

KIERKEGAARD AND ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Following the exploration of Kierkegaard as a kind of moral philosopher in the first part of this essay, I shall turn to a more important question of how to raise the question of ethics in Kierkegaard's work. For Kierkegaard, merely locating the theoretical framework for moral philosophy would be insufficient, if it does not ask the more pivotal question, "what does that mean for an individual today?" This essay explores Kierkegaard as an ethical thinker by addressing the above question using his theological framework.

KEY WORDS

Kierkegaard, Ethical requirement, moral framework, Subjectivity

INTRODUCTION: KIERKEGAARD AS A MORAL PHILOSOPHER

Although putting a label on Kierkegaard's ethics is hard, all of his writings are infused with an ethical temper. With ethical practice as his primary concern rather than developing an ethical theory, Kierkegaard follows Socrates, his favorite philosopher. In the *Lysis*, Socrates engages in a conversation about friendship with two boys along the return journey home from school. By the end of their conversation with Socrates, they may very well have forgotten the tentative definition of friendship they had agreed on with Socrates, but clearly they have become better friends. That, however, may well be Plato's point in that we understand Socrates as being less concerned with providing a theory of moral philosophy as to encourage them to become moral human beings.

Centering his primary focus on the practical life Kierkegaard remains critical about the pursuit of a purely objective truth with no concern for the question, "what is in it for me?" The ever dominant influence of positivism within natural sciences in the modern period, which pursued a neutral, objective, and universal "truth", also became the norm in other disciplines such as human and social sciences. This resulted in religious and ethical pursuits being fundamentally rational and

impersonal inquiries, which concerned themselves with the questions of theory and taxonomy rather than training in the practice of moral precepts.

This “modern philosophical paradigm,” which Penner calls, “objective-universal-neutral complex” conceived “propositions as the main bearers of Christian truths and revelation”¹ rather than a life marked by character and truth. The lure of abstraction for the moral philosopher prevented a subjective appropriation of truth. It is against this framework that “Kierkegaard draws his reader into restaging, retelling, and reliving his explorations of the moral and religious center of a life. The moral center here is that set of aspirations toward the good, true, and beautiful that inform a worthy life, and it clearly overlaps a religious center.”²

However, the pursuit of the moral philosophers, especially in the modern period, to create a moral theory that would sufficiently describe the different facets of moral choices, has proven to be elusive. “The reason would seem to be,” as Roberts argues, “that moral concepts do not behave in the way they would have to behave for a moral theory to be contrivable. For one thing, moral concepts, no matter what tradition they belong to, do not seem to be monistically orderable; for another, they seem to come in irreducibly distinct moral traditions.”³

Since Kierkegaard did not attempt to produce a moral theory in the pattern of modern moral philosophers, “by comparison Kierkegaard did not seem to be doing real moral philosophy.” This, according to Roberts, resulted in a “neglect” of Kierkegaard by moral philosophers who have instead “preferred to exploit the resources of much shallower thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant and the utilitarians.” However, “if what was thought to be real moral philosophy turns out to have been a wild goose chase, Kierkegaard may become more interesting.”⁴ In short, Roberts answers the question of whether Kierkegaard can be considered as doing moral philosophy in the affirmative. Yet, Roberts views Kierkegaard as pursuing moral philosophy not in the traditional modern philosopher’s point of view—a view from nowhere that is neutral-objective-universal, but as a moral philosopher who pursues “wisdom.”

While the debate of whether Kierkegaard should be treated as a moral philosopher or not continues, a more central “question is whether by treating Kierkegaard as a philosopher we are

¹ Myron Penner, *The End of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 32.

² Edward F. Mooney, “Introduction: A Socratic and Christian Care for the Self” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2.

³ Robert C. Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 91–92.

⁴ Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory,” 92.

getting all we can out of him, and again, whether we are taking from him all he himself would like to impart.”⁵ It may be argued that to derive the most out of Kierkegaard, treating him as a kind of moral philosopher and a theologian would be a far more exciting and rewarding project especially since he uses a philosophical framework, in the writings of Johannes Climacus, to articulate matters that have not been the concern of philosophy within the modern enlightenment framework.

SUBJECTIVE THINKING AS THE MORAL FRAMEWORK

What then does Kierkegaard present that is distinct and helpful for a moral philosopher? It is his overriding concern for the ethical practice rather than ethical theory. Some of his favorite authors are the ancient Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics, who are at least as well known for the way they conducted themselves as for the doctrines they taught in their schools of philosophy. Climacus’s collective descriptor for them in his *Postscript* is, “the subjective thinker.”⁶ This ought to be distinguished from “subjectivism” or “relativism” where each person may act according to his/her own personal preference. The distinguishing character of Kierkegaard’s subjectivity is in the primary concern being not so much to develop ethical systems as much as to put into practice ethical values in one’s own life.

