10-16-2023 9:30 AM

Kierkegaard and the Assumptions of Philosophy

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Theory and Criticism

Abstract:

This thesis explores the philosophy of early existentialist Søren Kierkegaard as implicitly critiquing the assumed essence of objectivity both directly understood as Absolute Truth in a classically Hegelian sense, but also in a more oblique meta-textual fashion in the presence of his varied pseudonymity. The first chapter takes on classical readings of Kierkegaard as a philosophy of stages—sometimes as aesthetic-ethical-religious, or otherwise despairing-anxious-faithful—and offers the alternative comprehension of a philosophy of moods which encompasses all these same "stages" as existing in and through each other in subjective existence. In the second chapter, I take the traditional reading of stages and unpack its complications in the presence of the varied and complicated pseudonyms his works were published under. These pseudonyms represent an ironic distance not simply from the ideas embraced in each work but from philosophy itself understood as instances of objective reasonings. In the third chapter, I explore Theodor Adorno's book on Kierkegaard which refuses readings of him centered on the necessity of the pseudonyms. His refusal to comprehend the writings of philosophers as poetry and his ultimate desire for the "truth content" that followed him to the very end in his *Aesthetic Theory* are underlined by the very hermetic irony held in his essential style; himself subject to the poetry he longs to rid of. It is with this modern critique that I hold my interpretation of Kierkegaard as implicitly attacking the very foundations of philosophy as reason and calling to its readers to re-examine the idea that, as Kierkegaard famously wrote, "subjectivity is truth."

Keywords:

Kierkegaard, Adorno, Aesthetics, Pseudonyms, Irony, Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Reason, Existentialism

Summary for Lay Audience:

This thesis examines the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard—often referred to as the godfather of existentialism—to reframe how we understand the idea of truth as a fixed entity in being. The idea of a "truth" in any given instance is assumed as an intangible constant. Something that is true is always true beyond the finite, like mathematics or the beauty of the sunset against a mountaintop. But what Kierkegaard aimed to do in his philosophy was to explore the idea that what we understand as truth does not in fact derive from the outside world. That is, the truth of the beauty of a sunset against a mountaintop is not a truth inherent in the sunset or the mountaintop but is instead a truth from within is. The idea that "subjectivity is truth" is that from which my thesis stems as the ground to explore the ways he did this in his texts—both on purpose and by accident. The main feature I explore is that his works were nearly all published under a variety of pseudonyms. What this aims to illustrate to the reader is that the idea of reading a philosophy text—when the pseudonyms are accounted for—should not be considered with authority but without it. We should not trust philosophy as imparting truth, but rather as explicating the truth of a single individual.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to Joshua Schuster, whose aid as supervisor has proven a monumental help to both the process of this thesis and my upbringing as a writer. Without his aid, none of this would have been possible. I would also like to extend the same gratitude to Jan Plug, whose early help gave me guidance in forming the arguments herein. Similar thanks to both Julian Haladyn—for helping me focus in on what I have to say about art—and to Helen Fielding—for helping me focus with ideas in general.

Thank you to the entire faculty and cohort of the Theory Department at Western. Thank you to Melanie Caldwell for her immense passion and dedication to the department. Thank you to all the nights spent at The Poachers Arms with colleagues, where thoughts flowed as much as drinks and whose conviviality provided me the courage and the confidence to argue and defend my ideas with certainty. Thank you to all the friends I've made in London, without whom I don't know if I could've made it this far.

Thank you to Julian and Will for letting me listen in to the Kierkegaard seminar and for popping the early kernels which guided me towards this thesis and thank you to all my friends back in Montreal who have graciously supported my interests.

Thank you to my family for always showing me love and supporting my passion for academia, and for understanding that when I was picking dandelions at little league, it meant that I was destined for an unfamiliar path.

Thank you to Emily, for your love and support throughout this endeavor; for listening to my long rants about meaning and truth and reason, and for not only understanding but empathizing and appreciating.

INTRODUCTION

What do philosophers look like? To appeal to physical characteristics would obviously be reductive and not hopeful in answering this question. But what are the characteristics about their persons that might tell a stranger who sees them in the street what they do? Must they be curious by trade, or is their nature one of more clear distance and objectivity? Do philosophers tend to stay up at night, tending to their thoughts by the light of a night's moon, or instead subsumed into the noisiness of everyday life?

On the campus of the University of Toronto is a scenic path named the Philosopher's Walk. Its name attempts to designate an essential feature of the philosopher: one who walks. One who walks to contemplate, perhaps alone, and to gaze at the features of nature and the structures of society to ease their mind or even to attack it and will it to comprehension. Otherwise these walks aid the philosopher in occupying their body, allowing their limbs to work through habit so the mind might be granted more rigorous attention.

Immanuel Kant famously walked. The tenacity with which he took his walks—every single day—was so well known in his town he was known as "The Königsberg Clock." His walking was not an isolated tendency, as the likes of Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Thoreau were all known for not only walking but for using walks as a way to do philosophy. Even those who aren't famous for walks are still yet famous for seclusion—often in nature's arms—as was the case for Heidegger and his hut in the Black Forest.

If one is to arrive at a general account of what philosophers are like, then, one might say that they are reclusive walkers. Søren Kierkegaard was—by all accounts—such an archetype. In

a private letter to his favourite niece he is quoted as stating: "Do not lose your desire to walk; […] I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it."[1] For Kierkegaard, walking is not simply an activity to which thinking is accompanied by, but an active cure to the illness of dull thinking. When one reaches a contemplative impasse, there is always a walk which can soothe the sickness of one's mind, and this description of walking reaches right into the very heart of his philosophy, which so deeply cared to examine the self's sickness, as in anxiety or despair.

My reason to ask this question of *what philosophers look like* is precisely what I am to explore through Kierkegaard's works and their use of aesthetic devices to unpack the ground on which philosophy and its authors stand. What is philosophy's promise? There is an assumption when one opens a philosophy text that the words on the page contain meaning and truth, and furthermore that this truth is imparted with objective and distanced reason. The philosopher may very well be writing with such intention, and, in service of this, the desire to imbue these words with a lyrical or poetic quality which can impart a sense of beauty or artfulness is often forgone because the author wants those words to simply act in service of meaning. This meaning could in fact be one about beauty or artfulness—as in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*—but it is important for Kant that it be a text about beauty and not a beautiful text.

Why Kierkegaard? There are of course countless instances of philosophy and poetry overlapping from Plato to Nietzsche—or even to today's more favourable autofiction genre—so why is Kierkegaard of particular relevance? What Kierkegaard did was illustrate the essential aestheticism of all philosophy: that philosophy stood on a definition which lied about its own

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Letters and Documents*, (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978) 214.

perfection. His rhetorical inquiries were not simply aesthetic experiments but were precisely aimed towards understanding how aesthetics necessarily operates in philosophy. If philosophy is understood as a perfect space of absolute reason and truth, then why are the questions which have been posed since the very inception of thought—*why are we here, what ought we to do or be, who are we*—still posed with as much weight and tenacity as they were thousands of years ago?

