CHAPTER 7

KIERKEGAARD (1813–1855)

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Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (5 May 1813–11 November 1855) is the most important Danish philosopher of the nineteenth century. His contributions in ethics, moral psychology, and philosophy of religion took some time to spread beyond Denmark, but his influence on early twentieth-century German and French philosophy was substantial,[1] and by mid-century his work had been translated into nearly 20 languages. The larger context of Kierkegaard's thought was the German philosophy and theology of the early nineteenth century,[2] but his approach to the issues that context presented was novel both in its content and in its mode of presentation. Although he published a series of works under his own name—including upbuilding and Christian discourses and a large monograph on Christian ethics—his most important philosophical works were published under a set of pseudonyms. The broader aim in these works is to present a set of comprehensive aesthetic, ethical, and religious life-views. The device of pseudonymity allowed him to argue for and against these life-views (and their components) from different perspectives. As a result we see them both as they look from the inside, to those trying to understand and direct their lives in the terms they provide, and as they look from the outside, to those with opposed commitments. Some views are portrayed as more adequate than others, in various ways, to the situation of existing subjectivity, and Kierkegaard's pseudonymous corpus as a whole can be approached as a many-sided portrayal of that situation.

The aesthetic view of life is a major focus in *Either/Or* (1843) and *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), and a topic in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *Repetition* (1843), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846). It is characterized from two directions: positively, by characters who embrace it (in *Either/Or*, for instance, by *A*, the author of the papers in the first volume), and critically, by characters who do not (in *Either/Or*, by Judge Wilhelm, the author of the papers in the second volume).

[1] Especially important was his early reception by K. Jaspers and M. Heidegger, and, later, by J.-P. Sartre.

[2] Apart from ancient sources (especially Plato) and some Danish thinkers (P. M. Møller, H. L. Martensen, J. L. Heiberg, F. C. Sibbern), Kierkegaard's main influences (and opponents) were I. Kant, J. G. Hamann, the German idealists (J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, G. W. F. Hegel), the late idealists (I. H. Fichte, C. Weisse and their circle), L. Feuerbach, F. Schlegel, and F. D. E. Schleiermacher.

A number of configurations of the aesthetic approach to life are described in *Either/Or I*, ranging from the unstructured pursuit of one hedonistic pleasure after another (in the essay on the musical erotic) through a series of approaches organized around more reflective pursuit of more sophisticated goals that still revolve around aesthetic satisfaction, and culminating in the highly structured production of opportunities for pleasure that is never actually enjoyed (in the diary of the seducer). In all of these configurations the organizing aim is the production of some subjective state—of sensual pleasure, or of reflective pleasure in works of art, in one's own self, or in other people rendered interesting by one's own manipulation of them. Notably, the end points (purest immediacy and the aesthetic in its most reflective form) are ideal types: Don Juan is pure sensuality untouched by reflection, and is an operatic character; Johannes the seducer has a conception of seduction so intellectualized as to be in the end sexless, and is probably a fictional character of *A*'s creation. The portions of *Either/Or I* meant to reflect *A*'s actual state of mind convey neither extreme, but instead his sophisticated reflections on the pursuit of the beautiful and the interesting, interspersed with expressions of his own frustration, melancholy, and despair.

Despair is the defining feature of the aesthetic view of life according to Judge Wilhelm's negative characterization in *Either/Or II*. What he means by "despair" (*Fortvivlesen*) is not in the first instance a psychological state, but rather the aesthete's denial that he is responsible for his actions and that his ends must ultimately be self-given. The Judge argues that *A*'s attempt to see himself as a spectator in life rather than a participant in it is a futile endeavor,[3] and that the despair (in the psychological sense) that *A* complains of in some of the *diapsalmata* is a symptom of despair in this deeper sense.[4] The message of this part of *Either/Or* is that the aesthetic view of life is self-defeating: it is a nominally normative stance (one that purports to be action-guiding) that at the same time denies some presuppositions of any such stance (e.g. the agent's responsibility for his own decisions).[5]

Like the aesthetic standpoint, the ethical standpoint is characterized both positively and negatively—positively primarily by Judge Wilhelm in *Either/Or II* (and his counterpart in *Stages on Life's Way*), and critically in *The Concept of Anxiety*, parts of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and in *The Sickness unto Death* (1849).

