforesaid "An Open Letter" (1851). Meanwhile, in the *Papers*, all mentions but one occur in journal NB23, begun on January 22nd, 1851, nine days before the publication of the open letter.[5] Now, we pivot to the characteristics of moral conscience with respect to his views about material conditions, constraint, and/or questions of conscience.

First, moral conscience does not only apply to particular situations or contexts. Rather, it embraces all existential dimensions. This follows from the axial Christian conviction that the change of infinity brings the inner power of conscience to invade the whole existence. As Kierkegaard puts it, "on the whole, one cannot make something particular a matter of conscience; either one must make everything that, as Christianity does, or nothing at all" (*WOL* 139–140). If the relationship of conscience is limited, it is at the same time denied. Second, moral conscience requires honest self-reflection. Kierkegaard explains this with the passage 3:16 from I Timothy: "God was…believed in the world." When Paul proffers these words, he is not demanding a yes or no answer from anyone. Paul states that God was believed in the world and walks away. Now, "it is left to you yourself, to your conscience, to answer for yourself" (*CD* 235). Then, the question effectively becomes a question of conscience. When there is a personal question, but there is no one who asks, "there in the deepest sense *you* are involved with yourself, and this is the relationship of conscience" (*CD* 236), says Kierkegaard. Third, as a result of this intense self-examination, moral conscience situates the single individual before God's scrutiny.

Kierkegaard claims that the relationship between the individual and God is itself conscience, so that "a person could not have anything on his conscience if God did not exist" (*WOL* 143). Fourth, moral conscience can operate as justification of character in cases of external opposition and can disembogue into martyrdom. With the current tumultuous political situation in mind, Kierkegaard writes, "if the direction is to be outward, it must be because the established order is expressly ungodly…Then it is a matter of conscience" (*J&P* 2130 [X 4 A 26, 1851; NB23:26]). Translation slightly modified). Within this configuration, a person must be in a position in which she "seeks dangers, creates difficulties for himself, discovers the most difficult way" (*J&P* 687 [X 4 A 34, 1851; NB23:34]). Kierkegaard synthesizes these two points in the final section of his open letter: "But if someone collides with the established order in such a way that he could imagine it to be a question of conscience…and he dares to say it, then he has to be a solitary person in order to strive through suffering, in order to choose martyrdom" (*COR* 57–58). A solitary action in character, against all odds, is the extreme representation of moral conscience.

So far, it is difficult to see how moral conscience reveals a way to avoid Christianity's indifference to the external. In seeking this path, we should not place our hopes on moral conscience as the inner power of faith, as the absolute God-relationship, or as the moral warrant for an extreme opposition to the political and ecclesiatical structure. However, our prospects improve when we turn to the description of love as a matter of conscience.

**Love Is a Matter of Conscience**

[4] The difference between *Bevidsthed* and *Samvittighed* is important. The first term refers to a cognitive process, the latter to the moral realm.

[5] For a more extensive account on Kierkegaard's use of the referred terms, see Tapia.

According to M. Jamie Ferreira (84–85), both parts of the third deliberation of *Works of Love* provide resources for defending Kierkegaard against the charge of advocating a form of Christianity that is callously indifferent to the plight of the poor. In this sense, III.A – "Love Is the Fulfilling of the Law" – presents inwardness as directed outwardly and III.B – "Love Is a Matter of Conscience" – makes a case for the hidden being of inwardness, which is another way of naming moral conscience. The basis for Ferreira's argument on this last topic is that we should not "identify what Kierkegaard terms 'externals' with all outwardness" (85). The challenge is to reconcile the vision of love as "sheer action" provided in III.A (*WOL* 98) with love as determined by conscience, considered as a category of inwardness.

