

# Kierkegaard in Process

Volume 3 (2019)

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# Kierkegaard in Process

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## About *Kierkegaard in Process*

*Kierkegaard in Process* is the Søren Kierkegaard Student Journal, based at the University of Copenhagen. This journal will offer a platform for undergraduate and graduate students to submit their own research on Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard in “process” emphasises the thought that one is never really finished with the existential project Kierkegaard is communicating and importantly, also that our student contributors are underway with academia, not fully accomplished scholars. *Kierkegaard in Process* further embodies both the thought that everyone is a continuous student of life and that we as philosophy students are also students of Kierkegaard.

At *Kierkegaard in Process* we wish to emphasise a reading of Kierkegaard that regards religiosity as an inseparable part of the authorship, but not as a Christian apologetic. We believe Kierkegaard’s value is not only limited to the sphere of philosophy and theology, but also literature due to his characteristic style of writing and invaluable existential insights.

## Editors' Introduction

Welcome, dear reader, to the third volume of *Kierkegaard in Process*. In the following pages you will discover an exciting collection of student essays on Søren Kierkegaard from academic institutions around the world.

As usual the essays we have selected explore many facets of Kierkegaard's thought, representing an array of subjects, including literary, theological, and philosophical approaches to his oeuvre. The essays we have selected – in our view – demonstrate a high level of academic rigour and original insight in relation to the level of the authors, which range from undergraduate to Ph.D.

The present volume begins with Stefan Bârzu's paper (10-19), which argues how one should *not* read Kierkegaard. Bârzu aims to “demystify” Kierkegaard's authorship by introducing the concept of “heteronymity,” with the goal of maintaining the ability to explore Kierkegaard's authorship as a literary whole. The second paper, by Mads Platon-Rødsgaard (20-32) presents a comparative reading of F. W. J. Schelling's *Weltalter* fragment, and A's life view in the ‘Diapsalmata’ in *Either/Or*. Platon-Rødsgaard's aim is to demonstrate that A's life view is metaphysically grounded in the philosophy of Schelling. This comparative structure is continued in Lykke Bonde Melone's paper (33-44) which explores love as a foundation for logic in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov* and Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. Melone's aim is to demonstrate how, for both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard love is our only access point to God and logic. Through an inquiry into the nature of love, Melone offers thoughts on how to live a meaningful life. In Francis Lemelin-Bellerose's paper (45-58), scepticism and doubt are explored in Kierkegaard's authorship. Lemelin-Bellerose's aim is to demonstrate, that whilst Kierkegaard is not a sceptic, in the full sense of the word, he identifies a shared foundation on which doubt and faith operate – a foundation all but lost to modern philosophy. The next paper, by Bas Blaasse (59-72) explores the connection between Albert Camus and Kierkegaard, and specifically Camus' critique of Kierkegaard's response to the absurd. Blaasse argues that whilst both authors depart from a *shared* perspective of the human condition, they ultimately *part ways* in their responses to this condition. This comparative trend between great thinkers continues in Balthasar Heinzelmann's paper (73-83), which sees Kierkegaard's concept of boredom explored with reference to Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*. The penultimate paper, by Katherine Zhao (84-93) critically views irony in Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary* through the lens of gender norms. Zhao is specifically concerned with the unsustainability of Kierkegaard's conception of the female ironist. Finally, Wilson Wu's paper (94-101) continues an exploration of Kierkegaard's irony, this time, in comparison with the work of David Foster Wallace. Wu suggests that Kierkegaard's and Wallace's conceptions and critiques of irony share remarkable similarities. Wu's aim is to draw out these connections, focusing especially on “the recursive case,” that is, “the ironizing of irony.”

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our Academic Advisors: Alison Assiter, Maria J. Binetti, Joakim Garff, René Rosfort, and Jon Stewart. We are always grateful for

your support, as well as your feedback and advice. We would also like to thank those who submitted, for both your wonderful papers and your patience with the (rather long!) editing process. We would also like to sincerely thank Lykke Bonde Melone, who assisted tremendously in the editing of this volume: *thank you, earnestly*. Finally, we hope you – dear reader – enjoy *Kierkegaard in Process Volume 3*.

Amanda Houmark-Ørsøe  
Barney Riggs

# Guide to References

*The following works by Kierkegaard appear throughout the journal as abbreviated below. Works by Kierkegaard are referenced in the text, whilst works by other authors are referenced in the footnotes.*

The Danish references to Kierkegaard use the following:

SKS Kierkegaard, S. (1997-2013), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, eds. N. J. Cappelørn, J. Garff, J. Kundsén, J. Kondrup, A. McKinnon, & F. Hauberg Mortenson, Copenhagen: Gads Forlag.

The English references to Kierkegaard, unless otherwise specified follow the Princeton editions of Kierkegaard's writings, translated by H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, and are abbreviated in the following:

Main Writings:

- AN *Armed Neutrality*
- BA *The Book on Adler*
- C *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, (translated by R. Thomte & A. B. Anderson)
- CD *Christian Discourses*
- CI *The Concept of Irony*
- COR *The Corsair Affair; Articles Related to the Writings*
- CUP1 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript I*
- CUP2 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript II*
- EO1 *Either/Or Part I*
- EO2 *Either/Or Part II*
- EPW *Early Polemic Writings: From the Papers of One Still Living; Articles from Student Days; The Battle Between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars*, (translated by J. Watkin).
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*
- FSE *For Self-Examination*
- FT *Fear and Trembling*
- JC *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*
- JFY *Judge for Yourself*
- LD *Letters and Documents*, (translated by H. Rosenmeier)
- P *Prefaces/Writing Sampler*, (translated by T. W. Nichol)
- PC *Practice in Christianity*
- PF *Philosophical Fragments*
- PV *The Point of View* including *On My Work as an Author* and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*
- R *Repetition*
- SBL *Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*
- SL *Stages on Life's Way*
- SUD *The Sickness unto Death*
- TA *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*
- TD *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*
- UD *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*

- WA *Without Authority* including *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air, Two Ethical-Religious Essays, Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays, An Upbuilding Discourse, Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*
- WL *Works of Love*

Journals, Papers, and Notebooks:

*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, translated by H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong use the following abbreviation:

JP, followed by the volume and journal entry, e.g. JP 6, 6597.

*Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, translated by B. H. Kirmmse, et al. use the following abbreviations:

KJN, followed by the relevant journal and entry, e.g. KJN: AA: 29;

NB, followed by the relevant notebook and entry, e.g. NB 17:28.



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# How Not to Read Kierkegaard: The Hermeneutics of Heteronymy

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### Abstract

There is an underlying pressure in Kierkegaard's authorship with regards to pseudonymity – one which I intend to demystify by introducing the concept of heteronymy into play. The redefining of pseudonyms emerges, I claim, from Kierkegaard's reading of the Scriptures, a reading which mirrors his very methods of communication. My thesis' goal is to trace a methodological pattern from his biblical hermeneutics to the heteronymous voices. Following this, I therefore intend to create a space for keeping Kierkegaard's authorship as a literary whole centered on the very progressive revealing of the image of the prototype [*Forbilledet*].

### Keywords

Pseudonym; heteronymy; Scripture; communication.

## 1. Introduction

My thesis with regards to a possible reading of Kierkegaard (hereafter: SK) is twofold. On the one hand, following Roger Poole's influential view on Kierkegaardian pseudonymity,<sup>1</sup> I am redefining the pseudonymity as heteronymity at work. Through this I seek to maintain distance from any hermeneutical impulse to read SK in the voice of the heteronyms by treating each authorial persona in its autonomous vocabulary and rhetorical style. On the other hand, by looking at SK's reading of the Scriptures and his theological stance on the performative resolution of the tension between law and grace, I seek to trace a progressive continuity in the very act of SK's authorial meta-creation (the creating of heteronyms). In this sense, the reading which I propose binds the Kierkegaardian oeuvre under the theme of "how to become a Christian," keeping Christ as the prototype [*Forbilledet*] which progressively moves from *indirectly accusing* (through the aesthetic writings) towards *directly exhorting* (in the religious writings and with the culmination of religious ideality). In order to tackle this reading I shall first try to justify my movement of redefining the pseudonyms as heteronyms and afterwards I will reconstruct the authorial orchestration within SK's religious *telos*.

## 2. Heteronymity

### 2.1. State of the Art

Roger Poole's radical book entitled *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (1993), revived Kierkegaardian scholarship in the direction of pseudonymity, drawing distinct lines between SK's voice and the pseudonymous voices. His particular attention towards the different personas that act within the Kierkegaardian oeuvre developed as a sharp critique of a prolonged history of interpretative confusion. From existentialists to theologians and Kierkegaardian scholars of the 20th Century there has been a persistent hermeneutical overlapping of SK's own voice on the pseudonymous voices. Mapping out Roger Poole's position in the scholarly literature on Kierkegaardian pseudonymity, Jon Stewart pointed:

He [Poole] condescendingly dubbed the earlier scholars "blunt readers" in the sense that they immediately ascribed to Kierkegaard whatever they found in the works of his pseudonyms without considering that by writing under a pseudonym Kierkegaard might have had something more sophisticated in mind.<sup>2</sup>

Following this insight, Poole explained the authorial usage of pseudonyms as being under the spell of SK's irony. This meant that the creator of these voices implicitly dismissed the very ideas presented by these pseudo-authors. Reflecting, more or less, upon the unveiling and self revealing made by Johannes Climacus in the appendix of CUP 2 – "what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked" (CUP 2 619), Poole insisted that each pseudonymous work should be read as to be refuted. This postmodern

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<sup>1</sup> Poole, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Stewart, 2016: xiii

application of the “death of the author” principle – in this case, the refrain from any interest towards an overarching theme or task orchestrated by SK – is controversial in Poole’s case. Following his hypothesis, the very literary usage of irony is nonetheless an indirect form of authorial design and the act of dismissing the ideas of the pseudonymous voices carries with itself the latency of pointing out towards the “other”, the true voice. Poole does identify a unifying intention of the father-author and a recurrent presence – irony. There would be no reason for SK to refute the vocabularies of the pseudonyms if there would be no “right way,” no salvation, and if so, it would all be just a grand deception or a farce (and irony, in contrast with a farce, has a reason apart from self-amusing). In PV, SK addresses this very aspect of deception, clarifying that it should be understood only with the “becoming a Christian” *in mente* (PV 41):

...the esthetic writing is a deception, and herein is the deeper significance of the *pseudonymity*. But a deception, that is indeed something rather ugly. To that I would answer: Do not be deceived by the word *deception*. One can deceive a person out of what is true, and – to recall old Socrates – one can deceive a person into what is true. Yes, in only this can a deluded person actually be brought into what is true – by deceiving him (PV 53).

Even if the pseudonymous voices are created to deceive, and to ultimately be refuted, the movement of refutation could only be valid and efficient if it has its foundation in the religious “as the goal” (PV 7). This dialectical method of “deceiving into truth,” as an apologetic strategy, is shaped by SK’s own understanding of what Christianity is:

The essentially Christian needs no defense, is not served by any defense – it is the attacker; to defend it is of all perversions the most indefensible, the most inverted, and the most dangerous – it is unconsciously cunning treason. Christianity is the attacker – in Christendom, of course, it attacks from behind (CD 162).

This sort of creating false discourses is the core of SK’s deconstruction of Christendom, working maieutically, “with the esthetic writings as the beginning and the religious as the τέλος [goal]” (PV 7), only to bring forth the truth – as the God-man, the prototype. The deceptive force of pseudonymity challenges the reader into identifying himself with the vocabularies of the voices. This mirroring of the reader with the esthetic pseudonymity pushes the boundaries of the voices to the extreme – only to provoke and expose their despair. In those extreme limits of the pseudonymous vocabularies and with their collapse does the religious task emerge – how does one (then) become a Christian?

Trying to keep both the aspect of distinction between authorial voices and the religious task within Kierkegaard’s authorship, John D. Caputo follows nonetheless the same postmodernist pattern of reading, or, I should say, of deconstruction. In the chapter of his book entitled *How to Read Kierkegaard* (2008), concerning pseudonymity, Caputo, following Poole and crediting Jacques Derrida, states that “no matter who signs his name as the author, what is said by the pseudonyms about the category of existence speaks for itself.”<sup>3</sup> Moving

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<sup>3</sup> Caputo, 2008: 71

away from Poole's pointing out of the ironical creation of the false voices, Caputo seems to imply that the pseudonyms portray a series of idealized poetical discourses which stand as a possibility for the reader (SK himself being in the same position – as a reader). The single individual, standing in front of these poetical possibilities is the one with the existential task of actualization, of choosing the possibility. In this very sense, each individual must find its own way.

Both Poole and Caputo begin with the same presupposition – nothing said by the pseudonyms should be taken to be SK's own view. Yet, if Poole ends up portraying SK as an ironist that dismisses all the pseudonymous voices and their life-view, Caputo sees SK as a reader, an occasion for the pseudonyms, himself being in the situation of agreeing with some of the writings.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I would like to follow up on Poole's (and Caputo's) blunt reading of the pseudonyms from a different point of view, one that, through a *historical reconstruction*, seeks to dismiss the postmodern reading, and understand pseudonymity as heteronymity in the context of SK's reading of the Scriptures.

## 2.2. Contextual Caution and Metatextual Comprehension

When we approach various textual references of SK himself to his so-called pseudonyms we always find a particular nuance of refrain and separation which insists upon our attention. This sort of attitude could nonetheless still play a role in a pseudonymous diversion – as a way of hiding one's identity under a different (false) name or as a strategy of experiencing the possibility of alterity through a distinct vocabulary – either as a writer or as a reader. Yet what is hermeneutically confusing is the *leitmotif* of an overarching design and coherency that works within the very polyvocality of SK's work. This indication of both distance and design has a clear expression in the more or less public dispute that SK had with the Icelandic theologian Magnús Eiríksson.<sup>5</sup> My interest is specifically centered around the method of response chosen by SK to justify pseudonymity. Eiríksson's book "Is Faith a Paradox and by the Virtue of the Absurd?" (1850), written, ironically, under a pseudonym (Theophilus Nicolaus), critically addressed the irrationality of faith as depicted by "Kierkegaard" in FT and CUP (both works of pseudonymity – de Silentio and Johannes Climacus). In several unpublished response drafts,<sup>6</sup> both expressed through pseudonymous voices (Climacus, de Silentio, Anti-Climacus) and SK's own voice, we can see a frustration that anticipates an entire convoluting and erroneous history of Kierkegaardian exegesis that uses formulas such as: "Kierkegaard says in *Fear and Trembling that...*" or "Kierkegaard theoretized faith as being – [quote from PF or CUP]" etc. In NB 17:28, SK himself says:

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<sup>4</sup> Caputo tributes this insight to Joel Rasmussen (Caputo, 2008: 72-73) – See Rasmussen, (2005).

<sup>5</sup> The extended relation between them has been thoroughly explored by Gerhard Schreiber's study Magnús Eiríksson: An Opponent of Martensen and an Unwelcome Ally of Kierkegaard, in Stewart, J. B. (2009) *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries*, London: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> *About Theophilus Nicolaus* - SKS 23, 182-3, NB17:28 / JP 6, 6597, and, as suggested by Schreiber, even entries as *An Observation about Something in "Fear and Trembling"* – SKS 23, 177-8, NB17:21 / JP 3, 3130.

Johannes Climacus himself declares that he does not have faith. Theophilus Nicolaus portrays the believer. He does not perceive at all that to be consistent he has to assume that everything Johannes Climacus says proves nothing, since he himself says he does not have faith, is not a Christian. But Theophilus Nicolaus has no inkling of this... How tragic is to live in such a limited setting that there is virtually no one who has an eye for a *profoundly executed artistic design*... I am identified automatically with my pseudonyms, and some nonsense is concocted which – of course – many more understand – yes, of course (JP 6, 6597)!

The radical rejection of any confounding of SK the author and his pseudonyms is clearly expressed here and has no trace of protecting SK's identity, but the very method of communication.<sup>7</sup> In other words, this journal entry insists upon the lack of attention towards the existential position of the author, that is, the non-religious, which somehow affects the whole value of his vocabulary. Furthermore, there is still the pressing task of reconstruction, with an adequate “eye,” of the “profoundly executed artistic design” – design which, I suggest, is under the orchestration of SK himself the whole time. This would mean that in a sense, a pseudonymous voice, taken by itself, is redundant, or “nonsensical” – the very core and *telos* being in the relating of the pseudonymous voice to the overarching artistic design. If we remove this element of design unto which the relation constitutes, we lose the whole authorial play. In this two-folded repertoire, we are bound to both *contextual caution* (with regards to the distinct vocabulary and rhetorical of each pseudonym) and *metatextual comprehension* (of the complex dialogue of voices within the grand authorial play). The balance of contextual caution and metatextual comprehension is, broadly, what I call *heteronymity* in action. A heteronym is therefore a textual actor, with no clue of the grand orchestration within which he partakes. This metaphor of theatre and play is also preferred by SK as an edification – “I am impersonally or personally in the third person a souffleur [prompter]” (CUP 2 625). The heteronym is independently acting and interpreting his lines without any understanding of the whole scenario, providentially following the momentum of his own vocabulary. In some sense, the whole scenario has not been clear even to SK himself until 1848<sup>8</sup> – “This is how I *now* understand the whole. From the beginning I could not quite see what has indeed also been my own development” (PV 12); yet this regards more of his position as a *reader* and the process of him *becoming a Christian* rather than his position as authorial creator. Later in that passage he states his gratitude for how much “Governance” has done for him in the revelatory sense of his purpose as a writer. This might mean that the “design”, at least in the form that I am reading it, is an addition to the supposedly primitive intent, or that SK himself had arrived at a better understanding of his own dynamics of becoming a Christian (as, we shall see later, is more in the sense of a becoming more like Christ).

### 3. Kierkegaard's Reading of Scriptures

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<sup>7</sup> There are journal entries of Kierkegaard that try to justify the fact that he never publishes his response – see Pap. VII-1, B 92, (304-306).

<sup>8</sup> The productive year when he wrote his most highly religious works such as CD, SUD, PC and the unpublished PV – “Then came the year 1848 –for me, beyond all comparison the richest and most fruitful year I have experienced as an author” (Pap X<sup>6</sup> B 249, 412).

In the next part I will try to show how SK's reading of Scriptures is the methodological basis for what I have earlier called "metatextual comprehension". That is, I will bridge and mirror SK's biblical hermeneutics with his authorial creation.

The issue of a biblical hermeneutics found within SK's authorship has been explored with great attention by Joel D. S. Rasmussen's article – *Kierkegaard's Biblical Hermeneutics: Imitation, Imaginative Freedom, and Paradoxical Fixation* and Timothy H. Polk's book *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading by the Rule of Faith (1997)*. The theological pillars of *Sola Scriptura* (only the Scripture) and *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (the Scripture interprets itself) are crucial aspects for our understanding of how SK was as a reader of the biblical texts. These notions maintain both attentiveness to the nature and vocality of each passage and view Scripture as a literary whole that configures all of the biblical texts under the sole purpose of portraying God's plan of salvation that centers on the person of Christ. Polk indicates that based on these premises, SK throughout his authorship consistently developed exegeses of biblical texts through other biblical passages as a way to insist upon hermeneutical intratextuality. Furthermore, Polk suggests, as a touchstone of SK's biblical hermeneutics, that the "scripture defines the world, not the other way around,"<sup>9</sup> comes as a clear, early orthodox Lutheran reading of the biblical texts which anticipates the 20th century neo-orthodox theology.<sup>10</sup> This said, it is of utter importance to see that this is SK's way (and Anti-Climacus', for he is for SK the ideal Christian) of reading the Scriptures, and not necessarily the way in which his heteronyms do. There certainly are hermeneutical differences within heteronymity, as Rasmussen rightly contrasts when he addresses the exegetical conflict with regards to the problem of faith between Climacus and Anti-Climacus (and SK):

But these differences are different not by virtue of how they evaluate the significance of historical scholarship for faith, but by virtue of how they engage Scripture despite the insistence that such scholarship demonstrates nothing for faith.<sup>11</sup>

These differences must be seen in the light of what I have suggested as being metatextual comprehension – the hermeneutical theme of *becoming a Christian* has to emerge from these very distinct types of engaging the Scriptures and their theological clash. For the heteronym Johannes Climacus, the epistemological task of knowing "the god" [Guden] and directly engaging with him in contemporaneity has its finality in gaining happiness – Christianity "wants to make the singular individual eternally happy" (CUP 1 16). This could indicate a reading of the Scriptures in its sharp contrast between *law and grace* – a reading that underlines the accusatory function of the law and the liberating force of grace (which brings true happiness to the believer). But this half reading of Scriptures is seen by SK as carrying with it a great danger, especially in a culture which is infused with a very light and secular form of Christianity that has a "burlesque edition of the doctrine of grace" (JP 2, 1878). With

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<sup>9</sup> Polk, 1997: 79

<sup>10</sup> H.V. Martin, a 20th century British theologian rightly grasps that "Through the writings of Barth and other leaders of the revolt against the prevailing Liberal Theology the name of Kierkegaard became known as that of possibly the greatest force behind this new theological movement." (Martin, 1950: 7).

<sup>11</sup> Rasmussen in *Tome* 2016: 268.

this in mind, if we look at SK and his reading of what is essentially Christian we see an opposing view to that of Climacus – “He [Christ] sacrifices himself – in order to make the loved ones just as unhappy as himself” (WL 111). Anti-Climacus underlines this very aspect of suffering in PC when he says:

Christianity came into the world as the absolute, not, humanly speaking, for comfort; on the contrary, it continually speaks about how the Christian must suffer or about how a person in order to become a Christian must endure sufferings (PC 63).

The suggestion that we have from this reading is that of the centrality of Christ as prototype and the urging of imitating him – imitation which, does not bring happiness, but assumes a life of suffering.<sup>12</sup> This reading of the Scriptures is one that urges the believer, *because of his redemption through grace*, in well-doing and indicates, in theological terms, the “third function of the law” (a function that is applied to believers only).<sup>13</sup> The very heteronymical movement, from the esthetic writings of the humorist Johannes Climacus to the religious writings of the ideal Christian Anti-Climacus is the condensed pattern of movement of SK’s entire authorship. In this sense, the images and shadows of the prototype that we have in the esthetic writings function only as *accusation that anticipate* the religious. The heteronymical voices (with the exception of the religious heteronym, Anti-Climacus) constitute therefore false possibilities which, through their very failure indirectly point out towards the leap into the religious. As Rasmussen suggested, they are not false because of their set of definitions, but, I should say, because of their qualitative value and therefore performative result (the truth as it is said by a non-believer vs. the truth as it is said and lived by a believer). This clash of voices, because of their exercise of exhausting the Christian problem puts forward more strikingly the very task for the reader “to find a truth which is truth” for him (KJN1: AA: 12). Through this, SK’s oeuvre is resembling and hermeneutically mirroring the Scriptures in both their contextual insights and the metatextual image of Christ.

#### 4. Conclusion

Within this pattern of decoding the heteronymical authorship, we are bound to look at works such as *The Seducer’s Journal*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Repetition* etc. with both contextual caution for the estheticism and non-believing discourse of the authorial agents and metatextual comprehension of the anticipatory shadows of the religious which is already indirectly at work. In this sense, as a further investigation for my thesis, it is plausible that the heteronym Anti-Climacus and its exposition of the ideally Christian is an addition to the Kierkegaardian oeuvre which was not intended from the very beginning.<sup>14</sup> The highly Christian exhortation, as exposed by Anti-Climacus, seems to have come into play as a last resort of SK’s pressure of being misunderstood by his contemporaries. It seems that the edifying discourses which accompanied the aesthetic heteronyms were the religious leitmotif and

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<sup>12</sup> See: SKS 23, 400; NB 20:19.

<sup>13</sup> See: Kim, 2016: 81-110.

<sup>14</sup> See last paragraph of 2.2.

exhortation of the original design up until CUP. Nevertheless, we do have vague but intriguing clues that this scenario might not be so. It might be very well plausible that the intention of ending the authorship with CUP was a diversion that was part of SK's grand design as well. At the end of CUP, in the appendix *An Understanding With The Reader*, Johannes Climacus says:

If only the teacher were to be found among us! I do not speak of [...] No, the teacher of whom I speak and in a different way, ambiguously and doubtfully, is the teacher of the ambiguous art of thinking, about existence and existing (CUP 622).