The modern philosophers predominantly raised the question of truth to settle it once for all, with absolute certitude. This was a dispassionate pursuit of the “objective” which for Kierkegaard entailed a form of *indifference* in the inquirer. While this may be excusable in the fields of mathematics and hard sciences, it is not a virtue to employ objective neutrality in pursuit of moral questions. Thus, in his *Journals* Kierkegaard reflects, “What matters is to find my purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. Of what use would it be to me to discover a so-called objective truth . . . Of what use would it be to me for truth to stand before me, cold and naked, not caring whether or not I acknowledged it, making me uneasy rather than trustingly receptive.”⁷

Since ethics answers ‘how one ought to live’, the moral philosopher has to concern him/herself in a way that affects one’s life and character. As Climacus writes, “Instead of having the task of understanding the concrete abstractly, as abstract thinking has, the subjective thinker has the opposite task of understanding the abstract concretely . . . the subjective thinker understands the

⁵ Alastair Hannay, “Kierkegaard on Natural and Commanded Love” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 113.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard [pseudonym: Johannes Climacus], *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 349.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 5: 5100.

abstract concept to be the concrete human being, to be this individual existing human being.”⁸ For Climacus, this is a central ethical principle.

Societies tend to arrange virtues according to “desirability characterizations”⁹ which evoke corresponding human responses. These “desirability characterizations” may be built around core beliefs that considers ethical standards either as God’s laws given to humanity to follow, or as societal laws attained by some form of communal solidarity, or as a moral aspiration within the framework of individual autonomy (*autos* = self, *nomos* = laws) where ethics and moral choices are fundamentally circumscribed within individual choices. Whichever way one may approach the ethical question, value judgments are inescapable. Even when “One might defiantly *reject* the thought that value makes demands that we must answer,” as Mooney observes, “such a move toward nihilism or despair is itself a normative response, a response that evaluates value.”¹⁰

Johannes Climacus, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* provides the concept of *subjectivity* as an ethical framework: “Ethics focuses upon the individual, and ethically understood it is every individual’s task to become a whole human being, just as it is the presupposition of ethics that everyone is born in the state of being able to become that.”¹¹ In distinguishing the central function of ethics as a form of *becoming*, Kierkegaard differs from other moral theorists who pursue it as a form of *knowing*. Kierkegaard’s *truth as subjectivity*, therefore, locates *truth* in its archaic sense of ‘trothing’ where the accent is on ‘fidelity’ or ‘faithfulness’ within the context of a relationship. It also provides “an ideal, a moral status to interpret, revise, and realize. Postscript’s theme of subjectivity maps out and embodies the drama of *realizing personality*.”¹² Thus, Kierkegaard’s model for ethical framework prioritizes a different set of values that are otherwise neglected in the process of ethical theorizing. As Roberts argues, “Were philosophers to follow his model, their work would consist in clarification of ethical concepts within one or another given tradition, with virtue-concepts perhaps at the center of their interest, the mood of the discourse would be ethical seriousness, and the *telos* of clarification would be to deepen moral self-understanding, to

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 352.

⁹ Following Elizabeth Anscombe, Taylor describes “desirability characterizations” as follows: “I come to understand someone when I understand his emotions, his aspirations, what he finds admirable and contemptible in himself and others, what he yearns for, what he loathes, and so on. Being able to formulate this understanding is being able to apply correctly the desirability characterizations which he applies in the way he applies them.” Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 119.

¹⁰ Edward F. Mooney, “Postscript Ethics: Putting Personality on Stage” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 39.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 346.

¹² Mooney, “Postscript Ethics: Putting Personality on Stage,” 39.

enhance understanding of moral concepts in such a way as to enhance the quality of moral living—in a word, to facilitate growth in wisdom.”¹³

Some have understood Kierkegaard’s philosophical framework as a veering off towards a form of irrationalism and antirealism, which have been sufficiently addressed within Kierkegaard studies.¹⁴ Seeking to counter the notion that Kierkegaard is an irrationalist, especially in the non-cognitivist version, Norman Lillegard proposes that Kierkegaard “endorses a notion of practical rationality structurally similar to Aristotle’s”¹⁵ Unlike the modern philosophical framework where moral and non-moral domains are clearly demarcated, Lillegard argues, “For Aristotle and Kierkegaard, all domains of life are morally significant.”¹⁶

Despite the similarity in Kierkegaard’s life-view (*livs-anskuelse*) to Aristotle’s *arche* in that “the formation of the self” is viewed fundamentally in terms of a lifetime of commitment “through training into distinctive ways of thinking, seeing, feeling and acting” Lillegard rightly concludes, “Kierkegaard’s works are full of a much richer fare of ethical/religious and above all psychological detail than can be found in most other writers, Aristotle included.”¹⁷ Yet, it is pivotal to follow up on Lillegard’s comment that the ideal which “Kierkegaard seeks to promote is qualitatively *beyond Aristotle in its severity*, his strategies in ethics are Aristotelian in form, and similar strategies structure his explicitly religious writings.”¹⁸ While Kierkegaard’s aim was not to improve upon Aristotle’s ethics, Lillegard’s observation about the severity the ethical requirement in Kierkegaard’s writings is one that demands our attention. Addressing how Kierkegaard sets up the ethical problem for the individual, I shall return to this question later in the paper.