Kierkegaard is wary of diluting the idea of inwardness by identifying it with something like charitable works or for the matter medieval monasticism. And yet, when actions spring from moral resolution, as it is the case with the Christian duty of neighbor love, efforts to reduce suffering in the world should no longer be considered matters of indifference. On Kierkegaard's account, due to a childish misunderstanding of Christianity, some people have confused faith with "indifference to friendship, to the family relationships, to love of the fatherland" (*WOL* 144). As Kierkegaard states it, "Christianity is not indifferent in a worldly way to anything, on the contrary; it is concerned about everything simply and solely in a spiritual way" (Ibid). This spiritual qualification renews externality with an elevated meaning.

Leo C. Barrett provides another reading supporting the view that external conditions are not matters of indifference to Kierkegaard's understanding Christian neighbor love. Barrett points out that there are three levels of concern when it comes to Christian love and externalities: the concern about material conditions (154-155), the concern about world obstacles such as culture, upbringing, love of money, excessive praise of preferential love, among others (155-158), and the concern about upbuilding through material and social means (158-163). With the first two levels, things are more or less straightforward. A person cannot love or be loved in the absence of a proper physical sustainability. Similarly, a father who pays more heed to money than inner development is likely to impoverish his children's spiritual prospects. The same might be said of a society that makes material success a god-term. Lastly, we have the third level, the one that refers to upbuilding. This level is naturally indirect, since it takes into consideration the influence of the spiritual over the concrete. Kierkegaard instructs, "There is no word in the language that in itself is upbuilding, and there is no word in the language that cannot be said in an upbuilding way and become upbuilding if love is present" (*WOL* 213). What a word means depends on how it is written or said. And the same goes for actions: "every human being by his life, by his conduct, by his behavior in everyday affairs, by his association with his peers, by his words, his remarks, should and could build up and would do it if love were really present in him" (Ibid). Witness, for instance, watching a child sleeping. It can be a soothing sight, but not necessarily upbuilding. "If you still want to call it upbuilding, it is because you see love present, it is because you see God's love encompass the baby" (*WOL* 214). The nurturing love of the mother is undeniably a concrete action, but it is more than that, it is the morally conscious repetition of God's love in the world.

## Conclusion

Although we have seen how the spiritual, in the form of love as a matter of conscience, can infuse new meaning to earthly affairs, Kierkegaard nonetheless implores the wretched one to be merciful with children of fortune like

him and he invites the poor charwoman to rejoice in her allotted circumstances, because what matters is inner change. What are we to make of these baffling requests.

Here again, Barrett helps us, arguing that we should always be attentive to the fact that Kierkegaard is employing "different rhetorical strategies to achieve very different goals" (138). In this sense, when Kierkegaard talks about the inner being of inwardness as a relationship of conscience, we can imagine his target being a person who doubts her moral strength. Correspondingly, when Kierkegaard highlights the upbuilding novelty that love provides when it becomes a matter of conscience, on the other end we can picture a person who asks about the authentic expressions of Christian love in the world. As Ferreira rightly asserts, "it is obvious that an ethic that undermines…concern for this-worldly welfare cannot be viable" (85). Thus, every time Kierkegaard addresses the wretched one or the poor charwoman, he is talking to them directly, but to the rest of society indirectly. The wretched one can rest quietly knowing that she can exercise mercy even if she has nothing to give, but that does not liberate the lucky ones from the duty to care about the needs of those who have come up on the losing end of the lottery of worldly existence. Comparably, the spiritual greatness that the poor charwoman reaches when she silently moves heaven and earth does not excuse her employer from being morally obligated to compensate her more fairly (Ferreira 96-97). What is said matters as much as how it is said and to whom.

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***Neighbor Love Through Fearful Days: Finding Purpose and Meaning in a Time of Crisis***
**(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021)**
**By Jason A. Mahn**

**Reviewed by Jamie Lorentzen**

In "A Letter to My Students as We Face the Pandemic" (The New Yorker, April 3, 2020), short story writer and novelist George Saunders wrote:

> *Jeez, what a hard and depressing and scary time. So much suffering and anxiety everywhere…. But it also occurs to me that this is when the world needs our eyes and ears and minds. This has never happened before here (at least not since 1918). We are (and especially you are) the generation that is going to have to help us make sense of this and recover afterward. What new forms might you invent…where all of the drama is happening in private, essentially? Are you keeping records of the e-mails and texts you're getting, the thoughts you're having, the way your hearts and minds are reacting to this strange new way of living? It's all important. Fifty years from now, people the age you are now won't believe this ever happened…. What will convince that future kid is what you are able to write about this, and what you're able to write about it will depend on how much sharp attention you are paying now, and what records you keep. Also, I think, with how open you can keep your heart…. It's good for the world for a writer to bear witness, and it's good for the writer, too. Especially if she can bear witness with love and humor and, despite it all, some fondness for the world, just as it is manifesting, warts and all.*

A new book by Søren Kierkegaard scholar Jason Mahn, *Neighbor Love Through Fearful Days: Finding Purpose and Meaning in a Time of Crisis*, channels Saunders's call. It is a first person account in real time last year of him, his wife Laura (a Lutheran pastor), their 12- and 14-year-old sons Gabe and Asa, plus neighbors and students and colleagues as they individually and collectively try to make sense of their lives in the spirit of Luther's concept of neighbor love. Mahn logs 30 chapter-entries between March 17 and August 31, 2020, marking the time that ushered in or reignited multiple plagues writ large, including the novel coronavirus, structural racism, economic and supply-chain instability, and the headwinds of catastrophic climate change.

What is literarily noteworthy about Mahn's reflections of, and practical responses to, those five-and-a-half months is that fortune found him on the cusp of a 2020-21 sabbatical year. The timing allowed him time to compose, edit, find a publisher, and, amazingly, publish the book by the beginning of the 2021-22 academic year—a feat matched only by the likes of Kierkegaard's own lightning-speed writing and publishing practices. The book's timeliness is also noteworthy—this time paradoxically—for its very timelessness. Many of the themes, events, and issues of 2020 aren't going away anytime soon, thus raising Mahn's para-journalistic account into the ranks of literature, akin to how Ezra Pound saw literature as *news that stays news*. We still have an infectious pandemic problem; we still have mask and vaccine problems; we still have race, unemployment, supply-chain and climate problems—all amid our pan-temporal neighbor love problem.

What makes Mahn's book particularly noteworthy to readers of Kierkegaard is that he distills in it Kierkegaardian wisdom long internalized through the composition of his first two books, *Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Becoming a Christian in Christendom* (Fortress Press,

2016). In his preface alone, Mahn catches the ear of even the casual reader of Kierkegaard as he speaks of "works of love" to which people are called in this life, "even and especially in fearful days"; how his book "both talks about and enacts such reflective practice" from the perspective of his personal encounters with "shared hardship, [his] own fear and anxiety, and an emerging sense of meaning and purpose"; and how writing "reflective stories that try to get at the heart of holy lessons" have been "both gift and task" for Mahn as a writer, teacher, father, spouse, and person (xiii-xiv)—all salient Kierkegaardian motifs.

In addition, Mahn's narration offers a report of his attempts to do what Kierkegaard has long advised his readers to do, namely, reduplicate Kierkegaard's wisdom in their own lives and practices by existing in the truth they understand (see, e.g., *Kierkegaard's Journal and Papers (JP) 2:537/Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks (KJN) 5:179*). In less abstruse language, Kierkegaard puts it this way: "What I have to say must not be lectured.… What I need is a person who doesn't gesticulate with his arms from the pulpit, nor with his finger from the professorial chair, but someone who gesticulates with his entire personal existence, who is ready and willing, amid every danger, to express in deeds exactly what he professes" (*KJN 4:322*; see also *JP 1:265*).