It may be the case to read this passage as an anticipation of a different heteronym, a religious one. If we follow the hypothesis that Climacus was "prophesying" about Anti-Climacus, we can look at Kierkegaard's note at the end of SUD, the *Editor's Postscript* with more attentive eyes – "This book seems to be written by a physician; I, the editor, am not the physician, I am one of the sick" (SUD 162); eyes that see this statement as a sort of fulfillment of the prophecy. The terms that are used are important for this hypothesis for it insinuates a hierarchy – the "physician," interested in prescribing the cure for the sick is in this parallel somewhat lower than the "teacher," who "is the teacher of the ambiguous art of thinking, about existence and existing." This parallelism would explain SK's own positioning as being "higher than Johannes Climacus and lower than Anti-Climacus" (JP 6, 6433) and brings suspicion with regards to the grand design itself – was there a grand design from the very beginning or what we read today as SK's work is an accumulation of designs? Were the works from 1855 (*This Must Be Said, So Let It Be Said, The Instant, Christ's Judgement on the Official Christianity and God's Unchangeability*) part of the same orchestration or were they contingent to the plan?

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# The Will that Wills Nothing: A's Life-View as an Expression of Schelling's *Weltalter*

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## Abstract

This article explores the metaphysical foundation of A's life-view. It is argued that A presents a unique standpoint that cannot be reduced to Wilhelm's understanding of A, and it is suggested that A's life-view is based on the philosophy of Schelling. The article uses the fragment *Either/Or*, in the section "Diapsalmata" to present the metaphysical foundation of A. The themes in this fragment are compared with the second draft of Schelling's *Weltalter* fragment, and it is argued that a similar understanding emerges. Both Schelling and A argue that a primordial state of non-willing exists, which is valuable to remain at. This state is confronted by an either/or between existence and non-existence. In order to remain at the standpoint of non-willing, it is necessary that no choice is made. The fragment *Either/Or* presents this struggle of non-willing. The article concludes with a short discussion on the difference between the metaphysical standpoint of A and Wilhelm, and the pedagogical conflict that arises in this "clash."

## Keywords

Kierkegaard; Schelling; *Weltalter*; *Diapsalmata*; *Either/Or*; will.

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the metaphysical standpoint of the character A in Søren Kierkegaard's (hereafter: SK) *Either/Or* (hereafter: EO). I find that the character A is often understood as just being the esthetic life-view. In EO this view of A is expressed by Victor Eremita (EO1 7) and Wilhelm (EO2 175), but is not a label that A uses on himself. After Alasdair MacIntyre's seminal work *After Virtue*, there arose a great debate on how to understand the relationship between A and Wilhelm. MacIntyre argued that both, A and Wilhelm, were on the same level, and the choice between the two different life-views was based on a criterion-less choice.<sup>1</sup> In the anthology *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*<sup>2</sup> several articles were collected that claimed that this was an incorrect reading of SK, and that Wilhelm was in fact the higher life-view. MacIntyre commented on the anthology and noted: "And it is a sign of the cultural impoverishment of most Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy that it has not been able to learn from Kierkegaard, that it has devoted so little attention to the aesthetic."<sup>3</sup> This article argues that A is in fact a unique standpoint that differs from Wilhelm's view of A.

I have previously suggested that the choices presented by Wilhelm are similar to the choices presented in Johann G. Fichte's: *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.<sup>4</sup> This article extends the study of German Idealism's influence on SK, by suggesting that the philosophy of Friedrich W. J. Schelling can be seen as the foundation to the life-view of A, or at least in part. With this approach I argue that a key theme in EO is how to understand the substance (or God) presented by Spinoza. How one understands this absolute principle, and man's relationship to this principle, will affect how one is to live life and form him/herself. SK comments on the idea of EO and he notes: "that which matters most to me about the whole of *Either/Or* is that it becomes evident that the metaphysical meaning that underlies it all leads everything back to the dilemma" (EO1 526). I find that this comment makes an exploration of the metaphysical meaning of A's life-view relevant.

## 2. Two Either/Ors in the Tradition of German Idealism

In order to present the life-view of A, and argue how it differs from Wilhelm's view of A, it can be helpful briefly to introduce two views of an either/or that arises in the tradition of German Idealism. Both views are based on an interpretation of the philosophy of Spinoza, and can be found in the works of Fichte and Schelling.<sup>5</sup> The philosophy of Spinoza presents a thought that God (hereafter: the substance) is the first principle, which has caused its own existence.<sup>6</sup> Spinoza's philosophy is pantheism, and it is argued that everything that exists,

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<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre, 2011: 47-48

<sup>2</sup> Davenport & Rudd, 2001

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre, 2001: 347

<sup>4</sup> Platon-Rødsgaard, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Guilherme, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Spinoza, 1987: 3

exists in the substance and as a manifestation of the substance. The philosophy of Spinoza argues that freedom is not possible for man, because he/she is not able to act as the first cause:

That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its own nature alone. That thing, on the other hand, is called necessary, or rather compelled, which by another is determined to existence and action in a fixed and prescribed manner.<sup>7</sup>

Since the substance is the only ‘thing’ that has caused its own existence, then it is only the substance that can be understood as free.

### 3. Either Freedom or Determinism

Fichte was greatly inspired by Spinoza, but he found that determinism was a problem.<sup>8</sup> In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Fichte found a solution to the problem. Kant argued that man had a principle, reason, which made it possible for man to make a separation between the empirical world and the world of reason.<sup>9</sup> Through this separation man had the ability to act independently from causal determining laws.<sup>10</sup> Fichte was greatly inspired by Kant, but he found that Kant lacked a systematic approach.<sup>11</sup> Kant argued that both freedom and the experience of a world that worked through causal laws were possible side by side,<sup>12</sup> but did not describe how it was possible.<sup>13</sup> Fichte’s approach was to combine both Spinoza’s and Kant’s philosophy. In Kant, Fichte found the possibility of freedom, and in Spinoza, Fichte found a systematic way of presenting it.<sup>14</sup> Man thereby had the possibility of freedom, because he/she could make a separation between the I-hood and the opposing causal determining world (*Ich≠Nicht-Ich*), just as argued by Kant. This ability was gained because man was closely linked to the substance. Man was created in the image of this substance, and because of this, man received the ability to also act as the first cause, and hereby gaining the ability of freedom.<sup>15</sup>

This different approach to the metaphysics of Spinoza created a problem, which was that Spinoza’s standpoint was not refuted. Fichte accepted that these two metaphysical standpoints were possible, and he commented that a solution to this problem could not be found through an argument. It was an act of choice, which made one of the standpoints possible.<sup>16</sup> Hereby an initial metaphysical either/or was created, which man was to reflect on. Either man is determined through causal laws, and thereby freedom is not possible, or man is intimately linked to the substance, and thereby has the ability to also act as a first cause. I

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>8</sup> Guilherme, 2010: 3

<sup>9</sup> Kant, 2011: 120

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 111

<sup>11</sup> Guilherme, 2010: 3

<sup>12</sup> Kant, 2008: 396

<sup>13</sup> Guilherme, 2010: 3

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>15</sup> Fichte, 1879: 122

<sup>16</sup> Fichte, 1975: 17

have elsewhere argued that when applying a Fichtian framework to the character of Wilhelm, there can be found great similarities between their understandings of choice.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Either Existence or Non-existence

The question of choice in relation to the substance is also a big topic in Schelling's *Weltalter* fragments. A key difference is that Fichte's either/or is epistemological for man, while Schelling's either/or is an ontological either/or in regard to how the substance comes into existence. This part will introduce the initial elements of the second draft of Schelling's *Weltalter* fragment.

It is argued by Schelling that the world consists of two principles, one expanding and one contracting.<sup>18</sup> The aim of his WA fragment is to present how this inner contradiction came into existence. In order to find this starting point, Schelling argues that there is a form of non-existent existence before the substance. This non-existence is confronted by a choice to either manifest itself, or not manifest itself. This possibility of a manifestation and non-manifestation is in fact the true primordial beginning and true freedom:

Ein solches, dem es frey steht [...] zu existieren oder nicht zu existieren, ein solches kann nur selber und seinem Wesen nach Wille seyn: denn nur dem bloßen, lauterer Willen steht es frey, wirkend zu werden [...] oder unwirkend zu bleiben.<sup>19</sup>

This presents a critique of Spinoza's understanding of the substance. Spinoza argued that the substance necessarily manifests itself: "It pertains to the nature of substance to exist [...] its essence necessarily involves existence."<sup>20</sup> Schelling's critique is that this view does not enable freedom, because the substance then is forced to come into existence. In order for the substance to have true freedom, then it must also have the ability not to exist. This results in that the absolute first cannot be a first act, but is a state of indifference between existence and non-existence: "Also ist nicht, wie [...] so oft gemeynt worden, eine That, eine unbedingte Thätigkeit oder Handlung, das Erste [...] Nur eine [...] übergöttliche Gleichgültigkeit ist das schlechthin erste, der Anfang, der zugleich auch wieder das Ende ist."<sup>21</sup> In Schellings's WA this state is presented as a will that wills nothing: "dass Unbedingte [...] sey ein lauterer Wille überhaupt [...] daßelbe also als der Widerspruchlose, welches wir suchten, sey der Wille der nichts will."<sup>22</sup> This will is passive, and does not willfully want anything, but just remains in this state of indifference. The will that wills nothing is thereby the contracting element, which manifests itself in the world. The question is how the second will, the expanding, comes into existence. Schelling argues that in this will that wills nothing a second will arises, which seeks itself:

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<sup>17</sup> Platon-Rødsgaard, 2017

<sup>18</sup> Norman, 2000: 108

<sup>19</sup> Schelling, 1966: 131-132. Translations of the German passages can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>20</sup> Spinoza, 1987: 6

<sup>21</sup> Schelling, 1966: 132

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 132

Aber je inniger und an sich wonnevoller diese Gelassenheit ist, desto eher muss sich in der Ewigkeit, ohne ihr Zuthun und ohne dass sie es Weiß, ein stilles Sehnen erzeugen, an sich selbst zu kommen, sich selbst zu finden und zu genießen, ein Drang zum Bewusstwerden, dessen sie [the eternity] doch sich selbst nicht wieder bewusst wird.<sup>23</sup>

This second will unconsciously creates itself within the eternity of the will that wills nothing.<sup>24</sup> These two wills are on the same level, and have the same “object,” but there is a slight difference in their willing. They both want the same “thing:” the eternity of non-willing. The first will wills nothing (passive). The second will wills this nothing/eternity (active seeking). This creates a split in the absolute beginning, where two forces suddenly oppose each other. Schelling writes:

Ebendarum [...] hebt er [the second will] die Ewigkeit nicht auf [...] denn er ist eben der Wille der die Ewigkeit will; der will, dass der Wille der nichts will als solcher wirkend und sich selber fühlbar werde [...] ebendarum, weil er sie sucht, dieser Wille niemals sie selbst werden, sondern er ist ewig nur ein sie wollender, ihrer begehrender Wille.<sup>25</sup>

This is a rather cryptic passage, but as far as I understand it, then the second will that wills eternity, seeks itself *as* eternity. The point is that eternity is the first will that wills nothing. When the second will searches for itself, it will, in its searching, not find itself, precisely because it is *searching*. Eternity is a passive state of non-willing. Therefore the second will finds itself (eternity) as *something*, which it is not (because eternity is non-willing). Slavoj Žižek presents this struggle well:

The dilemma is therefore the following: “either it [will that wills nothing] remains still (remains *as* it is, thus pure subject), then there is no life and it is itself as nothing, or it *wants* itself, then it becomes an other, something not the same as itself, *sui dissimile*. It admittedly wants itself *as* such, but precisely this is impossible in an *immediate* way; in the very wanting itself it already becomes an other and distorts itself. Everything thus turns around the primordial act by means of which “nothing” becomes “something.”<sup>26</sup>

I will not continue my exegesis of WA any further, but find that the thought of the two wills, and the movement from nothing to something, should be enough to present my argument about the character A. It is important to note that in the WA fragment, man is to be seen as a microcosmos of this absolute beginning.<sup>27</sup> Just like there is a longing for eternity in eternity itself, then this longing can also be found in man: “Also ist auch darum der unbewegliche, nichts wollende Wille das höchste und Erste [...] Dahin zielt alles, danach sehnt alles [...] jeder Mensch insbesondere strebt eigentlich nur in den Zustand des Nichtwollens zurück.”<sup>28</sup> Man is

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 136

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 138

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, 2000: 40-41

<sup>27</sup> Norman, 2000: 111-112

<sup>28</sup> Schelling, 1966: 134

thereby also caught in a confrontation between two principles. He/she has a longing for this non-will, but he/she is unable to attain it.

## 5. A – The Will that Wills Nothing

When SK was writing EO, he participated in Schelling's lectures in Berlin and took extensive notes on the lecture.<sup>29</sup> He did not attend the entire lecture. In these notes some of the same thoughts are found, which are presented in the WA fragments. SK notes:

This is explained as follows [at Schelling's lecture]. Capability is a quiet will [will that wills nothing]<sup>30</sup>; a transition from *a potential ad actum* is a transition from not-willing [will that wills nothing] to willing [will that wills eternity]. In this will [will that wills nothing], one can think of a willing [will that wills eternity] and a not-willing [will that wills nothing], since the infinite potency does contain both parts and contains the opposites. The nicht-uebergehen-willende [will that wills nothing] is actually the impotent; capability acquires it by exclusion. The uebergehen-willende [will that wills eternity] passes over, but the nicht-uebergehen-willende [will that wills nothing] is of course inactivity (Gelassenheit), but in passing over, the uebergehen-willende [will that wills eternity] excludes the other form itself and thereby posits it, forces it out of this Gelassenheit (CI 338-339).<sup>31</sup>

This note presents a similar theme as that of the WA fragment. Here two wills are presented, a passive and an active, and the act of creation as a process where the active will forces the inactive will out of its inactivity.

Tonny Aagaard Olesen comments that even though SK did attend the lectures of Schelling, there is very little Schelling to be found in EO: "Although Kierkegaard worked on *Either/Or* at the same time he was attending Schelling's lectures, there is amazingly little Schelling to be found in Kierkegaard's first large pseudonymous work."<sup>32</sup> This claim is very understandable. When reading the second part of EO strong traces of the philosophy of Fichte can be found,<sup>33</sup> but it can be very difficult to get an idea of the "metaphysical meaning" in the first part. When trying to get an idea of the metaphysical standpoint of A, I will use the fragment *Either/Or* in the section: "Diapsalmata." Here A presents "the quintessence of all the wisdom of life" (EO1 39). The either/or presented in this fragment also mirrors Wilhelm's view of A's life-view: "your view of life is concentrated in one single sentence: 'I say simply Either/Or'" (EO2 158). Both A and Wilhelm comments that the either/or of A consist in an either/or between two negative alternatives. Wilhelm notes on A's either/or: "Do it or do not do it – you will regret both" (EO2 159) and A: "Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry,

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<sup>29</sup> Olesen, 2007: 239

<sup>30</sup> I have bracketed the concepts of: "will that wills nothing" and "will that wills eternity" in order to present the similarities between Schelling's WA fragment and the thought presented at the lecture.

<sup>31</sup> Notes of Schelling's Berlin lectures

<sup>32</sup> Olesen, 2007: 254

<sup>33</sup> Platon-Rødsgaard 2017; Kosch 2006

and you will also regret it” (EO1 38). When reading this in the light of Schelling’s WA, this can be read as a metaphysical claim.

A writes in the fragment Either/Or: “Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way [...] This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life” (EO1 38). If looking at this statement as a metaphysical postulate, then this either/or can be understood as a metaphor for the either/or, which exists before existence in Schelling’s WA fragment. As commented by Schelling the either/or before the beginning is a choice between existence and non-existence. This state is a state of pure will, which does not will anything. This state expresses a sort of authentic existence, the absolute first, which man longs after.<sup>34</sup>

The point is that in order to stay on the position of the pure will, then one has to be indifferent between an either/or between existence and non-existence. If making a choice, then this indifferent harmony will be broken. If one chooses existence, then one has already moved beyond the will that wills nothing. If one chooses non-existence (nothing/eternity), then a choice has been made, and the will that wills nothing suddenly *wills* something. This willing of the nothing/eternity is the qualitative leap in Schelling’s WA, where the pure will steps out of itself, in itself, and moves beyond the standpoint of non-willing. Therefore, whatever choice is made, it will have a negative consequence in relation to the primordial existence of non-willing.

A continues the fragment:

It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything *aeterno modo* [in the mode of eternity], but I am continually *aeterno modo*. Many believe they, too, are this when after doing, one thing or another they unite or mediate these oppositions. But this is a misunderstanding, for the true eternity does not lie behind either/or but before it (EO1 39).

Here A comments that he continually is in the state of eternity, which can be argued is similar to the state of non-willing, as expressed in Schelling’s WA. It also presents a critique of Georg F. W. Hegel’s understanding of true eternity (philosophische/wahrhafte Unendlichkeit). In Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Hegel comments on the philosophy of Spinoza. Hegel argues that Spinoza has misunderstood the concept of *Causa Sui* (cause of itself). Cause of itself must mean, according to Hegel, that there is a difference within the substance, as he comments:

Wir stellen uns vor, die Ursache bewirkt etwas, und die Wirkung ist etwas anderes als die Ursache. Hier hingegen ist das Herausgehen der Ursache unmittelbar aufgehoben, die Ursache seiner selbst produziert nur sich selbst; es ist dies ein Grundbegriff in allem Spekulativen. Das ist die unendliche Ursache, in der die Ursache mit der Wirkung identisch ist.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Schelling, 1966: 134

<sup>35</sup> Hegel, 2013: 168

Hegel argues that in the substance there is a difference between the cause of itself and the effect of itself. This difference is not a real difference, because the cause and effect are both the manifestation of the substance. True eternity, in philosophy of Hegel, is thereby a unity where there is a difference within.<sup>36</sup> Hegel writes: “Die philosophische Uendlichkeit, das was *actu* uendlich ist, ist die Affirmation seiner selbst [...] Das Affirmative ist so Negation der Negation.”<sup>37</sup> True eternity is therefore to be understood as a sort of two-step process: Firstly, there is a split in the substance between cause and effect (negation of the unity). Secondly, this split is cancelled, because the cause and effect are both the expression of the substance (negation of the negation of the unity). When A therefore writes: “Many believe they, too, are this [in the mode of eternity] when after doing, one thing or another they unite or mediate these oppositions” (EO1 39), then this can be seen as a Hegel-inspired claim. This is not true eternity, according to A, because true eternity lies *before* an either/or. The true eternity of A thereby points in the direction of Schelling: “Also erkennen wir in dem Willen, der nichts will – das aussprechende, das ich der ewigen unanfänglichen Gottheit selber.”<sup>38</sup>

A continues:

My wisdom is easy to grasp, for I have only one maxim, and even that is not a point of departure for me. One must differentiate between the subsequent dialectic in either/or and the eternal one suggested here. So when I say that my maxim is not a point of departure for me, this does not have the opposite of being a point of departure but is merely the negative expression of my maxim, that by which it comprehends itself in contrast to being a point of departure or not being a point of departure. My maxim is not a point of departure for me, because if I made it a point of departure, I would regret it, and if I did not make it a point of departure, I would also regret it (EO1 39).

This last quote perfectly captures the quest of non-willing. In order to remain at the standpoint of non-willing, and to overcome the qualitative leap in Schelling’s WA, then it is necessary that the maxim of non-willing is not to be chosen. A choice of the maxim of true eternity (non-willing) presents a choice, or will, of this maxim, which would result in the qualitative leap that A tries to avoid. Therefore, A is aware that it is absolutely crucial that no choice is made, by presenting both choices in an either/or as a regretful experience. A tries to remain at this standpoint of non-willing, and comments: “But if I never start, then I can always stop, for my eternal starting is my eternal stopping” (EO1 39), which mirrors Schelling’s point in WA: “Nur eine [...] übergöttliche Gleichgültigkeit ist das schlechthin erste, der Anfang, der zugleich auch wieder das Ende ist.”<sup>39</sup>

It can be argued that when using the metaphysical framework of Schelling’s WA fragment on A’s fragment *Either/Or*, it is possible to construct a view that has very similar characteristics as that of Schelling’s WA. This would also make sense of SK’s claim: “that

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<sup>36</sup> This point is also made in Hegel, 2006: 72

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172

<sup>38</sup> Schelling, 1966: 135

<sup>39</sup> Schelling, 1966: 132

which matters most to me about the whole of *Either/Or* is that it becomes evident that the metaphysical meaning that underlies it all leads everything back to the dilemma” (EO1 526). The work EO would therefore not just be the meeting between an ethical point of view and the point of view of an esthete, but would present the meeting of two very different metaphysical interpretations of Spinoza’s substance, Fichte and Schelling.

## 6. Concluding Comments

If we accept that A presents a unique standpoint that differs from Wilhelm’s view of A, an important question arises. How well does Wilhelm capture A? When reading the second part of EO, Wilhelm states a very knowing and quite arrogant view:

I would not direct him [anyone] to you if he in a higher sense wished to understand what it means to live esthetically, for you would be unable to inform him precisely, because you yourself are trapped in it; the only person who can explain it to him is the one who stands on a higher level, or the one who lives ethically (EO2 178).

If we accept the argument made in this article, then the life-view of A differs fundamentally from the life-view of Wilhelm. Wilhelm links to a similar conception as that of Fichte, and the main argument is that in order to gain autonomy, it is necessary to activate the will and make a choice between two different standpoints (either Spinoza or Fichte). This conception of the will is quite different from A’s. Here the main argument is that it is important that the will is *not* activated in order to remain at the primordial standpoint of non-willing (neither existence, nor non-existence). This question of Wilhelm’s understanding of A is of course up for debate, but my educated guess would be that Wilhelm correctly captures that A despairs, but does not to a full extent know the grounds of the despair. One of the main conflicts that arises in EO is the clash of viewpoints, and the pedagogical intervention used by Wilhelm to resolve the clash. Wilhelm’s approach is quite forceful (which again links to Fichte<sup>40</sup>), and he tries to converge his life-view on to A, without respecting that A might have a standpoint that differs significantly from Wilhelm. Wilhelm simply fails in respecting the autonomy of the individual in his pedagogical intervention. I will let a quote from *The Point of View for my Work as an Author* speak for itself:

If One Is Truly to Succeed in Leading a person to a Specific Place, One must First and Foremost Take Care to Find Him Where He Is and Begin There. This is the secret in the entire art of helping [...] all true helping begins with a humbling. The helper must first humble himself under the person he wants to help and thereby understand that to help is not to dominate but to serve, that to help is not to be the most dominating but the most patient, that to help is a willingness for the time being to put up with being in the wrong and not understanding what the other understands (PV 45).

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<sup>40</sup> In *Über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, Fichte argues that the vocation of the scholar (Gelehrte) is to educate the whole of mankind (Fichte, 1959: 51-52), but without engaging the individuals in a thorough investigation (Ibid., 50).