If subjectivity is identified as providing the framework for ethical thinking, it begs the question, “what does subjectivity entail for the individual?” Edward Mooney helpfully suggests the following “six-fold breakdown of the ingredients of subjectivity [which] really amounts to six features of the broad demand that the ideal of subjectivity makes on us.”

¹³ Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory,” 92.

¹⁴ The questions of irrationalism and antirealism have been specifically addressed in the works of Stephen C. Evans. See, his “Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox and Faith” in *Religious Studies* 25 (1989), 347–362. Also see, “Realism and Antirealism in Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 154–176.

¹⁵ Norman Lillegard, “Passion and Reason: Aristotelian Strategies in Kierkegaard’s Ethics” in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 30. 2 (2002), 251.

¹⁶ Lillegard, “Passion and Reason,” 252.

¹⁷ Lillegard, “Passion and Reason,” 271.

¹⁸ Lillegard, “Passion and Reason,” emphasis added.

- *"Live out a complex relational pattern of deep personal concern.* Life should be more than an arena for trivial distractions, one-upmanship, say, opinion mongering, or the puffery of market success.
- *Inhabit the ethico-religious stage of existence or character.* Life should transcend the shallow "objective" stage of scholarship, aesthetic voyeurism, or passionless urban life of "see and be seen."
- *Exercise practical moral agency where responsibility is paramount.* Life should not be reduced to world-observing or theoretical knowing.
- *Show an adverbial "how," a style in which I go about my tasks.* Persons are not just an objective "what," say, what one has learned or acquired or what status one has attained; action has a manner or style.
- *Exercise self-avowal.* Take up something as my own project or commitment. Persons are gifted with more than a capacity for self-observation, or for action.
- *Cultivate an imagination and faith-wrought proportion of aesthetic, ethical, and dialectical virtues (Bildung).* Persons can counter pulls toward fragmentation and disintegration, bringing themselves up, letting themselves be built up."¹⁹

As a framework, subjectivity is not meant to become a research topic that satisfies one's cognitive curiosity for then the ideal would continue to exist outside of oneself. Rather, subjectivity is an internal disposition, a pre-theoretical mood, in which an individual lives in a manner that engages one's life and everyday choices. This may be comparable to what Heidegger calls "attunement" that functions within the precognitive realms of our consciousness, where "Dasein cannot know anything of the sort because the possibilities of disclosure which belong to cognition reach far too short a way compared with the primordial disclosure belonging to moods."²⁰ Accordingly, "mood discloses the world for us in a primordial way; it effects a construal of the world *before* our cognitive, intellectual 'knowledge' of the world comes into play. And we do an injustice to this 'understanding' that is effected by mood/attunement if we require it to answer to our more familiar criteria for 'knowledge'."²¹ For Kierkegaard, subjectivity is not a posture that is assumed

¹⁹ Edward F. Mooney, "Postscript Ethics: Putting Personality on Stage," 42.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §29, 173. Cited by James K A Smith, "Secular Liturgies and the Prospects for a 'Post-Secular' Sociology of Religion" in *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, eds. Philip Gorski, et al., (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 170.

²¹ Smith, "Secular Liturgies and the Prospects," 170.

occasionally in one's life but rather becoming an ontologically different self, where, to use the Pauline metaphor, the individual becomes a "new creation."

If the pseudonymously authored *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* provides the framework for Subjectivity as the grand matrix under which Kierkegaard frames his ethical focus, it gets narrower in his theological writings that appear under his signed name. While Climacus technically presents a "non-Christian" view of things, he nevertheless is sympathetic to Christianity. Yet, what Climacus does in both *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is provide a non-Socratic view of truth, where truth is procured from without.

The Socratic argument expounded by Plato in his *Meno* argued that humans possess truth within themselves just as the slave boy without schooling was able to arrive at the right answer to a geometric problem with some prompting. For Socrates, this illustrated that the truth is present within the individual, where the teacher merely plays the role of a midwife to bring out the knowledge already possessed as latent memory.²² Contra Socrates, Kierkegaard sets up the problem where the individual is incapable of procuring truth within him/herself, making it essential for God to enable the ethical formation of the individual. In what follows, I shall look at Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination* as presenting a theological framework for ethical formation.

THE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK IN *FOR SELF-EXAMINATION*

To explicate Kierkegaard's framework for ethics, we must turn to his signed work *For Self-Examination* published in 1851, at the very end of his writing career. The structure of the book with three chapters provides a logically progressive flow to what essentially is a theological argument. Chapter one sets up the problem of the "severity of ethical requirement" of Christianity, which the subsequent chapters seek to address. The argument goes as follows: given the human incapacity to meet the ethical requirement of Christianity articulated in chapter one, the second chapter provides a Christological treatise where Christ meets the requirement in the place of humans and the final chapter is a pneumatological treatise of the Spirit empowering a disciple to do that which he/she is incapable of doing. This follows a standard theological argument where Christology deals with the question of justification and pneumatology with the question of sanctification.

²² Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 9. Cf. Plato, *Meno*, 80d. For further elaboration see my *Truth and Subjectivity, Faith and History: Kierkegaard's Insights for Christian Faith* (OR: Pickwick, 2012), 21–28.

While the Christological argument is extensively elaborated in almost all of Kierkegaard's works, the pneumatological²³ argument is confined to chapter three of *For Self Examination*. The Christological focus generally is built to argue that contrary to what Socrates imagined, humans do not possess the capacity for truth. Contra Socrates, truth is inaccessible for the individual and must be procured as a gift provided by Christ, the absolute teacher. Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* argues, "if the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must bring it to him, but not only that. Along with it, he must provide him with the condition for understanding it But no human being is capable of doing this; if it is to take place, it must be done by the God himself."²⁴

The sequencing of the question, "what is required?" in the opening chapter of the book may be understood as a device that baits his readers to first explore the requirement of Christianity: "Christianity's requirement is this: your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one thing more is required—that you humble yourself and confess: But my being saved is nevertheless grace."²⁵ And similar to the Christological argument that articulates human incapacity for justification, chapter three of the book titled, "It is the Spirit" presupposes the human incapacity for ethical living oneself and is in need of the Holy Spirit who is the ethical enabler.

Conceiving truth fundamentally as a religious concept in Kierkegaard, I have elsewhere argued that he understands the Spirit as the provider of truth as well as the condition for truth.²⁶ In this sense, the life in the Spirit reorients an individual to accomplish that which one is naturally incapable. Consequently, chapter three of *For Self Examination* presupposes the Spirit as being the agent who brings each human faculty, by aligning the cognitive, the volitional, and the affective, to a position where truth can be received.²⁷

IMPRACTICALITY OF THE ETHICAL REQUIREMENT

The nature of Christian ethics is that the demand it makes upon the Christian is understood as being beyond human capacity to fulfill. Philosophers and theologians have recognized this, as

²³ For a fuller engagement of Kierkegaard's pneumatology, see Murray Rae, "The Holy Spirit: Kierkegaard's Understated Pneumatology" in *T&T Clark Companion to the Theology of Kierkegaard*, eds. Aaron P. Edwards and David J. Gouwens (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 353–370.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 14–15.

²⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination and Judge For Yourself*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 17.

²⁶ See Aruthuckal Varughese John, "Third Article Theology and Apologetics" in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission*, ed. Roji T. George (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2017), 202–222.

²⁷ For further discussion, see my *Truth and Subjectivity, Faith and History*, 133–136.

“the gap between the moral demand on us and our natural capacities to live by it.”²⁸ For instance, Kant argued, “when the moral law commands that we ought now to be better men, it follows inevitably that we must be able to be better men.”²⁹ Thus he argues that “each must do as much as lies in his power to become a better man,” and only then “can he hope that what is not within his power will be supplied through cooperation from above.”³⁰

Just as in any society, cultures influenced by Christian ethics do not always live according to its highest virtue. The Danish society of Kierkegaard’s time was no exception. However, throughout the history of the Church, Christian influence on cultures has not been by determining everyone’s choices in favor of a higher ethic. Rather, its influence has been in the manner it plagued Christians to practice an impossible ethic, whether it is the Sermon on the Mount or the command to love one’s neighbor.

As David Bentley Hart observes, “It is the sheer ‘impracticality’ of Christianity . . . its extraordinary claims, its peculiar understandings of love and service, which down the centuries have not so much dominated Western civilization as haunted it, at times like a particularly engrossing dream, at others like an especially forlorn specter.”³¹ Yet, it is precisely the ideals that haunt a society that shape its culture. It is in holding certain virtues as an ideal that the culture approximates the value, however poorly. Hart expresses a sense of nostalgia within the post-Christian culture when he writes, “the question with which I find myself left at the far side of my narrative is what must become of our culture once that benignant or terrible spirit has finally departed.”³² In this sense, the loss of the ethical standards that Kierkegaard bemoans is not so much about a sudden disappearance of certain virtues from the Danish culture as much as it is about the disappearance of the lure of an ideal, which had always remained humanly impractical.

Like the Christological argument where truth is not within human reach, the fine-tuning of human capacities does not help attain ethical standards. Reflecting a Pauline theological framework, Kierkegaard’s understanding tends to focus on God as the ethical enabler of humans because humans are inherently incapable of meeting God’s moral demands.³³ Ethical enablement is

²⁸ John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 46.

³⁰ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason*, 47.

³¹ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 222.

³² Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 222.