[3] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 155; 1997–, 3: 168. The Judge argues (at S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 149; 1997–, 3:161) that *A*'s refusal to direct his life is itself a way of directing his life. *Cf.* also S. Kierkegaard 1901–06, II: 215; 1997–, 3: 228–229.

[4] *A* himself embraces fatalism at several points in the first volume, and himself connects this fatalism to his psychological malaise. "My soul has lost possibility." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, I: 25; 1997–, 2: 50). "It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything *aeterno modo*, but I am continually *aeterno modo*." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, I: 23; 1997–, 2: 48) *Cf.* S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, I: 6; 1997–, 2: 30. His maxim—not to begin anything, not to will (S. Kierkegaard 1901–06, I: 23; 1997–, 2: 48)—follows from his fatalism. The result is that he finds time senseless (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, I: 13–14; 1997–, 2: 38), existence tedious (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, I: 9; 1997–, 2: 33), and nothing meaningful (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, I: 15; 1997–, 2: 40).

[5] I argue for this reading of the Judge's criticism in M. Kosch 2006a. For similar interpretations see, for example, M. Taylor 1975; H. Fujino 1994. Other interpretations have been offered. Some take the fundamental weakness of the aesthetic standpoint to be the vulnerability to failure of aesthetic projects themselves (a vulnerability ethical projects are thought not to share). See, for example, W. Greve 1990; P. Lübcke 1991. Others take the fundamental weakness of the aesthetic standpoint to lie in its inability to support some aspects of a meaningful and fulfilled human life (such as a stable self-conception and stable interpersonal relationships). See, for example, A. Rudd 1993; P. Mehl 1995.

Wilhelm defines the ethical view of life by contrast with the aesthetic: its central feature is the acceptance of personal responsibility. This emphasis on responsibility is a feature of the religious standpoints as well, and for this reason it makes sense to say that the most basic division between life-views in the pseudonyms has the aesthetic on one side and the ethico-religious on the other.[6] What distinguishes the ethical stage from the religious is its commitment to an account of normativity based on the autonomy of the will. The Judge believes, with Kant and Fichte, that the negative concept of freedom as absence of determination by alien causes gives rise to a positive concept of freedom as self-determination, which in turn gives rise to a law or an end which gives content to the moral life.[7] In enjoining *A* to choose the ethical, the Judge advises him to choose with utmost energy, arguing that the demands of the ethical become apparent as soon as one takes choice seriously.[8]

The criticisms of the ethical standpoint in the other pseudonyms target this basic premise; the claim is that it entails that morally wrong actions can never be fully imputable.[9] This criticism is most fully spelled out in the second part of *The Sickness unto Death*, where the premise of the ethics of autonomy is linked with the Socratic–Platonic thesis that intentional action always aims at the good;[10] a similar worry is voiced in *The Concept of Anxiety*.[11] The message of these works is that, like the aesthetic view of life, the Judge's ethical view is internally incoherent: the "either/or" that defines it (the emphasis on freedom and responsibility) is at the same time undermined by the account of the source of norms it presupposes, since on that account the agent never in the end confronts a true either/or.[12]

[6] See H. Fujino 1994. The Judge sorts "speculative philosophy" (i.e. the philosophy of German idealism) together with the aesthetic standpoint as a view (though not a "life-view" in the full sense) that does not leave room for agency. *Cf.*, for example, S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 155; 1997–, 3: 167.

[7] In M. Kosch 2006c, I argue that J. G. Fichte was the primary historical model for the ethical standpoint described in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works. J. Disse 2000 and H. Fahrenbach 1968 also present the Judge's as a basically Kantian/Fichtean view of ethics.

[8] He argues that the individual becomes an ethical individual by becoming "transparent to himself" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 231; S. Kierkegaard 1997, 3: 246) and becomes transparent to himself by taking choice seriously. "As soon as a person can be brought to stand at the crossroads in such a way that there is no way out for him except to choose, he will choose the right thing" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 152; S. Kierkegaard 1997, 3: 164). *Cf.* S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 192, 234; 1997–, 3: 205, 249.