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## Appendix: Translations of German Quotes<sup>41</sup>

Footnote 19: “Ein solches, dem es frey steht [...] zu existieren oder nicht zu existieren, ein solches kann nur selber und seinem Wesen nach Wille seyn: denn nur dem bloßen, lauterer Willen steht es frey, wirkend zu werden [...] oder unwirkend zu bleiben.“

“A thing that is free [...] to exist or not to exist such a thing, by itself and with respect to its essence, can only be will. For only pure will is free to become active [...] or to remain inactive.” (Schelling 2000, 132)

Footnote 21: “Also ist nicht, wie [...] so oft gemeynt worden, eine That, eine unbedingte Thätigkeit oder Handlung, das Erste [...] Nur eine [...] übergöttliche Gleichgültigkeit ist das schlechthin erste, der Anfang, der zugleich auch wieder das Ende ist.“

“It is thus not the case, as so often said [...] that a deed, an unconditioned activity or action is the First [...] Only [...] [a] supradivine indifference is absolutely First; it is the beginning that is also at the same time the end.” (Ibid., 132)

Footnote 22: “[...] dass Unbedingte [...] sey ein lauterer Wille überhaupt [...] daßelbe also als der Widerspruchlose, welches wir suchten, sey der Wille der nichts will.“

”[...] the unconditioned [...] is pure will in general [...] this is precisely that (state of) noncontradiction for which we have been looking; it is the will that wills nothing” (bracket in original, Ibid., 132)

Footnote 23: “Aber je inniger und an sich wonnevoller diese Gelassenheit ist, desto eher muss sich in der Ewigkeit, ohne ihr Zuthun und ohne dass sie es Weiß, ein stilles Sehnen erzeugen, an sich selbst zu kommen, sich selbst zu finden und zu genießen, ein Drang zum Bewusstwerden, dessen sie doch sich selbst nicht wieder bewusst wird.“

“But the more this composure is profoundly deep and intrinsically full of bliss, the sooner must a quiet longing produce itself in eternity, without eternity either helping or knowing. This longing to come to itself, to find and savor itself; it is an urge to become conscious of which Eternity itself does not become conscious.” (Ibid., 136)

Footnote: 25: “Ebendarum [...] hebt er die Ewigkeit nicht auf [...] denn er ist eben der Wille der die Ewigkeit will; der will, dass der Wille der nichts will als solcher wirkend und sich selber fühlbar werde [...] ebendarum, weil er sie sucht, dieser Wille

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<sup>41</sup> The translation of Schelling’s *Welalter* used is Judith Norman’s translation in *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Žižek & Schelling, 2000).

niemals sie selbst werden, sondern er ist ewig nur ein sie wollender, ihrer begehrender Wille.“

“For just these reasons [...] it [the second will] does not sublimate eternity [...] For this is the very will that wills eternity – that wills that the will that wills nothing become active and perceptible to itself as such [...] Furthermore, because the will seeks eternity, it can – for precisely this reason – never become eternity itself; rather, it is eternally only a will that wills and desires eternity.” (Ibid., 138)

Footnote 28: “[...] Dahin zielt alles, danach sehnt alles [...] jeder Mensch insbesondere strebt eigentlich nur in den Zustand des Nichtwollens zurück.“

“[...] Everything aims for it, everything longs for it [...] every man in particular strives, in truth, only to return to the condition of nonwilling [...]” (Ibid., 134)

Footnote 35: “Wir stellen uns vor, die Ursache bewirkt etwas, und die Wirkung ist etwas anderes als die Ursache. Hier hingegen ist das Herausgehen der Ursache unmittelbar aufgehoben, die Ursache seiner selbst produziert nur sich selbst; es ist dies ein Grundbegriff in allem Spekulativen. Das ist die unendliche Ursache, in der die Ursache mit der Wirkung identisch ist.“

“We imagine that the cause causes something and the effect is something other than the cause. However, the cause and effect are not entirely different [das Herausgehen der Ursache unmittelbar aufgehoben], because the cause of itself produces only itself; this is the main concept in all speculative thinking. This is the eternal cause, where the cause is identical with the effect.” (author’s own, admittedly poor, translation)

Footnote 36: “Die philosophische Uendlichkeit, das was *actu* uendlich ist, ist die Affirmation seiner selbst [...] Das Affirmative ist so Negation der Negation”

“The philosophical concept of eternity is that which *actu* eternal is. It is the confirmation of itself [...] The confirmation is thereby the negation of the negation.” (author’s own translation)

Footnote 38: “Also erkennen wir in dem Willen, der nichts will – das aussprechende, das ich der ewigen unanfänglichen Gottheit selber.”

“We thus recognize the will that wills nothing as the expressing, the I of the eternal, unbeginning divinity itself” (Schelling 1966, 135)

Footnote 39: See footnote 21.



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# A God Called Love: Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky on Love, Logic and Growth

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## Abstract

‘A God Called Love: Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky on Love, Logic, and Growth’ explores how love is our, human beings’, only access point to God and logic. The essay focusses on Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*. Dostoevsky provides a concept of love where love serves as the foundation for a working logic – an idea in which life only has meaning insofar as we love it. Kierkegaard’s thoughts on the nature of love supplies the essay with the idea of the loving person as a gardener, who nurtures her beloveds by presupposing that they are capable of loving. Both philosophers speak of loving as being connected to God and thus encourages their readers to love actively. With this theoretical basis, the essay analyzes Dostoevsky’s character Dmitri, who endures the fall of being innocently prosecuted against patricide. The analysis revolves around Dmitri’s potential for growth, which requires a fall to actualize itself and around the power of the supporting love from Grushenka, Dmitri’s beloved. Overall, this essay is an inquiry into the nature of love with the goal of offering thoughts on how to live a meaningful life.

## Keywords

Kierkegaard; Dostoevsky; love; growth; God; life; logic.

## 1. Introduction

GOD IS LOVE

IT'S NOT A SLOGAN

IT'S A WAY OF LIFE

Such claims a sign outside a church along the highway in Littleton, Colorado. Declarations like these sound convincing and important, but what does it mean for God to be love and how can it be a way of life? All who have experienced love will understand the importance of finding a way for love to guide one's life. In order to answer this question, this essay will predominately explore the beautiful works, *The Brothers Karamozov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *The Works of Love* by Søren Kierkegaard. All passages from *The Works of Love*, I have translated myself. The focus of my writing is on how love provides meaning in our lives, allows us to connect genuinely with others, and supports us through our growth-provoking falls. First, this essay investigates the relationship between love and logic, then it looks at how love allows human beings to relate to God, thirdly it explores the power of love as conveyed in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Fourthly, I will to extrapolate Kierkegaard's plant analogy in order, finally, to analyze Dostoevsky's characters, Dmitri and Grushenka. The aim of this paper is to show how love is our only access point to God and logic and by presupposing love, love can be loved forth.

## 2. Love & Logic

In this section, I will demonstrate how logic relies on love in order to function. To do so, I will first look to a conversation between Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov in the local tavern. While the brothers are eating dinner together and "getting acquainted"<sup>1</sup> after years of separation, the conversation revolves around love. Their family dynamic contains enormous tension and a patricide is on the horizon. Ivan is the first to speak:

"I want to live, and I do live, even if it be against logic [...] I want to go to Europe Alyosha, I'll go straight from here [...] I will fall to the ground and kiss those stones and weep over them – being wholeheartedly convinced, at the same time, that it has all long been a graveyard and nothing more. And I will not weep from despair, but simply because I will be happy in my shed tears. I will be drunk with my own tenderness. Sticky spring leaves, the blue sky – I love them, that's all! Such things you do not love with your mind, not with logic, but with your insides, your guts, you love with your first young strength... Do you understand any of this blather, Alyosha, or not?" Ivan suddenly laughed.

"I understand it all too well, Ivan: to want to love with your insides, your guts – you said it beautifully, and I'm terribly glad that you want so much to live," Alyosha exclaimed. "I think everyone should love life before everything else in the world."

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<sup>1</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 229

“Love life more than its meaning?”

“Certainly, love it before logic, as you say, certainly before logic, and only then will I also understand its meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

Alyosha and Ivan can be understood as opposites in the novel; Alyosha leads a spiritual life at the monastery, while Ivan is a critical, atheist-inspired intellectual. Yet, the brothers find common ground in this passage. Ivan displays a zest for life and embodies a powerful love towards the “European graveyard.” Alyosha advances the argument by not only including the particular, the “European graveyard,” but also the universal: loving life before anything else. Alyosha emphasizes the importance of his statement by adding that only by loving life before logic, can you understand the meaning that life bears. An example can illustrate this point; Professor David Mason described translation as “a product of love.”<sup>3</sup> Translation is the desire to share a text with someone outside the given language. The demanding work of translation is driven by the love for the text and the commitment to stay true to the text. Without love, the translator would miss the essence of the text and the logic of translation would fall apart. Similarly, without love for the world, using logic to make sense of it would be impossible. Why would one bother representing and analyzing the world correctly without a care for it? In this way, logic is dependent on love.

Kierkegaard takes a similar stance in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where he argues that subjectivity is a prerequisite for truth. He writes,

Inwardness in an existing subject culminates in passion; corresponding to passion in the subject, the truth becomes a paradox; and the fact that the truth becomes a paradox is rooted precisely in its having a relationship to an existing subject. Thus one corresponds to the other (CUP1 203).<sup>4</sup>

In this way, only through a passionate, longing relationship to truth, truth will exist. Without this subjectivity there is no truth. Kierkegaard emphasizes, “But the passion of the infinite is precisely subjectivity, and thus subjectivity becomes the truth” (CUP1 199).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in order for life to have meaning and the world to make sense, we must encounter it with love, passion, and subjectivity. Truth and thus logic can only exist under these circumstances.

### 3. Love & God

Having shown that logic only works when infused with love, I will explore the relationship between God and love. Dostoevsky’s character Father Zosima, an elder at the monastery, utters, “And if you love, you already belong to God.”<sup>6</sup> It seems like Zosima takes the starting point in 1 John 4:8 “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” and thereby deduces that whenever you love, you relate to God. Logically we can now

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<sup>2</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 230-231

<sup>3</sup> David Mason, Personal Communication, November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See Kierkegaard, 2008: 378

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>6</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 52

explore the inverse of the statement: not loving means being away from God. Zosima endorses this view on his death bed: “Fathers and teachers, I ask myself: ‘What is hell?’ And I answer thus: ‘The suffering of no longer being able to love.’”<sup>7</sup> If human beings relate to Divine goodness through Love, hell must necessarily be the opposite. Moreover, relating back to meaning, if logic depends on love like Alyosha and Kierkegaard propose, then Zosima is right that an inability to love must be hell because living in an irrational world that one cannot relate to, truly is hell. Inversely, when you love, you have a working logic and you can thus wholeheartedly enter into this world.

Kierkegaard deepens the understanding of ways to be close with and even akin to God, when he writes,

But God is love, we thus only can resemble God by loving, like we also only, according to an apostle’s words, could be “God’s colleagues in – love”. In so far as you love the beloved, you do not resemble God because for God there is no preference [...] In so far as you love your friend, you do not resemble God because there is no difference for God. But when you love your neighbor, then you resemble God (SKS 9, 69).<sup>8</sup>

Both Kierkegaard and Father Zosima believe in the power of unconditional love, because to them, to truly connect to God, one must love the way God loves. Since God has no preference, God is indiscriminatory with his love. This is a selfless love directed towards all existence. Zosima elaborates,

“Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul.”<sup>9</sup>

To Zosima, love becomes a spiritual practice, a way to connect to God and your immortal soul. To love is to be with God, to love unconditionally is to be like God, and to love actively is to allow the world to have meaning. When you only love your beloveds, they become the only part of humanity that you understand. Loving the world will open the world to you.

#### 4. The Power of Love

The philosophers’ reflections on active love are beautiful and appealing, yet such a lesson is difficult to learn and embody. This becomes clear in the court case against Dmitri, the eldest of the Karamazov brothers. Despite his innocence, Dmitri is accused of murdering his father, Fyodor Karamazov. His prosecutor defends Dmitri against the charges. He argues that since Fyodor was a negligent father, Dmitri does not owe him anything and thus has license to kill him. The prosecutor claims:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 322

<sup>8</sup> For original text, see Appendix 1

<sup>9</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 56

such a father as the murdered old Karamazov cannot and does not deserve to be called a father. Love for a father that is not justified by the father is an absurdity, an impossibility. Love cannot be created out of nothing; only God creates out of nothing.<sup>10</sup>

Dostoevsky makes a point calling the chapter with this passage “An Adulterer of Thought.” The idea that a father needs to prove his love is utterly confused. This passage serves as a parody showing what logic is like when it has not first been infused with love. Moreover, the idea that creation of out nothing is impossible for humans, shows a lack of understanding about the nature of love. The divine act of creating nothing out of nothing is exactly what love is. Since love is *causa sui* and thus belongs in the godly realm, love is our most tangible relation to the infinite, our closest connection and communication with God.

Engaging in the sphere of love, speaking the language of God, may be the most difficult task that humans encounter. Loving a negligent father or even loving a world from which a heavenly father may seem absent, is an enormous challenge. Ivan narrates a poem titled “The Grand Inquisitor”<sup>11</sup> that explores this difficulty. In the poem, Jesus appears during the Spanish Inquisition, where he encounters the Grand Inquisitor. This man, who is in charge of all the horrors committed in the name of Christianity, explains himself as repairing the ills Jesus brought because of his death:

“Instead of taking over men’s freedom, you increased it and forever burdened the kingdom of the human soul with its torments. You desire the free love of man, that he should follow you freely, seduced and captivated by you. Instead of the firm ancient law, man had henceforth to decide for himself, with a free heart, what is good and what is evil, having only your image as a guide – but did it not occur to you that he would eventually reject and dispute even your image and your truth if he was oppressed by so terrible a burden as freedom of choice? They will finally cry out that the truth is not in you, for it was impossible to leave them in greater confusion and torment than you did, abandoning them to so many cares and insoluble problems.”<sup>12</sup>

In dying on the cross, Jesus becomes a paradox, a crucified god. There is no external force for Christians to believe in Jesus, because he is not a strong God that defeats and demands worship. Instead, Jesus opens a freedom of belief, a freedom to love. The Grand Inquisitor believes that humans are too weak to handle this freedom. Therefore, he considers himself morally righteous in his deadly actions because he allows humans to be led like sheep again, which they, in his opinion, flourish under.<sup>13</sup> Being accused of these harms, Jesus provides an answer:

when the Inquisitor fell silent, he waited some time for his prisoner [Jesus] to reply. His silence weighed on him. He had seen how the captive listened to him all the while, intently and calmly, looking him straight in the eye, and apparently not wishing to contradict anything. The old man would have liked him to say something, even something bitter, terrible. But suddenly he

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<sup>10</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 744

<sup>11</sup> Ivan himself calls this story a poem in Dostoevsky, 1881: 246

<sup>12</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 255

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 257

approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is the whole answer.<sup>14</sup>

Fictionalized Jesus demonstrates that love takes over where words cease. Jesus' kiss exemplifies the power that love carries: only through love incomprehensible matters like Jesus dying for our sins or the meaning of life begins to make sense. Only by first being infused with love, circumstances have any meaning. Moreover, through the kiss, we are once again reminded that love is our only means of communication to the divine.

## 5. The Heart and The Gardener

Kierkegaard implies in *Works of Love* that one can understand personal growth in a similar way to a plant's life cycle. He, when exploring how love enters the heart, writes,

When the question is about the work of love's ability to build up,<sup>15</sup> then it must *either* mean that the loving person plants love in the heart of the other human being; *or* it must mean that the loving person presupposes that love is in the other human being's heart, and just with this presupposition, love inside of him builds him up [...] One of these options must be what it means to build up. But can the one human being plant love in the other human being's heart? No, that is a superhuman relationship, an unthinkable relationship between human being and human being, in this way, human love cannot build up. It is God, the Creator, who must plant love into every human being, he, who himself is love (SKS 9, 219).<sup>16</sup>

Love is planted as a seed into our hearts. The seed is there from birth without any human involvement. The job for humans merely consists of tirelessly believing that this seed is present in the Other. This is what Kierkegaard calls to "presuppose love." Employing the argument of logic's dependency on love, presupposing love is the understanding that everyone is capable of loving and, thus, able to lead a meaningful life. To presuppose love in everyone is, to Kierkegaard, the most upbuilding action. He elaborates:

It is out of the question what the loving person, who wants to build up, must do to recreate the other human being or to force love to cultivate in him. [...] Only the unloving person believes that he must build up by forcing the other; the loving person presupposes constantly that love is present and just this way he builds up. [...] the loving person only has one approach, to presuppose love [...] In this way, he lures the good to come forth, he loves love forth, he builds up. Because love can and will only be treated in one way, by being loved forth; to love it forth is to build up. But to love it forth is indeed to presuppose that it is present in the ground (SKS 9, 219-220).<sup>17</sup>

Since the loving person does nothing for the beloved except presuppose love, the loving person can be compared to a gardener. The gardener does not synthesize molecules into a vegetable.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1881: 262

<sup>15</sup> "To build up" or "to upbuild" is my literal English translation of the Danish "*at opbygge*." I chose to keep the literal translation because it speaks to the action as more than just building; "upbuilding" indicates the fact that something is positively and well-built.

<sup>16</sup> For original text, see Appendix 2

<sup>17</sup> For original text, see Appendix 3

All she does is provide the best conditions for her plants. She does not want to change her plants in any way. She trusts that the seed contains all it needs to become a fully-grown vegetable. By presupposing love and thus allowing her love to inform her logic, the gardener is able to relate genuinely to her beloved. Hence the beloved is also able to engage in a caring relationship, and thereby becomes a loving person too. In this way, love grows.

With growth comes maturity and to complete the circle of seed germination, the fall from the plant is inevitable. The concept of “fall” is defined as an event, usually painful and, in ways, damaging, that catalyzes change. *The Brothers Karamazov* begins with an epigraph from John 12:24: “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” The verse conveys that falling can serve as a vehicle for growth. If the corn does not fall, its seed and all its potential remain enclosed in the shell. A powerful fall is therefore necessary for the seed to open and sprout.

## 6. Dmitri: A Case Study

With the theoretical backbone of the power of love, I will analyze Dmitri Karamazov’s fall and rise. Dmitri is the eldest of the Karamazov brothers, known for his drinking, fighting,<sup>18</sup> and need of money.<sup>19</sup> He becomes accused of murdering his father.<sup>20</sup> Although he claims innocence, he threatens to kill his father on several occasions.<sup>21</sup> Dmitri perceives his court case like a fall. This fall is growth-provoking because a new person has risen in him, ready to break free, and because Grushenka, his beloved, provides guiding love so he can fall trustfully.

The first sign of Dmitri’s transformation appears in a dream; During the hearing of witnesses, Dmitri lies down and falls asleep. He dreams that he is driving through a remote area, snow pouring down. On the steppe, Dmitri enters a pitiful village with burned down houses and poorly dressed women standing by the road. One of the women holds a crying baby, blue from the cold,

“No, no,” Dmitri still seems not to understand, “tell me: why are these burnt-out women standing here, why are people poor, why is the wee one poor, why is the steppe bare, why don’t they embrace and kiss, why don’t they sing joyful songs, why are they blackened by such black misery, why don’t they feed the wee one?”<sup>22</sup>

For the first time in the novel, Dmitri expresses compassion towards the world. A shift has happened in him and the empathy evolves,

And he also feels a tenderness such as he has never known before surging up in his heart, he wants to weep, he wants to do something for them all, so that the wee one will no longer cry, so that the blackened, dried up mother of the wee one will not cry either, so that there will be

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<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 592

<sup>19</sup> For example, Dostoevsky, 1881: 385-6

<sup>20</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 444

<sup>21</sup> For example, Dostoevsky, 1881: 122

<sup>22</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 507

no more tears from that moment on, and it must be done at once, at once, without delay and despite everything, with all his Karamazov unrestrained.<sup>23</sup>

Dmitri is bewildered by the suffering. An active love and a desire to help fills his heart. The phrase “with all his Karamazov unrestrained” alludes to the innate baseness that is said to run in the Karamazov family, perhaps an allusion to human original sin. The suffering becomes an opportunity for Dmitri to exercise his newfound compassion and thus overcome the parasitic nature of being born a Karamazov.

Grushenka’s presence in Dmitri’s situation prior to the dream is crucial. Dmitri is in love with Grushenka.<sup>24</sup> While Fyodor Karamazov, Dmitri’s father, was alive, Grushenka was involved with both men, much to Dmitri’s upset and jealousy.<sup>25</sup> After Fyodor’s death, Grushenka’s relationship with Dmitri is changed. She is now loyal and loving towards Dmitri. This initially seems strange and the reader is skeptical of her motives. Yet as the story proceeds, the love appears genuine and as it arises from Dmitri’s innocence and severe struggle. This is evident when she leaves the interrogation room and greets Dmitri goodbye:

Grushenka made a low bow to Mitya [Dmitri].

“I’ve told you that I am yours, and I will be yours, I will go with you forever, wherever they doom you to go. Farewell, guiltless man, who have been your own ruin.”

Her lips trembled, tears flowed from her eyes.<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that Grushenka is sincere in what she says; her trembling lips and the tears streaming down her face shows her emotions clearly. Her love is carried on into Dmitri’s dream state where she says to him:

“And I am with you, too, I won’t leave you now, I will go with you for the rest of my life,” the dear, deeply felt words of Grushenka came from somewhere near him. And his whole heart blazed up and turned towards some sort of light, and he wanted to live and live, to go on and on along some path, towards the new, beckoning light, and to hurry, hurry, right now, at once!<sup>27</sup>

Despite Dmitri’s heartbreaking situation, innocently accused of murder, Grushenka’s presence and words enlivens him and becomes a source of light. In this way, she works as a gardener; by presupposing love, Dmitri is able to love her in return and thus, in Zosima words, “be with God.”

Another way that Grushenka works as a Kierkegaardian “gardener” is in how she cares about Dmitri – both as who he is now and who he will become. Kierkegaard reflects on this kind of relationship by analyzing Jesus’ love for Peter. Peter, who disowned Jesus three times,

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 508

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 412

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 174

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 510

<sup>27</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 508

Christ's love for Peter was in this way limitless; he perfected by loving Peter what it means to love the human that one sees. He did not say, "Peter must first change and become a different person before I can love him again," no, just the opposite, he said, "Peter is Peter and I love him; my love if anything must just help him to become another human being." He thus did not cut off the friendship in order to resume it again later when Peter had become a different human being; no, he preserved the friendship unaltered and was thus in this way helpful to Peter in becoming a different human being (SKS 9, 172).<sup>28</sup>

Grushenka knows that changing Dmitri will be beneficial neither for him nor for his development, she therefore loves Dmitri as he is. She does not wait to love him until his new man has risen. Instead, her caring acceptance of Dmitri as an entire human being, serves as a support for Dmitri through his growth. Dostoevsky's character, Grushenka, gracefully shows the potency of loving the way a gardener takes care of her plants. She demonstrates the ability of a human being to love love forth.

Dmitri is in fact on the doorstep of maturing. He shares several times that a new man is forming in him. While at a meeting in a room full of lawyers, who think him guilty of patricide, Dmitri addresses them all and says:

Gentlemen, we are all cruel, we are all monsters, we all make people weep, mothers and nursing babies, but of all – let it be settled here and now – of all, I am the lowest vermin! So be it! Every day of my life I've been beating my breast and promising to reform, and every day I've done the same vile things. I understand now that for men such as I a blow is needed, a blow of fate, to catch them as with a noose and bind them by an external force. Never, never would I have risen by myself! But the thunder struck. I accept the torment of accusation and of my disgrace before all, I want to suffer and be purified by suffering!<sup>29</sup>

Dmitri speaks to a necessity of regeneration, the act of letting go for the new to come. Hence, he prophesizes a purification through his suffering. Seen through the Kierkegaardian plant analogy, Dmitri's seed is ripe; all that is needed is a fall so the potential can unfold. In a conversation with Alyosha, Dmitri emphasizes how crucial he considers his personal development to be:

Brother, in these past two months I've sensed a new man in me, a new man has arisen in me! He was shut up inside me but if it weren't for this thunderbolt, he would never have appeared. Frightening! What do I care if I spend twenty years pounding out iron ore in the mines, I'm not afraid of that at all, but I'm afraid of something else now: that this risen man not depart from me! Even there, in the mines, underground, you can find a human heart in the convict and murderer standing next to you, and you can be close to him, because there too, it's possible to live, and love, and suffer!<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For original text, see Appendix 4

<sup>29</sup> Dostoevsky, 1881: 509

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 591

Dmitri has recognized the potency of his potential, so now his whole being is focused on staying close to this new man inside of him. He is so determined about the importance of his new man that suffering means nothing to him now. In a sense, Dmitri becomes attached to the suffering, since it is what brought about the new phase in his life. He states, “It’s impossible for a convict to be without God, even more impossible than a non-convict! And then from the depths of the earth, we, the men underground, will start singing a tragic hymn to God, in whom there is joy! Hail to God and his joy! I love him!”<sup>31</sup> The association between suffering and joy is drawn because convicts, living under harsh conditions, must rely on the nourishment of God. Dmitri continues asking:

And besides, what is suffering? I’m not afraid of it, even if it’s numberless. I’m not afraid of it now; I was before. You know, maybe I won’t give any answers in court... And it seems to me there’s so much strength in me now that I can overcome everything, all suffering, only in order to say and tell myself every moment: I am! In a thousand torments – I am; writhing under torture – but I am. Locked up in a tower, but I still exist, I see the sun, and if I don’t see the sun, still I know it *is*. And the whole of life is there – in knowing that the sun *is*.<sup>32</sup>

Dmitri has a wisdom now that he lacked in the beginning of the novel. He is fearless towards suffering now that he knows of the sun’s existence, the possibility of love, and thus a connection with God. Dmitri’s zest for life shows that he has embodied loving the world and found meaning therein. Now it does not matter how much he suffers: through love, he has a working logic to encounter the world, and in this way, he is able to relate to humanity. This is a gift that no amount of suffering or obscuration of vision can take away from him.