³³ Kierkegaard is consistent with both the Johannine understanding of Jesus as the Spirit-baptizer who enables a believer to live a spirit-filled life rather than a life led by the flesh as well as the Pauline explications of Torah/flesh antithesis of 2 Cor. 3, Gal. 3–6 and its development in Rom. 7–8 and flesh/spirit antithesis in Gal. 3–5 and Rom 7–8.

therefore not a heightening of human natural capabilities but a divine gift, particularly of the Spirit. He writes, "But is this supposed to be Christianity, this appalling error? No, no! This life-giving in the Spirit is not a *direct* heightening of the natural life in a person in *immediate* continuation from and connection with it—what blasphemy! How horrible to take Christianity in vain this way!—it is a new life."³⁴ Natural human life must face "death first; you must first die to every merely earthly hope, to every merely human confidence; . . . you are also dead to the world."³⁵ For Kierkegaard, the ideal religio-ethical life is envisioned within the Pauline typology of new creation metaphor.³⁶ Even as faith is essential to eternal life, Kierkegaard concludes that the "Spirit brings faith, the faith—that is, faith in the strictest sense of the word, the gift of the Holy Spirit—only after death has come in between."³⁷ He further argues, "Faith is stronger than the whole world; it has the power of eternity; it is the Spirit's gift from God, it is your victory over the world."³⁸

CULTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF IMPRACTICAL ETHICAL REQUIREMENT

Take the instance of neighbor love, which Kierkegaard argues is not natural like romantic love or friendship love—it requires one to practice preferential love toward the neighbor, over oneself. It is delusional to believe that "neighbor-love can be identified with such natural, merely human loves celebrated by the poet as friendship or romantic love, or at best sees neighbor-love as something that one has, alongside or in addition to these natural forms of love."³⁹ Kierkegaard cautions that this Christian requirement is often confounded with loving many people: "Christian love yields, slackens the tension of eternity, scales down, and is of the opinion that when a great many are loved, then it is Christian love. Thus *both* poetic *and* Christian love have become confused, and what has stepped in as a replacement is *neither* poetic *nor* Christian love."⁴⁰

Within the Danish culture of his time, we may assume that the "public would have an initial respect for whatever was correctly called Christian love, and out of that initial respect it would, when confronted with a work able to foster a better understanding of that love, either be disposed to revise its conception of what that love amounted to or be brought to shame by its own reluctance

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 76.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 77.

³⁶ 2 Cor. 5:19 "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 81.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 82.

³⁹ Stephen C. Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 116.

⁴⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995), 50.

to do so...."⁴¹ In Kierkegaard's thinking, what is natural within human capacity is so different from the neighbor-love that is commanded, that they may be considered "mutually exclusive."⁴² This antithesis between "the divine conception and the merely human conception"⁴³ is what makes the neighbor love a duty, which "to the natural man it is an offense."⁴⁴ In fact, it may be conceived that it is precisely the human incapacity for neighbor-love that necessitates the divine command; otherwise, the natural mind would not conceive of it and we would lack the ideal "requirement" to measure ourselves against. Yet, this divine "requirement" that escapes human capacity, also, at once, for that very reason, necessitates divine assistance. As Westphal argues, "far from being the condition of the possibility of the neighbor love command, the merely human I and We, along with their horizons of meaning and truth, are the conditions of its impossibility. In order to make room for a faith which, like Abraham's, will be receptive to the divine command, Kierkegaard finds it necessary to deny the knowledge of human reason and worldly wisdom. Here is divine transcendence in its epistemic mode."⁴⁵ Similarly, the impractical character of ethical requirement extends beyond the command to neighbor-love. The ethical requirement to shun the "works of the flesh"⁴⁶ or practice the "fruit of the spirit"⁴⁷ is not possible within natural human capacities.

This entails a condition where the impractical ethical requirement can evoke two distinct responses that may be projected along two axes: one *cultural* and the other *theological (spiritual)*. Yet, the categories—*cultural* and *theological*—are not necessarily watertight compartments that function independent of each other. *Theologically*, the impractical ethical requirement leads to a form of pietism that relocates the moral and epistemic capabilities from the human to the divine as already explicated in *For Self-Examination*. Ethical life in this classical theological frame is understood as a form of divine-enablement and not as a human accomplishment.

Culturally, people tend to deal with the impractical ethical requirement by redefining the requirement to more attainable levels by lowering the moral bar to the realm of human possibilities. This "secular mentality," Kierkegaard writes, "wants to have the name of being Christian but wants to become Christian as cheaply as possible."⁴⁸ Although the term "secular" has come to mean something entirely different today, we may with some liberty suppose that for

⁴¹ Hannay, "Kierkegaard on Natural and Commanded Love," 114–115.

⁴² Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 117.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 109.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 58.

⁴⁵ Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 224.

⁴⁶ Gal. 5: 19–21.

⁴⁷ Gal. 5: 22–25.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 16.

Kierkegaard it refers to what may be conceived as a child of Christianity, albeit more accurately, a prodigal child.⁴⁹

In his astute prognosis and anticipation of the rampant secularization of Western cultures, especially of the Scandinavian societies, we find in Kierkegaard, a helpful cultural exegete, who long before the likes of Max Weber, Peter Berger, Jose Casanova, or Charles Taylor, foresaw cultural shifts from a transcendental frame of reference towards an immanent frame. This shift essentially redefines ethics as a human project where the moral standards are the result of human poetic imagination rather than a revelation received from without. In the *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes that the world intends “to emancipate people from all bonds . . . from the bond that binds one to God and binds one in everything, in every expression of life . . . there is a more or less open intent to depose God in order to install human beings—in the rights of humanity? No, that is not needed; God has already done that—in the rights of God. If God is dismissed, the place will indeed be vacant.”⁵⁰ Philosophers and sociologists would later understand this dismissal of God as the “disenchantment of the world,”⁵¹ that results in the condition that Taylor calls “exclusive humanism,” which “accept[s] no final goals beyond human flourishing nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.”⁵² For Kierkegaard, a culture that rejects God’s standards is burdened with the task of setting its own standard.