Finally, Mahn approaches the truth that he understands in neighbor love not only as a practicing Lutheran but as a staunch advocate for both the liberal arts and narrative approaches within the liberal arts model that inform what it means to be human. These are credos to which Lutheran colleges such as the one with which he is affiliated (Augustana College) have long been bound even as they are increasingly challenged and threatened from without and within. (Mahn addresses the current state of college liberal arts and Lutheran vocation—*vocatio*, religious calling—in two other books co-authored and edited by him, *The Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education* (Lutheran University Press, 2016) and *Radical Lutherans/Lutheran Radicals* (Cascade, 2017). A notable coincidence here is that Hong Kierkegaard Library founders Edna and Howard Hong also worked tirelessly against the diminishing aspects of Lutheranism in Lutheran college settings while, amid their practical endeavors, Howard co-edited and contributed to volumes with titles similar to Mahn's titles, including *Integration and the Christian Liberal Arts College* (1956) and *Christian Faith and the Liberal Arts* (1961).

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"I teach religion at a Lutheran liberal arts college," Mahn writes in his introduction. "One primary goal of being liberally educated (meaning *widely* educated) is the ability to critically and constructively participate in public debates of real importance…. Liberal arts education helps young people hear stories with critical and self-critical ears" (xx).

One of at least two central Kierkegaardian themes above speaks to attending to stories *critically*, that is, listening carefully for and actively responding to benign or ill designs of the storytellers themselves—especially tellers of tales who over-objectively and over-optimistically explain away, dismiss, or deny difficult issues such as suffering, paradox, and ineffable mysteries. "Our lives," Mahn writes, "are not so easily understood and contained" (xxxiii). As a gadfly to his over-optimistic, scientifically objective 19th Century, Kierkegaard was similarly critical of easy explanations and simple proofs.

The second patently Kierkegaardian theme above has to do with hearing stories with self-critical ears. This theme reveals Mahn's *modus operandi* as well as neighbor love's requirement and presupposition: self-love. Mahn,

following Kierkegaard, indirectly treats self-love as a person's commitment to self-honesty. The discipline renders anyone more capable of acts of neighbor love by being attentive to, and more understanding of, the well-intentioned *narratives* of the neighbors—whether they are other Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or secularists—the neighbor being, according to Kierkegaard, "the other you," while "the one who loves presupposes that love is in the other person's heart and by this very presupposition builds up love in him" (*Works of Love, Kierkegaard's Writings (KW)* 16:53, 216–17).

More to the point: Just as Kierkegaard speaks of how earnestness involves an "honest distrust of oneself" that compels him always to treat himself "as a suspicious character" (*For Self-Examination, KW* 21:44), neighbor love hinges upon a love of self that is rigorously and ethically self-examining—or, in Mahn's parlance, a person's "self-critical ears." Such earnest self-inquiry points to and is the presupposition of neighbor love, as Kierkegaard suggests when he writes that "most people are subjective toward themselves and objective toward all others, sometimes horribly objective. Ah, the task is precisely to be objective in relation to oneself and subjective in relation to all others" (*KJN* 4:162; see *JP* 4:348). The now tripartite theme of self-love, self-examination, and neighbor love is central not only to sound liberal arts protocol, but also to sound religious protocol in which an honest distrust in oneself places oneself at the threshold of confession, contrition, and penitence that, in the end, prompts neighbor love. Such is the path that leads to what Mahn calls religious vocation's "purposeful callings." "Lutheran higher education," Mahn writes, "follows its namesake, Martin Luther, in equating vocation with love and service to the neighbor" (16)—especially but by no means exclusively in fearful days and times of crisis.

Personal confessions by Mahn that spring from an honest distrust in himself, then, are essential to his narrative. In fact, he regularly exposes his privileged white race, class, and status from whence he came, privilege that (as inherited sin itself is wont to do) wittingly or unwittingly perpetuates racial, economic, and climate-related sins. Just as sin-consciousness resides at the heart of Kierkegaard's authorship, the redemptive hope that springs from a person's conscious confession of sins is at the heart of Mahn's book, which he suggests as much in a chapter entitled "Dear Amy—June 15, 2020." The chapter addresses, in letter form, Amy Cooper, the woman who, on May 25, 2020, threatened to call the police on the Black bird-watcher in New York's Central Park after he asked her to put her dog on a leash and then filmed her exasperated distress. Mahn, at wit's end by Amy Cooper's unrepentant deer-in-the-headlights stance, writes:

*Where on Earth do we go from here? I don't clearly know. I have been writing [to you, Amy] about repentance when I thought I would be writing about neighbor love. I thought that I would be finding ways to reach out to others during this time of crisis, but as COVID has done its own shape-shifting to reveal structural sins underneath, I find myself remembering backward and reaching inward—confessing sin in lieu of outwardly loving. Equally as surprising, there turn out to be as many barriers within as without—logjams where the currents of my confessions turn to eddies, churning in on themselves. But repent we must. There's no other way forward. As C. S. Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity, "We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to a place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then going forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road." I don't know if you, Amy, call yourself a Christian or what that means if you do. To me, it means that the road toward love of our neighbors necessarily winds through places we don't want to go. We've got to repent from the sin of wielding our whiteness.* (116-17)

What is especially fortunate here of the power of sin-consciousness in a Kierkegaardian sense is that Mahn's own confession of guilt serves as a neighborly exemplar to Amy's hesitancy, reluctance, or outright denial of culpability in the aftermath of her far-from-neighborly actions and behaviors. In addition, and according to Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus, guilt is the very "expression for the strongest self-assertion of existence" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, KW 12.1:528), an unambiguous I AM as opposed to NOT ME—an assertion of human existence, in other words, that Mahn hopes both for himself and others.

In a concluding unapologetic confession, Mahn writes: "Honestly, others (and I) need stories of love between neighbors now more than ever. I still strain to hear what I am called to do, and who I am called to be. Writing about neighbor love comes easier to me than neighbor love" (197). Such a confession of fallibility is nonetheless also a fortunate work of love, helping Mahn understand his life backward as he lives it forward. Meanwhile, between Mahn's introduction and his epilogue is story after story of love between neighbors and of ways neighbor love is performed—all of which equate to so many everyday acts of attentiveness, openness, generosity, hospitality, grief, empathy, joy, patience, and simple kindnesses that allow grace to enter into the vast milieu of cultural confusion from which we all (radically and fortunately) suffer.

Mahn claims that his story "gets truer, not to mention more interesting," he writes, "when I see it within the stories of others," some of which he finds in books by the likes of Toni Morrison, Albert Camus, Kierkegaard, Wendell Berry, and Simone Weil, while other stories are ongoing and lived out by his own neighbors, family, students, friends, and himself. What also makes his story "truer" is how it is generously peppered with his own remarkable breadth of liberal arts-knowledge of the important current and ongoing public debates. As for the remainder of what it means to be liberally educated, Mahn believes that it

*involves the ability to tell stories and thus to make meaning in the first place. Liberal arts colleges, especially those that are church-related, want our students to form character as well as acquire skills. To form and know your character is to come to know yourself as a character in a larger story. It is to find yourself in a story that you did not create but can fully own and narrate…. This is another way of saying that church-related liberal arts schools educate for vocation. They want students to form the kinds of selves and live the kinds of lives that are attuned to—and can capably respond to—the needs and callings of others. Questions about one's sense of calling or vocation direct attention not only toward doing but also toward being.* (xx-xi)

Here again Mahn taps into another central Kierkegaardian theme, namely, how "Christianity is the existential, it is a task for character" (KJN 8:412; see JP 6:425).

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Kierkegaard readers and scholars who offer comparable narratives to Mahn's book are primarily first person and confessional in nature, all to (as Kierkegaard suggests throughout his authorship) turn "abstraction into the personal" (*KJN* 6:133/see also *JP* 6:178). Among such narratives are author's prefaces of so many secondary scholarly texts in Kierkegaard studies, the 35 essays that compose *Taking Kierkegaard Personally: First Person Responses* (Mercer University Press, 2020), Gordon Marino's *The Existentialist's Survival Guide* (Harper One, 2019), and virtually all of the dozen-plus books Edna Hatlestad Hong published (especially her novels, creative nonfiction memoirs, and historical fictions). Mahn's own activism also follows a bloodline along so many

religious and spiritual activist writers, including Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, Dorothee Sölle, Wendel Berry, Parker Palmer, and Bill McKibben. "My writing has felt like paying attention and thus like prayer," Mahn writes. "But I know that introverts like me who find sanctuary in leather-bound journals need to give up that security, too, in order to be with others more practiced at loving neighbors and to try to learn from them, as awkward and as humbling as that is" (129).