In the first chapter I introduce the reader to Kierkegaard as he is understood by the overwhelming philosophical public. Referred to as a sort of "father of existentialism," his writings attempted to impart a desire for truthful self-reflection in his contemporary audience; one he found severely lacking in critical individuality. While it is a distinctly religious philosophy whose definitions of self depend on traditional conceptions of spirit and with certain appeals to divinity, he was also extremely critical of the status of Christianity as a political institution. His interest in the inward turn was a direct request to oppose state religion and to find God in one's heart rather than in a parish priest.

The most popular reading of Kierkegaard remains as one of "stages." *Either/Or* serves a good example, where a collection of fake authors are presented as archetypes of these stages. The first half of the work is dedicated to aesthetic characters, varied and plenty, each with their own disorderly musings on art and life which all combine to illustrate a sordid existence plagued with immaturity and perversity. The second half acts as the ethical counterpart in the form of one long diatribe in direct response to the first half, written by a judge, perhaps the utmost ideal of what ethics represents.

Rather than focusing on *Either/Or*, I take the alternative approach of examining despair, anxiety, and faith, which operate as another set of classical stages through which one can take the

inward turn towards true faithfulness in both oneself and God. Yet my reading opposes the idea that his philosophy constructs stages of progression, thinking that the word is set too firmly in beginnings and endings. Instead, I understand Kierkegaard's philosophy as one of *moods*, more accurately describing these psychological and spiritual ailments as tendencies which exist over and through each other, all at once and never particularly isolated. Anxiety leads one to despair, and even in the most faithful of states, anxiety plagues the choices we make with spiritual courage. The faithful are not perfect beings, but each in their own way haunted by the doubts of despair and anxiety.

In the second chapter, I return to *Either/Or* as a particularly interesting turning point in Kierkegaard both as a philosopher and as a creative writer. His first standalone publication—the former being a master's thesis on Socratic irony—was also his first foray into the pseudonymity which would define nearly half of his published works. The book is edited by a fictitious author named Victor Eremita who happens upon a collection of texts written by two people: an aesthete and a judge writing a letter urging the aesthete to forgo his poetic sins and become an ethical person instead. But the pseudonymity does not end there, for in the first half—the aesthete's writings—are further leaps towards pseudonymity, notably in "The Seducer's Diary," which the aesthete claims not to have written himself but was penned by a man named Johannes.

All this pseudonymity, I argue, points to Kierkegaard as one who—as he put it himself—aimed to write "without authority." What this means is that philosophy must not be taken—as I believe it is—as pure objective reasoning. One should not put their faith in the idea that any given philosopher is absent from their own text and able to construct such an objectivity but instead take it that all philosophy is necessarily written by a subject and is therefore both

essentially aesthetic and therefore vulnerable to subjectivity's desire for inward truths and not Absolutes.

The pseudonymity at play in *Either/Or* also importantly refers back to his previous master's thesis on Socratic irony because it acts as an ironic position insofar as it aims to impart truth negatively rather than positively. Instead of communicating directly what it aims to say—as philosophy strives for—the pseudonyms approach truth through implicitly arguing that established ideas of Absolute truths don't exist the way we think they do. Subjectivity is truth for Kierkegaard, and what that means for the reader is that they cannot resort to absolute faith in any given philosopher but must take their arguments as illustrative of their persons and use these archetypal foundations to instead explore what *they* think about the questions posed in texts.

The third and final chapter examines the first portion of Theodor Adorno's book on Kierkegaard, which argues that Kierkegaard never—in his assumed philosophy of stages—actually got past the aesthetic stage and exists in the history of philosophy as a bourgeois figure, explaining both his desire for the inward turn as in opposition to an interest in the public sphere, but also rendering it impossible for him to confront any real issues at the heart of 19th century Denmark which was at that time facing the beginning of industrialism.

While I do agree with Adorno's central argument on Kierkegaard's bourgeois status and his disavowal of the public sphere, I take issue with Adorno's disinterest in understanding Kierkegaard as essentially a poet and believe the pseudonymity to be a defining quality of his works. Because of his disinterest in the pseudonymity, Adorno takes all of Kierkegaard's arguments as representing Kierkegaard's own doctrine. While this is not entirely wrong, it fails to understand the nature of the pseudonyms as expressions of both authoritative shame and as aesthetic experiments in the nature of authority. If one must read Kierkegaard's philosophy as

essentially an expression of his private thoughts—which is certainly a righteous endeavor—one must also understand that these expressions were accomplished through the pseudonymity and that their presence also expresses an essential feature of his thinking.

This thesis aims to explore these ideas of Kierkegaardian philosophy to account for the assumption of philosophy as the communication of Absolute truth. It takes the stance that all individuals are aesthetic in nature, and that to hope to let go of this aestheticism in favor of any ethical or religious turns is a mistake. One's aesthetic nature—unlike Kierkegaard displays it, as lacking commitment and folding to the whims of sensuous immediacy—defines oneself just as much as anything. If we cannot accept this aesthetic nature, then we cannot fully comprehend what it means to own one's own thoughts, to be an individual, or to choose oneself. Without this, there is no possibility of existing in the world, either for oneself or for others, in any real sense.

THE MOODS OF KIERKEGAARDIAN PHILOSOPHY

It is always important to remember that Søren Kierkegaard is a Christian philosopher. When he is taken up by Paul Tillich in his theological philology *The Courage to Be*, he writes that "when Kierkegaard deals with the problem of guilt it is not the theological question of sin and forgiveness that moves him but the question of what the possibility of personal existence is in the light of personal guilt."[2] Kierkegaard, for Tillich, exists as the historical answer to Hegel's system of reason in turning it foremostly inward, claiming that the only place absolute truth exists in this realm is not outward in the world but in our very deepest thoughts and consciousnesses. For Tillich this inward turn exists as a call to arms to understand exactly what ails a person—anxiety, despair, sinfulness, guilt, evil—and to combat it, churning through one's diseases of the mind to face existence with the courage of being. It is a distinctly theological reading in its appeal to Kierkegaard as a Christian philosopher, echoing his desire to instill in his readers the virtues of the knight of faith.

Alternatively for Charles Taylor—some 50 years later in his *A Secular Age*—detailing the changes in Western society and the *absences* of faith in contemporary cultures, Kierkegaard doesn't show up in any significant way. This is much different from Tillich's (and most others') framing of him as the "godfather of existential philosophy," regardless of Tillich's particular Christian perspective. Kierkegaard does, however, show up in his earlier *The Sources of the Self*:

[2] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1952), 142.

> This change of stance which Kierkegaard calls choosing ourselves brings about a reversal which can be called transfiguration. All the elements in my life may be the same, but they are now transfigured because [they] are chosen in the light of the infinite. In a sense, we renounce all the finite things when we renounce the aesthetic stance and go to the ethical. But we receive them all back, now no longer as absolutes, as the determinants of our final ends, but as relative to our life project.[3]

Taylor understands Kierkegaard through the traditional mode of stages. In this understanding, one exists naturally as an aesthetic being—chained to the limited finite life—perhaps changing and learning the appeals of an ethical life, and in the best of scenarios attempts to merge the pleasures of the poetic existence and the virtues of the ethical through a divine faith in God. Taylor then attempts to oppose Nietzsche to Kierkegaard's stages in how Nietzsche affirms the inclusion and acceptance of everything the world has to offer, good and bad. "To affirm the world, even though it remains the domain of the blind, unspiritual, chaotic forces,"[4] Taylor writes, is more proper to a secular age. Kierkegaard may or may not be the first existentialist, but his Christian philosophy is outdated and there is a reason he doesn't show up in Taylor's later works. The existence of God and the positing of faith means that one can't affirm the world in a real, concrete way.