The recasting of traditional morality in the West may thus be understood as resulting from an evacuation of God via disenchantment, but also that its “denial” of transcendence may be conceived as a psychological defense mechanism—a refusal to accept the truth within the cultural psyche, because of being haunted by Christian ethics. Shifts towards individual autonomy of the culture as a whole is what prodigalizes the “secular” and its recasting of the moral vision; after all, it is autonomy that prodigalized the younger son in the New Testament parable.

Thus, the culture shifts from defining moral freedom predominantly as the *power to choose against one’s natural inclination* to defining it as a *right to choose according to one’s inclinations*. Reflecting

⁴⁹ For further elaboration on “secular” as a prodigal child of Christianity see Aruthuckal Varughese John, “Cultural Exegesis as the Calling of an Asian Theologian: Looking through Secularity as a Condition” in *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology*. Vol.21, Nos. 1–2 (Mar—Sep 2017), 5–29. On a similar note, George Marsden describes modernism as Christianity’s “prodigal offspring.” See, George Marsden, “Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture,” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture, With Responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 85.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 115. Interestingly, this is the exact predicament we encounter in Nietzsche.

⁵¹ Max Weber coined this phrase, drawing on the poet Friedrich Schiller, who referred to the “disgodding” of nature. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Abraham Fischoff, 2nd ed. (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1991), 125.

⁵² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2007), 18.

on the shifts in moral reasoning in the Western society, Taylor writes, "It is easy to see how standard morality itself can come to be seen as inseparable from stifling convention. Morality as normally understood obviously involves crushing much that is elemental and instinctive in us, many of our deepest and most powerful desires."⁵³ Consequently, Kierkegaard in his explication of *The Concept of Anxiety*⁵⁴ anticipates shifts towards individual autonomy that legitimize self-centeredness, the ethics of authenticity, and the resultant cultural slide towards narcissism and its self-infliction of narcissistic injury,⁵⁵ which may be tracked in the shifts towards a "selfie culture."⁵⁶

While these shifts would be more extensively developed only later in philosophical and sociological literature, Kierkegaard not only foresees such shifts towards individual autonomy but also identifies them right within his own historical context. Reflecting on the condition of the despairing self, he argues that "the self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is the despair On closer examination, however, it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing; his position his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment. Ultimately, this is arbitrarily based upon the self."⁵⁷

Taylor tracks the cultural shifts toward individual autonomy instanced in the redefining of authenticity. This redefinition takes an ethical turn within the calculus of individual autonomy in that one's highest ethical commitment is to become what one is/feels. This "lack of *telos* beyond the narrow confines of one's own imaginations traps self-actualization within a moral reasoning that is merely self-referential."⁵⁸ The "culture of narcissism," Taylor argues, "makes self-fulfillment the major value in life and that seems to recognize few external moral demands or serious commitments to others."⁵⁹ In one sense, the shifting of the moral frame of reference to the self effectively abolishes virtue since one's ethical commitment cannot be distinguished from some

⁵³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 65.

⁵⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁵⁵ With the shifts towards individual autonomy the burden of having to frame one's identity solely is upon the individual unlike in the earlier traditional communities where it was accomplished under the aegis of the community. The vicious cycle in which an individual in an autonomous frame is left to seek his/her identity and is also burdened to bestow the same upon oneself leads to a "narcissistic" injury.

⁵⁶ For the phrase, see Alicia Eler, *The Selfie Generation: How Our Self Images Are Changing Our Notions of Privacy, Property, Sex, Consent, and Culture* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017).

⁵⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 69.

⁵⁸ Aruthuckal Varughese John, "Towards Freedom of Conscience: Navigating Between the Individual and the Community" in *The Bible in India: Religion and Ethics*, eds. Finny Philip and Jeremiah Duomai (New Delhi: Mountain Peak Publications, 2017), 125.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 55.

form of self-indulgence. Kierkegaard privileges the classical notion of *freedom as freedom over* human inclinations rather than the contemporary popular understanding of *freedom as freedom to be* in accordance to our natural inclinations.