## 7. Conclusion

Love allows logic to work because only when you care for the world are you able to, and willing to, understand its complexities. Moreover, love is the medium with which we can connect to God. Through this connection, we are able to cultivate love. By loving others, so that they can love in return, they are brought to the presence of God; who is love. Suffering can be a gateway to encounter God, since it provokes love and compassion and thereby invokes God and his joy. Human life seems to move in cycles: birth, growth, death. Birth, growth, death. This cycle is always with us, in our breath. To continue living, we must let go of our initial breath to take another.<sup>33</sup> So is it with trusting life; you must fall in order to grow.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 592

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Courtesy to Ellie Coriell for this beautiful metaphor.

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## Appendix

1. “Men Gud er Kjerlighed, derfor kunne vi kun ligne Gud i at elske, som vi ogsaa kun, efter en Apostels Ord, kunne være »Guds Medarbeidere i – Kjerlighed«. Forsaavidt Du elsker den Elskede, ligner Du ikke Gud, thi for Gud er ingen Forkjerlighed [...] Forsaavidt Du elsker Din Ven, ligner Du ikke Gud, thi for Gud er ingen Forskjel. Men naar Du elsker »Næsten«, da ligner Du Gud.” (SKS 9, 69. My translation, 3 April 2017).
2. “Naar altsaa Talen er om den Kjerlighedens Gjerning at opbygge, saa maa dette *enten* betyde, at den Kjerlige nedlægger Kjerligheden i et andet Menneskes Hjerter; *eller* det maa betyde, at den Kjerlige forudsætter, at Kjerligheden er i det andet Menneskes Hjerter, og just ved denne Forudsætning bygger Kjerligheden i ham op [...] Een af Delene maa være det at opbygge. Men mon nu det ene Menneske kan nedlægge Kjerlighed i det andet Menneskes Hjerter? Nei, dette er et overmenneskeligt Forhold, et utænkeligt Forhold mellem Menneske og Menneske, i den Forstand kan menneskelig Kjerlighed ikke opbygge. Det er Gud, Skaberen, som maa nedlægge Kjerlighed i ethvert Menneske, han, der selv er Kjerlighed.” (SKS 9, 219. My translation, 3 April 2017).
3. “Talen kan da ikke være om, hvad den Kjerlige, der vil opbygge, nu skal gjøre for at omskabe det andet Menneske, eller for at tvinge Kjerligheden frem i ham [...] Kun den Ukjerlige indbilder sig at skulle opbygge ved at tvinge den Anden; den Kjerlige forudsætter bestandigt, at Kjerligheden er tilstede, just derved opbygger han [...] den Kjerlige, som opbygger, han har kun een Fremgangsmaade, at forudsætte Kjerligheden [...] Saaledes lokker han det Gode frem, han opelsker Kjerligheden, han opbygger. Thi Kjerlighed kan og vil kun behandles paa een Maade, ved at elskes frem; at elske den frem er at opbygge. Men at elske den frem er jo netop at forudsætte, at den er tilstede i Grunden.” (SKS 9, 219-220. My translation, 31 March 2016)
4. “Christi Kjerlighed til Peder var saaledes grændseløs, han fuldkommede i at elske Peder det at elske det Menneske, man seer. Han sagde ikke »Peder maa først forandre sig og blive et andet Menneske, inden jeg kan elske ham igjen«, nei, lige omvendt, han sagde: »Peder er Peder, og jeg elsker ham; min Kjerlighed, dersom ellers Noget, skal just hjælpe ham til at blive et andet Menneske.« Han afbrød altsaa ikke Venskabet, for saa maaskee at begynde det igjen engang, naar Peder var bleven et andet Menneske; nei, han bevarede Venskabet uforandret og var just derved Peder behjælpelig i at blive et andet Menneske.” (SKS 9, 172. My translation, 26 March 2016).



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# Scepticism in Context: The Purpose of Doubt in the Authorship

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## Abstract

In this essay we will discuss skepticism in Kierkegaard's authorship in an attempt to capture the various motives to summon doubt, from its guidance in a contextual critique of philosophy up to a practical divergence with the passion of faith. In the first section, ancient skepticism will be exhibited as a proper philosophical movement based on its ethical commitments corresponding to theoretical views. In the second section, we will draw a contrast with modern philosophy's limited understanding of doubt's original aim. Following these preparatory remarks, Kierkegaard's own perspective on skepticism will be addressed in section three and four, first in his reaction to the philosophical tendency to overcome subjective dilemmas too hastily, and then as an answer to skepticism itself, since the very recognition of skepticism as an existential disposition unveils the way it may be overcome. Our contention is that while Kierkegaard is not a skeptic, he still recognizes a similar ground on which doubt and faith operate – a ground which is lost to modern philosophers.

## Keywords

Scepticism; doubt; authorship; faith.

## 1. Introduction

Skepticism is a recurring theme in Kierkegaard's authorship that once tackled may enlighten in a substantive manner the way we grasp some of his intellectual dispositions. It can also introduce new challenging paths of inquiries that will undeniably reflect on our impressions as readers. One particular issue related to that aforementioned theme may be asked as follows: Is Kierkegaard a skeptic thinker? How this question is addressed entails distinct, conflicting and even opposite pictures of the authorship. A potential answer which is in line with the contention of R. H. Popkin in his famous book on the history of skepticism is that Kierkegaard is in fact a skeptic thinker, or more precisely, a skeptic fideist thinker. Although Popkin is not arguing in favor of reading Kierkegaard on the skeptical level of Montaigne or La Mothe Le Vayer, he does observe a hostile penchant against the philosophical enterprise that brings Kierkegaard in the territory of fideism, for the fact that he rejects the apprehension of truth within the power of reason. Popkin defines a radical form of skeptical fideism as well as a moderate form of fideism as follows:

Fideism covers a group of possible views, extending from (1) that of blind faith, which denies to reason any capacity whatsoever to reach the truth, or to make it plausible, and which bases all certitude on a complete and unquestioning adherence to some revealed or accepted truths, to (2) that of making faith prior to reason.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard is classified as a proponent of the former. The collaboration of doubt and faith prompts an unfavorable view to the philosophical enterprise as a whole, which at its core advocates for the use of reason, subsists to skeptical doubts and diverges from faith. This perception of Kierkegaard is not only advocated by Popkin, but also by theologians and philosophers alike, which only a brief overview of the secondary literature on the so-called *leap of faith* would confirm.<sup>2</sup> It seems that moving further into that direction, informed by the skeptical moments in his thought and combined with his peculiar religious perspective entails considerable consequences on our grasp of the authorship, one being that Kierkegaard cannot be appreciated with a relevant philosophical insight, but as the complete opposite: an enemy of reason and philosophy altogether. If Kierkegaard was to still be regarded as a philosopher, albeit a marginal one, do we then have the impossible task of dismissing the skeptical inclinations in the authorship completely?

Following the insight of scholars in the last decades,<sup>3</sup> the character of doubt in Kierkegaard's thought will be tackled in the hope of suggesting an alternative to the reading advocated by Popkin and others. Our contention is that the skeptical leanings in the authorship have to be approached contextually as an answer to how the philosophical enterprise has disposed of the ancient skeptic's ethical aim and inherent *modus vivendi*. By

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<sup>1</sup> Popkin, 2003: xxii

<sup>2</sup> For example, Schaeffer, 2001: 5, on the "Kierkegaardian concept of faith as a jump in the dark"

<sup>3</sup> Notably Evans (2006), Neto (1995), Politis (2005)

contrasting the ancient skeptic's strong character with its dilution in modernity, notably in the works of Descartes and Hegel, an improved framework, that acknowledges both Kierkegaard's animosity towards modern philosophy as well as his personal deal with skepticism, can be established.

## 2. Indirect Contextualization

A brief overview of skepticism in its antique genesis, disconnected from its modern philosophical treatment, is a necessary step on our way towards a better grasp of the motives to call on skepticism in Kierkegaard's authorship. One of Popkin's purposes in his book was to expose the so-called *crise pyrrhonienne*, an intellectual crisis that is at the threshold of modernity.<sup>4</sup> The given name to the crisis is a direct reference to the influential skeptical Hellenistic school that includes such thinkers as Pyrrho of Elis, Aenesidemus and Sextus Empiricus. At the core of skepticism is the persistent operation of doubt, in its epistemological and psychological concerns. Doubt as advocated by the ancient skeptics is one whose aim is to remain in the existential state of uncertainty to both uphold a coherent understanding of our subjective limits as well as to avoid all the troubles dogmatic philosophers are victims of.

Pyrrho (360-270 BC) is the obscure master at the origin of the movement who left no writings. Witnessing Alexander's conquests, he attempted to adapt to a world where massive changes were occurring and the Greek *Telos* endangered by remaining indifferent (*adiaphoria*) both in his own subjective state (*doxai*) and towards the objective elements of the world (*acatalepsia*). Many Hellenistic thinkers also believed that if one wishes to reach tranquility of mind (*ataraxia*), judgment must be withheld (*epoque*), although Pyrrho's suspension is even more ambitious, with the ceaseless operation of the motto "no more;"<sup>5</sup> no more this impression than that other impression, for that nothing is any more this than that.<sup>6</sup> The principle of equipollence (*aklinesis*) along with the practical subjective and objective assumptions are fundamental to the formation of skepticism and will be further developed by the neo-pyrrhonists, most notably Aenesidemus (80-10 BC), whose Ten Modes<sup>7</sup> are concrete examples of various situations where Pyrrho's skepticism may be applied: some are related to our subjective state, or "how the existing object which is judged appears to the subject,"<sup>8</sup> and others to the objective nature of the world. In the eighth's mode is exhibited the inherently relational nature between the subjects and the things, and the frequent lacks of cohesion between the two in the process of forming judgements.

In his book *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus (160-210 CE) not only gives an extensive exhibition of the Ten Modes, but the most complete and detailed account of

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<sup>4</sup> Popkin, 2003: 3

<sup>5</sup> Empiricus, 2000: 46-47

<sup>6</sup> Laertius, 1853: 402

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed overview and analysis of the Ten Modes, see Empiricus, 2000: 12-40

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 35

skepticism, its principles, its relation to truths and arguments in order to promote the skeptical way of living. Skepticism is defined as “an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility.”<sup>9</sup> From its enduring search that never leads to definite conclusions, it distinguishes itself from other dogmatic schools of thought, since both the positive and negative dogmatists believe they have enough reasons to conclude or abdicate the epistemological adventure. This “never-ending but still maintained” character of the skeptic’s ways redefines the relationship between searching and finding. The misstep of the dogmatic and anti-dogmatic philosopher is to put emphasis on finding, which is both an unfunded contention and a source of interior troubles.

The doubt of the skeptic is one that is constantly nourished while never pushed further towards a state of certainty. As P. Hadot explains, with its practical wisdom skepticism is a *haireseis* – an attitude of thought as well as a lived philosophy; an exercise of transformation of the way of life.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Direct Contextualization

One essential aspect of the modern philosophical tradition can be described as a sustained answer to the skeptical challenge, reinvigorated by the likes of Montaigne in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Many modern philosophies are developed on the ground of having battled and won against the skeptic’s theoretical framework. Interestingly, there is nonetheless an important place allocated to the state of uncertainty in those philosophies, one that is constrained at its core. Doubt is being thought out in such a way that (1) the independent practical aim of the skeptic (i.e. doubting for our well-being; doubting as an advisable way of life) is philosophically refuted and then (2) incorporated in a program that wishes to move past it while still recognizing its purpose. In other words, doubt now serves as a means for a greater project at the cost of its authentic end.

Both of these aforementioned alterations of the skeptical ways are essential to Descartes’ project, where the usefulness of doubt is established as a preliminary sweep on our path towards a new epistemological foundation, as is already established in the synopsis of the First Meditation: “Doubt’s greatest utility lies in freeing us of all prejudices, in preparing the easiest way for us to withdraw the mind from the senses.”<sup>11</sup> The skeptical arguments are vigorously spread out in a radical descent towards complete destruction of unsatisfiable truths. From the methodic doubt and the refutation of the knowledge of the senses to the hyperbolic doubt and the hypothesis of the evil genius, Descartes reaches what seems to be a point of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>10</sup> Hadot, 1995: 160, 177

<sup>11</sup> Descartes, 2006: 6

universal uncertainty. But it is precisely once knowledge is at its lowest point and skepticism at its highest that the latter is refuted, suddenly turning against itself by opening the door to the *Cogito* in the Second Meditation: “from the fact that I doubt, it follows that I am [which] cannot in any way be doubtful.”<sup>12</sup>

Descartes’ strategy regarding skepticism is made more explicit in the Replies to the Second and Fifth Objections. In the former, the references to ancient skepticism are described pejoratively as the distaste in reheating old cabbage.<sup>13</sup> It is then suggested to spend weeks considering these skeptical arguments before moving past them, granting a transitory dimension to a philosophy that was encompassing life itself. In the Replies to the Fifth Objections, the contrast between the now temporal nature of skepticism and skepticism as a way of life is even harsher:

Don’t forget, though, the distinction that I insisted on in several of my passages, between getting on with everyday life and investigating the truth. For when we are making practical plans it would of course be foolish not to trust the senses; the sceptics who paid so little heed to human affairs that their friends had to stop them falling off precipices deserved to be laughed at. That’s why I pointed out in one place that no sane person ever seriously doubts such things.<sup>14</sup>

Hidden behind the pretense of recognizing doubt in its universal application, the practical aim of the ancient skeptic was snatched from him before he was thoroughly introduced. Descartes resorts to an alteration of skepticism that is both limited in space, voided of its ethical dimension, as well as in time, since it never lives as more than a provisional argument.

This new way of accepting skepticism while also twisting its significance will be of great influence on other modern philosophers. Closer to Kierkegaard, Hegel will integrate doubt in the dialectic where it may stand as a formally defined figure of opposition to the philosophical progression of thought. In the introduction of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel speaks of the “Pathway of despair,” which “renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what truth is.”<sup>15</sup> Just like in Descartes’ project, skepticism is now a specific moment, an unavoidable and even recurring moment, but a moment nonetheless, as the negation from which we move on as we go further and further in the development of thought.

Later in the *Phenomenology* the strengths and the limits of skepticism are on full display in its answer to the problems inherent to stoicism. Where stoicism is the notion of freedom but devoid of any content, skepticism is the application of the notion of freedom and actual living in the contingent world, but in such a way that it only replaces the problem inherent in stoicism with the internal contradiction in its discourse: “it pronounces an absolute

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 76

<sup>14</sup> Descartes, 2007: 81. The anecdote about the sceptics is a direct jab at Pyrrho’s master, Anaxarchus (Laertius, 1853: 403)

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, 1977: 50

vanishing, but the pronouncement is.”<sup>16</sup> Skepticism proclaims universal contingency, but is that claim itself universal or contingent? This then prompts Hegel to comment in a similar fashion to Descartes on the caricatural nature of some of the skeptic’s habits:

Its talk is in fact like the squabbling of self-willed children, one of whom says A if the other says B, and in turn says B if the other says A, and who by contradicting themselves buy for themselves the pleasure of continually contradicting one another.<sup>17</sup>

For the philosopher, on the other hand, the opposite lasts “so long – until” (CUP1 337) and serves as the occasion to switch from A to B in proceeding towards new breakthroughs.

#### 4. Summoning Doubt

Kierkegaard’s reaction to this pervasive handling of doubt in the modern philosophical tradition is more precisely directed at a dubious sincerity in the process of forming comprehensive intellectual postures. At different points in the authorship, the philosophical tendency to revise and transform the skeptic’s practical wisdom for the sake of the new foundation and knowledge’s progress is met with disdain and irony. This reception is significant in many ways. First of all, we happen to appreciate the articulation of the concept of doubt in Kierkegaard’s thought, since it is not treated the same way as it is with Descartes or Hegel. For Kierkegaard, doubt is neither a temporary moment in a dialectic, nor a specific experience that leads to another superior one as an occasion of complete epistemological reversal: *doubting* may very well be a way of life, to be chosen or not. Secondly, this reaction provides us with a general idea of his depreciation of philosophy as it stands in the context of an enterprise which now has reached a systematic, all-encompassing triumph. In order to situate Kierkegaard’s revulsion against philosophy, this second point will be developed further in this present section with two noteworthy instances where it is not so much doubt that is being discussed, but more so the modern penchant to confine it to a program that proclaims to have surpassed it. Only afterwards will the first point regarding the place of doubt in Kierkegaard’s thought, and consequently whether he is a skeptic or not be addressed more directly.

In an unfinished play written between 1838 and 1840 titled *The Battle between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars*, Kierkegaard illustrates the ridiculousness of the modern intellectual scene in post-Hegelian Denmark. It is alleged that two of the characters, Mr. Phrase and Mr. von Jumping-Jack represent two of Denmark’s prominent intellectuals of the time, J.L. Heiberg and H.L. Martensen,<sup>18</sup> who both made a strong impression on Kierkegaard and his level of appreciation of philosophers, with their respective understanding of historical evolutionism and promotion of Hegelianism.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 125

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 126

<sup>18</sup> See notes 9, 11 and 48 in EPW, 261-62, 264

Mr. Phrase and Mr. von Jumping-Jack both take turns exposing their philosophical ambitions and discoveries in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> scene of the 2<sup>nd</sup> act of the play. Mr. Phrase repeats that he has gone beyond Hegel (EPW 119, 122) and how philosophy, driven by great aims, “strive[s] to make the great results of scholarship accessible to the people” and how “our time's development ought to gain in extensity what it loses in intensity” (EPW 114). Mr. von Jumping-Jack launches himself in a monologue on the development of thought since Descartes, which is preceded by a statement regarding Descartes’ whole enterprise and the deal with skepticism as an answer to Mr. Phase:

Yes, that's all very fine with the popular, but my doubt is by no means popular; it is not a doubt about this, that, or the other, about this thing or that thing; no, it is an infinite doubt. Yes, sometimes I have been troubled by a truly scholarly doubt as to whether I have indeed doubted enough, for doubt is the specific character of modern philosophy, which, said *in parenthesi*, began with Descartes, who said *de omnibus disputandum est* (EPW 114).

Both of these intellectual discourses portray philosophy of that time. It is now a never-ending encompassing machine, accumulating and progressing while also pretending to legitimately be doubting – going so far as to proclaim its doubt to be *infinite*, but ironically confining it in parentheses. Here seems to be laying a contradiction with the extension of thought that sees no end and the infinity of doubt, where both cannot coexist and one necessarily has the upper hand on the other. There also seems to be a misunderstanding of the modern philosophy’s foundation, since the *de omnibus dubitandum* (everything must be doubted) of Descartes has now become *de omnibus disputatio* (everything must be disputed). This portrait, far for lacking irony, is the crisis of identity that the experience of Descartes has led to in modernity; an experience supported by an illusory doubt that is now both stuck in a monologue without real adversity and as a way of arguing without any consideration for its existence as a lasting passion.

The contrast between the skeptic’s ways with doubt and the ones of the modern philosophers is addressed in a more straightforward manner in *Fear and Trembling*, published a few years after the unfinished play was written. It begins with a discussion on the state of philosophy, where we are reminded of Descartes’ assertion of a new beneficial temporariness to the state of doubt:

What those ancient Greeks, who after all did know a little about philosophy, assumed to be a task for a whole lifetime, because proficiency in doubting is not acquired in days and weeks, what the old veteran disputant attained, he who had maintained the equilibrium of doubt throughout all the specious arguments, who had intrepidly denied the certainty of the senses and the certainty of thought, who, uncompromising, had defied the anxiety of self-love and the insinuations of fellow feeling—with that everyone begins in our age (FT 6-7).

Doubt is said to be essential and necessary to the philosophical enterprise, but in the end, it is temporary and its aim is drastically limited to arguments that are not related to a way of

life. The contrast between these two understandings of doubt is followed by a parallel with faith: “in our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but goes further.” Faith, as an existential unsystematic passion, is in a similar posture to doubt. A systematic tendency not only entails to discount the plea for doubt, but also the plea for faith. In the end, what is assimilated and too easily trespassed are the individual’s choices and the existential states as they are related to him. It leaves space for neither doubt, nor faith, except when it is established in its own encompassing terms, which is conflicting with their nature as singular passions. In sacrificing the individual’s potential intensity with the extension of the enterprise, we now enter a process that thinks of itself as remarkable in quantity while remaining empty in its quality, or, in other words, the individual has been tricked into becoming objective (CUP1 33).

Still, these seemingly skeptical apologetic passages and their representation of Kierkegaard’s overall standpoint are to be taken carefully. Even if he is in fact reacting strongly to a continuous alarming philosophical phenomenon, it would still be quite a leap to extrapolate a skeptical disposition from it. Two final points will serve as a transition before exploring Kierkegaard’s own perspective of skepticism.

First of all, Kierkegaard wants to take seriously that which cannot be systematized, which includes doubt as an essential part of the individual’s subjective choices. This leaves enough room for an understanding of skepticism that could potentially be similar to the one advocated in antiquity; skepticism as a way of life. The parallel with faith enlightens what is escaping and fully existing outside of the whole that is objectivity, since it is first as individuals that we doubt, just as it is as individuals that we have faith. Second of all, the revulsion against the alteration of the aim of doubt of modern philosophers is not to be understood as the rejection of philosophy as a whole, but more so as an urgent wake-up call for what such an enterprise may and may not attempt. In a later section of *Fear and Trembling*, it is suggested that “Philosophy cannot and must not give faith, but it must understand itself and know what it offers and take nothing away, least of all trick men out of something by pretending that it is nothing” (FT 33). Philosophy should self-reflect on its inherent limits before going further and further in encompassing the individual’s passions and choices. In other words, it is not only doubt and faith that are lost in the process of extension, but philosophy as a discipline.

## 5. Overcoming Doubt

Up to this point, little has been said regarding Kierkegaard’s own appreciation of skepticism in itself if negative, or if just an extent, from his reaction to the modern way of declaring the problem to be dealt with. As has been briefly laid out, his affiliation with skepticism is a significant one in many respects, most of all as an entry point to his critique of modern philosophy in the light of a distinction between the ancient form of skepticism from its modern use. If we compare the latter with the former, it is clear that the meaning of

skepticism has been at the very least reshaped, and that the essence of doubt is now articulated in a qualitatively different way. By legitimizing doubt as one of the individual's passions, Kierkegaard brings forward a new – or simply forgotten, deliberately or not – recognition of ancient skepticism as a legitimate existential standpoint.

Yet, this reactionary affiliation does not naturally make him a skeptic, or even an apologist of skepticism, despite the appraisal of its antinomy with objectifying philosophy – an antinomy which could very well be rendered as some of the aesthetical moments in the authorship. One of the dangers when reading Kierkegaard too literally at times, especially when he is writing from an aesthete's point of view, is to overlook the fact that many of his ambitions, while not hidden or obscure, are nonetheless indirect ones. In the case of skepticism, Kierkegaard is himself using it as a way out of overarching doubts, although the path diverges greatly from the one taken by modern philosophers. Here, however, lays the Popkinian contention with its definition and classification of fideism: while Kierkegaard is not a Pyrrhonian skeptic, doubt is still endorsed in a cooperative manner with faith as irrational passions opposed to the philosophical enterprise. In the previous section, this hatred of philosophy was revealed to be contextual and directed at a specific epistemological tendency of modern thinkers. In the present section, skepticism's credit will be addressed more directly, as well as the limits of the collaboration it may bear with faith.

Before taking into account Kierkegaard's skeptical moments in aesthetical-leaning passages of the authorship, the method of indirect communication has to be invoked. Although he may seem to promote a stance similar to the skeptic's, any assertion should not immediately be taken at face value, but as the recognition of the many possibilities of existence *prior* to overcoming doubtfulness. In the autobiographical *Point of View*, the following is said of the method: "In order truly to help someone else, I must understand more than he-but certainly first understand what he understands. If I do not do that, then my greater understanding does not help him at all" (PV 45). While certain views may be deemed weaker than others, nothing worthwhile is grasped for any party involved if one does not climb down off his high horse:

If I nevertheless want to assert my greater understanding, then it is because I am vain or proud, then basically instead of benefiting him I really want to be admired by him. But all true helping begins with a humbling. The helper must first humble himself under the person he wants to help and thereby understand that to help is not to dominate but to serve, that to help is not to be the most dominating but the most patient, that to help is a willingness for the time being to put up with being in the wrong and not understanding what the other understands (PV 45).