This argument echoes a more contemporary approach to reading Kierkegaard in Martin Hägglund's 2018 *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. The book argues for the essential finitude of all life, but importantly for Hägglund is that finitude means not simply to

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[3] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 450.
[4] Ibid.

live in relation to one's own death, but also to be dependent on others.[5] This secular vision of dependence—which holds a heavy emphasis on *care*, both for oneself and others—opposes the Christian understanding of finitude whose object is *love*, a wholly religious term describing those who, obscured by faith in the afterlife, can only love the finite but not *care* for it in an irreducibly finite way. In Hägglund's view, the religious conception of infinity is wrong in the leap it makes beyond concrete existence, into the fabulous appeal to salvation in Christian depictions of Heaven. The Christian—precisely because they believe that the end of their life on earth is in fact only the beginning of their infinity in heaven—cannot care for the earth in the same way someone whose understanding of infinity is the infinite succession of earthly life; that one lives because others have cared for them and the world they live and that one must do the same for the future. Secular faith holds a sense of the encroaching preciousness of time, carrying us away in every waking moment, that demonstrates to us how important our relationships are.

Hägglund in one chapter challenges the danger of blind faith in God he finds in Kierkegaard's treatment of the story of Abraham at the heart of *Fear and Trembling*. While Kierkegaard sees Abraham's faith—which leads him to nearly sacrifice his son on a blood altar—as an example of God's ultimate presence beyond all comprehension and a signpost of where to lead one's heart, Hägglund believes that we cannot be freed from the despair of trembling anxiety towards the future through naïve optimism or basic truth that things will work out. Life requires a living faith that affects your day-to-day existence.[6]

"If there were no eternal consciousness in a man […] what then would life be but despair?"[7] Kierkegaard writes. But this eternal consciousness does not exist in the same as it

[5] Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon, 2018), 5.
[6] Ibid, 137.
[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New Jersey: Princeton; 1983), 30.

does for Hägglund, who speculates in his opening pages on the experience of history in the sand and rocks he stands on in his parent's house. This experience instills in him a consciousness which is both finite and eternal, recalling both his ancestors and the generations which will fall into his place when he is nothing more than an ancestor himself. For Kierkegaard, eternal consciousness gives one hope that through all the cruelty of life, there is a beginning to every end and a reason to believe. But for Hägglund, the risk of despair is intrinsic to constructing one's identity in making movements of secular faith. "The risk of despair—the anticipation that my world can break down—" he writes, "recalls me to what matters in my life and why it remains important what I do. My very life is at stake in my finite relations."[8] While Hägglund's work, both as a Marxist thinker and as a critic of religious ideals, have been notably attacked over the past few years,[9] the importance of his arguments, opposed or defended, recall to us that either way one attempts to read Kierkegaard, is it impossible and surely impractical to untie him—the author of *Christian Discourses* and *Practice in Christianity*—from his theological origins.

Kierkegaard was born into a Lutheran Denmark, some 300 years after its influence spread through the monarchs of Denmark and many other parts of Northern Europe in the early 16th century. A denomination of Protestantism in which the Bible is considered the sole authority on Christian ideals in direct opposition to the singular power of the People, Lutheranism can in many ways be seen as a call for individuals to take faith as a matter to be explored *oneself* rather than assumed through the blessings of authority.

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[8] Hägglund, *This Life*, 141.

[9] There has been an entire issue of the Los Angeles Review of Books dedicated as a symposium to *This Life*, but there have also been a number of notable defenses of Christian philosophy in reaction to his earlier *Radical Atheism*.

One can begin to see connections between Luther and Kierkegaard in their critiques of institutionalized religion and in re-defining God's transcendent nature as a call to action for the religious individual. Yet Lutheranism was the established social formation across Northern Europe at the time, and while one of Luther's main critiques was to bring back faith into the hands of the individual, it formed its own social hierarchy and assumed the very same problem it once sought to overcome. The very fact of Lutheranism as the dominant religious authority of Kierkegaard's contemporary Denmark confuses the radical nature of its origin, which perhaps even informs us on the early existentialist's confused obsession with religious authority.

His brother, Peter Christian Kierkegaard, a pastor following in the footsteps of their father, called to Søren while he was on his deathbed at Frederik's Hospital in October of 1855. Despite a sordid and brutal relationship, with Peter at times publicly humiliating Kierkegaard upon the publication of a new work critiquing the state of church but proclaiming that he would not actually stand behind his words,[10] he hoped to provide Søren with the deep spiritual satisfaction of laying to rest brotherly squabbles and give him the Eucharist in a final act of familial love. Søren refused.[11] While he is certainly the author of *Practice in Christianity*, he is also the same who wrote *Attack Upon Christendom*.

These details are important because Kierkegaard's legacy as an early existentialist who pushed for the primacy of individuals in all things aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual comes with the essential caveat of an—at the very least confused and complex—assumption of debated concepts life God, spirit, and faith. Having a spirit is not as assumable today as might have been in Lutheran Denmark, and much of its trickiness lies precisely in its inability to be grasped. "Man

[10] Bruce H. Kirmmse, ""Out with It!": The modern breakthrough, Kierkegaard and Denmark," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay & Gordon D. Marino (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35.
[11] Ibid, 15.

[…] is a synthesis of psyche and body," he writes, "but he is also a *synthesis of the temporal and the eternal*."[12] Spirit then exists as this synthesis in how it both sustains the unity of mind (what Kierkegaard refers to as the psyche) and the body as necessary unity of the concrete and the abstract membranes of the self, and also as the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, resting in a finite, temporal body, but wrestling with a vision of infinity in the eternal consciousness of one's mind.

> "The moment signifies the present as that which has no past and no future, and precisely in this lies the imperfection of the sensuous life. The eternal also signifies the present as that which has no past and no future, and this is the perfection of the eternal."[13]

This second synthesis Kierkegaard writes of does not clearly have an object of synthesis in the same way that spirit exists as the synthesis of psyche and body in the self. The present does not exist as a livable concept of time; one can never feel the true instance of the present, nor reach the past or the future, "except precisely as something infinitely contentless."[14] What this means for him is that the second synthesis of existence calls towards the first. The spirit which is sustained by the unity of body and mind posits the moment of the present wherein no instance can be felt except the eternal or rather the infinite succession of time in which the spirit can cast its dreams forward or look back on itself.