[9] In fact, accounting for imputable moral evil is a problem for both Kant and Fichte, and the Judge explicitly denies its possibility. I discuss Kant's problem with accounting for moral evil in M. Kosch 2006b ch. 2. I discuss the reasons for Fichte's denial of radical evil in M. Kosch 2006c. For the Judge's denial, see S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 157, 159; 1997–, 3: 170, 171.

[10] Anti-Climacus characterizes the common feature of the ethical views that are his target as their lack of "the courage to declare that a person knowingly does wrong, knows what is right and does the wrong" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 205; 1997–, 11: 96). "If sin is being ignorant of what is right and therefore doing wrong, then sin does not exist." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 200; 1997–, 11: 90).

[11] Vigilius Haufniensis describes a "first ethics" (by which he means a non-Christian, philosophical ethics) for which "the possibility of sin never occurs" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 295; 1997–, 4: 330) or which includes sin "only insofar as upon this concept it is shipwrecked" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 289; 1997–, 4: 324). I argue for this way of reading those and related passages in M. Kosch 2006b, 160–74.

[12] I argue for this reading of Kierkegaard's criticism of the ethical standpoint in M. Kosch 2006b 155–78. Other accounts have been offered, most of which appeal not to the internal inconsistency of the ethical standpoint but its incompleteness or inadequacy to some aspect of human experience. Some take its shortcoming to be the absence of individualized duties (see e.g. R. Adams 1987). Some

The ethical standpoint is thus, like the aesthetic, a form of despair (in Kierkegaard's deep sense) and the typology of despair in the first half of *The Sickness unto Death* includes a form that corresponds to it: the "despair of wanting to be oneself."[13]

The religious standpoint has two main configurations: philosophical and revealed religion. In *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), Johannes Climacus presents the first as the "Socratic" account of ethico-religious knowledge, the second as an alternative to it. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* they are religiousness "A" and "B". It is with the second, and with Christianity in particular, that Kierkegaard is most concerned; but he believed that its peculiar characteristics are best brought out by comparing it with the first. He approaches both—as with the other stages—as comprehensive views of life, examining how they function as normative frameworks (how they guide action), what they presuppose about the nature of human agency (and whether the presuppositions are plausible), and what it is like to take each of them as one's perspective on life. These standpoints are again characterized from different perspectives in the different pseudonymous works. Johannes Climacus (in *Fragments* and *Postscript*) describes the epistemology and psychology of both from the perspective of someone who does not presuppose the truth of either. Anti-Climacus (in *The Sickness unto Death* and *Training in Christianity* (1850)) offers an account of the self, of normativity, and of the relation between these two, from within the Christian perspective. Vigilius Haufniensis explains the moral psychology of sin (on the Christian conception) in *The Concept of Anxiety*. (Christianity is the highest stage of existence in Kierkegaard's scheme, and so there is no point of view higher than it from which it is subjected to criticism. That said, the difficulty of occupying it is vividly portrayed in all of these works, as well as in *Fear and Trembling*.)

A great variety of religious views fall more or less under the "A" rubric as Kierkegaard describes it, and undoubtedly he meant for this to be the case. Although Socrates is the named source, surely Spinoza (especially Jacobi's Spinoza) and Plotinus (whose influence on the German idealists and the larger philosophical culture of the time was substantial) figured among the historical models. These figures shaped the approach to religion shared by the German idealists, and the religion of idealism must sort under "A" if anything does. Fichte's later religious writings may be particularly significant here.[14]

Like the ethical standpoint, religiousness A is characterized as an answer to the normative question that has its source in human reason; this is what Kierkegaard means when he describes A as "immanent" religiousness.[15] The divine is conceived as a place mapped out within a philosophical system; everything about it is knowable by reason alone. The criterion of the good is union with God, and the task religiousness A sets for the individual is to

take it to lie in an alleged inability of finite individuals to satisfy ethical standards without either divine assistance or the possibility of divine forgiveness (see e.g. A. Hannay 1982; J. Whittaker 1988; H. Fahrenbach 1968).