The author humbles himself in order to reach the reader in his own subjective dimension and from that comparable disposition is a given demeanor addressed. This is Kierkegaard's own principle of charity, reaching a deeper level than its usual argumentative application: through the sensibility of a pseudonym with his own pen, the existential significance of one given outlook is not only posited, but lived through.

Hence, in some passages of the ‘Diapsalmata,’ with their aesthetical undertones, Kierkegaard carries out a discourse in line with a skeptical-existential point of view: “I have, I believe, the courage to doubt everything; I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything; but I do not have the courage to acknowledge anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything” (EO1 23). The individual’s subjective condition prevents him from asserting about anything in life. Doubt is expressed in such a way that we are reminded of early-modern Pyrrhonian figures, like Montaigne, in the way that it expresses the vanity of our different moods: “What if everything in the world were a misunderstanding; what if laughter really were weeping!” (EO1 21). Behind every conclusive decision also lies the possibility – or inevitability – of pain and suffering:

Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way. [...] This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life (EO1 38-39).

These passages and the first part of *Either/Or* as a whole, if read in a vacuum, could give to an understanding of the elusive nature of Kierkegaard in a similar way that did J. Wahl who named him the “poet of the religious,”<sup>19</sup> or even to Camus’ understanding of the disarray at the forefront of his reflection, which “begins in the chaos of an experience divested of its setting and relegated to its original incoherence.”<sup>20</sup> Although these comments are obvious regarding the aesthetical stage and its inclusive skeptical moments, Kierkegaard’s aim is still indirectly to *not* remain in a state of doubt or confusion even though its existential legitimacy has to be acknowledged before laying out the option to maneuver out of it.

One of the most significant accounts of doubt in the authorship, leading to the settlement of our initial inquiry regarding the collaborative nature between doubt and faith is disclosed in the interlude of *Philosophical Fragments*. Concerning the apprehension of truth in its historical aspect, the contrast between a skeptical position and the resolution to believe will expose major differences, despite a partial common ground between the two passions.

History involves the temporal dimension of any object that has come into existence, whether it is a specific historical event which we encounter indirectly through witnesses, or of experiences that we recall or reflect upon by ourselves. In other words, the past comprises the historicity of events as related to us as subjects in relation to the world in its ever-changing nature and to ourselves as imperfect cognitive beings. There are epistemological implications to the historical aspect of human existence regarding truth, where experiences and their lasting impressions continually succeed one another. On one hand, “immediate sensation and cognition cannot deceive” (PF 81), since it involves certainty for as long as we are in the process of

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<sup>19</sup> Wahl, 1938: 14

<sup>20</sup> Camus, 1979: 30

experiencing it. On the other, once the event is of the past, it is now a matter of uncertainty: “the historical has in itself the illusiveness [...] whereby that which is not firm is made dubious” (PF 81). We may be reminded of the way Sextus separates appearance and what is said of that appearance, the former being granted, the latter being subject to our judgments.<sup>21</sup> Since our judgments do not perfectly infer from experience or events in regard to the truth, they are subject to blunders. Only the present is given directly to the senses while history portrays senseless encounters, whether through internal afterthoughts or the help of external witnesses.

The historical dimension of personal or social events then does not just entail apprehension, but a form of commitment on the part of the subject whose will has to be disposed in a certain way to accept or refute truths that are not directly experienced. Just like Pascal’s Wager we come to realize that *we are embarked* and must make a choice: will we accept what has come into existence or not?

Kierkegaard further exposes two courses of action related to the individuals’ decision following the acknowledgment of the limits of apprehension. The first one is advocated by the ancient skeptics: since the phenomenon is not directly accessible, it is not in our power to make a worthwhile accession, and therefore it is preferable to suspend our judgment. Doubt is then an expression of the skeptic’s choice, where “they doubted not by virtue of knowledge but by virtue of will” (PF 82). Hence, the skeptic *chose* to abstract himself from concluding in order to mitigate the possibility of error. The second course of action, however, is to nonetheless dispose ourselves to accept what has come into existence. While we do not have a direct link to truth itself, certitude of faith is what annuls the uncertainty of what came into existence. Faith operates in a similar fashion to doubt in that it accepts the premise regarding the limited apprehension of objects, though it operates in a different fashion to doubt in that it still reaches out to certainty and therefore ventures into a different path than one of suspension. Faith is then not so much in parallel, but in contrast with doubt as a result of a disposition of the will, despite a shared understanding of apprehension:

I cannot immediately sense or know that what I immediately sense or know is an effect, for immediately it simply is. That it is an effect is something I believe, because in order to predicate that it is an effect, I must already have made it dubious in the uncertainty of coming into existence. But if belief decides on this, then the doubt is terminated; in that very moment the balance and neutrality of doubt are terminated—not by knowledge but by will (PF 84).

From the same epistemological framework may be chosen two not only distinct, but opposite paths, where one is positioned against the other. Faith as an act of liberty that excludes doubt does not conclude differently, for that would mean that it does not accept the same limits to apprehension. It instead arrives at the resolution to accept one given truth nonetheless. Belief and doubt are two opposite passions, where one closes itself down in front of uncertainty and the other opens itself up in order to overcome doubt.

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<sup>21</sup> Empiricus, 2000: 8

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Recognizing the qualitative contrast between doubt and faith partially answers the question whether Kierkegaard is a skeptic fideist or not. The two-step course of Kierkegaard's project regarding skepticism first consists of revoking its illegitimate reception in the philosophical tendency to declare the dilemma it poses as settled. In light of this distinction can be addressed the parallel skepticism bears with faith, which leads towards the legitimate rejection of the former. From a mutual understanding of the way apprehension works to the divergence in their respective paths, the believer distinguishes himself from the skeptic in its handling of the will. A further study could explore to greater extent this dynamic between doubt, faith and reason. The believer's objection in the *Philosophical Fragments* does involve a leap, but is such a leap anti-rational or blind? As remarks Westphal: "A leap could be described as blind either if it occurred without the awareness that a leap was involved, or if one had no idea what one was jumping toward."<sup>22</sup> The leap, from the standpoint of an answer to skepticism, is enlightening regarding both of these concerns, since the believer is aware of the ground on which the decision occurs just as much as to where this decision leads to in the first place: towards himself and the passionate nature of his own commitments.

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<sup>22</sup> Westphal, 1996: 78

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# In-between Absurdities: Evaluating Camus' Critique of Kierkegaard

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## Abstract

This paper evaluates Albert Camus' critique of Søren Kierkegaard regarding their views on the human condition, by conducting a close reading of *The Sickness Unto Death*. First, it briefly outlines Camus' philosophy of the absurd as found in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, followed by his criticism on Kierkegaard based on the former's conception of being (un)truthful to oneself. Subsequently Kierkegaard's anthropology as constructed in *The Sickness Unto Death* is expounded by scrutinising his formulation of the self and the corresponding possibilities of being (un)faithful to oneself. It is argued that: (a) both authors depart from a shared notion of man's condition; but (b) their ways part regarding their ideas how man *ought* to remain loyal to his condition. Finally, this leads to an affirmative understanding of the formal similarities between Camus and Kierkegaard, regarding their embracement of the absurd, while enlightening their contrastive answers to an existential demand for authenticity.

## Keywords

Camus; the absurd; absurdity; existential; anthropology; authenticity.

## 1. Introduction

Close on a hundred years after the initiation of Søren Kierkegaard's oeuvre, Albert Camus wrote an essay on the concept of the absurd wherein Kierkegaard's name appears thirty times, including a footnote. This paper will evaluate Camus' critique of Kierkegaard as conceived in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). It will seize Camus' criticism as an occasion for a close reading of *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus. The first section provides an outline of Camus' philosophy of the absurd and his corresponding critique of Kierkegaard, based on the former's idea of a self in *untruth* to its condition. The second section provides a comprehensive discussion of Kierkegaard's anthropology by scrutinising his formulation of the self, with continuous reflections on the corresponding ways for a self to be *unfaithful* to its condition. To conclude both views will be briefly contrasted for a comparative understanding of Camus and Kierkegaard.

This paper will argue that: (a) both authors depart from a shared notion of the condition man finds himself in — the idea of a fundamental disruption found in the longing of man for something the external world is unable to comply with; however (b), their ways part with regard to how one ought to remain loyal to his condition, that is, how one is to relate in the relation of the self to that which *is* (or has been) given to remain truthful or faithful so as to become authentically oneself. Finally, this will lead to an affirmative understanding of the formal similarities between Camus and Kierkegaard, regarding their embracement of the concept of the absurd, while enlightening their contrastive answers to an existential demand for authenticity.

## 2. An absurd demand for authenticity in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

According to Camus, the human condition is one marked by absurdity: on the one hand, we are driven by a profound longing for rational explanations such that they make up a complete and meaningful, clear unity of our lives; on the other hand, we find ourselves ultimately posited in an irrational world, forever unable to fully comply with those demands.<sup>1</sup> Camus sees human beings as being preoccupied with making sense of the world we live in. However, this world we find ourselves in — the firmament for our everyday life — is really a world devoid of meaning. Our preoccupation with finding meaning leads us to seek in vain for answers to questions we cannot possibly answer, since the given material to work with — the world we live in — is insufficient.

This is where the absurd springs from, and to recognise this, to become aware of this deprivation of meaning, is to be expelled from some familiar place. A world that makes even the

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<sup>1</sup> Camus, 1942: 37, 45–8

slightest sense is a familiar world, according to Camus, one we feel at home in. But in a world devoid of meaning, one that refuses to make sense, we no longer feel at home; rather, it gives us a feeling of alienation.<sup>2</sup> Being part of a world we can never fully comprehend, we forever remain strangers, not least to ourselves.<sup>3</sup> This provides us with a feeling of absurdity, and this feeling of absurdity is born in the consciousness of the incommensurability of what we *want* to know, and what we *can* know.<sup>4</sup> The absurd is “lucid reason noting its limits.”<sup>5</sup> What is absurd, according to Camus, is a disproportion, a gap between two things compared, in this case an intention and a reality.<sup>6</sup> It is our sheer awareness of this divorce, arising from the confrontation between a mind that desires and a world that disappoints, between a human need and the unreasonable silence of the world, that gives rise to the absurd.<sup>7</sup>

If Camus sets out a dilemma in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), he merely takes it as a point of departure, and intends to explore its logical consequences; to become aware of the absurdity of this irresolvable friction implies asking after its effects.<sup>8</sup> To do so, means to reflect upon the separation constitutive for the absurd itself. It is in this context that Camus writes of suicide being “the only truly serious philosophical problem,” and that to judge whether life is worth living or not “amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”<sup>9</sup> This is rephrased in the context of the absurd to whether one is to “die voluntarily or to hope in spite of everything”.<sup>10</sup> If we long for something unattainable, must we simply abandon this life, or are we granted hope for the impossible?

As a result, the absurd seemingly enforces a choice between two possibilities upon us, yet this merely consists of an illusion, according to Camus, since it pretends to offer a dilemma between two indeed very different “ways out,” although there really is none. The “exile” of man is “without remedy.”<sup>11</sup> The absurd offers no hope of ever returning home. Camus calls our yearning for making sense of our lives a “nostalgia for unity.”<sup>12</sup> We are homesick for that familiar world gone by, where everything still had its place and meaning, and could make perfect sense to us. Our nostalgia makes us search for a way out, desperately wanting to dispose of the problem by either erasing the gap at all, or by filling it with a substitution.

However, we need not answer the alleged twofold dilemma. Rather, we must face the problem underlying it: we are not only to make do with this feeling of absurdity, but ought to live in complete lucidity accepting nothing beyond. For Camus, this denotes the only sincere

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 33

<sup>5</sup> Camus 1991, 49

<sup>6</sup> Camus 1942, 47

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 45, 71

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 45

<sup>9</sup> Camus, 1991: 1–2

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>11</sup> Camus, 1942: 18

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33

authentic attitude toward life: to live is to keep the absurd alive in consciousness by contemplating the constant confrontation between oneself and one's own obscurity.<sup>13</sup> We are to reject our temptations to do away with our anxieties, and to live "without appeal."<sup>14</sup> The absurd cannot be divided.<sup>15</sup> This is what it means for Camus, following the ultimate logical consequences of what the absurd entails: to keep the confrontation between our rational desire and the irrational silence of the world alive, rebelling against our nostalgia, allowing no deceitful fulfilment of the former by means of hope, nor the negation of the latter by means of suicide. Both hope and suicide disregard the inseparability of the absurd by means of escape.<sup>16</sup>

Kierkegaard, according to Camus, does not maintain the equilibrium.<sup>17</sup> In awareness of the loss we continuously suffer, Kierkegaard precisely wants to fill the nostalgic gap, but can only do so in a leap of faith for reconciliation.<sup>18</sup> The rational wish for unity is sacrificed to the irrational, and reason as its ground is forsaken, whereby the absurd ultimately disappears. Kierkegaard holds on to hope, negating the absurd human condition: "Kierkegaard wants to be cured."<sup>19</sup>

### 3. An ontology of authentic selfhood in *The Sickness unto Death*

To evaluate Camus' critique of Kierkegaard, we turn to *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus, where an explicit image is erected of what it means to be human. Its renowned opening passage describes a human being as "spirit" and goes on to define spirit as "the self." The self is specified as being: "a relation that relates itself to itself or [...] the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself" (SUD 13). The human self is accordingly conceived, not only as something that relates two terms with each other, but simultaneously, in being such a relation, relating itself to the fact that it is this something that relates two terms with each other. Both constituent elements of the self are therefore indiscernibly requisite. The passage continues to disclose what constitutes the relational aspects of the human self: "A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis" (SUD 13). Drawing upon the image provided hitherto, the human being as a self appears in the strokes of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 76–77

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37, 76–7

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 49, 55

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33, 75–7

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>18</sup> According to Camus, Kierkegaard let the antinomy and the paradox become the criteria for religion: he sacrifices the intellect for faith by giving God the attributes of the absurd. Even though appropriating a similar vocabulary, one could say that Kierkegaard and Camus use different idioms when arriving at the concept of the absurd; for Camus the absurd is limited reason without hope, for Kierkegaard the absurd is limitless hope without reason (Camus, 1942: 57–9)

<sup>19</sup> Camus, 1991: 39

following two traits: a rather factual, passive combination of two components, and an act of reflection upon being this relation.

However, an important remark is added, since considered in this way, “a human being is still not a self” (SUD 13). This leaves one with at least the provisional predetermination for a human being potentially not being or becoming a self, while further specifications are supposed. Something is lacking. A few lines down, the image is further established: “Such a relation that relates itself to itself, must either have established itself or have been established by another” (SUD 13). If the relation has been established by something else, this self-reflective relation enters into another relation, namely to that “which established the entire relation” (SUD 13). This is immediately followed by the assessment that a human self is “such a derived, established relation”, that is, “a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another” (SUD 13-14). Hence, considered in this way, the action of reflection not only requires an inward awareness, but also requires for a self to relate to the fact that it relies on another, which means reflecting on its dependence. Here the outline for an ontology of the self is brought to light: first (i), the self as spirit is conceived as dialectical, being a relation between two terms: a synthesis between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, between freedom and necessity; second (ii), this dialectical self as a relation is self-reflective: a relation that relates itself to itself; third (iii), the self in addition relates itself — as a relation relating itself to itself — to the power that established it.<sup>20</sup>

Now these three criteria for a genuine, complete human self imply simultaneously a possibility for a human being *not* to become a self. In this context the important and much recurring notion of “despair” enters the stage. Despair is formulated in the title of the first section as the “sickness unto death,” or in the subtitle as “the sickness of the spirit,” which is the self (SUD 13). Despair is: “the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself” (SUD 15). Hence, despair is a disharmony of the whole of the configuration of the self: the state of a human being when not genuinely a self, or a self that is not true to itself in any of its relational aspects.<sup>21</sup> In accordance with the three elements making up the self, there can be three forms of not being a self, that is, of being “in despair.”

The rest of the book can be read as a broad exposition in three parts on various forms of human beings being misrelated to the essentials of the self and therefore remaining in a state of despair, corresponding to the triadic structure of the self.<sup>22</sup> First, despair is considered without a notion of consciousness, namely as being unconscious of being misrelated, thus only with regard to the components of the self as synthesis. However, this is “not despair in the strict sense,” because what is most important is the volitional aspect of despair: not *willing* to become oneself, and thus being conscious of the state of despair (SUD 13).<sup>23</sup> Despair then in

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<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Davenport, 2013: 230–251; Glenn, 1987: 5–21; Larsen, 2015: 31–54

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Larsen, 2015: 38–9

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Glenn, 1987: 5–6; Sousa, 2012: 37

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Glenn, 1987: 6

the second form is accordingly defined by self-consciousness, precisely being despair with regard to the volitional aspect of the self. Third, despair is analysed as “sin,” ultimately being unfaithful to one’s dependence on another, that is, the power that established the whole of the relation: God.

With regard to the latter, despair as illness of the self is contrasted by faith as being the “health” of the self.<sup>24</sup> Because the self is made up of three relational elements, relating to itself as a synthesis that has been established by something other than itself, the self lacks harmony and unity when only one of the necessary conditions for the self is misaligned — as a human being we remain ill and thereby in despair as long as we do not (want to) become our (true or authentic) self (SUD 15-16).<sup>25</sup> Only when all of the relational elements of the self are in place, despair is fully eradicated. The first two pages of the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death* end with the ultimate formula of the self, when not in despair: “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it” (SUD 14). In this way it becomes clear how the “ontology of selfhood” as presented in *The Sickness Unto Death*, will finally lead to faith as that state in which a human being ultimately becomes itself — being faithful to its (human) condition.

I will continue to elaborate on the formulation of an authentic self, by separately treating the three nevertheless inseparable criteria (i, ii, iii) alongside the possible ways for a self to be in despair; I will investigate the relation between the anthropology set out and its implications for being (un)faithful to the self.

(i) The first element of the self can be read as a “dialectical.”<sup>26</sup> The human being is understood as both/and, as a synthesis between limitedness and limitlessness. We respond to the experiences we undergo; we both have the facticity of our given past, and are able to see beyond that, a ray of possibilities pertaining to a future. We have a life given *to* us “in necessity,” and simultaneously have the capacity to choose between opportunities “in freedom,” thereby transcending our mere definiteness.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, we are both a *being* in necessity and a possible *becoming* in freedom (or we are finite and infinite, temporal and eternal). We are both confined within the finite, and yet find ourselves boundlessly free within the realm of infinite possibilities. We hover in-between.<sup>28</sup> With our faculty of imagination, we mediate our in-betweenness, we can move between our concrete reality and an ideal universe of possibilities,

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<sup>24</sup> Glenn, 1987: 5–6; cf. Hannay, 1987: 27-36

<sup>25</sup> Glenn, 1987: 6. On the relation between selfhood and authenticity in general with regard to Kierkegaard’s thought, see e.g. Golomb, 1995, 33–67. Among others, Davenport interprets Kierkegaard within a framework of existential thinking, referring to “selfhood” — becoming a self — as the existential goal of human beings. Becoming a self implies a potential self pertaining to the human condition. This potential singular individual is perceived as the “authentic self”, and the existential project of human life becomes an “authentic ideal of selfhood”. Despair, then, is the situation of a human being not being an authentic self (Davenport, 2013: 230–231).

<sup>26</sup> Davenport, 2013: 232. Davenport calls this first of first order in the self-thesis the *hylomorphic* synthesis (235); Glenn refers to this as a synthesis of “polar opposites” (1987, 5).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Davenport, 2013: 232; Davidshofer, 2013: 137–143; Glenn, 1987: 8; Söderquist, 2009: 154–9

<sup>28</sup> Davidshofer, 2013: 138

between concrete being and ideal becoming.<sup>29</sup> Responding to our given facticity, by relating our particular reality to a form of ideality, we can move into *actuality* (of both what is, and what can become): all realisation of possibilities complemented with all necessary concreteness of reality.<sup>30</sup>

Being in despair, regarding the first element of the self, is always conceived as an excess, inclining too much to either one of the two poles constituting the relation, as a deficiency. However, it is regarded without regard to it being conscious or not, “consequently only with regard to the constituents of the synthesis” (SUD 29-43). The paradoxical condition of man demands holding the equilibrium between the polar opposites of the human synthesis: “To become oneself is to become concrete. But to become concrete is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, for that which is to become concrete is indeed a synthesis” (SUD 30)<sup>31</sup> Hence, despair can be formulated as the lack of one of the two poles.<sup>32</sup> However important, this form of despair is not despair “in the strict sense,” because it is not aware of it. Therefore, we move on to the second element of the self.

(ii) The second constituent element of the self can be labelled “the reflective self.” Already foreshadowed above, self-consciousness or awareness is fundamental to the project of selfhood: “it is whether or not despair is conscious that qualitatively distinguishes one form of despair from another. [...] In general, what is decisive with regard to the self is consciousness, that is to say, self-consciousness” (SUD 29).<sup>33</sup> At the very beginning, it is stated that a relation is a third term, relating two (opposing) terms (SUD 13). This element, the relation as a third term that relates itself to itself, does not passively merge two poles into a unity, but by relating to both of them, the relation itself actively considers its own process of relating — thus relates to itself *as* a relation — and henceforth “positively” constructs a new reflective relation. According to Larsen, this denotes a qualitative shift from “mere *human nature* into realized *human selfhood*.”<sup>34</sup> It constitutes the *way* the synthesis as relation is constructed — a form of active consciousness, “in the way that it is interested as a productive tension between the poles

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<sup>29</sup> Hanson, 2014: 73–79; McDonald, 2013: 23–29

<sup>30</sup> Hanson, 2014: 78–9

<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, inasmuch as the self is synthesis, it is *potentiality*, and by the medium of imagination it has the task to become oneself: “Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility” (SUD 35).

<sup>32</sup> With regard to finitude and infinitude, finitude’s despair is defined as a lack of infinitude, whereas infinitude’s despair is formulated *vice versa* as a lack of finitude. Finitude’s despair is a shortcoming of imagination, leading to forms of determinism and fatalism, reducing all of man’s action and striving into deeds purely corresponding to natural needs. Infinitude’s despair is then contrastively a state of unlimited imagination, never to establish actuality. Analogously, possibility’s despair is defined as a lack of necessity, whereas necessity’s despair is once more formulated *vice versa* as a lack of possibility. Possibility’s despair means running away from all that is necessary and concrete, lacking the recognition of the limitations of life, that man is a “definite something and thus necessary.” Necessity’s despair is annihilating possibility, that is, denying the possibility and thus not recognising the human being in freedom, as a synthesis being both limited and limitless (SUD 31–6).

<sup>33</sup> Davenport, 2013: 235 refers to this second order of the self, being a *volitional* relation as a form of a *reflexive structure*; Glenn, 1987: 5 denotes it as a “self-relating” entity. Hitherto, no genuine form of despair has actually been formulated, despair in the strict sense is always defined with regard to self-consciousness:

<sup>34</sup> Larsen, 2015: 32

of the human synthesis.”<sup>35</sup> Consciousness, then, is stressed rather with regard to the *volitional* than a cognitive element of the self as relation.<sup>36</sup>

The human being as self-relating spirit implies a responsibility for becoming a self, corresponding to the volitional aspect of the self-thesis. The self *is* “freedom,” and this freedom denotes a notion of *will*: “The more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self” (SUD 29).<sup>37</sup> Only by virtue of self-consciousness, the human being possesses the ability to move “between possibility and necessity,” that is, retaining a state of balance with regard to the paradoxical synthesis of the human being, and having the responsibility for being misrelated. Only by virtue of consciousness, the human being can be genuinely in despair. This, then, is what the relation in relating itself to itself adds to a mere relation: an activity of reflection on itself as a relation, providing it with the ability of being responsible for it being in despair or not.