Contrary to the secularized culture that either abandons the transcendent or makes divine commands unnecessary, Kierkegaard conceives the divine command as a sufficient basis for ethical framework. This ethical imagination makes divine command obligatory for a Christian and demands “unconditional obedience”: “But you shall love God in unconditional obedience, even if what he requires of you might seem to you to be to your own harm, indeed, harmful to his cause; for God’s wisdom is beyond all comparison with yours, and God’s governance has no obligation of responsibility in relation to your sagacity. All you have to do is obey in love.”⁶⁰

There is, therefore, a gap between what we desire for ourselves as individuals and what is demanded of us by divine command. Any self-actualization that is undertaken self-referentially remains suboptimal at best and detrimental at worst, to achieve our ultimate *telos*. While Kierkegaard articulates the desired shift away from the objective to the subjective, the centering of the self shall not remain self-referentially in the self but rather in the divine command. Likewise, while the pursuit of authenticity is clearly in finding “my purpose . . . a truth that is truth for *me*, to find the idea for which *I am* willing to live and die,” yet, Kierkegaard understands proper authenticity of the self as the pursuit of, “what it really is that *God wills that I shall do*.”⁶¹

GRACE, WORKS, AND THE MORAL REQUIREMENT

The lowering of the moral bar to fit human capacities is essentially a problem within Christendom and occurs only in a “Christian” culture by misunderstanding the idea of “grace.” Culturally, this is similar to the manner in which the “secular mentality” parasitically depends on Christianity as its prodigal child. Following the Reformation of Luther, the notion of grace can be employed to free people from the requirement of Christianity. This “secular mentality” finds an opportunity in Luther’s *Sola Fide* to declare, “we are free from all works—long live Luther! . . . If it is to be grace—fine, but then I must also ask to be free from works....”⁶²

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 20. This of course raises the question of how to understand those divine moral obligations that we now deem immoral. For further discussions on that, see chapter thirteen of Stephen C. Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*. For engagement with the more problematic question of ethical demands of God in the Old Testament, see Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 5: 5100. emphasis added.

⁶² Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 16.

The slide of the Christian ethic toward the secular is also seen as the flip side of the Reformation, which as Taylor argues was “a drive to make over the whole society to higher standards”⁶³ but in reality, it did quite the opposite. James K A Smith succinctly summarizes Taylor, “What had been intended as a division of labor between religious and lay vocations had taken on this hierarchical ordering and become a ‘two-tiered religion’ (p.63), a ‘multi-speed system’ (p.66) with monks and clergy on a fast track, looking disdainfully at the domestic slowpokes mired in ‘the things of this world’ (even though their labor and profit sustained the monasteries and abbeys). Conversely, because spiritual pressure was sequestered to the religious vocation, the ‘weight of virtue’ was relaxed for the wider populace. Carnival was effectively generalized, and some felt that the laity was being let off the eternal hook.”⁶⁴

Thus reformation, which was intended to amplify the belief that “God is sanctifying us everywhere”⁶⁵ in declaring the priesthood of all believers, also entails the opposite: “If people aren’t meeting the bar, you can either focus on helping people reach higher or you can lower the bar. This is why Reform unleashes both Puritanism and the ‘60s.”⁶⁶

However, a culture that tries to free itself from guilt by misinterpreting “grace” as lowering of the moral bar does so by abolishing “sin”, which conversely also abolishes grace. In short, for Kierkegaard, Christianity cannot be morphed to converge with the secular culture such that they are hardly distinguishable. While grace takes away human guilt, it cannot be a mechanism that tricks us into believing that we are not guilty. Where there is no guilt, there is no need for grace. The secular culture, which redefines what constitutes sin, cannot appropriate grace, for it refuses to recognize guilt. Conversely, it is precisely the sense of inadequacy that enables one to appropriate grace.⁶⁷ After all, grace can only be appropriated in proportion to the human guilt. Thus, lowering the moral bar effectively abolishes grace.

Although, this “secular mentality” that nullifies the high ethical requirement may be inherent to Christianity as evident in the aftermath of the Reformation, Kierkegaard absolves Luther of such an omission. Although it is true that the Protestant nations were the first to be secularized, the Reformation itself is not the target of Kierkegaard. In fact, unlike some thinkers who see the Reformation as having caused rampant secularization of the Western cultures, Kierkegaard may think of the excesses of Christendom to have paved the way for the overcorrection towards the

⁶³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 63.

⁶⁴ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 35–36.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 79.

⁶⁶ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 37.

⁶⁷ Because of their lack of sense of guilt, the Pharisees did not exude the same gratitude as the woman who broke her alabaster jar. For she loved much as her many sins were forgiven (Luke 7:47); whereas the Pharisees who could not acknowledge their many sins, received little forgiveness.

misunderstanding of “grace.” “There was a time,” he writes, “when the Gospel, *grace*, was changed into a new Law, more rigorous with people than the old Law. Everything had become rather tortured, laborious, and unpleasant, almost as if, despite the angels’ song at the advent of Christianity, there was no joy anymore either in heaven or on earth. Through petty self-torments, they had made God just as petty—in this way it brings its own punishment! . . . Everything had become works.”⁶⁸ As a corrective to the attempts to ‘earn’ redemption through atoning penitential works, Kierkegaard thinks, Luther’s *Sola gratia* was necessary. “The error from which Luther turned was an exaggeration with regard to works. And he was entirely right; he did not make a mistake—a person is justified solely and only by faith. That is the way he talked and taught—and believed. And that this was not taking grace in vain—to that his life witnessed. Splendid!”⁶⁹