[13] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 178–81; 1997–, 11: 181–4.

[14] Although Hegel's account of religion fulfills the metaphysical and epistemic constraints of Kierkegaard's description, it wholly lacks the element of existential pathos and emphasis on self-negation as an ethical project that are prominent in *Postscript's* discussion of religiousness A.

[15] *Cf.*, for example, S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 498–9; 1997–, 7: 519–20. The early Fichte had distinguished dogmatism from the critical philosophy by saying that critical philosophy is "immanent" because it "posits everything within the self," while dogmatism is "transcendent" because it "goes on beyond the self" (J. G. Fichte 1971, I: 120). It is this distinction Kierkegaard has in

overcome those aspects of her being in which finitude consists—not only finite desires and attachment to the world ("dying to immediacy"), but also the will itself insofar as it is the particular will of a particular individual. This is an ideal that it is possible to approach, but not to attain (since no human individual can entirely overcome his finitude).[16] Moreover, it cannot be approached directly through individual effort (since individual agency is among those characteristics of finite existence that one is supposed to attempt to overcome); instead, the suffering that characterizes existence under the imperative of fulfilling an unfulfillable task is what brings about a transformation in the individual. The trial of existence is seen as having a reward, but because the trial cannot in any genuine sense be passed-or-failed, the reward is not contingent on the individual's action.[17]

The ethical standpoint and religiousness A are therefore similar, in that in neither does the individual's ethico-religious fate rest on his own actions.[18] From the perspective of the agent, one decisive difference between the immanent views and religiousness B is that in the latter the individual is responsible for her own guilt or innocence.[19]

Another decisive difference lies in the epistemology of religiousness B, the primary topic of *Philosophical Fragments*. On the account given there, a normative criterion is given to human beings through revelation by a transcendent and otherwise unknowable God. The revelation is a contingent historical event; epistemic access to it requires the right sort of causal contact (either first-hand or through testimony). This event is at the same time the establishment of that criterion as normative for the recipient. Religious belief is justified, on this account, just in case it has the correct aetiology. But the possession of such justification is unverifiable in principle by any human being (including the believer). This is

mind in describing both the "first ethics" in *The Concept of Anxiety* and the Socratic view in *Fragments* (in which "self-knowledge is god-knowledge" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 181; 1997–, 4: 220)) as "immanent" views.

[16] Religiousness A is based on the idea that "the individual is capable of doing nothing himself but is nothing before God . . . and self-annihilation is the essential form for the relationship with God." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 401; 1997–, 7: 418) "The upbuilding element in the sphere of Religiousness A is that of immanence, is the annihilation in which the individual sets himself aside in order to find God, since it is the individual himself who is the hindrance." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 489; 1997–, 7: 509).

[17] "Religiousness A makes existence as strenuous as possible (outside the sphere of the paradoxically-religious); yet it does not base the relation to an eternal happiness on one's existing but has the relation to an eternal happiness as the basis for the transformation of existence. The "how" of the individual's existence is the result of the relation to the eternal, not the converse, and that is why infinitely more comes out than was put in." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 500; 1997–, 7: 522) Religiousness A "is oriented toward the purely human in such a way that it must be assumed that every human being, viewed essentially, participates in this eternal happiness and finally becomes eternally happy." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 507; 1997–, 7:529).

[18] The close relation between these two standpoints is visible already in *Either/Or II*, in which the Judge presents a sermon by a pastor of his acquaintance on the topic "the upbuilding that lies in the thought that before God we are always in the wrong," saying of it that "In this sermon he has grasped what I have said and what I would have liked to have said to you; he has expressed it better than I am able to." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, II: 304; 1997–, 3: 318).