Regarding consciousness, two main categories of despair are defined: despair that is ignorant of being despair, and despair that is conscious of being despair. The former is really stressed as a lower form of despair, according to the importance for the self of it having consciousness. To be unaware of being in despair and to be ignorant of having a self makes it questionable “whether it is justifiable to call such a state despair” (SUD 42). Hence, we will not go into further detail regarding this form of despair. Despair that is conscious of its state, on the other hand, is therefore conscious of having a potential self, and therefore two subcategories are added: (a) in despair not to will to be oneself and (b) in despair to will to be oneself. The “chief focus” is on these conscious forms of despair, being “despair’s *higher* forms.”<sup>38</sup>

The two forms of despair being conscious, denote a consciousness of the self being in despair and being both finite and infinite, therefore pertaining to “something eternal” (SUD 47). In other words, despair regarding being conscious or not literally implies self-consciousness. In despair not to will to be oneself is denoted as “weakness” (SUD 49-67). This form of despair relates to a form of immediacy, a kind of conformity to not authentically choose to become *someone*, but rather someone else, that is, imitate *the* self, rather than taking up responsibility for *a* self.<sup>39</sup> In despair to will to be oneself is entitled as “defiance” (SUD 67-74). Even though

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<sup>35</sup> Davenport, 2013: 236–7. Already one can sense the artificiality of the separation of the self in three constituents (cf. Larsen, 2015: 28). The faculty of imagination as the mediation between the poles of the human synthesis stands in direct connection to the self-awareness, being “interested” in the way the synthesis is constructed, referring to the etymological ground of *inter-esse* (being-between), denoting to a form of mediation (see, McDonald, 2013: 24)

<sup>36</sup> Glenn, 1987: 11

<sup>37</sup> This freedom is the nuanced freedom as the unity between necessity and possibility, that is, not a negative freedom without responsibility, but an existential freedom, relating both of the poles of the synthesis. See: Davenport, 2013: 236ff.

<sup>38</sup> Glenn, 1987: 12

<sup>39</sup> Now despair of “weakness” is further specified in two forms: as “despair *in* weakness”, and as “despair *over* one’s weakness.” The first denotes to being too much devoted to something rather contingent: something earthly. The second form instead despairs over the fact of being in despair, referring to a state of consciousness of the fact that the self is also something eternal, and yet does not want to act upon it. This despair understands that it is

there is a form of *willing* to be self-involved, this form of despair does apparently still not meet the self-thesis' criteria.

Basically, this form of despair pertains to self-narration. The self wants to be its own master by making its self into the self it wants to be. The human being is conscious of it being able to create a self, yet rebellious to the fact that this self remains a "derived" self, that is, a self that has been established by something else. It wants to cut loose from its relation to the power that established it, and therefore it lacks "seriousness" by way of its activity in imaginary constructions (SUD 68). Moreover, the self consequently lacks "continuity", since its given past, as being its facticity, becomes self-created, and the self can thus decide on any given moment to *re*-create what had been written by itself.<sup>40</sup> Being caught up in imaginative creation, one refuses to become one's authentic self by denying its presence before God, or its positedness, and therefore the self is never actualised. Finally, the self "wants to take credit for his fictional masterly project" (SUD 69). However, eventually, it turns out that the human self remains a "riddle", that it cannot penetrate its genuine self by virtue of its own made up creation (SUD 68-69). Both forms of conscious despair, then, still "lack" something, that is: conscious of itself it is still not yet a self, but misrelated, namely to the power that established the self, i.e. God.

(iii) Perhaps most crucially to the entire ontology of the self, the self before God has already been set up implicitly in what preceded little by little.<sup>41</sup> A human-being is not (yet) a self when not aware or in denial of one's relation to the entity that "gives" life (SUD 46). Because a human self has been granted with life, and has not established itself, it has to relate to the power that did establish it, and therefore the two conscious forms of despair "in the strict sense" can take shape; if the human self were self-established, in despair to will to be oneself — despair of defiance — would not be possible but only in despair not to will to be oneself would (SUD 14). Even by willing to be oneself, the complete autonomy of this faculty is delusional as far as it remains an "established willing", that is, a heteronomous autonomy. An active self-relation will always include an "implicit attitude toward the power that founded this will."<sup>42</sup> In this sense, there is no self possible not relating to its dependency: despair cannot be eradicated on one's own powers.

Despair, then, in being aware of the self before God, "or with the conception of God" is named *sin*, that is self-consciousness on its dependency but in awareness not accepting to be before God. Thus: "sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification

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"weakness to make the earthly so important, that is it weakness to despair" yet does not turn to faith but rests in despair: despairing over his despair (SUD 61).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Söderquist, 2009: 159ff

<sup>41</sup> Davenport, 2013: 235 places the self before God as part of the second order of the self, being conscious of the dependency of the second order volitional self; Glenn, 1987: 5 concludes the third stage of the self-thesis as "ultimately *dependent* on God."

<sup>42</sup> Davenport, 2013: 245

of despair” (SUD 77)<sup>43</sup> Regarded under the aspect of sin as a form of disobedience, sin is not actualising one’s potentiality as a self, that is, not living up to the demand of God: to become oneself and to see one’s givenness as one’s task (SUD 78-82). Being in despair as sin can take several forms, all of which are forms of refusal to relate itself to the authentic primordial self as grounded spirit: either one does not want to perceive one’s given self as a task, or one acknowledges one’s founded autonomy, but still rejects faith in pride, or, thirdly, one rebels against God by declaring the Christian dogma’s of faith to be untruth.<sup>44</sup>

To be in truth, to be cured from the sickness unto death, is to have faith: to relate to God, the power that posits a human being. Yet this relationship is not cognitive in essence, it precedes reason entirely. To “rest transparent in the power that established me,” indicates that more is asked for than sheer rational comprehension; perhaps faith should be seen as a form of trust: all is possible for God, even when “humanly speaking, there is no possibility” (SUD 38). This contradiction of faith is essentially something absurd, it is an offence to reason for it cannot be understood, and therefore it transcends reasons capacity (SUD 83-86). To relate to God is to see human freedom as entangled by something external to man that posits the self.<sup>45</sup> The self has been put in place and must *trust* its givenness. Becoming a self cannot be done without relating to one’s dependency; a human self can never be “fulfilled” by way of self-understanding, by disregarding its external dependency.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4. An absurd demand for authenticity

The similarities between Camus and Kierkegaard lie *in abstracto* in their shared premises of the human condition, their dissimilarities can be found in their constructions of what it means to live up to the demands of this condition. Both authors depart from the notion of the human condition being deprived from meaning on its own, and being fundamentally disrupted in man’s longing for something the external world is unable to comply with.<sup>47</sup> Both authors then deduce a longing back for unity that the self has lost in consciousness. Everything starts in consciousness, and regarding the program of an “authentic ideal of selfhood,” all comes down to self-consciousness, that is awareness of the true state of the self. Interestingly, both authors criticise different forms of being untruthful to what it genuinely means to be a human self, and they appear to personify one another’s critique.

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<sup>43</sup> What is important for this third (iii) constituent of the self is that it still pertains to the second (ii), being firmly attached to self-consciousness. To be misrelated to the self before God, then, also pertains to the volitional aspect of the self-thesis: not to will to submit to its dependency, however aware of one’s heteronomy.

<sup>44</sup> Davenport, 2013: 248–9

<sup>45</sup> Larsen, 2015: 26–7

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

<sup>47</sup> Berthold, 2013:138–40. Kierkegaard and Camus share grounds, traced back to Immanuel Kant who stressed the “peculiar fate” of human reason, being a faculty that by virtue of its own nature incessantly asks questions it is unable to ignore, yet transcending its powers man in all reason is unable to answer them.

For Camus, consciousness of the absurd is noting reason's limits, and not willing to go beyond to reconcile with the "nostalgia for unity," but in revolt accepting one's absurd fate in pride. Giving up reason for the irrationally of faith to coincide with the disrupted self is not being sincere to the absurd: Kierkegaard commits a form "philosophical suicide," according to Camus.<sup>48</sup> And indeed, *The Sickness unto Death* does fit the image, in wanting to reconcile that what is missing, in being aligned in such a way that the unity of the self is re-established. This disruptive condition of man is one of imbalance that for Kierkegaard must be brought back into an equilibrium to remain utterly truthful to this human condition. A desire supposedly implies a lack. Humanly speaking, by virtue of man's own activity, one is still unable to arrive to the point where the self's deficiency is eradicated; the self is put in place by another. The longing of man for unity leads Kierkegaard to an understanding of the self before God as the only possible path of (re)uniting the ruptured whole, requiring a leap of faith by virtue of the *absurd* — the holy becomes a *garant* for the wholeness of the self.

Alongside Camus' critique of Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* provides an image of despair that could resemble Camus' attitude toward life: defiance. The defiant self prefers itself, rather than to see itself established by God, it wants to be its own master, it wants to become God (SUD 67-71).<sup>49</sup> The defiant self does not seek help from someone else: "Rather than to seek help, he prefers, if necessary, to be himself with all the agonies of hell" (SUD 71). Camus stresses and affirms the fractured condition of man, but in complete lucidity he revolts to this absurd confrontation between man and world, which is for Camus the only truly earnest way when one is to remain true to oneself. When the scenery of the world drawn up as a comprehensible unity reveals itself as sheer construction, man suddenly sees himself surrounded by a godforsaken desert where piling the ground only serves castles in the sky. Precisely the idea of a constructed image is present in Anti-Climacus' critique of the self being in despair of defiance: it wants to narrate a life, construct an image that in the end is too fragile and unbelievable (SUD 68-70). Camus' thus affirms the dialectical and the reflective notion one finds in Anti-Climacus' description of the self, yet negating Kierkegaard's idea of the possibility of unity of the self before God, leading him to an *absurd* authenticity. Camus' response to the absurd fits, more or less, the image of the defiant self.

Finally, to see the dissimilarities as being two inverted images could be too harsh of a qualification. First of all, Berthold points to the fact that both authors might not have had that much of a problem with being portrayed the way they are by their apparent "counterpart."<sup>50</sup> Moreover, both authors speak about sincerity and construction; the images of unity raised in life end up being mere hypothesis and therefore cannot genuinely guide oneself. For Camus, the construction would be the presence of God, though also science, in trying to

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<sup>48</sup> Camus, 1942: 61

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Berthold, 2013: 147

<sup>50</sup> Berthold, 2013: 139

explain the world where it cannot.<sup>51</sup> For Kierkegaard the construction of the self-narration without God leads to an unbelievable image.

Perhaps most crucially, both ways do lead back to an affirmation to life. When Camus calls Kierkegaard's position one of philosophical suicide, it seems to imply Kierkegaard would not affirm the finitude of this life, but rather cling on to hope for another. However, in his leap of faith, everything is precisely sacrificed for *this* life: "Faith is not a yearning 'for a future life' but 'for this life'."<sup>52</sup> The value of the given is a man's life, here and now: he is both finite and infinite. It is in this sense that their usage of the same concept — that is, the absurd — shares a connotation.<sup>53</sup> The absurd condition of man demands an affirmative stance toward life and within both treated works, the existential demand for authenticity, "points to the possibility of a sort of splendour within the very bleakness of a world divested of illusions and lights." Perhaps, what they share most is the *form* of resilience toward the absurdity of a seemingly meaningless world, and their response — albeit different content wise — is an affirmation to *this* life in complete lucidity, ultimately taking responsibility and pride for that what is given to oneself.

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<sup>51</sup> Camus, 1942: 35–37

<sup>52</sup> Berthold, 2013: 147

<sup>53</sup> Note that both authors do use the concept in different ways, being that the conception of the absurd in Kierkegaard's authorship is more specific. Yet one can argue that the absurd as put forth by Camus spans Kierkegaard's notion.

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## Idle Strolling with Montaigne and Kierkegaard: On the Force of Boredom in “Rotation of Crops: A Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence”

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### Abstract

This essay analyses Kierkegaard's concept of boredom as a twofold ambivalence by consulting Montaigne's *Essais* "Of Idleness," "Of the Force of Phantasy" and "Of Vain Subtleties." One ambivalence is introduced by explaining how boredom undermines the common difference between idleness and work. The other ambivalence consists of boredom itself and roots in the relation of consciousness. The intensity of the ambivalence of boredom depends on the degree of reflectivity of the consciousness. Hence, there is an ambivalence of immediate boredom and an ambivalence of mediate boredom depending on the self-relation of the consciousness. The self-relation is not defined as an internal entity as opposed to an external realm. In fact, one of the theoretical achievements of the esthete A is to have overcome this dichotomy, discovering its point of contact and to have defined the self-relation as a field of balanced forces (perception and memory), which has to be protected from stronger forces (once again, perception and memory).

### Keywords

Boredom; Kierkegaard; negativity; consciousness; Montaigne; idleness; esthetic; perception; memory.

# 1. The Ambivalence of Boredom

## 1.1. Approaching the Ambivalence of Boredom: The Principle of Boredom as the Platonic Eros

People with experience maintain that proceeding from a basic principle is supposed to be very reasonable; I yield to them and proceed from the basic principle that all people are boring. Or is there anyone who would be boring enough to contradict me in this regard (EO1 281)?

Subsequent to a long quote from Aristophanes' comedy "Plutus," the first sentence of "Rotation of Crops" in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* already presents the principle of boredom: Man is utterly boring. Even contradicting the principle of boredom would be motivated by boredom. But shouldn't the claim of author A also be applied to his essay? Hence, is his essay boring itself? Is "to yield someone" then part of the irony of A? But isn't it on the other hand quite entertaining to see an essay asking itself: am I boring? If this is not a performative contradiction, it is at least a performative tie.<sup>1</sup>

This basic principle has to the highest degree the repelling force always required in the negative, which is actually the principle of motion. It is not merely repelling but infinitely repulsive, and whoever has the basic principle behind him must necessarily have infinite momentum for making discoveries (EO1 281).

The principle is now set in motion. Boredom, or more precisely, boring man, is something repulsive and deterring. No one wants to be this way, nor is anyone able to bear pure boredom – although man *is* already boring. This paradox is the motor powering the repulsive force of boredom, which empties the world of its sense. Neither is the negativity of motion a negation, because the principle of boredom is not negated by it (if it was, it would lose its fundamentality), nor is the negativity of motion nothing. Rather, it is the moving-principle of boredom. It is where the nothingness of boredom has its source. As it is only the principle of this nothingness, it is itself less than nothing.

In the following, the motion of negativity will unfold as an "Ent-sprechen," in the sense that it responds and corresponds to the relation of boredom to itself. Only if this relation corresponds inappropriately to its moving principle, then boredom becomes repulsive and deterring, that is, boredom is then the silent response or expression of the motion of negativity.

Plato's figure of knowledge is applied in the analysis of boredom as the principle of man: All philosophical effort lies within the capacity to remember a knowledge that man already knew. To prove this claim to Menon, Socrates asks for a slave. Menon then witnesses an experiment, in which a mathematically untrained slave reveals bits of mathematical knowledge all by himself. He reveals what he had already known. However, these mathematical insights elicit broader problems, and further insights, so that this knowledge is never

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<sup>1</sup> The performative aspect of the text, or as author A would call it: "the classic", is further dealt with in Section 3 'How does the relation of the self relate to boredom?'

completed. You never become knowing although you already are. One makes new discoveries that are in fact old memories. The old looks new again, shows itself as something of "inter-est". The inter-esting pends between the old and the new, between memory and perception, between the lack of (*penia*) and the means to reach (*poros*) wisdom. All the pros and cons handled by the philosophical Eros are in fact moved by the negative moving-principle. Hence, the philosophical Eros and boredom share the same negative moving-principle – Eros is boredom.

Through this structural vicinity boredom gains its power for its critique on society, which detects on the ground of its garish business a big nothingness *and* gains its appreciation from the esthetic right for entertainment.

Despite the aversion and repulsion boredom creates, author A's assessment remains neutral or almost mechanical. The "despite" turns out to be the ground, the impulse and accelerator of discoveries of the eternal return of the new: the bigger the boredom, the stronger the impulse to make discoveries.

*[I]f he wants to press the speed of the motion to the highest point, almost with danger to the locomotive, he needs only to say to himself: Boredom is the root of all evil (EO1 285).<sup>2</sup>*

Boredom can be modelled and assessed like this. More important is that its negative principle functions as a disguised motor of productivity: The longer boredom stays, the more it becomes aversive and deterring and the stronger the impulse to discover something new. The duration of boredom increases not only with time but also with intensity. Well behaved children become "unmanageable" in their play, if boredom intensifies itself (EO1 285). This is where the right of the esthetics stems: a governess is required to stand in between the children (the relation of boredom to itself) and to work against the intensity of boredom in order to protect the children from themselves.

Idleness is not the evil; indeed, it may be said that everyone who lacks a sense for it thereby shows that he has not raised himself to the human level (EO1 289).

By means of entertainment, or more precisely, her "in-betweenness" as being inter-esting for the children, the governess protects man from himself and makes him human at first.

## 1.2. The Force of Boredom and the Force of Phantasy

Montaigne acknowledges<sup>3</sup> the necessity of the inter-esting, when he writes for example "Of the Force of Phantasy," which, when is left on its own, damages the soul.

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<sup>2</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> This essay does not defend any strong influence of Montaigne on Kierkegaard. It follows Landkildehus' claim that Kierkegaard did not study Montaigne systematically (Landkildehus, 2009: 113 – 128). Hence, Montaigne's factual influence on Kierkegaard is considerably small. However, Landkildehus reaffirms that paralleling some aspects of both of their ideas can be a fruitful enterprise in our own efforts to read Kierkegaard or Montaigne respectively (Landkildehus, 2009: 125 – 126).

[E]veryone is jostled by it, but some are overthrown by it. It has a very piercing impression upon me; and I make it my business to avoid, wanting force to resist it. I could live by the sole help of healthful and jolly company: the very sight of another's pain materially pains me, and I often usurp the sensations of another person. A perpetual cough in another tickles my lungs and throat.<sup>4</sup>

The force of phantasy consists – like the force of boredom – in the possibility of intensifying itself, so that the field between the coughing and my own stimulus to cough gets thinner and thinner. Phantasy becomes an uninter-esting rapture – not just for one's mind but one's body too, as Montaigne emphasizes with his examples. Here again we can find an ambivalence in the capacity of phantasy; it can heal *and* lead to diseases, like boredom can stimulate the discovery of interesting things *and* can consume the inter-esting.

Both times, it is important to master the phenomena and use their power for one's own profit:

When I lately retired to my own house [...] I fancied I could not more oblige my mind than to suffer it at full leisure to entertain and divert itself, which I now hoped it might henceforth do, as being by time become more settled and mature; but I find—

"Variam semper dant otia mentem,"

("Leisure ever creates varied thought."—Lucan, iv. 704)

that, quite contrary, it is like a horse that has broke from his rider, who voluntarily runs into a much more violent career than any horseman would put him to, and creates me so many chimaeras and fantastic monsters, one upon another, without order or design, that, the better at leisure to contemplate their strangeness and absurdity, I have begun to commit them to writing, hoping in time to make it ashamed of itself.<sup>5</sup>

Montaigne focuses on the relation which phantasy and idleness each have to themselves. Let alone with themselves, the "in-betweenness" disappears and both harm the human side of men. The suggestions of how to maintain the in-betweenness seem to be opposed to each other: Montaigne is against and author A is for idleness. But they relate to each other, since Montaigne's idleness marks phantasy exactly as that which justifies phantasy in A's view. Both work on the same point: the closed relation of boredom/phantasy to itself. In this sense, Montaigne would be fine with idleness; a kind of idleness, which is not left alone but corrected and regulated (e.g. the idleness of writing). The other way around, author A describes the rapture of phantasy as boring, since it lacks the inter-esting as the category of an open relation to itself. The person indulging in phantasy escapes phantasy with the same reason as the bore flees boredom: the one meets with its full emptiness the empty fullness of the other. For both the world becomes "em-fulled."

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<sup>4</sup> Montaigne, 2009: 89.

<sup>5</sup> Montaigne, 2009: 55 – 56

### 1.3. The Ambivalence of Boredom

The parallel between boredom and phantasy can be unfolded further by considering A's notion of work, in which he might allude to Montaigne: "Idleness, we are accustomed to say, is the root of all evil. To prevent this evil, work is recommended" (EO1 289). This leads to the ambivalence of boredom in a strict sense.

Author A is not against the opposition of idleness and work, even more so, he himself holds on to it, but from a different perspective. For him, no evil results from idleness, simply because idleness is defined as the response to the negative, repulsive force of boredom. Taking the principle of boredom for granted, idleness is the other, positive form of the repulsive and deterring. Work can be defined as the opposite of idleness. To do so, the opposition does not consist in different forms of activity as it is commonly understood but in the relation to the negative force of boredom. Only if boredom shows itself as idleness, and if work is not defined as boring, the preceding quote is right to claim that work is the opposite of idleness. On the contrary one could also claim that being idle is an activity, in fact the only one of relevance: the work which is demanded by the relation of boredom to itself.

Boredom is the daemonic pantheism. It becomes evil itself if one continues in it as such; as soon as it is annulled, however, it is the true pantheism. But it is annulled only by amusing oneself – ergo, one ought to amuse oneself (EO1 290).

It is important to notice that the daemonic describes a certain relation of boredom. If no activity or work is invested, the relation remains daemonic; if daemonic pantheism gets “annulled,” it becomes true boredom. In any case it is the relation of boredom that gets modified in its expression – not the principle of boredom itself. How can this be brought together? Daemonic pantheism is just one way in which boredom can relate (correspond) to itself. Daemonic boredom is one response, i.e. expression, of the correspondence of boredom to itself: The world appears as a silent nothing. True boredom is another correspondence of boredom to itself: The world appears as a voluble entertainer. In both cases boredom is not annulled but enacted in different modes.

With the introduction of true boredom, the criterion of truth is established on esthetic grounds. The aesthete will find truth only in the category of the inter-esting. More precisely, he measures with true boredom the extent and degree of the interesting.

To sum up: Negativity is a principle of motion and not a merely logical operation of negation. If the latter was the case, the principle would negate itself. In order to define boredom, the principle of boredom has to be set in motion, as boredom lies within the movement of this principle. The repulsive and deterring consists only in a certain form of motion, which is explained by a relation of boredom to itself. It is not qua negativity automatically something deterring or repulsive or negating. On the contrary: Negativity – that is the moving-principle – consists in a silent/untrue or entertaining/true response in the correspondence of boredom to itself.

## 2. The Twofold Ambivalence of Boredom

Keeping Montaigne in mind helps to see what A did not mean with entertainment and interest: an idle phantasy left alone playing with itself. To analyze this case more closely, the ambivalence, which consists in the relation of boredom, has to be defined in a double way.<sup>6</sup>

(a) Boredom left on its own can be found in idleness in two different ways: (i) immediate genius talent and (ii) acquired immediacy (EO1 290). Both have in common that idleness is experienced in an immediate state of consciousness.

(i) The genius English is a prototype of the inborn talent. In spite of all his traveling he does not reach mediate idleness, "for admiration and indifference have become undifferentiated in the unity of boredom" (EO1 280). Here, idleness is the consequence of undifferentiation through immediacy. The undifferentiation is a symptom of his genius – from the standpoint of a reflected, mediate consciousness. (The same constellation of admiration and indifference can reappear without immediacy. Then it affects consciousness (see b) and the "nobility").

(ii) Boredom can be immediate without genius, since the immediacy can be acquired: the insectoid bustling, or the Philistine astonishment fall under this category. The immediacy of the mind is acquired or unstable, so it can swing back to a mediate state of mind. The acquired immediacy can be a result of boredom, too. The interesting is not automatically a part of the category of activity or work, only because it is experienced immediately: "To say that it is annulled by working betrays a lack of clarity, for idleness can certainly be canceled by work, since this is its opposite, but boredom cannot" (EO1 290).

Idleness and work can both be a reflex of boredom, an immediate response of the negativity of boredom. That, which looks at first glance like entertainment (or work analogously), is exposed to be a reflex of boredom. The reason of this ambivalence is rooted in immediacy, because the experiencing person lacks some degree of consciousness to define the difference or even sense it.

The example of the English is in so far the opposite of Don Juan as both are born talents, but for Don Juan the immediate appears in a fully sensuous form: music. Don Juan is immediate sensuousness – defined from the point of view of Christian consciousness. The immediacy is continued in the figure of the English, however here the sensuous-erotic character is reduced to a minimum. The English represents pure sensuous emptiness, that is the pure

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<sup>6</sup> Neither Liva nor Rocca mention a twofold ambivalence (Liva, 2013: 143 – 155; Rocca, 2017: 151 – 167). As a consequence, Liva's esthete has to negate the sensuousness: "His reaction is to try to leave the meaningless external world alone and entertain himself with what he can control: his own internal world" (Liva, 2013:154). In my view, the esthete is characterized as undergoing the dichotomy of internal vs. external. It is part of the reason why his assessment of sensuousness is unfinished, which Liva also contests later on, when she brings together EO and CA via the Greeks and the notion of continuity. This allows her to show in a very instructing way that A's uncertainty is the source and antidote of boredom. Here the additional distinction of a twofold ambivalence would support her argument how and why the esthete oscillates completely and "constantly between intense passion and emotional emptiness and stillness" (Liva, 2013:153 – 154)

form of immediate sensuousness. In a nutshell: The English is the attempt to reduce immediate sensuousness to the process of negation executed by Christian consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

(b) On the other side, the ambivalence of boredom can be defined as mediate – as is the case with the "superior" and the "chosen ones" (EO1 289). In this case boredom effectuates the relation of consciousness to itself. Idleness can be stopped with work. But even by doing so, boredom is not stopped, because it is grounded in consciousness.