May students and scholars of Kierkegaard be prompted and encouraged by Mahn's first person account of everyday life that makes up *Neighbor Love Through Fearful Days*. Such is the kind of witnessing and testimony that bends toward a lived Kierkegaardian life over against an essentially scholarly life, a kind of existence that indirectly asks readers what Kierkegaard himself repeatedly asks his readers:

*Are you now living in such a way that you are aware of being a single individual and thereby aware of your eternal responsibility before God; are you living in such a way that this awareness can acquire the time and stillness and liberty of action to penetrate your life relationships? You are not asked to withdraw from life, from an honorable occupation, from a happy domestic life—on the contrary, that awareness will support and transfigure and illuminate your conduct in the relationships of life. (Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits, KW 15:137)*

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### *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford University Press, 2016)
### By Fred Rush

**Reviewed by Troy Wellington Smith, University of California, Berkeley**

Fred Rush is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, and he has co-edited the *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus* for a number of years. As an authority on German idealism, Rush is well-positioned to reevaluate the function of irony for both the idealists and their romantic interlocutors. His *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard* is by and large an excellent book, elegantly written and compellingly argued. Rush demonstrates a magisterial command of the secondary literature on German romanticism and idealism, and his facility with the primary texts leads the reader to some unprecedented findings on Friedrich Schlegel's authorship and its influence. Rush's readings would have benefited from a more thorough examination of the scholarship on Kierkegaard, but Kierkegaardians should nonetheless take note of the "Schlegelian resources" that Rush finds the Dane deploying in his critique of Hegelian dialectics (213).

In his introductory remarks, Rush lays out four theses, the first two of which are handled in the first chapter. Perhaps the most philosophically fine-grained of the four is Thesis I. According to Rush, whereas Kant smuggled "theodical rationalist metaphysical principles" into his model of regulative reason, and required the transcendental necessity of these principles, Schlegel stressed the historical contingency of all such models, counseling a pragmatism of sorts (7). In Thesis II, Rush claims that Schlegel—and not Novalis—should be considered philosophically preeminent among the luminaries of German romanticism. (And here he gainsays both Manfred Frank and Frederick Beiser.) Irony, rather than being a literary concept dictating Schlegel's philosophical position, is instead an outcome of his theory that foundational principles are regulative, not constitutive. Thesis III, which is the basis for chapter 2, contrasts Schlegelian dialectic with its Hegelian counterpart. Whereas the former, being an "ironic dialectic," is systematically constrained to remain open, the latter, as the engine for an "autotelic" system, necessarily drives on towards closure (10). Lastly, Thesis IV purports that Kierkegaard's interpretation of the concept of irony has a Hegelian inflection, but that Kierkegaard later turns this irony against Hegel.

Schlegel's philosophical superiority to Novalis is cogently argued for in chapter 1, where Rush demonstrates that Schlegel is less beholden to Fichte's "foundationalism and universalism" than Novalis is (27). While for Novalis the absolute was not to be grasped philosophically but approached by each subject through faith and feeling, Schlegel claimed that the absolute did not elude "*all* understanding," but that it did frustrate "*any particular* understanding" (41). Schlegel thus mobilizes his legions of fragments in order to build a never-to-be-completed scaffolding around the absolute, to "'approximate' (*annähern*)" it (46). Most concepts, then, are to be regarded as historically contingent, and "merely regulative," not constitutive. Poetry is the preferred form for the romantic ironist, in that it gestures towards more than can be pinned down, "leav[ing] its content *suggestively indeterminate*" (59). To read poetry, particularly romantic poetry—in the Schlegelian sense, of course—is therefore analogous to the subject's experience of existence; just as she cannot exhaust a poem's meaning, neither can she wholly gain purchase on the absolute. Those who only know Schlegel and his novel *Lucinde* through Kierkegaard's *On the Concept of Irony* will be surprised to find this philosophically constructive, striving Schlegel, one far removed from the empty and confused aestheticism for which he is arraigned in part 2 of the magister thesis—a charge reflexively echoed by a number of Kierkegaard scholars in their own work.