[19] Christianity differs from the ethical view in allowing for willful defiance: "In this transition Christianity begins; by taking this path, it shows that sin is rooted in willing and arrives at the concept of defiance" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 204; 1997–, 11: 94). It differs from religiousness A in that it does not equate finitude with necessary guilt: "Christianity has never assented to giving each particular individual the privilege of starting from the beginning in an external sense. Each individual begins in

because, on the one hand, the revealed criterion is not one to which human beings have alternative access (e.g. through reason), and so it is unverifiable by reference to any alternative.[20] But, on the other hand, there can also be no adequate empirical evidence that some set of events is a revelation. Kierkegaard agreed with Kant that there can be no immediate, sensibly apprehensible marks of divinity or divine manifestation,[21] and he agreed with Hume that the sort of mysterious or improbable events that might seem to constitute indirect evidence should be regarded with skepticism in direct proportion to their mysteriousness or improbability (that is, in direct proportion to their suitability as evidence for divine revelation).[22] Having a religious justification for one's actions is in practice indistinguishable from having no justification at all: although there is a distinction, it is one only God is in a position to draw. Kierkegaard follows Hamann, who in turn follows Hume, in concluding that the Christian must therefore view his own belief as itself a miracle.[23] What Hume calls a miracle, Kierkegaard calls "the condition": the subjective condition, imparted by God, for apprehending a set of events as a revelation.[24]

Fear and Trembling is in part a meditation on the normative situation of someone with this religious orientation. Abraham is of course not a Christian, but the justification of his actions in the binding of Isaac has a similar structure. Johannes de Silentio emphasizes

an historical nexus, and the consequences of nature still hold true. The difference is that Christianity teaches him to lift himself above this 'more,' and judges the one who does not to be unwilling." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 342; 1997–, 4: 376–77).

[20] Kierkegaard's disagreement with Kant and Hegel on the relation of priority of reason and revelation is spelled out most forcefully in *Fear and Trembling*'s Problemata (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, III: 104ff.; 1997–, 4: 148ff.).

[21] Historical contemporaneity is no advantage to the believer, since "divinity is not an immediate qualification" and even the miraculousness of a divine individual's acts "*is* not immediately but is only for faith, inasmuch as the person who does not believe does not see" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 256; 1997–, 4: 290–1). *Cf.* I. Kant 1968, 7: 63 and 6: 87.

[22] The project of giving a "probability proof" of the correctness of religious belief is absurd: "wanting to link a probability proof to the improbable (in order to demonstrate: that it is probable?—but then the concept is changed; or in order to demonstrate: that it is improbable?—but to use probability for that is a contradiction)" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 257n.; 1997–, 4: 292n.). *Cf.* D. Hume 1999 p. 183: "Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavour to establish." Hume focuses on the evidence of testimony to miracles, arguing that since miracles are, by their nature, maximally improbable, any report of a miracle is therefore incredible. But an analogous argument applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to evidence of the senses. Experience of anything seeming to be a miracle is, because of the intrinsic improbability of miracles, far more likely to have been a sensory hallucination.

[23] J. G. Hamann 1821–43, I: 406. *Cf.* D. Hume 1999, p. 186: "[W]hoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to [the Christian religion], is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience." Kierkegaard cites Hamann's embrace of Hume's conclusion in a journal entry of 10 September 1836, commenting: "one sees the complete misunderstanding between the Christian and the non-Christian in the fact that Hamann responds to Hume's objection: 'yes, that's just the way it is'." (S. Kierkegaard 1909–78, I A 100; 1997–, AA: 14.1). *Cf.* S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VI: 103; 1997–, 6: 101. For further discussion of Kierkegaard's appropriation of Hamann and its significance for the interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* in particular, see M. Kosch 2008.

[24] "Only the person who personally receives the condition from the god . . . only that person believes" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 265; 1997–, 4: 299). "How, then, does the learner become a believer

the impossibility of knowing oneself to be justified in religious terms, and the moral anxiety suffered by the person committed to acting on a divine imperative.[25] This is part of the larger project in that text of portraying the religious life as more challenging than it is typically taken to be—driving up the price of faith, in the terms Johannes employs in preface and the epilogue.[26] (This fact makes it all the more puzzling that *Fear and Trembling* is so often taken to contain an argument in favor of a religious view of life over a non-religious ethical one.[27])