This distinction of spirit is indicative of Kierkegaard, as a follower in the footsteps of the subject-oriented enlightenment philosophies of Hume and Kant, because it a question of understanding the self to a greater extent before engaging with the world outside. For Kierkegaard, to avoid such engagement with our spirit in making the choices that structure our

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[12] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 85.
[13] Ibid, 87.
[14] Ibid, 86.

lives is to appeal to fate as a relation to the spirit as external.[15] To cast your life to the wind is to walk forward blindly in life "as much by necessity as by accident."[16] Yet a necessity—that something must happen regardless of whether or not a choice is actively made—that is not consciously made is then always accidental. To reckon with a spirit that can dream of choice, of changing and moving through life with the courage and intent of risk, that is Kierkegaard's interest.

It is also precisely what he seemed to find lacking in his contemporary Denmark. He believed the majority of the people surrounding his environs to have a mindlessness which was a direct product of Christian influence; such people did not think for themselves in an honest way in an appeal to religious authority. In his *The Present Age*, perhaps the instance in which he directs his social critique most clearly, he writes that "our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose."[17] The use of the word reflection here is perhaps too strong, as the kind of understanding that exists without passion is not in any way a real reflection. The person who reflects without passion is only reflecting on what they have been taught to reflect on, and in this sense is not reflecting or understanding in any real way. Ethics for Kierkegaard is not a decree from any hegemonic force but an inward movement of the spirit which re-articulates itself with every moral instance. It is the duty of the individual to realize themselves and ask themselves the questions that philosophy continuously demands asking—of *what one ought to do*—but are never deeply considered because of the comfort of having been answered for them by the church.

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[15] Ibid, 96.
[16] Ibid, 97.
[17] Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (New York: Harper & Row; 1962), 33.

What one finds in Kierkegaard that moves beyond the Humean and Kantian interest in subjectivity which marks the enlightenment is a philosophy of *moods*. Fear and trembling, the dizziness of anxiety, the sunken depths of despair… Kierkegaard is often joked of in reference to these desperate temperaments, and I have hard colleagues say they are scared to read him for fear of growing depressed soon after, yet these moods are precisely what make his philosophy so prescient. He asks us not only to confront the moods we wish to remove ourselves from but to confront them as signifying a condition of our spirit. To be fearful or despairing or anxious *means* something, and to consider our mood however dark it may be is to be honest with oneself, and this is precisely the kind of reflection he felt lacking in his age.

This philosophy of moods distinguishes itself from the traditional mode of reading Kierkegaard as a philosophy of stages. One can read this latter mode from the perspective laid down by *Either/Or*—and read into by Taylor—as individuals who begin as aesthetic and move their way through the ethical into the religious stage of being, or otherwise through his later works as beings who are essentially in anxiety or even despair, and forcibly work their ways to the same religious end, inevitably illustrating that both are indicative of the same philosophy of stages. I oppose this reading on the grounds that some of Kierkegaard's most important ideas: notably *anxiety, despair, and faith*, do not exist as stages of life that one moves through linearly, but exist simultaneously in the individual who seeks to continuously understand the way their mood operates through themselves and out into this life. But what are these moods and how do they operate?

ANXIETY

There is a strong sense in which one might understand anxiety as the most foundational moods of Kierkegaard's philosophy. While there have been earlier treatments of this illness of the soul from the likes of Buddha to Aristotle, Kierkegaard was the first to commit the subject to its own work entirely. Anxiety is vital to Kierkegaard because it is not the product of will or intention, but a mood in which we are in every waking instance. It is unlike the intense emotional and psychological attention and action one must devote to faith or the draining force of a resolved pessimism in the form of despair. Anxiety is rather assumed in all subjective existence.

Anxiety is always at play in being because its subject is freedom of possibility in everyday choices. Kierkegaard writes of it as "freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility,"[18] and this repetition of terms illustrates how anxiety operates on the scale not simply of choice, but of the choice to make choices. One can choose what to do, both at a granular, local level, as in when one chooses to get out of bed or what to have for breakfast, and on a larger, conceptual level, as in choosing what paths in life to lead. Do I want to be a social person or a ragged, elusive mystery? Do I want to live with an endless love to gift the world or to decide whom and what deserves a varying degree of it?

Whether or not I get food now or later is a decision I must make, and although there is usually a hierarchy of difference between the psychical and spiritual possibilities of decisions, like the importance of whether I choose to be a painter or an insurance salesman over when I would like to eat, both fall to the restless whims of the anxiety of freedom. It is also important to remember that this freedom is "entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but is entangled, not by necessity, but in itself."[19] If freedom whereas such by necessity it would not

[18] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 42.
[19] Ibid, 49.

cause anxiety; anxiety exists because freedom entangles itself into possibility. One decides, at a certain point in one's life, that total freedom should does exist and one must make choices, effectively entering the possibility of possibility not be necessity but by choice.

Freedom is a theoretical concept which creates anxiety as a thought, but it is never actually possible in itself. Kierkegaard writes that "as soon as the actuality of freedom and of spirit is posited, anxiety is cancelled."[20] Freedom simply exists before the choice which temporarily relinquishes us from our anxieties, and this is part of why anxiety is so difficult to handle. True freedom of possibility cannot exist. In life, one must make the choices which confront us and plague us with anxiety. Our freedom exists entangled in the lives we lead.

But neither can anxiety be "cancelled" as he writes. The cancellation must simply exist as a possibility in the same way as total freedom because otherwise one would not be truly free. It may be compared to the positing of the present as a concept in time which is always instantly becoming the past as soon as we attempt to grasp it. As soon as I make a choice, new freedoms are posited, creating new feelings of anxiety. While Kierkegaard does in fact write that the actuality of freedom cancels anxiety, it does so in a given instant, and in the very next re-actualizes itself in anxiety. Anxiety is then subject to the infinite succession of time.

Kierkegaard understands freedom as providing us with the possibility of idealistic greatness—the promise of enlightening our spirits and paving the paths for great lives—yet the existence of such possibility also suggests that all of these choices *must* be made and that failure *must* be a possibility. When "freedom looks down into its possibility,"[21] anxiety takes hold as the condition of dizziness whereby the infinite possibilities of choice render the individual confused

[20] Ibid, 96.
[21] Ibid 61.

as to what choice will provide the right path for them. In a sense, anxiety is the condition of philosophy's question: *what ought one to do*? Anxiety is guilt's relation to freedom in holding ourselves accountable for our own agency; that *what we ought to do* is not a question we can relinquish to the whims of fate, but something we must actively pay attention to and work with.

Asking oneself this question destroys what Kierkegaard refers to as the peaceful spirit of innocence that dreams freely.[22] It is the dream of a child, one whose thought are untainted with the heavy weight of morality, but who asks questions with total freedom and innocence, devoid of emotional associations or social norms of feeling. This is the very same innocence whose passing through posits that freedom which exists in itself and not by necessity. Innocence, in this sense, is translatable as *ignorance*.[23] This word may help us understand more that for Kierkegaard—interested as he was in critiquing his present age—this state of innocence whereby individuals dream freely without anxiety is not exclusively reserved for children.

Anxiety must be understood, then, not simply as the struggle with which we make decisions, but the struggle with which ethics are made at every moment, and therefore in a Christian treatment, a question of sinfulness. When sin is posited, so is the difference between good and evil,[24] because one is making choices which will affect the present sinfulness of one's person. The tale of Adam and Even is not for Kierkegaard the traditional one of falling *into sin* by eating from the tree of knowledge upon the call of satanic forces, but simply illustrative of the sinfulness which enters us all at the point in which we decide to forego innocence in favor of reflection and understanding.