In chapter 2, Rush opens by suggesting that Hegel received the romantics harshly because of his anxiety over the commonalities between their respective understandings of dialectic. Both Schlegel and Hegel define a given type of consciousness as a tension within its content or as a conflict in attitude towards that content; for both philosophers, this opposition is ultimately responsible for the transition between one type of consciousness and another. Yet Hegel draws a sharp distinction between his dialectic and Schlegel's. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Schlegelian romanticism is denoted by the typology "Beautiful Soul or Evil," the final stage before what Rush rightly claims to be Hegel's own perspective. The Beautiful Soul consigns ethics to the inwardness of sheer intentionality; dialectically speaking, Evil is an advance on the Beautiful Soul, in that it represents an externalization of Conscience, but Evil is insufficient insofar as it maintains a provisional, noncommittal stance towards the perspectives it puts forward. Like Schlegel's ironic dialectic, Evil remains open, leading to inevitable contradiction. Hegelian dialectic, on the other hand, resolves all apparent contradictions as it churns towards closure, towards the absolute. After a brief consideration of the socio-political implications of Schlegel and Hegel's respective dialectics, Rush then proceeds to the Berlin lectures on aesthetics, where Hegel attacks romantic irony as "subjective humor," an inferior conception of art that Hegel disdains in favor of "objective humor."

Rush, in chapter 3, remarks that Kierkegaard has reproduced Hegel's criticism of Schlegel's irony or subjective humor in his magister thesis—an uncontroversial claim but one that still bears repeating. Of greater interest is Rush's second point, that Kierkegaard deploys Schlegelian methods to challenge Hegelian dialectics and objective humor. For Hegel, humor is the apex of art, as it borders on Hegelian philosophy as such. For Kierkegaard—or, rather, the pseudonym Johannes Climacus—humor is but a *confinium* between the ethical and what he calls Religiousness A, an immanent religiosity. As Rush correctly points out, humor has no consciousness of sin, and so the transcendent Religiousness B—the stage privileged by Kierkegaard—is not directly accessible via humor. Rush further argues that Kierkegaard's existential spheres are analogous to Hegelian forms of consciousness, but that the "transition between spheres" is not "necessary" (245); this is much like Schlegelian dialectic, in which possibility always remains open. Yet this theory of the stages, as Rush describes it, remains somewhat Hegelian insofar as its sequence is "necessarily cumulative," meaning that in order to proceed from the original stage (i.e., the aesthetic) to Religiousness B one must also pass through each intermediate stage (e.g., the ethical) in sequence (216); now *this* is a rather controversial claim, but Rush assumes it *a priori*. Such a position is by no means unprecedented, as it can be found in Stephen N. Dunning's *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness* (Princeton UP, 1985), for example. One might, however, at least begin to question this assertion here, without attempting to resolve the controversy definitively. James Collins, for instance, in his *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Princeton UP, 1983), explicitly cautions against picturing the stages as the rungs of a ladder, or as any sort of spatio-temporal succession (45). Moreover, in Kierkegaard's own writings, namely, in part 2 of *The Sickness unto*

*Death*, one finds the figure of the religious poet, "en Digter-Existents i Retning af det Religieuse" (a poet-existence by way of the religious) (*SKS* 11:191), which in itself would strongly suggest a direct connection between the aesthetic and the religious spheres, one that bypasses the ethical. Rush, by his own admission, has consciously ignored *The Sickness unto Death*, as well as the other works of the "second" or "religious" authorship. This omission is by no means irrelevant, for Jon Stewart has demonstrated in his *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge UP, 2003) that Kierkegaard employs a Hegelian dialectical methodology in *Sickness* (551). With that said, Rush has offered a robust account of Kierkegaard's "first" or "aesthetic" authorship in respect to both Schlegel and Hegel.