Those who bore themselves are the chosen ones, the nobility. How remarkable it is that those who do not bore themselves generally bore others; those, however, who bore themselves entertain others (EO1 288).

Author A appreciates the boredom of those, who bore themselves. Not only because they entertain in the same time the others, but because of their state of consciousness, which is not immediate (may it be acquired or genius immediacy) (EO1 288-289).<sup>8</sup>

Montaigne's prohibition of phantasy has to be located inside this framework, too, because it does not affect an immediate state, but a mediate consciousness. In the essay entitled "Of Vain Subtleties" Montaigne depicts the mediate self-relation as an in-betweenness of immediate stupidity and hyper-reflective wisdom. When applying Montaigne's concept to A's prototypes, the immediate genius needs to be completed with a hyper-reflective state of mind, which boredom cannot effectuate as it coincides with this state. In other words: The self-relation, which can be effectuated by boredom, has to contain both extremes (stupidity and hyper-reflectivity) as its liminal unreachable borders. Up to a certain degree, the hyper-reflective state can be ascribed to the "nobility," because boredom appears to them most concisely: either they die of boredom (that is: passively remaining in daemonic boredom) or they shoot themselves out of curiosity (namely: they actively affirm it. The activity consists in the work of turning daemonic pantheism into true boredom as the most interesting) (EO1 289).

Here we can find the hyper-reflective state of consciousness, which kills man by increasing the interesting, respectively the repulsive, to an inhuman intensity. A's immediacy and hyper-reflectivity are, like Montaigne's stupidity and wisdom, limits of the self-relation. This sarcastic exaggeration clarifies that the second ambivalence of boredom has to be sought within consciousness: an immediate/unreflective consciousness vs. a mediated/reflective consciousness. Only in the ambivalence of consciousness boredom is rendered a full esthetic phenomenon. Its definition has to be related to the perspective of the self-relation: the degree

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<sup>7</sup> Due to reasons of space, I cannot unfold this argumentation here. But it is important to notice that the last consequence of this reduction would be that thinking, by reason of its negativity, is always to some degree sensuous-musical.

<sup>8</sup> Rocca 2017: 152. On the one hand Rocca acknowledges that the daemonic comes into being only and at first with boredom. Like in Kant, Kierkegaard's "negative Erhabenheit" is one side of the self and cannot be located in nature (Rocca, 2017: 159). However, for Rocca there is just one way of enjoying idleness: in immediacy (151, 161). He does not mention a reflective and mediated mind, where boredom appears as true boredom, which is opposed to daemonic boredom ("daemonic pantheism"). The aesthete does not proclaim a retreat into immediacy but aims at intensifying reality through mediate reflection.

of the negativity of boredom corresponds to the degree of the reflectivity of the self-relation. This is the common ground of the interesting and the deterring.

### 3. How Does the Relation of the Self Relate to Boredom?

To sum up the previous sections one can say that the model of boredom as a motor of discovery has been expanded by another parameter: the relation of the self. Only when this relation is mediate and reflective, one can really discover the inter-esting (or the repulsive-daemonic). Thus, esthetic truth depends highly on the relation of the self. But how is this relation defined?

Once again it is helpful to first consult Montaigne: For him, one can measure boredom with the self-relation, since it is mainly a relation of different forces. The rupture of phantasy overpowers the forces of the self whereby the "in-betweenness" disappears:

and for that reason it is, that I have undertaken to say only what I can say, and have accommodated my subject to my strength. Should I take one to be my guide, per adventure I should not be able to keep pace with him; and in the freedom of my liberty might deliver judgments, which upon better thoughts, and according to reason, would be illegitimate and punishable.<sup>9</sup>

The right to accommodate the subject (i.e. its form) to the strength of the "I" and the right for entertainment share the same ground of legitimacy: both reassure that the in-betweenness, the "I," does not get lost in the phantasy of the facts. The forces of the self are not endless and need to be respected. In order to secure the field of in-betweenness from the overpowering forces of reality, the "I" is already always bending "reality." Without bending "reality" there would be no reality and fictionality at all.

When one judges one's intentions by the capacities of the "I," one does not take the risk to be confronted by thinking left alone on its own. When the capacities are exhausted, the field of in-betweenness vanishes and the "I" finds itself left alone with pure reason reasoning against itself.

This is why Montaigne and author A suggest that their words should be used carefully: Montaigne's preface opens the doors to a realm where there is "no reason thou shouldst employ thy leisure about so frivolous and vain a subject."<sup>10</sup> The author A faces the problem of writing the unwritable: "for my wisdom is not zum Gebrauch für Jedermann [for use by every man], and it is always most prudent to be silent about rules of prudence" (EO1 288).

The "beautiful stirring enthusiasm" (EO1 288) of both is a meandering trained in respecting the capacities of the self-relation and is not a work of mere boredom or phantasy.

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<sup>9</sup> Montaigne, 2009: 94 – 95

<sup>10</sup> Montaigne, 2009: 35

The "classical" correspondence between form and content is thereby situated in the thematization of the self-relation in the form of a poetology.<sup>11</sup>

‘Rotation of Crops’ is centered around this core, which aims at describing a balance of forces that represents consciousness. Similar to Montaigne, the measure of social prudence is formed upon the balance of forces. The author A claims that these forces are remembering and forgetting (although forgetting is just a way of remembering). They indicate the level of boredom, since they undermine and esthetically intensify daily life. What the "extensive method" can reach only insufficiently by permanently changing the field of activity, is outweighed by the independence reached in preparing a field in the "intensive method". Whereas the extensive method depends on external factors, the intensive method concentrates on the powers of the self which can at any time enrich a situation poetically. Not the addition of diverse extensive factors (books, cigarettes, music), but the continuing restriction of them underlines the fact, that the autonomy of this method is based on the self and its powers to remember. In order to protect the mnemotechnic from involuntary recollection, social prudence commends all present experience to be of a quality that is easy to handle for memory. Yet even if it advises to avoid strong experiences, it does not urge to avoid sensuousness itself, since memory heavily relies on perception and vice versa. To define consciousness it needs only a field of memory that is based on an ongoing process of perception and memory. It is therefore heavily formed by the "external" world, or rather, the external world is a constituting part of consciousness, so that the dichotomy of internal vs. external is rendered obsolete. This field of perception-memory provides the measurement at the core of social prudence.

No part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he cannot forget it any moment he wants to; on the other hand, every single part of life ought to have so much meaning for a person that he can remember it at any moment (EO1 293).

At the core of the esthete is a rigid calculus banning – not sense-impressions in general, but – extreme situations. This protects the poeticizing power of memory so that the esthete can build up a comfortable situation/self from his perception and memory.

One talks around it and thereby deprives it of its sharpness and by no means wishes to forget it – but forgets it in order to recollect it (EO1 294).

By using memory intentionally, consciousness finds the "Archimedean point with which one lifts the whole world" (EO1 295). "Everything will surely come again but in a different way" (EO1 296) is the mantra of the esthetic mnemotechnic. Consciousness depends on the right to bend a circle into an ellipse, to combine difference with repetition – otherwise it would lose its humane in-betweenness; its inter-est.

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<sup>11</sup> Some components for a poetology of in-betweenness could be: irony (see Feger, 2002: 364 – 394), the use of "pseudo"-noms, Schlegel's concept of the novel as a collection of different genres (Hüsch, 2014: 208 – 234); the genres itself: aphorism, essay, "auto"-biography, letter, diary, dialog; narratological technics using a focalization between internal and external, autodiegetic and unreliable narration, metalepsis and many more.

In a last step, the importance of restriction will be emphasized even more by bringing up the mood. Mood is of importance because it hinders the forces of memory and perception.

To have them under control in the sense that one can produce them at will is an impossibility, but prudence teaches us to utilize the moment (EO1 298).

It is all about predicting the dynamics of a situation evolving within moods. Those are not in the hands of the self and its strategies of poetization.

The prediction of moods demands a way of observation that gives up hope. Hope, itself a strategy of poeticizing, gets in the way of analyzing the situation. In giving up hope, one is free to see the casual and arbitrary character of life. Building upon arbitrariness the self has found the standpoint from which it "lets its reality run aground on this" (EO1 299). The restriction of the self thereby culminates in covering even the intentional use of memory itself. It is not anymore about changing reality via the poetic force of memory, but about giving up intention itself and directing the self to the arbitrariness of the situation "in such a way that the person does not himself run wild in it but himself has pleasure from it. One does not enjoy the immediate object but something else that one arbitrarily introduces" (EO1 299).<sup>12</sup>

The interesting for the esthete is the arbitrary, because he finds in its indifference a tool to overcome reality through reality. The arbitrariness protects the mnemonic forces of themselves and makes them aware of the present situation. It is a counterweight to the intentional use of memory which can overrule perception; or more precisely, arbitrariness is the fact that memory and perception are irreversibly intertwined. Only here the inner and the outer do touch, where the "accidental outside a person corresponds to the arbitrariness within him" (EO1 300). True boredom is found in one's restriction by focusing on the vicinity of memory and perception. The measure is the field of in-betweenness in which the forces of the self are not overpowered, neither by their own tendencies nor by extreme experiences. Only a twofold ambivalence can account for this; one is the ambivalence work vs. idleness rooting in the relation of boredom. This leads to the other ambivalence understood as a response of the correspondence of boredom. For the immediate consciousness work and idleness remain ambivalent. The response of boredom (be it daemonic pantheism or true boredom) is only fully present to a mediate self – defined as a field of forces of memory-perception.

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<sup>12</sup> "To yield someone" is related to this claim in many ways, but I cannot extend it here any further.

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# The Invalidation of the Female Ironist in Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary*

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will present a critical reading of the irony present in Søren Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary* through the lens of gender norms. Following the Socratic exploration of Kierkegaard's irony, I will first argue that irony is a liberating force, and crucial for the transformation of the immediate aesthete into an autonomous reflective aesthete. I then argue that Kierkegaard's model of the female ironist is unsustainable, due to the insurmountable gender conventions and financial dependency characteristic of women during the Danish Golden Age. I argue that although the Socratic education of irony liberates the inner self, there are severe social and psychological consequences for transgressing ethical constructs, especially for women. I also argue how Kierkegaard is skeptical of women's Socratic education in irony within *The Seducer's Diary*, and examine Kierkegaard's contemporaries' positions on women's education. I discuss the invalidation of the concept of the female ironist in *Either/Or's* autobiographical context, and analyze how Kierkegaard indirectly communicates his aim to reaffirm his and his former fiancée Regine Olsen's love through religious faith.

## Keywords

Irony; female ironist; gender; self; faith.

In his pseudonymous works, Søren Kierkegaard emboldens readers to perceive different modes of existential thought by thrusting them into a state of mental gymnastics; in the case of *The Seducer's Diary*, he draws particular attention to the reflective aesthete. This essay aims to examine the dynamic between irony and Johannes the Seducer's relationship with Cordelia Wahl, in the context of Kierkegaard's stages of existence — namely, the aesthetic and ethical. Simultaneously, this essay will also deconstruct Kierkegaard's stance on gender within the literary layers of *The Seducer's Diary's* original text, *Either/Or*. The invalidation of the female ironist will subsequently be interpreted in a biographical context, pertaining to Kierkegaard's broken engagement with his fiancée Regine Olsen. In testing the possibility of becoming an ironist for females in Cordelia's social position, Kierkegaard responds to historical conditions of Golden Age women in his contemporary Copenhagen. Kierkegaard integrates indirect communication in Johannes's intellectual seduction of Cordelia to ultimately prove that irony is a liberating force. However, the precariousness of Cordelia's psychological and social position post-seduction questions the validity of such a conclusion, revealing how wealth and gender disparities create brutally real barriers to successfully becoming an ironist.

The examination of irony in *The Seducer's Diary* draws from Kierkegaard's existentialist discussion of isolation in his work *On the Concept of Irony*. In the work *The Isolated Self: Irony as Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony*, K. Brian Soderquist engages with Kierkegaard's dissertation, adopting a critical perspective on the opening and closure of the self through irony. Of most significance is the definition of Kierkegaard's irony as the movement from immediacy and an inward turn toward self-consciousness. As Socratic philosophy strongly influenced Kierkegaard's philosophy, there exists unquestionable parallels between Socratic irony and Kierkegaardian irony, of which Kierkegaard appends the concept of faith:

For Socrates "infinite absolute negativity" would express the belief that the individual's response to infinite and indeterminate flux is to create personal values in face of life's instability. Socrates' belief (Socratic ignorance) is at the same time an acceptance of man's finitude and of universal pluralism, and an ardent call to ethical lucidity and inquiry. Irony is the verbal dialogical consequence of the attempt to merge the finite and the infinite into acceptable metaphors of action.<sup>1</sup>

This infinite negativity isolates the individual from external influence, forcing them to self-reflect. Self-reflection consolidates Kierkegaard's use of "indirect communication," through which he encourages the reader to manifest their own opinion, as opposed to the author claiming a certain perspective as absolute. In *The Seducer's Diary*, Johannes's art is "to use amphibolies so that the listeners understand one thing from what is said and then suddenly perceive that the words can be interpreted another way" (EO1 370). Johannes's skill further strengthens Kierkegaard's value of autonomy and individuality, in that readers are intended

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill, 1979: 224

to derive their own meaning from his language, isolating themselves from immediacy. For instance, “A,” the pseudonymous transcriber of *The Seducer’s Diary*, states that Johannes “has so developed her esthetically that she no longer listens to one voice but is able to hear the many voices at the same time” (EO1 309). Additionally, there are two forms of ethics: the received bourgeois conventions, and the higher metaphysical form of ethics. In the case of *The Seducer’s Diary*, Johannes teaches Cordelia to reject received ethical conventions through irony and reflection. Although numerous forms of literary irony exist, the internal separation from conventional thought or the societal code of ethics will serve as the basis of this essay’s characterization of Kierkegaard’s irony.

In *The Seducer’s Diary*, Johannes eagerly seeks out Edward, the epitome of social triviality, to awaken Cordelia’s subconscious perception of irony. Johannes manipulatively pairs Edward with Cordelia, so that she may see that Edward is “inadequate for her passion. She looks down on such a person [...] she becomes almost diffident about her own reality when she senses her destiny and sees what actuality offers [...] Then becomes proud in her love” (EO1 62). By exposing Cordelia to the ethical convention of engaging mundane small talk, Johannes teaches Cordelia an aristocratic sense of superiority. Cordelia gradually picks up on irony by eavesdropping on Johannes’s calculated conversations with her aunt, and her distaste towards Edward grows as she becomes restlessly self-aware of her internal unfulfillment. This awareness of irony elevates her psychological being, gradually metamorphosing her aesthetic immediacy, the fundamental stage of the individual, to aesthetic reflection. The reflective aesthete, which Johannes personifies, transcends the immediacy of sensual pleasure, and seeks intellectual pleasure. Through Edward’s superficial courtship of Cordelia, Johannes wants Cordelia to feel that her “womanliness is neutralized by prosaic common sense and ridicule [...] by the absolutely neutral, namely, intellect” (EO1 346). Johannes’s aesthetic point of view describes womanliness as true, authentic beauty. Throughout the text, Johannes repeatedly refers to the neutralization of woman, suggesting that ethical thought — in particular, societal norms — interfere with the aesthetic transformation of woman. In upholding an air of reflective superiority, Cordelia is unsettled by the ethical proposition of a dull future with Edward, subconsciously recognizing Johannes as the pure aesthete. In doing so, her “womanliness,” which equates to her essence, reawakens, free from the threat of society extinguishing her authenticity and restricting her psychological exploration.

Johannes’s principle regarding love and true beauty corresponds with that of the German Romantics and Idealists, in that romantic love is not reconcilable with ethical markers — in particular, institutional marriage. Prominent during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, German Romanticism and Idealism movements sparked dialogue regarding the theological rationalization of marriage. Described as an “uncivil” union, marriage was uncivil “in that the unification effected in it drew only on itself, structure itself only in reference to itself, and required, for its legitimacy, its essence, and its purpose, no reference to a civil society outside.”<sup>2</sup> According to the Romantic thinkers’ philosophy, marital relations should not

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<sup>2</sup> Daub, 2012: 8

be governed by civil codes — in other words, the ethical. The Romantics and Idealists reasoned that relationships should be private, preserving the autonomy of marriage by “unmooring it from state or ecclesiastical structures.”<sup>3</sup> Young Romantics and Idealists criticized the contractual nature of the traditional marriage union, believing that the union’s strength steadfastly exists regardless of bourgeois reinforcement. The Romantic theories regarding the metaphysics of marriage were anarchic, struggling to reconcile with the human rationalization of marriage; romantic love, when externalized from a contemporary context, removes societal constraints that are irrelevant or invalid to the relationship. Through irony, Cordelia comes to this realization of the ethical as it pertains to marriage.

Following the awareness of irony, Johannes ultimately plans for Cordelia to break her and Johannes’s engagement herself — a critical point to becoming an ironist, in which she attempts to secure her autonomy. Johannes believes that “the banefulness of an engagement is always the ethical in it. The ethical is just as boring in scholarship as in life [...] engagement does not have ethical reality such as marriage has” (EO1 367). In Johannes’s perspective, the concept of engagement is unsubstantial, a ridiculously abstract event before marriage ungrounded by actuality. A broken engagement provides the prime opportunity for Johannes to secure a more “beautiful and significant relationship” with Cordelia; through the isolation from ethical ideals, such as the notion that marriage is life’s objective, Cordelia preserves her pure, youthful love for Johannes. After close observation of Johannes’s irony “over the foolishness” and “cowardliness” of people, Cordelia eventually sends a letter to Johannes in which she makes fun of engagements, revealing her growing consciousness of irony (EO1 360, 392). The experience and revelation of authentic, erotic love causes Cordelia to realize that love does not, and should not, be constrained to marital duty and social obligations. By breaking the engagement herself, Cordelia thus liberates herself from the received conventions of the ethical. Johannes’s relationship with Cordelia mirrors that of Socrates and his pupils — “he is not involved with any relationship with them but [...] he continually hovers freely above them, enigmatically attracting and repelling” (CI 146). In Johannes’s philosophizing of his seduction, Johannes believes himself an occasion like Socrates, rather than a teacher, of reflective irony. Although Johannes’s seduction of Cordelia is perceived as controlling rather than liberating through the lens of modern gender politics, a Socratic understanding of the seduction reveals how it serves more so as a catalyst that ultimately aids Cordelia in selfhood and autonomy.

In reality, however, the traumatic effect Johannes’s departure has on Cordelia calls into question this optimistic emancipation from ethical constraints, and the price of becoming an ironist. Egotistically, Johannes believes he successfully poetizes himself out of Cordelia’s life, having “neither eyes nor ears for her,” and takes pleasure in having her “discover this change in her solitude” (EO1 421). Even A sympathizes with Cordelia, having received her distraught letters to Johannes, which suggests the interpretation of Johannes as a cruel and despicable character. When distinguishing between Johannes’s perception of the seduction and

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<sup>3</sup> Daub, 2012: 6

the reality of the situation, the reader questions whether he is deliberately cruel, or deluded. As Leo Stan and Céline Léon discuss in *Fertile Contradictions: A Reconsideration of 'The Seducer's Diary'* and *The Neither/Nor of the Second Sex*, respectively, Cordelia would see few possibilities for her future. Johannes's seduction leaves a permanent social and psychological mark on her — she can either commit societal suicide, or she can become a seducer herself.<sup>4</sup> As a woman, Cordelia is “fallen” and “tainted” due to her loss of innocence, which create barriers to societal re-assimilation and future marriage, if she even chooses so. This option would seem unlikely, considering how Cordelia has forsaken the ethical. It is inconclusive whether her newfound isolated self is compatible with society or not. Johannes speculates that “she will want to take [him] captive with the same means [he has] employed against her — with the erotic” (EO1 421). In this sense, there is a possibility that she can become a seducer herself; but full recovery from her existential angst and despair over the disappearance of Johannes is unlikely. Johannes believes that if he “were a god, [he] would do for her what Neptune did for a nymph: transform her into a man,” which calls into question the compatibility of irony and convention applied to the female gender (EO1 446).

Although irony frees any individual through isolation and self-reflection, it fails to fully liberate women in the long term, due to the social duty and dependency pertaining to their gender. Through an intervention of modern gender politics, the reader observes how gender plays a prominent role in *The Seducer's Diary*, depicted by the stereotyped male fantasy seen through Johannes's eyes: “the cheerful smile, the roguish glance, the yearning eye [...] the slender figure, the soft curves, the opulent bosom, the curving hips” (EO1 428). The diary structure of the text allows the reader to see into an overexaggerated point of view, which appears sexist when interpreted in modern gender politics. In his discussion of the biblical origins of Adam and Eve, Johannes remarks in accordance with Eve:

She became flesh and blood, but precisely thereby she falls within the category of nature, which essentially is being-for-other. Not until she is touched by erotic love does she awaken; before that time she is a dream. But in this dream existence two stages can be distinguished: in the first, love dreams about her; in the second, she dreams about love. As being-for-other, woman is characterized by pure virginity. That is, virginity is a being that, insofar as it is being-for-itself, is actually an abstraction and manifests itself only for-other. Feminine innocence has the same characteristic. Therefore, it can be said that woman in this state is invisible (EO1 430).

Johannes's language suggests that woman cannot be brought into actuality without man, inherently creating an asymmetric sexual dynamic in which woman is foremost for-other. The seducer's sexual fantasy calls into discussion the dominance of man in a firmly patriarchal society. In *Woman-Bashing in Kierkegaard's 'In Vino Veritas,'* Robert L. Perkins applies this language to the sexism of Western society, especially the image of woman through entertainment.<sup>5</sup> Through *The Seducer's Diary*, Kierkegaard examines the role of women in society, by amplifying Johannes's stereotypical male narrative in order to criticize ethical

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<sup>4</sup> Stan, 2016: 92-95; Léon, 2008: 71

<sup>5</sup> Perkins, 1997: 97

standards revolving around the significance of woman. Consequently, irony turns the reader inward to the self, overlooking stereotypes and immediate beliefs. In Cordelia's case, Kierkegaard acknowledges the social disparity between male and female sexes, suggesting that being a male would allow her to become an uninhibited ironist, due to her obligations as a woman. Therefore, the reader questions the possibility of the female ironist, given the restriction on social freedom and privilege of upper-class females, in contrast to those of upper-class males.

Aside from the deeply ingrained stereotypes in society obstructing the path to becoming a true ironist, the financial dependency of women creates another social barrier. Johannes's wealth and reputation among his peers is a key factor in acquiring the freedom necessary to reject society — this freedom becomes increasingly apparent when compared to Cordelia's familial situation. Through the awareness of irony, Johannes's objective is to free Cordelia from the obligation to blindly follow conventional norms. However, as both of her parents are deceased, Cordelia is dependent on her aunt (EO1 340). Not only is she obligated to follow ethical routines to become a socially respectable woman, such as her course at the royal kitchen, but she also does not have the financial independence nor the societal freedom as an unmarried woman to become an ironist. Her fallen status post-seduction makes it increasingly difficult to recover her social position, for which marriage is necessary to cover her basic needs. In Johannes's case, he “always [had] money at hand in order to be able to set out upon a journey” (EO1 328). In contrast, the woman at the beginning of the novel nervously walks “alone” at night, but has a “servant in tow” (EO1 317). Literally speaking, Johannes has greater freedom of movement in a way that other women in the narrative do not. In the context of *The Seducer's Diary*, social mobility and exploration are much easier for men, whereas the ethical duty to marry anchors women, a cultural concept that persists in modern society. As a woman, Cordelia cannot become a self-sufficient ironist or distance herself from ethical constructs, due to an inflexible societal structure restricting her financial and social freedom.