Nor is *Fear and Trembling* the only pseudonymous text that portrays the difficulty of occupying this standpoint. Much of the *Postscript* is dedicated to an exploration of what Climacus calls the "existential pathos" of the A and B forms of the religious life, and he argues that the latter is "sharpened" in comparison with the former by the two features already mentioned: its account of the god-relation as a relation to a historically contingent apparition; and its emphasis on individual responsibility. The believer at the standpoint of religiousness A is certain of the object of his belief; and although the believer's certainty is at the same time a consciousness of his necessary inadequacy (qua finite being), this necessity is itself reassuring. By contrast the combination of epistemic groundlessness on the one hand, and emphasis on individual responsibility on the other, renders the prospect of salvation extremely insecure, and the situation of the believer correspondingly psychologically strenuous, in religiousness B. In *Postscript* the language of "market price" appears again in the discussion of existential pathos, and the clear message is that salvation (in the terms proposed by religiousness B) is a reward so dearly purchased that it is, from a human perspective, lunacy to go in for it.[28]

or a follower? When the understanding is discharged and he receives the condition" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 228; 1997–, 4: 265). See also S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 228, 265; 1997–, 4: 265, 299.

[25] That Abraham is uncertain of his own justification is suggested at numerous points in the text: he is unable to sleep (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, III: 126; 1997–, 4: 169), unable to reassure himself that he is legitimate (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, III: 112ff.; S Kierkegaard 1997–, 4: 155ff.), can find reassurance from no one else (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, III: 126; S. Kierkegaard 1997–, 4: 169)—not even another knight of faith (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, III: 120; 1997–, 4: 163)—and is constantly tempted to return to the ethical and its relative normative security (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, III: 109, 119–20, 160; 1997–, 4: 153, 162–3, 202).

[26] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, III: 57, 166; 1997–, 4: 101, 208. See R. Green 1998, 258ff. and C. Evans 1981, p. 143, for readings of *Fear and Trembling* along these lines.

[27] For a survey of this part of the literature, see J. Lippitt 2003 chs. 4 and 6, and R. Green 1998. For a rebuttal of what I see as the various possibilities for reading *Fear and Trembling* in this way, see M. Kosch 2006c.

[28] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 336; 1997–, 7: 352. It has seemed plausible to many that Kierkegaard endorses a voluntarist account of Christian belief (see e.g. L. Pojman 1984). I do not believe the texts support this reading, and have argued against it in M. Kosch 2006b 187–200. But even someone convinced that Kierkegaard thought religious belief could be produced voluntarily would have a hard time convincing any reader of the *Postscript* that it could be rational, for prudential reasons, to produce it in oneself. Pascal is clearly the target of the remarks referenced here (at S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 336; 1997–, 7: 352); the wager on an eternal happiness would be irrational even if Christian belief could be reliably brought about by the means Pascal suggests. Neither can there be Jamesian reasons for believing, since on Kierkegaard's portrayal, far from offering reassurance and so enabling action in the face of risk and uncertainty, Christian belief is itself the source of the most extreme risk and uncertainty. (Some interpreters, by contrast, have argued that the risk that accompanies Christian belief is thought by Kierkegaard to be itself a consideration in its favor (see e.g. R. Adams 1982 and J. L. Schellenberg 1993, 152–67). This is one of many approaches to arguments in *Postscript* that on the

Far from offering any sort of apology for Christian faith, any justification (epistemic or prudential) of the religious standpoint or any attempt to make it more appealing to anyone not already occupying it, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works do just the opposite: they are dedicated to displaying the true extent of its difficulty. In *Postscript*, Climacus describes his particular authorial vocation as "making difficulties everywhere" in an age in which life in general—and Christianity in particular—has been made too easy.[29] This is an important part of Kierkegaard's own authorial vocation, persisting from early journal entries to the late writings attacking the Danish state church. For Kierkegaard, the only way open to human beings to help one another toward faith is a negative one: helping them to work their way free of the various attitudes that they might mistake for it. Thus Johannes de Silentio, while nominally praising Abraham, in fact demonstrates the impossibility of taking him (or anyone else) as a model of faith; and Johannes Climacus scoffs at the idea of wanting to reassure people about their salvation, claiming that in this area "the most one person can do for another is unsettle him."[30]