Before closing, it might be worthwhile to compare *Irony and Idealism* to an important work that, quite strangely, does not appear in Rush's bibliography: K. Brian Soderquist's *The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony* (Reitzel, 2007). Soderquist contrasts the irony of Schlegel with the controlled irony of Kierkegaard, taking the latter to be the first step toward recognizing "the self's ontological dependence"; the former, for Soderquist, represents the romantic myth of "self-creation" (3). Schlegel, according to Soderquist, "is the eminent model for a position Kierkegaard considers to be one of the most pernicious threats to selfhood: the modern 'poetic' consciousness" (119). In *Irony and Idealism*, on the other hand, one finds a much more nuanced account of Kierkegaard's dealings with Schlegel. In the magister thesis, Kierkegaard does prosecute Schlegel along Hegelian lines (as Rush readily admits), but the Jena romantic also serves as a model for Kierkegaard's subsequent critique of Hegelian dialectic, insofar as the movement from one existential stage to another is a leap or radical choice, rather than a necessary development. Furthermore, Rush perceptively notes that the frame narrative of *Either/Or*, which recounts the discovery of a cache of papers of ambiguous authorship, is eminently Schlegelian in its irresolvability. All this is to say that Schlegel was also a positive model for Kierkegaard, one that had a decisive influence on his dialectics and literary form. A Kierkegaardian might wish that Rush had been more familiar with the body of scholarship on the Dane, but the radical reevaluation of Kierkegaard's relations to Schlegel provided by *Irony and Idealism* should make the book of great interest to anyone working in the field of Kierkegaard studies.

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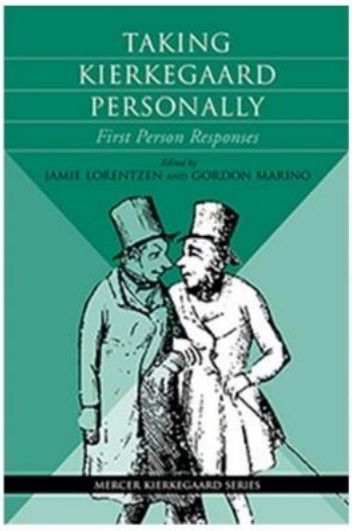


**Taking Kierkegaard Personally: First Person Responses**

**Edited by: Jamie Lorentzen, Gordon Marino**

**Publisher: Mercer University Press**

TAKING KIERKEGAARD PERSONALLY is a one-of-a-kind volume in which scholars from the world over address personal, existential lessons that Kierkegaard has taught them. Papers were selected from the June 2018 International Kierkegaard Conference, sponsored by the Howard V. and Edna H. Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College. The Conference's prompt--The Wisdom of Kierkegaard: What Existential Lessons Have You Learned from Him?--compelled scholars to drop their guards and write primarily in first person narrative instead of standard third person scholarly/professorial narrative. Papers range from a preacher in Texas discussing how this white nineteenth-century Dane's thought speaks to black issues, to a university development director wondering what Kierkegaard can teach Silicon Valley executives, to a Danish scholar struggling with human autonomy versus dependence on God, to a Jewish scholar finding hope in this Danish Protestant's works in which existential alienation from the world is the norm, to a Nigerian scholar introducing Kierkegaard's "single individual" into his Ndi Igbo community (a tribe predicated not on the individual but the collective), to a Slovak scholar surviving a bad divorce, to an Hispanic scholar's passion to teach Kierkegaard along the U.S.-Mexico border to Hispanic students, to an American scholar fielding his father's questions about suicide, to other scholars suffering from and coping with deaths of parents, raising children, working in trauma units, finding the need for self-denial in flourishing countries, preaching valuable sermons, dealing with college campus/department politics, and living perfectly quotidian lives.