A juxtaposition of Kierkegaard's *Early Polemical Writings* and Johan Ludvig Heiberg's *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age: An Invitation to a Series of Lectures on Philosophy* reveals Kierkegaard's stance on female privilege — in particular, those regarding education. Heiberg was Kierkegaard's contemporary during his time, contributing toward the discussion of Hegelian philosophy. In the invitation to his philosophy lectures, Heiberg “dares to believe that cultured *ladies* will also be able to participate in the lecture's serious investigations, in that they make the group more beautiful by their presence.”<sup>6</sup> Noting how women have “a sharper and more consistent understanding, a greater dialectical proclivity” — the certain intuition that men lack — Heiberg presents the idea of women attending lectures, despite the fact that they are not permitted to attend the university.<sup>7</sup> Heiberg's perspective grounds the importance of women's education in a broader historical context. However, Kierkegaard was critical of educating women during the Danish Golden Age, questioning the

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<sup>6</sup> Heiberg, 1883: 118

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

motives for inviting women to lectures. In his article *Another Defense of Woman's Great Abilities*, Kierkegaard wittily states,

from Eve's hand we shall receive the apple of knowledge [...] So fly, then, from this ungrateful earth, raise yourselves on the wings of philosophy and look down with contempt on those [...] [who] prefer to remain behind by the fleshpots (EPW 5).

Kierkegaard appreciates women's artistic abilities — he highly praised Thomasine Gyllemboug's *An Everyday Story*, which was published anonymously, but the identity of the female author remained an open secret. However, he is skeptical of women's academic potential in “dissertations, plays, [and] philosophical works” (EPW 5). *The Seducer's Diary* echoes this sentiment from the beginning of Kierkegaard's authorship. Kierkegaard has reservations regarding the indirect, Socratic education of women, as well as a direct education. Through Cordelia's first-hand experience with irony in *The Seducer's Diary*, Kierkegaard questions the validity of women's existential education.

To further understand the unsustainability of the female ironist, it is crucial to examine *The Seducer's Diary* in its autobiographical context. Through indirect communication, Kierkegaard intends to repulse his beloved fiancée Regine Olsen into acceptance of their broken engagement; however, he also wishes to win her back by “virtue of the absurd,” a concept central to his work *Fear and Trembling*. Here, Kierkegaard examines the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, in which Abraham, despite his tumultuous, internal angst, places complete faith in God that Isaac will live. This “leap of faith” intertwines itself with the religious stage of life, one of the three spheres — the aesthetic, ethical, and religious — Kierkegaard provides Olsen following their broken engagement.<sup>8</sup>

Through A and B's perspectives in their respective volumes of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard invalidates both the aesthetic and ethical stages of life. In his “editor's” note, A believes that by leading others astray, in this instance Cordelia, Johannes goes astray himself — “pursued by despair, he is continually seeking an exit and continually finding an entrance through which he goes back into himself” (EO1 308). Johannes pursues the aesthetic too fervently, restlessly navigating a psychological maze and constantly seeking reflective pleasure. Judge William, Kierkegaard's pseudonym in the second volume of *Either/Or*, also criticizes the aesthetic for cowardliness, in that the aesthete never makes decisions and miserably hovers above actuality. Cordelia writes in a letter to A, describing Johannes: “I threw my arms around him, everything changed and I embraced a cloud” (EO1 309). Johannes manifests the same traits mentioned in A's and Judge William's critique of the aesthete, in that he hovers above actuality, constantly in reflection. The aesthetic stage of life risks abstraction, and is thus invalidated as it causes the untethered confusion of self. On the other hand, Kierkegaard also invalidates the ethical stage of life. In the ethical defense of marriage, the Judge claims that the aesthetic can flourish

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the ironic and the humorous are the *confinia* between these stages of life; Kierkegaard maps the three stages and their *confinia* in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. While Kierkegaard does not elaborate on humor — the border between the ethical and the religious — in *Either/Or*, it is assumed that one should not adopt it for the long term.

within the repetitive structure of ethical marriage. Appealing to the aesthete, the Judge defends the aesthetic validity of marriage, in which the quality of the aesthetic is annulled and preserved in marital love. According to the Judge, the ethical dethrones the aesthetic, because the aesthetic should not dictate a relationship. However, while the Judge derives pleasure from the marriage arrangement, the patriarchal system limits the autonomy and voice of the wife. As Cordelia realized in her critique of the ethical, her pure love with Johannes does not require a social label or a sense of duty.

As stated in Kierkegaard's work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "irony is the *confinium* between the aesthetic and the ethical." Irony exists between both stages of life, and its invalidation as a possibility for the heartbroken Olsen has been previously established. Stereotypical gender obstacles and financial dependency in a patriarchal society obstruct the freedom of the female ironist. The remaining option for Olsen is the religious, which Kierkegaard does not invalidate, in accordance with the pseudonymous sermon at the end of *Either/Or*. In the last chapter, Judge William sends A a sermon by his friend, the Jutland pastor, in a letter:

How might a man be able to depict his relationship to God by a more or a less, or by an approximate definition? He then convinced himself that this wisdom was a treacherous friend, who, under the pretext of helping him, involved him in doubt, drew him alarmingly into a perpetual circle of confusion. What before had been obscure to him, but had not troubled him, became now, not any clearer, but alarming to his mind and troubling. Only by an infinite relationship to God could the doubt be calmed, only by an infinitely free relationship to God could his anxiety be transformed into joy (EO2 354).

In the pastor's *Ultimatum, The Edification Implied in the Thought That as Against God We Are Always in the Wrong*, the pastor claims that regardless of whether a human lives aesthetically or ethically, they are always in the wrong, and God is just. To achieve an infinite relationship with God, a believer must come to this realization, and only then can they attain true joy. Through this jubilation, they transcend the inevitable despair of the aesthetic and ethical. Passionate faith would thus strengthen and protect the love between Kierkegaard and Olsen, without the contractual duties of marriage. By invalidating other stages of life with the exception of the religious, Kierkegaard indirectly communicates to Olsen that a spiritual, platonic marriage will preserve their love.

Although Kierkegaard proves that irony leads to a reflective aesthetic freedom, the irreconciliation of Cordelia's psychological and social position suggests the impossibility in the execution of such a philosophy, due to hegemonic class and gender barriers in Golden Age society. Through a Socratic manner of teaching, Johannes manipulates Cordelia into the self-awareness of irony, the separation from immediacy and the turn towards self-reflection. By becoming overly proud towards Edward and ending the engagement with Johannes, Cordelia becomes an ironist when she acquires a distaste for the ethical. However, after Johannes abandons her, Cordelia's future as an isolated ironist is uncertain and bleak. The inherent barriers in society prevent her from sustainably transcending ethical norms and becoming an

ironist or seducer to Johannes's degree. While these insurmountable social constructs do not prevent Cordelia from transgressing against the ethical, they also do not safeguard her from the fallout of violating ethical norms. The female ironist must face this precarious social position, in that she cannot violate the ethical without severe consequences, which are less in force for male ironists. Kierkegaard questions the traditional education of women at the start of his literary career with his *Another Defense of Woman's Great Abilities* essay, a theme that persists in *The Seducer's Diary*, through his skepticism of women's Socratic education in irony. In the larger context, Kierkegaard invalidates the aesthetic, ethical, and ironic as possible avenues for Regine Olsen after he breaks their engagement. While Kierkegaard does not delve into the religious sphere of life in detail in *Either/Or*, the *Ultimatum* at the end of the second volume suggests that a passionate, religious faith preserves platonic love. Through indirect communication, Kierkegaard draws readers' attention toward issues of gender in contemporary society, proving how irony is delimited by gender differences. As hinted by the optimistic conclusion of *Either/Or*, however, the invalidation of the female ironist opens to further discussion of the intimate connection between faith and love.

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## *Ironia Ironiarum: Meta-Irony in the Fiction of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace*

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### Abstract

Irony as Søren Kierkegaard conceived of and criticized within the nineteenth century shares remarkable similarities with that irony which preoccupied David Foster Wallace's work. This similitude is especially clear in the comparison of *The Concept of Irony* and "E Unibus Pluram." Parallels however extend beyond these writers' most direct and academic explications of irony. Irony casts a shadow over both their oeuvres, readily present in (and, in at least Wallace's case, absolutely permeates) their fictional works, where, for both, irony is intimately related to self-reflection and isolation. This paper traces out these connections between selected pieces of Kierkegaard's and Wallace's fiction, focusing especially on their treatment of the recursive case, the ironizing of irony. This, then, is an earnest attempt to draw out from the work of these two writers that shared concept which for the sake of its own self-preservation most steadfastly and desperately defies earnestness.

### Keywords

Irony; David Foster Wallace; fiction; self-reflection; isolation; earnestness.

*The Concept of Irony* (hereafter: CI), Kierkegaard's doctoral dissertation and most forthright, non-pseudonymous treatment of irony serves as a suitable point of departure. (Kierkegaard notes that with beginnings, as with irony, the "subject is still free" (CI 253), has not yet been shackled by responsibility nor commitment. I, then, am here free to provide only the barest adumbration necessary of Kierkegaard's multifaceted irony). Note firstly that the irony Kierkegaard discusses is irony *sensu eminentiori* (CI 254), or what Cross terms "existential irony"<sup>1</sup> – that is, not merely a figure of speech, but rather a lifestyle, *modus operandi*, and worldview. (Thus, Socrates' position as the central figure in CI is warranted not just by his manner of argumentation but by his life and thought, both ironic in their entirety (CI 45)). An ironic manner of speaking is only an outward symptom of something which constitutes much more centrally the ironist's being: a fundamental rift between phenomenon and essence (CI 247). One dryly states, for instance, that circumstances are "swell," when in reality they are anything but. The phenomenon here, the sarcastic utterance, is in diametric opposition to the essence: one's actual thoughts on the matter. This most basic form of verbal irony, however, Kierkegaard notes to be self-cancelling (CI 248), as one reasonably expects the listener to easily understand one's true meaning. (Cross judges this to be a "deficient mode" of irony, comparable to the metaphor which through overuse has become hackneyed cliché.<sup>2</sup> The ironic is diluted into nothing more than an alternative but benign manner of expression; "swell," in the appropriate tone of voice, is simply synonymous with "rather not swell"). In contrast, irony *sensu eminentiori* does not self-annihilate, at least not immediately. The existential form of irony instead fully separates essence from phenomenon, cleaving the individual from his surroundings, providing him with freedom from this immediacy (recall the aforementioned comparison to beginning). The crux: total irony brings total negative (unfettered but without positive capacity) freedom from actuality, isolating the subject from immediacy. It moreover must inevitably consider itself, realize that its own essence must be severed from phenomenon (the ironic actions which the ironist observes himself to partake in), and "eat up itself" (CI 56), convince itself of its unreality, leaving the ironist empty-handed. This instability Cross considers to be an oversight in Kierkegaard's early understanding of irony;<sup>3</sup> I will argue, however, that in his pseudonymous fiction Kierkegaard makes clear that this characterization is instead intentional and appropriate.

Turning to *The Seducer's Diary*, a fragment ensconced comfortably within Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, we through the epistolary form observe lucidly the inner thoughts of Johannes the Seducer, one who is not only an embodiment of the aesthetic sphere but also an incorrigible existential ironist. This is evinced before the diary is even allowed to begin: the pseudonymous "A" describes Johannes' aesthetic enjoyments as predominantly self-reflective, in which "actuality [is] drowned in the poetic" (EO1 305). That is, the aesthetic situations the Seducer manufactures for himself are not of his primary interest; they are instead only a springboard with which he launches himself bodily into an inner bacchanal of reflective

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<sup>1</sup> Cross, 1998: 126

<sup>2</sup> Cross, 1998: 127

<sup>3</sup> Cross, 1998: 140

aesthetic pleasure. That Johannes lives only for this second-order poetic enjoyment is directly a result of his ironic existence. “A” postulates that Johannes is “too strong” (EO1 305) for actuality, that he has through irony successfully distanced and freed himself from immediacy. This negative freedom is evident throughout his *Diary*, in which the Seducer is entirely ironic in his interactions with those around him, especially the object/victim of his love, Cordelia. In the sum total of letters Johannes writes her not the smallest particle of sincerity can be found. This is not mere dissimulation, however: Johannes revels in the ironic disparity between Cordelia’s conception of him and the truth; he delights in both the freedom from commitment and his verbal superiority over her (another function of irony which Kierkegaard expounds upon, comparing ironic speech for the intellectual elite to the French spoken amongst the aristocracy (CI 248)). In fact, he prefers written communication precisely because of the inherent separation it offers, providing “free rein” (EO1 386) to convey mock ardor and emotional intensity, the epistler’s physical ubiquity concealed from the reader. This continuous irony, of course, isolates him from any sincere connection to the world. He seems not to have a single genuine friend, seems to misconstrue the concept of friendship entirely. Edward, who Johannes uses only as an auxiliary object in the pursuit of Cordelia, is termed a “true” friend, one with which the Seducer is on “intimate terms” (EO1 347). What prevents this relationship from approaching anything close to an actual friendship is its marked asymmetry. Edward shares with Johannes his innermost feelings and does in fact sincerely see him as a close friend (before of course his betrayal). Johannes, meanwhile, is entirely ironical in his treatment of Edward, revealing nothing to him of his true thoughts and emotions, thus freeing himself from any obligation. This same characterization applies to all Johannes’ relationships; in each one, he is only “playacting,”<sup>4</sup> alienating himself from any intimacy or earnest communication with those which he converses. One, however, would not yet describe Johannes’ irony as reaching totality, isolating as it may be: he has not yet turned his irony on itself, but rather is still capable of sincere enjoyment of his irony. His self-reflection does not regress into a void, but is still grounded by physical actuality, his immediate situation a *sine qua non* of aesthetic enjoyment. One shall see in Wallace’s work characters who are not thus limited in their irony.

In “Another Pioneer,” the speaker relates (through a fourth-hand narration which immediately evokes association with ironic detachment – note also the speaker’s verbal tics: each argot he precedes with “*comme on dit*,” disavowing himself of its sincere use) the supposed myth of a prophetic messiah figure born to a paleolithic rain-forest tribe. This child prodigy, capable of answering any question posed to it, all of a practical and immediately survival-oriented nature, quickly assumes a central oracular role within his tribe and through monthly ceremonial question-and-answer sessions effects on the hunter-gatherer society great “quantum leaps”<sup>5</sup> resulting in agriculture, an economic system, and written language. The child’s answers are all however severely mechanical, consisting of direct responses to a literal interpretation of each inquiry, until the “epitasis”<sup>6</sup> in which the child upon listening to a question secretly

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<sup>4</sup> Cross, 1998: 132

<sup>5</sup> Wallace, 2004: 124

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, 2004: 26

uttered by a cannibalistic albino shaman or beautiful young girl (the narrator provides multiple variants and sub-variants, some omitting the question entirely) gradually transforms, begins posing Socratic questions of his own, casting into doubt the tenets of the tribe's still-primitive culture and religion, inflicting upon them introspection with which their paleolithic minds are unable to cope. This leading, of course, to societal collapse, abandonment and torching of the prophetic child and now-agricultural city, and reversion to hunter-gatherer lifestyle or possible death in the conflagration which advances too quickly for them to escape. Within this myth, the child plays the role of Kierkegaardian irony. Before he is introduced, the tribe is fully dependent on its surrounding environment for survival; its existence is fully immediate, engaged solely in the interaction with nature (hunting, gathering, etc.) necessary for survival. Only once the child appears are its members able to distance themselves from their surroundings. The technological advancements made possible by the child are precisely those which separate the society from its immediacy; a functioning economy, alphabet, and so-called consultancy class all greatly reduce the tribe's dependence on its surroundings, elevating it to the level of civilization. This is analogous to the function of a limited, not-yet-total irony, without which "no genuinely human life is possible" (CI 326). Irony in this form is still dependent on the actual – the prophetic child's responses are direct functions of that which he is asked, questions concerning the tracking of dik-dik, the locations of edible roots, and so on. The answers do not cut the tribe off entirely from actuality; they in fact enhance its ability to interact with immediacy, aiding it in more efficient gathering and utilization of resources. In the same way, irony in moderation is seen by Kierkegaard to be beneficial. Controlled irony trims away the unexamined traditions and assumptions which clutter one's immediacy, provides just enough margin between actuality and contemplation, leaving room for one to develop the inwardness necessary to truly be one's own person. However, the danger of total existential irony is also manifested in Wallace's fictive myth. The pivotal scene, the posing of that pernicious question to the young prodigy, represents the exact moment when irony turns on itself. The antagonistic shaman whispers,

Is it possible that you have not realized the extent to which these primitive villagers have exaggerated your gifts, have transformed you into something you know too well you are not? Surely [...] they so revere you precisely because they themselves are too unwise to see your limitations?<sup>7</sup>

Thus, irony is made to consider itself, to doubt its own validity. And thus, irony begins to isolate totally, tearing from the tribe its societal structure, religious beliefs, cultural practices, severing the members' ties between themselves and to their environment. In the midst of this disintegration the tribe attempts in self-preservation to abandon irony entirely, but this is futile; they are engulfed in flame.

This all-consuming fire provides a vivid metaphor for the instability and end result of total irony, irony turned on itself. That is, Wallace seems to be directly demonstrating the

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace, 2004: 138

ineffectuality, moreover the danger, inherent in this “meta-ironizing,” contradicting the thesis put forth by some scholars that irony is precisely the implement with which he meant to counteract irony. Campora for instance claims that the antidote suggested by Wallace in “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace’s notorious “New Sincerity,” is not at all the strategy taken in any of his subsequent works; instead, Campora states, he “use[s] irony to overcome cynicism by exposing its limitations,”<sup>8</sup> “cynicism” here signifying those alienating effects of irony, that negativity which erodes the actuality of the ironist’s surroundings. This possibility I believe to be clearly invalidated in Wallace’s fiction, for the instant at which the prodigy and irony-personification of “Another Pioneer” is forewarned of his weakness, when he is made to point his preternatural genius towards himself, is exactly the inflection point transforming an irony which had heretofore been largely beneficial to a destructive total negativity. Campora analogizes Wallace’s supposed ironizing-of-irony to Kierkegaard’s “controlled irony,” (Campora uses the translation “mastered irony”), and asserts that, like Wallace, Kierkegaard believes the antidote to irony is another recursive level of irony, that for Kierkegaard “cynicism is simply an irony that does not go far enough.”<sup>9</sup> With this point I must once again disagree. In *The Seducer’s Diary*, Johannes, as I have argued, does not yet turn his irony on itself, but it is only because of this that he is still able to live out his aesthetic mode of existence, is able to enjoy poetically the seduction. Once he does ironize his irony, his self-reflection will be made total and self-sustaining, no longer grounded by actuality; for Johannes, nothing beyond a complete wretched isolation can be gained through meta-irony. Or consider A, who in the ‘Diapsalmata’ of *Either/Or* reveals himself to be perfectly aware of the futility of his irony, realizes that his “soul’s poisonous doubt consumes everything” (EO1 37). A is in fact the one who points out the despair lying in wait for the Seducer once his irony consumes itself, writing,

I can think of nothing more tormenting than a scheming mind that loses the thread then directs all its keenness against itself as the conscience awakens and it becomes a matter of rescuing himself from this perplexity. The many exits from his foxhole are futile; [...] pursued by despair, he is continually seeking an exit and continually finding an entrance through which he goes back into himself (EO1 308).

A, aware of the limitations of irony, arguably ironically discussing his own irony (he wryly suggests that his “doubting soul” (EO1 35) would be consoled by an essay he had written as a schoolboy, if only he had not discarded it) still despairs, likens himself to a “[chess] piece [that] cannot be moved” (EO1 22), thus is in despair exactly because he realizes these limitations. Neither Kierkegaard nor Wallace, then, see the ironizing of irony as a valid mode of escape from the ills of total irony; indeed, they both characterize it as compounding the problem. Den Dulk explains, “even if such a total negation [through irony] of existential irony would in fact be executed, the result would still be the same total negativity that one started out with, [...] for irony is incapable of producing.”<sup>10</sup> Both Wallace and Kierkegaard saw that irony does not

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<sup>8</sup> Campora, 2003: 13

<sup>9</sup> Campora, 2003: 14

<sup>10</sup> Den Dulk, 2012: 337

provide anything to replace that which it cynically distances itself from; Wallace describes irony as “singularly unuseful”<sup>11</sup> for establishing anything with which to replace the connection to actuality it erodes away. Thus, when irony swallows irony, it does not provide any alternative or route of escape. Rather, it merely creates a more complete void.

And for those who hope to elude the ineluctable draw of this void stemming from infinite ironic recurse, what solution is to be found? As we have seen, Kierkegaard does not prescribe total abstinence from irony; for him irony, as long as it is fully controlled by its host, is in fact vitally useful, irony “limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content” (CI 326). Without irony one cannot hope to achieve true personhood, cannot hope to become other than the deterministic product of physical circumstance. Without the “bath of rejuvenation” (CI 326) provided by irony, one is unable to question the presuppositions of one’s finite immediacy. Wallace, as evinced in “Another Pioneer,” shared this belief in the spiritually salubrious effects of a controlled irony; irony is of course the mechanism with which postmodern literature and art allowed the society of 1950s America to critically examine its hypocrisies, its assumed and often pernicious beliefs.<sup>12</sup> The question which remains is: what exactly is this controlled irony supposed to entail? What exactly is meant to be doing the controlling? The solution is not, as I have already argued, irony itself. Irony upon irony, greedily swallowing up the actuality of all in its path, consuming even itself, certainly does not evoke a sense of control or mastery. Instead, what is seen in the works of Kierkegaard and Wallace is a sort of absolute morality (by which I mean a spiritual resoluteness that can encompass either ethical or religious resolve, a real distinction between these two spheres being unfortunately outside the scope of this paper) as the controlling element. This morality is what Johannes the Seducer, for instance, most obviously lacks, and it is this immorality which leads him to a spiritually enervating and despair-inducing life dedicated to the manipulation of others towards his own aesthetic ends, one which is in complete isolation from the subjectivity of those surrounding him. Frazier confirms that for Kierkegaard, “mastered irony is irony that is circumscribed by moral commitment.”<sup>13</sup> For only through an irony guided and supported by morality can one trim away the unnecessary factors of one’s immediacy, those assumptions and hypocrisies which hinder development of one’s inwardness, without allowing this negative freedom to grow beyond one’s ability to contain, to become that all-consuming inferno of Wallace’s myth. Wallace writing elsewhere also expresses similar thoughts. In ‘John Frank’s Dostoevsky,’ ostensibly a review lauding the title bibliographic series but in addition also another examination of irony in modern culture, Wallace states that this is the key difference between nineteenth century Russian greats such as Dostoevsky and the modern literati: Dostoevsky held the bravery to express strong moral (in his case religious, a factor which though obviously important to Kierkegaard is not as frequently manifest in Wallace’s own writing) conviction, ceaselessly “promulgating unfashionable stuff in which he believed,” believing that “a life lived without moral/spiritual values was not just incomplete but

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, 1993: 183

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 183

<sup>13</sup> Frazier, 2004: 474

depraved.”<sup>14</sup> The point being, that one may cautiously immerse oneself in one’s ironies, revel in their negatively freeing power, but, in order to prevent the infinite emptiness left in the wake of uncontrolled irony, must never allow these ironies to run unrestrained, instead constrain and uphold them with uncompromising morality.

But without the control offered by morality, by strong spiritual belief, irony, as we have seen demonstrated by both writers, leads to nothing but void. And this void is, for Wallace, imminent, looming over a society already steeped in total existential irony. For Kierkegaard irony was comparable to a language of the nobility, wielded largely by the intelligentsia; by the time Wallace was writing, irony had been thoroughly disseminated to the wider public through television’s “institutionalization of hip irony.”<sup>15</sup> And Wallace, writing in the 1990s, had the prescience to argue that technological advancement, what he quoted Gilder as terming “the telecomputer, a personal computer adapted for video processing and connected by fiber-optic threads to other telecomputers around the world,”<sup>16</sup> i.e. what we now know as the World Wide Web, video streaming services, social media, advancements which allow custom-tailored image-watching on an unprecedented scale, will only deepen the mire, further enveloping an interconnected populace within instinctive total irony. And when we as society begin to ironically examine our existential irony, when we ironically ridicule and distance ourselves from our very cultural dependence on irony, it is difficult to imagine Wallace’s and Kierkegaard’s views of this movement as a throwing off of irony’s shackles, as anything other than a further entangling of ourselves within its grasp.

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<sup>14</sup> Wallace, 2005: 271-274

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, 1993: 181

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 187

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