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[22] Ibid, 41.
[23] Ibid, 37.
[24] Ibid, 112.

This question of the good is an important instance in which Kierkegaard's philosophy shows itself as distinctly religious, yet in an ambiguous manner respective to his position as a complicated believer, opposed to the decisions of belief imposed by the Lutheran state. Kierkegaard does not believe in original sin—that one is born into sinfulessness—but rather than "through the first sin, sin came into the world."[25] This belief reflects a complex vision of life that encompasses both a faith in the existence of sinfulness and goodness as a position of religiosity at the same time as an understanding of Adam as indivisible from both himself and humanity. This latter understanding is closer to what Hägglund describes as his vision of infinity as distinctly finite, where the sand beneath his toes recalls to him the people which came before him and those who will live beyond his years. Kierkegaard is a religious thinker, yes, but he does not believe in a default sinfulness. Because Adam is both himself and all of humanity, the positing of sinfulness in the first sin poses a task of historical movement in a concrete sense; that one is responsible for their own acts of sinfulness whose reasoning is separate from the divine.

The fall represents an objective anxiety; a reflection of sinfulness in everyone. "By coming into the world," that is, through the fall, "sin acquired significance for the whole creation."[26] But the fall did not create sin, rather it is simply the first sin through which sin entered the world. In this sense it is akin to freedom in its total infinity. Within this objective anxiety thought—*always*—is a subjective anxiety present in the individual. Here Kierkegaard describes the self as a contradiction in how it posits the universal as the particular.[27] One eats an apple despite prohibition, but the sinfulness is not the act of eating but of positing the sin as such, entering the knowledge of sin as universal through the understanding that its prohibition

[25] Ibid, 31.
[26] Ibid, 57.
[27] Ibid, 78.

universally renders it sinful to eat. Positing here means understanding that something is sinful or wrong: the act of sinfulness is wrong, but it is not sinful. What is sinful is instead the positing or understanding of an act to be performed as wrong. "The individual," he writes, "in anxiety not about becoming guilty but about being regarded as guilty, becomes guilty."[28]

Philip Quinn argues that Kierkegaard understands the story of sin different from his predecessors Kant and Schleiermacher in providing Adam with a motivation for his transgression.[29] It is the prohibition itself of deciding not the eat from the tree of knowledge, not any subsequent actions, that gives birth to sin as the positing of sinfulness which fuels the abyss of anxiety. Quinn thinks Kierkegaard tows the line between the Kantian emphasis on the ultimate power of freedom and will which cuts off the possibility of being influenced by society or history in choosing sinfulness by "grounding particular evil actions in an evil propensity which is the product of an atemporal free act"[30] and the Schleiermacherian tendency to focus so minutely on the history of sinfulness which affects the individual that the individual's *choice* is forgotten entirely. In the latter view one is historically predisposed to sin rather than actively engaged with it in every instance of decision. Kierkegaard instead illustrates both the objective and subjective anxieties to show that sinfulness and anxieties are tendencies which operate both in the realm of the universal and the particular.[31]

One has the freedom to choose, but such a choice can be daunting because one is tied between the sensuous throngs of sinful desire and the mighty woes of reason, and this leads Kierkegaard to make his famous claim that "anxiety is a sympathetic antipathy and an

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[28] Ibid, 75.
[29] Philip L. Quinn, "Does Anxiety Explain Original Sin?," *Nous* 24, no. 2 (April 1990): 239.
[30] Ibid, 242.
[31] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 78.

antipathetic sympathy."[32] Simply put, all this means is that anxiety is a paradoxical form of desire because one fears what they desire in the abyss of anxiety. One wants to know what is sinful to make choices against it, but in positing such sinfulness one must know the desire with which it attracts. It is both sympathetic and antipathetic in how it must consider the paths which it immediately distrusts to figure precisely how and why there are paths one mustn't follow. One must imagine why such a path may be tempting but ultimately an emotional failure (say, in the desire for an affair). Even when one makes the good choice there is always the presence of sinfulness, and therefore, a guilt involved in anxiety.

Anxiety is precisely that middle ground between innocence and guilt. One dreams freely as a child, but as soon as one posits the possibility of choice, that one must make choices rather than lead their life by fate, anxiety begets the nothingness of freedom and its infinity of choice. Guilt is then that state in which anxiety wins; when the individual who was awakened from their dogmatic slumber refuses to acknowledge the weight of responsibility and does not actively make the choices they are confronted with. In evoking this Kantian "dogmatic slumber," I hope to illustrate that while Kierkegaardian faith is certainly involved in a leap beyond reason, anxiety is very much involved in ethics.

Ronald Green finds similarities in both authors, arguing that their assumed difference, that "Kant's a prioristic, formalistic moral law differs from Kierkegaard's understanding of the normative pattern for the religious individual" is unconvincing, and that *The Concept of Anxiety* is the world which reveals this the most.[33] At the heart of Kierkegaard's work is a Kantian

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[32] Ibid, 42.

[33] Ronald Green, "The Limits of the Ethical in Kierkegaard's The Concept of Anxiety and Kant's Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Volume 8, The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), 65.

emphasis of the power of human freedom. As individuals, we have the ability to control our impulses and desires through the process of free choice. Not only do we have this ability, but for both freedom is also an ethical responsibility and a question of one's will rather than of the actual consequences of freedom. In the Kierkegaardian state of anxiety, the responsibility of choice is not about the material consequences of either the guilt of not choosing or of choosing wrong, but of avoiding the position of sin in the dizzying abyss of freedom.

Both authors are distinctly against the attitude of indifference that Kierkegaard illustrates in his discussion of fate's position towards anxiety. Fate's position in Kierkegaard is a pagan tradition which reduces life to a passive experience in its relation to anxiety. "Fate is a relation to spirit as external,"[34] he writes, and what this means is that in appealing to fate when encountering the dizziness of anxiety is to imagine that whatever choice is made in any given situation is a predetermined one. The spirit here exists externally to itself because one does not remain honest, facing anxiety with courage and decision, knowing full well that the decisions one makes are entirely of their own choice and not to be delegated to some outside force whose position towards their future they remain unaware of.

Anxiety is not simply a state one must assume to with negative connotation—for such is despair—but a state in which one can educate oneself. It has the capability, as will be illustrated later, to lead oneself to make the leap by which faith is achieved. Yet, as Gordon D. Marino phrases it, the struggle to lead a good life is one that must be struggled either against or with

[34] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 96.

anxiety.[35] It is impossible to be an individual without grappling with the essential anxiety plaguing the self once it moves beyond the pass of innocence.

DESPAIR

"No matter how deep an individual has sunk, he can still sink deeper, and this "can" is the object of anxiety."[36] Kierkegaard writes this sentence with a contradiction of negative and positive connotations. There is the sinking of the spirit, yet it is supposed as a "can" rather than a "can't." It is not that the individual is void of choice that leads him to this state, but instead an active possibility of descension into the sinful. The "can" of anxiety invites the possibility of sinking deeper and deeper into the dizzying abyss of anxiety, which leads to a state of despair in which one loses hope in making good decisions. Freedom's possibility makes it so that it could always be better. When the will is despairing in such a way, one wonders why trying is even worth it. Despair confuses the negative and positive connotations of anxiety's object by understanding the "can" of freedom's possibility into a "can't."