Having absolved Luther, Kierkegaard laments that the Danish church had lost “the conception of the unconditioned requirement.” Using his typical irony, Kierkegaard writes that the people turn against this severe ethical requirement and ask, “Of what use is the biblical requirement, since no one, after all, fulfills it?” It has become “the impractical, a foolishness, a ridiculousness, so that they, mutinously or conceitedly, reverse the relation, seek the fault in the requirement and themselves become the claimants who demand that the requirement be changed.”⁷⁰

At this point, one could worry whether such a drive towards the recognition of one’s severe inadequacy and guilt could lead to the abandoning of faith. Not so, unless one is too proud to receive grace. For Kierkegaard, the recognition of one’s inadequacy should lead not to the abandoning of faith, but rather towards humility to receive grace. In *The Point of View* he clarifies, “Christianity is just as gentle as it is rigorous, just as gentle, that is, infinitely gentle. When the infinite requirement is heard and affirmed, is heard and affirmed in all its infinitude, then grace is offered, or grace offers itself, to which the single individual, each one individually, can then have recourse as I do; and then it works out all right.”⁷¹

BALANCING GRACE AND WORKS: *CHRIST THE REDEEMER AND CHRIST THE PROTOTYPE*

While Kierkegaard explicates how the concept of grace could be misunderstood resulting in the redefinition of what is required, especially as manifest in the cultural response to the impractical ethical requirement, it is pivotal to clarify how Kierkegaard balances grace and the ethical

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, 15.

⁶⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Judge For Yourself*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 193.

⁷⁰ Kierkegaard, *Judge For Yourself*, 156–7.

⁷¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View on my Work as an Author* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 16.

requirement understood as works. The individual, Kierkegaard argues, is caught between two tensions: “there is an inclination either to want to be meritorious when it comes to works or, when faith and grace are to be emphasized, also to want to be free from works as far as possible.”⁷² The confusion pertaining to grace and works goes something like this: “If it is to be grace—fine, but then I must also ask to be free from works—otherwise it surely is not grace.”⁷³ This leads to the question: How does Kierkegaard think of grace and works as being compatible and not as being antithetical?

The key is to distinguish between the two senses in which “works” or “ethical requirement” may be understood: first, in the sense of “earning our salvation”, and second, in the sense of “training in Christianity.” Kierkegaard clearly rejected the idea that one could earn one’s salvation through works but affirmed that being a disciple involves commitment to practicing Christianity. A clue to Kierkegaard’s holding grace and works in balanced tension is in the two images of Christ that persistently appear in his writings: *Christ the redeemer* and *Christ the prototype*. He writes, “we continually call to mind . . . that Jesus Christ is not only the prototype but is also the Redeemer.”⁷⁴ Both these images, while representing the two ends of the polarities in terms of grace and works, bring with it corresponding meanings that are pivotal to faith and practice. The image of *Christ the redeemer* accentuates grace that the redeemer freely gives to everyone who believes. The antidote to the condition “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”⁷⁵ is “but they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”⁷⁶ Where as, *Christ the prototype* “corresponds [to] imitation. There is really only one true way to be a Christian—to be a disciple. The disciple has among other marks also this: to suffer for the doctrine.”⁷⁷ These two visions of Christ provide a way of seeing grace and works as being compatible.

While Kierkegaard recognizes the urge to redefine doctrine or morality to fit secular visions, without pronouncing a self-righteous line of separation between “true” and “false” followers of Christ—a task he leaves to God—he nevertheless, tenaciously urges his readers to think as to how they can be better followers of Christ, without impoverishing themselves with a diminished notion of grace. As he reflectively writes, “Anyone who has not suffered for the doctrine has in one way or another incurred the guilt of using his sagacity to spare himself in a secular way. That he

⁷² Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, 16.

⁷³ Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, 16–17.

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, *Judge For Yourself*, 159.

⁷⁵ Rom. 3:23.

⁷⁶ Rom. 3:24.

⁷⁷ Kierkegaard, *Judge For Yourself*, 207. For further discussion of imitation in Kierkegaard, see Wojciech T. Kaftanski, “The Socratic Dimension of Kierkegaard’s Imitation” in *Heythrop Journal*. Vol.57, No.4 (2016), 599–611.

therefore should not dare to call himself Christian or that he will not be eternally saved is far from my idea—God forbid that I should dare to say something that would end up recoiling upon myself most of all.”⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

While Kierkegaard is not a moral philosopher in the traditional sense, he nevertheless has an ethical framework, which is best understood from within Kierkegaard’s theological commitments. Thus we may fully realize the philosophical import of Kierkegaard’s ethics only when approached through the prism of theological presuppositions that undergird his thinking.

Kierkegaard’s theological underpinning conceives the “ethical requirement” as divine command, which legitimately lays a claim upon an individual in terms of complete obedience. However, just as truth, which involves the ethical life, is inaccessible to the individual and must be procured from without as a gift, the capacity to fulfill the ethical requirements similarly evades human ability. This necessitates the divine as the ethical enabler of human beings to accomplish that which one within one’s natural capacity is incapable.

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⁷⁸ Kierkegaard, *Judge For Yourself*, 207–208.