Kierkegaard devoted much of his authorship to an extensive typology of moral character. The theory of agency on which that typology is based is presented most systematically in *The Sickness unto Death*. There, in terms that draw on Fichte and Schelling, Anti-Climacus describes the self as a synthesis that is self-relating and that, in relating to itself, relates to a power that posited it.[31]

To say that the self is a synthesis is to say that its activity involves bringing together and unifying disparate cognitive and conative states into a single consciousness. Anti-Climacus claims that the self is a synthesis "of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom[/possibility] and necessity."[32] The pairs of terms emphasize Kierkegaard's view of human agency as an interplay of constraint and transcendence (a theme that appears in *The Concept of Anxiety* as well). The agent must integrate the givenness of herself with the set of goals or view of life she has taken up, forming her concrete embodiment into some ideal shape, but also tailoring the ideal to the unchangeables of personal history, social situation, and physical and psychological nature.[33] Human freedom is both opposed to the constraints upon it and dependent on them—opposed because they place limits on possible actions, dependent because they provide the context in which actions make sense and so contribute to determining what actions they are. It is not and cannot be entirely clear where the freedom begins and the constraint leaves off; the agent continually faces the question of what is really possible given the constraints, a question that never finds a final answer.[34]

assumption—nowhere confirmed by the texts—that Climacus is in the business of recommending Christianity to the non-Christian.)

[29] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 155–56; 1997–, 7: 172. *Cf.* e.g. S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 349–50; 1997–, 7: 366–7. The theme is prominent in *The Sickness unto Death* as well. "The trouble is not that Christianity is not voiced . . . but that it is voiced in such a way that the majority eventually think it utterly inconsequential" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 213; 1997–, 11: 214).

[30] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 336; 1997–, 7: 352.

[31] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 127; 1997–, 11: 129.

[32] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 127; 1997–, 11: 129.

[33] Note that what is at issue are "ideals" in a projective, but not in a normative sense. I agree (on this and many points) with P. Lübcke 1984.

[34] "Where, then, is the boundary for the single individual in his concrete existence between what is lack of will and what is lack of ability; what is indolence and earthly selfishness and what is the

To say that the self is a synthesis that relates to itself is to say that its activity is the object of immediate awareness and the possible object of reflective consideration.[35] Self-relation encompasses a range of degrees of self-consciousness, from immediate awareness of what one is doing as one is doing it to the highest degree of reflectiveness upon one's life as a whole. It subsumes any number of ways of conceptualizing, and stances taken toward, one's activity (including refusal to consciously reflect on it). Self-awareness of any sort becomes part of any new synthesis (as when a negative evaluative attitude toward some intention causes one to abandon it).

The characterization up to this point is consistent with, and apparently modeled upon, J. G. Fichte's theory of the self. But Anti-Climacus takes issue with one central element of that account when he claims that, in relating to itself, the self must at the same time relate to a power that posited it. What Fichte meant by the claim that the self must view itself as absolutely self-positing is controversial, but he seems to have meant at least that it must see itself as self-determining (projecting its own ends and determining itself by action on them) and as self-legislating (being the source not only of its actual ends but of the norms that govern their adoption). It has appeared to many readers of the early *Wissenschaftslehre* that Fichte also thought of the self as ontologically *sui generis*, and that he explained the apparent facticity of agency by appeal to the unconscious character of the empirical self's origin in the absolute I. In denying that the self is self-positing, Anti-Climacus surely means to reject the third claim. But equally important for the project in *The Sickness unto Death* is his rejection of the second. The self is not the source of the laws that govern it, and so in reflecting on its own activity, it must orient itself towards (or away from) a standard that has its source in a power outside of it. This relation can take a number of forms, including any number of construals of the nature of that power (and including even the denial that there is any such power).

The analysis of despair in the first half of *The Sickness unto Death* is a catalogue of ways to fail to achieve an adequate conception of one's own selfhood. Despair has one unconscious form (not recognizing that one is a self to begin with) and two conscious forms: not wanting (or willing) to be oneself, and wanting (or willing) to be oneself.[36] These correspond to three ways of misconstruing one's agency: failing to see oneself as an agent to begin with (unconscious despair); failing to take responsibility for oneself and one's actions (aesthetic despair); or aspiring to take total control of oneself and to be not only self-directing, but also self-legislating (ethical despair).[37] These

limitation of finitude? . . . Let all the dialecticians convene—they will not be able to decide this for a particular individual *in concreto*." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, VII: 426; 1997–, 7: 444).