Anxiety is at its highest, in the form of despair, when repentance—the feeling of not only guilt but regret in one's decisions—commands the spirit. "Repentance is reduced to a possibility in relation to sin […] [it] cannot cancel sin, it can only sorrow over it."[37] This possibility exists in negativity insofar as it posits the existence of freedom in itself as sinful; that the weight of possibility is an inherently sinful act of the mind towards one's choices.

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[35] Gordon D. Marino, "Anxiety in The Concept of Anxiety," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, (Georgia, Mercer Press, 1985) 309.
[36] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 113.
[37] Ibid, 115.

Kierkegaard further argues that repentance is an ethical contradiction because it is ambiguous about what it removes.[38] It only *thinks* about what is wrong, delaying the action and decision which could soothe and cure the despairing soul. This contradiction leads Kierkegaard to make the claim that "action is precisely what ethics requires"[39] which further illustrates the will and intention involved in anxiety, differing from the lack of reason seen in his idea of faith. If all we do is sit and think about the good, we are surely not good people but wallowers in anxiety, repenting on the guilt of our possible good which forces both within and without us impede us from.

The Danish word for despair, *Fortvivlelse*, has within it a "two" (tvi) suggesting an ambiguous complexity with which it operates in the individual's psyche. Alastair Hannay writes of despair in two senses: on the one hand it is "knowing or suspecting that one is powerless to achieve some cherished goal but continuing, against all odds […], to attempt to achieve it" and yet in another sense it is "precisely to act in accordance with the facts, to give up the attempt *because* the goal is impossible."[40] Despair seems to have two faces which contradict each other, yet each resolved in their disparity, both giving up on the significance of any given decision only to continue the act on the first account and to give up in the second.

Kierkegaard himself writes of despair as either "not wanting in despair to be oneself, [or] wanting in despair to be oneself."[41] Despair is the failure to live up to one's expectation of themselves; that is, of knowing what one ought to be but not putting in the effort with which to achieve this desired self, and in response, despairing in repentance rather than acting upon it.

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[38] Ibid, 117.
[39] Ibid, 118.
[40] Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 331.
[41] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, quoted in Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," 332.

Kierkegaard even suggests that simply put despair is double-mindedness.[42] It is a descending culmination of the dizziness of anxiety. In the infinite wealth of choice that confronts the question of what one ought to do, the individual cannot resolve to make a decision with intent, and so, despairs in the lack of choice rather than the guilt of making the wrong decision. This, for Kierkegaard, is much worse because since the self is a good towards which the individual strives, to fail is more spiritually honest than it is to give up.

In the preface to *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes that "death is indeed the expression for the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to die to the world."[43] Death expresses wretchedness not in any inherent nature—that is, death is not in all cases wretched or an act of wretchedness—but is instead an expression of despair in its total lack of choice. One cannot choose to live or to die. One either faces death with courage or with fear but in both with despair most necessarily, for one cannot choose the act of death but only one's demeanor to it, hence "to die to the world."

"When all hope of freedom is lost, you often hear the phrase: leave me alone in my wretchedness."[44] Yet despair, in some significant way despite its refusal of the hope of freedom, can be considered a solvent in dissolving the antipathetic desires of anxiety by treating them with reason, leading one to instead desire the absurdity with which faith operates. Like any of Kierkegaard's disparate moods, they are often dark and gloomy but always with an educative edge. For despair, it is that one spends so long dealing in anxiety with reason—of contemplating choices and decisions and paradoxically confronting desire so that one wallows in their

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[42] Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession* (New York: Harper, 1958), 61.
[43] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 6.
[44] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 137.

wretchedness. But as we will soon see in considering faith as another mood, the rejection of reason leads one to the path of faith and its absurdity, which for Kierkegaard is the final path along which the self is to be led. It is here that we understand despair as a mood and not simply a stage because it is a state in which one consistently returns to in spiritual recurrence. Despair is held over the state of anxiety as its warning, and in all cases, we must return to it in the face of our very last moments, and because of death, despair is a mood we cannot dispel but can at the very least rise ourselves to admitting and understanding.

FAITH

Having described the complexities of anxiety and despair in describing the major moods in Kierkegaard's philosophy, one realizes that these moods are not isolate but engaged in an overwhelming system of recurrent moods which move through and with each other towards an enlightened and recognized ideal of selfhood. One grows from the whims of innocence into an anxious self whose misfortune and mistakes can render the self despairing, but for Kierkegaard the philosophy of moods does have, as its goal or ideal, the mood of faithfulness, in which one makes the most significant spiritual transition.

Anxiety is still very much at play here, for Kierkegaard describes anxiety as "the final psychological state from which sin breaks forth in the qualitative leap."[45] This sentence calls forward a popular association of Kierkegaard's philosophy as coining the "leap of faith," yet nowhere in his works does he ever actually use the term. M. Jamie Ferreira, in his essay on the

[45] Ibid, 93.

uses of term, argues that Kierkegaard's real configuration of this spiritual transition is a leap *to* faith.[46] In order for there to be a qualitative transition in the self, a leap beyond reason is required. To say that one makes the leap *of* faith is to admit that the leap was made *with* faith, therefore with a kind of spiritual reason. The positing of spiritual life beyond our concrete existence is incalculable and not subject to any kind of scientific positing or reasoning, simply existing beyond our realm of understanding. The leap *to* faith instead foregrounds this unreasonable quality of faith that is so crucial to Kierkegaard.

Why must we make such a leap to faith without reason? Kierkegaard argues that the path to faith is absurd and impossible to be reasoned with—as the enlightenment thinkers like Hegel argued—where a dialectical logic could be taught, leading one to divine *enlightenment* through science rather the mystical unknowing of faith's essential absurdity.[47] The belief one has in God is paradoxical and therefore absurd. God is untranslatable, transcending all human categories of understanding, yet Hegel had sought to know God through his system. Hegel is not isolated in his attempt at transcendental understanding, with even more falsely mystic paths like the ladder of divine ascent serving as a popular medieval method wherein concrete and material steps can be taken by the individual to achieve spiritual "perfection."[48]

The leap to faith is comparable to a letting go. When one tries to demonstrate God's existence, no existence emerges, but as soon as one lets go of the need to demonstrate, its existence is there in the act of letting go. "There is no approximation [and] wanting to quantify

[46] M. Jamie Ferreira, "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 207.
[47] Ibid, 209.
[48] It would behoove me not to mention, to those who may not yet be sold on Kierkegaard's treatment of faith as being reactionary and deeply critical of Christian philosophy, that *The Ladder of Divine Ascent's* author is Climacus—the direct antagonist of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus.

oneself into faith," Kierkegaard writes, "[is a] misunderstanding, a delusion."[49] To attempt to reason faith's existence through demonstration is a delusion because of the inability to impel the existence of God through such demonstration. Yet letting go is an act of will. It is, as Ferreira notes, curiously passive and active in how it reinforces the existence of God through a lack of reinforcing, but nonetheless the presence of a lack of willfulness is still a willfulness in how one lets go of the desire to will God's existence.[50] While Ferreira ultimately aims to explain Kierkegaard's reaction against the Hegelian dialectical reasoning of God, it also holds that one cannot conceive of a qualitative transition without an act consisting of an act of will.

Abraham is the famous emblem of faith for Kierkegaard in his endurance against the temptation to despair. Abraham's interest for Kierkegaard lies in how he kept his faith in God despite how He commanded the sacrifice of his son Isaac, which opposed Abraham's finite reason which dictated the protection of his family. It is not that God wants us to kill, but rather than the self—before conceiving any of any idea of a God of whom or what might command such atrocities (since such categories are impossible to translate)—demands the acceptance of absurdity before being able to leap towards faith. Kierkegaard explicitly writes that Abraham "left behind his worldly understanding, and he took along his faith,"[51] otherwise Abraham would have thought the act unreasonable and found his way back home with his son.

Kierkegaard writes of faith in "a future life"—the more traditional account of eternal salvation in Christianity's paradise—as an untrue faith. "Abraham believed precisely for this life,"[52] and this paradox seems so because to believe in an eternal salvation is to make a claim

[49] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, *Volume II* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15.
[50] Ferreira, 210.
[51] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 17.
[52] Ibid, 20.

with reason rather than faith. One believes in salvation because they have a sense of knowing that in their faith they are saved, but such faith is not proper because it does not believe by virtue of the absurd. No one outgrows the fear and trembling one learns which "chastens the youth."[53] The truly faithful learn to embrace the fear that is necessary to the blinding experience of faith.

The qualitative transition towards faith must be a free act, of which its alternative would be something that becomes necessary through reason.[54] One cannot decide to be faithful through thinking about *what ought to be done* but becomes faithful through an act of total freedom akin to the lack of logic at play in the innocent who dreams freely. But what is the difference between the ignorant innocent and the faithful? The substance of faith is pathos through which the faithful becomes courageous in venturing through life, as opposed to the innocent who roams through life without purpose but only curiosity. the leap to faith is "like the change from nonbeing to being"[55] in its complete upheaval of any sense of reason one might construct in their life.

Kierkegaard writes that "without risk, [there can be] no faith."[56] This does not mean that the leap to faith must be made with a deliberate reasoning, because the acceptance of risk does not imply knowledge or reasoning of the transition. To one without faith, the risk in every decision rests in a concrete reality wherein one is threatened by concrete loss in an entirely material sense: will I lose my lover, my job, my values? Alternatively, the faithful's threat is one of absolute loss whereby one's certainties—one's beliefs even—could change with a single leap.

[53] Ibid, 7.
[54] Ferreira, 216.
[55] Ibid.
[56] A repeated refrain in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, as quoted in Ferreira, 219.

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Faith is the mood which presents us with Kierkegaard's desire to be over with the philosophical obsession with objective or pure truth.[57] It is more important for him to discuss certitude and inwardness in an entirely concrete sense; to learn to be oneself rather than to strive for eternal perfection. Yet faith is not alone, because it is achieved precisely through anxiety and despair. No moods are alone in Kierkegaard. They are rather interwoven in a system of subjectivity. Anxiety is the saving grace of faith because it teaches one—even in the wretched depths of despair—that freedom of choice consumes all finite ends in its early paradox of desire; that one has an infinite of choice in a realm of finitude. Anxiety is the deceptive curse of individuality through which we come to learn that paradoxes are the very fact of existence. They are the paradoxes which propel us towards the absurdity of faith, not because it makes sense, but precisely because it cannot.

[57] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 138.

THE OBFUSCATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTIVITY

Kierkegaard once said that his authorship could be divided into two categories: the aesthetic works, written under various pseudonyms and often structured themselves in aesthetic fashion—like the speculative situations (the *Problemata*) involving Abraham and Isaac at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*—and the ethical-religious works, signed under Kierkegaard's own name.[58] The present chapter will take the former half of this divide—the aesthetic works—as the grounds to place an argument that not only is the pseudonymous nature of these earlier essential to any critical reading, but that it is also the very characteristic which transforms Kierkegaard's works into something between philosophy and literature; something which implicitly critiques the assumptions on which philosophy stands. Kierkegaard not only divided the works into these two categories—aesthetic and ethical-religious—but analogized them in saying that they were in fact so different that one category was written by his left hand and the other his right. This may very well be nothing more than a simple turn of phrase, but curiosity's dangerous gaze takes hold of me when I think about how Kierkegaard—in his scholarly interest in Christendom—would have been very well acquainted in his Latin, and how this informs a statement such as the one above.

The hands play an important role in Romantic traditions for they are not simply denotative of the hand on the left side of my body, nor the right. In Latin the right hand is the

[58] Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, "Historical Introduction," in Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View of my Work as an Author* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), ix.

dexter: the skillful and able hand, with associations of fidelity and friendship. It is the hand one would use to shake others' hands, to make new friends and to barter deals. The dexter governs outward behavior, defining moral principles and deciding whom one trusts and takes into their lives. Even in our contemporary English, right denotates correctness: one is on the right track, or a good deed is applauded with a "right on!"

The left hand, *ad sinistram*, alternatively denotes a sinister character. Historians may argue it had to do with the position of the rising sun in meetings of the Roman augurs, whereas more folk-oriented scholars might claim that the left hand was simply the hand one used for wiping, washing, and cleaning themselves. The left hand got dirty, and in this sense, *was* dirty. The tradition of the sinister hand moves all the way into our contemporary world, where left-handed people are still somewhat outcast from the norm, despite efforts towards inclusion. Scissors, musical instruments, can openers, and most school desks are still designed for the right-handed side of the world, and the creation of left-handed versions of these tools are still only specialty items that one may find difficult to procure. The contemporary English *left* also extends this tradition: one walks with two left feet or otherwise are backwardly insulted with left-handed compliments. My father recalls stories of the nuns at his school hitting left-handed hands to ward away bad habits, and these stories are not isolated but common ones heard between generations.

Arbitrary as this left-right distinction might sound, the case is made more compelling when one reads his *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, which he described as the turning point from the aesthetic works towards the more rigid theological ones.[59] Penned by Johannes Climacus, it bridges this gap by being the first text in which Kierkegaard attaches his own name

[59] Ibid, 5-6.

as editor, in one sense still ironically distant from authorial ownership, yet in another still distantly agreeing with its arguments. The *Postscripts* works its way through Hegel's logical systems, attacking determinism in favor of a more Kantian formation epitomized in its famous pronouncement "subjectivity is truth."[60]

It is in this middle work that finds Climacus/Kierkegaard wondering about Gotthold Lessing's statement that "If Gold held all truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left hand the persistent striving for the truth, and while warning me against eternal terror, should say: Choose! I should humbly bow before his left hand, and say: "Father, give thy gift; the pure truth is for thee alone."[61] The subsequent pages explore the possibility of logical systems of truth in classic Hegelian fashion, where absolute truth is not only sought after but achieved by processes of reason in the individual. Absolute here is understood as isolated in its perfection; not attached to anything but true in and of itself. Such a system of truth must begin with the immediate or given, that which is unmediated by any kind of reflection, if it is to reach the absolute in itself. Kierkegaard writes that,

> *How does the System begin with the immediate? That is to say, does it begin with it immediately?* The answer to this question must be an unconditional negative. If the System is presumed to come after existence, by which a confusion with an existential system may be occasioned, then the System is of course *ex post facto*, and so does not begin immediately with the immediacy with which existence began; although in another sense it may be said that existence did not begin with the immediate, since the immediate never is as such, but is transcended as soon as it is. *The System's beginning which begins with the immediate is thus itself reached by means of a process of reflection*.[62]

[60] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts* (New Jersey: Princeton; 1971), 224.
[61] Ibid, 195.
[62] Ibid, 197.