[35] S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 127; 1997–, 11: 129.

[36] See, respectively, S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 154–8; 1997–, 11: 157–62, S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 161–78; 1997–, 11: 165–81, and S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 178–85; 1997–, 11: 181–7.

[37] I argue for this reading in M. Kosch 2006b, 200–9. Of the alternative readings, most influential has been Theunissen (1991 and 1993), according to which *The Sickness unto Death* is an exercise in depth-psychology aimed at uncovering the sources of despair viewed as an affective state, and constructing a theory of the self based on that account of the pathologies to which it is subject. This reading is self-consciously revisionist: it can account for only one form of despair (that of not wanting to be oneself), must ignore the claim that the theory of the self's pathology is based on the theory of the self (rather than the other way round), and cannot account for the second part of the book at all. Other interpreters understand despair as failure to live up to the personal ethical task that has been set for one by

do not exhaust the options (as they might appear to); it is possible to be a self free of despair.[38]

Something like this account of agency is presupposed in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard's most sustained meditation on the phenomenology of freedom. The premise of that work is that the possibility of a basic plurality of outcomes (good and evil) must correspond to something in the phenomenology of agency, and that something (whatever it is) must be what makes a choice of sin a psychological possibility. This is the role Kierkegaard proposes for anxiety.[39] These two moral psychological works present a positive picture of the human agent corresponding to the characterizations of the aesthetic, ethical, and immanent-religious standpoints as somehow inadequate to the situation of existing subjectivity.

This description of the situation and perspective of human agency was what drew twentieth century phenomenologists like the early Heidegger and Sartre to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, and echoes of his accounts of anxiety and of subjectivity more generally are clearly discernible in *Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness*. Kierkegaard's influence in Anglo-American philosophy, by contrast, has come primarily through philosophers of religion, for whom *Philosophical Fragments, Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the posthumously published *On Authority and Revelation*, and above all *Fear and Trembling* have been most significant.[40] More recently, scholars have begun to focus on works Kierkegaard published under his own name; *Works of Love* (1847) in particular has received much recent attention.[41] Finally, Kierkegaard's method, his use of pseudonymity and of what he called "indirect communication," has drawn the sustained interest of both philosophers and literary theorists.[42]

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God. These readings make sense of the announcement that "despair is sin" with which the second part of the book is introduced, but they also fail to account for all three forms of despair described in the first part. The conscious despair of wanting to be oneself is a sticking point on both approaches, and to make sense of it one must take seriously Anti-Climacus' claim that there can be the forms of despair described because the self is an agent that has its source of norms outside itself. "If a human self had itself established itself, then there could only be one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself." (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 128; 1997–, 11: 130)

[38] See, for example, S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, XI: 128; 1997–, 11: 130.

[39] Anxiety's ambiguity (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 314, 316, 338, 343, 377; 1997–, 4: 349, 350, 372, 378, 411) suggests that it is that state of "restless repose . . . out of which sin constantly arises" (S. Kierkegaard 1901–6, IV: 294; 1997–, 4: 329).

[40] In addition to works cited in the footnotes, see B. Blanshard 1974 ch. 6, C. S. Evans 1983, and S. Walsh 2008.

[41] See, for example, J. Ferreira 2001 and C. S. Evans 2004.

[42] Among philosophers, the focus here has been on the meaning of religious language, and whether it can have meaning for non-believers (see e.g. S. Cavell 1976 ch. 6), the question of whether there can be "significant nonsense" (see e.g. J. Conant 1989 and 1993; J. Lippitt and D. Hutto 1998), and what Kierkegaard means by "indirect communication" (a question to which there have been a variety of approaches—see e.g. P. Lübcke 1990 and R. Poole 1993). For a survey of twentieth-century receptions of Kierkegaard, see R. Poole 1998.

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