The unconditional negative with which the *Postscripts* critiques Hegel is implicated in the notion of truth as absolute. Kierkegaard discusses the absolute in its relation to immediacy, translating the oblique special status of Absolute Truth as isolate to a quality of finitude in immediacy. For Hegel, the Absolute is figured as total, yet Kierkegaard argues that the immediate has to be started at some isolated point and wants to know where this isolate status begins, and in doing so must figure that the System towards such a truth must also be subject either to a finitude or infinity. Systems must be final and finished to be a system, otherwise they would not be systems but simply incomplete. What is important to remember is not that Kierkegaard aims to attack the notion of Truth as Absolute, but rather that the System by which the Absolute Truth is gained refutes any real notion of individuality.

The system begins with the immediate or given, that which is unmediated by any kind of reflection, and is in this sense absolute. But in questioning this immediacy's existence, wondering how the system begins with the immediate, Kierkegaard concludes that it's beginning as immediacy must be reached by a kind of reflection. To think a logical system without reflection would be either an accident or a miracle, in either case refuting the presence of a system as logical. Furthering this notion, he claims that reflection is the very quality of logic because its aim is primarily the resolution of a thought. This critique of Hegelian logic therefore works on the ground that Absolute Truth and its System does not exist without the individual, who is not a perfect reasoning creature. Existence is nothing if it is not persistent striving, and in being so alludes to the existence of a finalized in which one can achieve or reach truth. But this Absolute Truth is more of an allusion than it is a graspable actuality, and existence as such is more about striving than it is about the grasping of truth.

This persistent striving is for both Lessing and Kierkegaard the quality of the sinister left, and for Kierkegaard to imbue the *Postscripts* with such importance on this left hand/right hand distinction and therein to also have an important section metaphorically distinguish its two qualities seems too perfect. The poetic sensibility is also that very left kind of existence in which one opts for persistent striving over the rigid, theological achievement of Absolute Truth in reason.

This association of the left hand with the aesthetic works draws an important distinction that followed Kierkegaard up until even his very final posthumous works. In *The Point of View*, a text on the use of pseudonymity throughout his career, he writes that his entire authorship is *from* the pseudonymous aesthetic and *to* the ethical-religious;[63] that in doing so he is in essence reflecting his stages of individuality in which one begins as a poet and transforms into a Christian. But while the overwhelming wealth of Kierkegaard's philosophy displays a variety of moods and temperaments which dictate both our reasonable and unreasonable existence, he strangely disregards the aesthetic sensibility and its supposed sinister dirtiness sooner than he even begins to grow into his own (albeit largely pseudonymous) authorship. Only two years after the publication of *The Concept of Irony*—his Masters' thesis on the use of rhetoric in Socrates—he released his treatment of the depravity and obsessions of aesthetics with *Either/Or*.

In the first half of this work, layered with strange authors and mysterious editors, all under the puppeteering guise of Kierkegaard's own obsession with the possibilities of not owning one's ideas and the implications of assumed authority in philosophical writing, an author known by the text as A and by scholars as The Aesthete describes his various interests. Namely,

[63] Ibid.

he is concerned with the dangers of seduction: both in Mozart's Don Giovanni, whose mythology of sexual conquest illustrates the sinfulness with which he conducts his affairs, and the far more elusive Johannes, author of "The Seducer's Diary," in which his desire for Cordelia takes the reader through a mind distraught in its concern for the possibility of everything. But while Kierkegaard's earliest pseudonymous work establishes such a critique of the aesthetic life, Kierkegaard himself never succeeded in moving beyond—either personally or professionally—from the aesthetic sensibilities he so despised.

In an essay on *Either/Or*, Louis Mackey writes that "philosophical thought is not the firming up of the Absolute Truth, but the imaginative exploration of the possible toward the enrichment of human self-understanding and the enabling of human decision."[64] What this illustrates is a complication of Kierkegaard's points of view of the varying authors (including Kierkegaard himself) that can never be reconciled. Each author is distinctly himself, exploring his self-hood *through* the rhetorical mode of philosophical objectivity, and in many cases exploring themselves in an objectivity which paradoxically takes advantage of a lack of ownership in pseudonymity. What is not achieved nor attempted in the aesthetic works is this very firming up of Absolute Truth, which at the very least is a partial intention of the later theological texts. It is not simply that The Aesthete is a pseudonym with which Kierkegaard can explore aesthetics. A is at once a way for Eremita the editor to conceal his desire to contrast aesthetics with ethics before synthesizing them into the religious stage of existence, and Eremita in turn is Kierkegaard's way of laying the groundwork for this stage-oriented philosophy in one of his earliest works to complicate throughout his career without assuming its concreteness,

[64] Louis Mackey, "Philosophy and Poetry in Kierkegaard," *The Review of Metaphysics* 23, no.2 (December 1969): 331.

while also being a pseudonym that tries to understand the danger of his own aestheticism, employing pseudonyms himself as with Johannes, the author of "The Seducer's Diary."

There is a parallel to be made in Socrates here, whose interest not in teaching others but in revealing to individuals that they are able to teach themselves—that all persons already have knowledge of the truth and only need to be reminded in the right space of dialogue—in its own way distinct from Kierkegaard also affirms the essential power of the inward turn. This interest in Socrates is not simply the way in which he began developing his notions of radical subjectivity and inwardness but also is the key to understanding his pseudonymity. Irony, in Kierkegaard's treatment of Socratic irony from his very first work, at once distances itself from communication in the very same way the pseudonymity distances itself from philosophical objectivity and is also importantly "the awakening of subjectivity."[65] On the one hand, irony is necessarily an interpersonal activity in its involvement with language and communicating with others, yet on the other hand it is precisely interested in not communicating, or in more simple forms not communicating directly. Let me explain: the common example given, as in Andrew Cross' essay on Kierkegaard's use of irony, to explain this rhetorical tool is the sentence "Nice weather we're having."[66] On a sunny summer's day, this statement means nothing other than a direct communication; the sun is out and the wind cools the simmering heat, one can hear the waves in the distance and the songs of summer birds. But, on say a day where it is hailing or there is the sight or sound of rain hitting mud, this sentence becomes ironic in its simple reversal of intended meaning.

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[65] Andrew Cross, "Neither Either Nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 126.
[66] Ibid, 131.

But it is not so simple, for the intended meaning is not affirmed in its negation; the bad weather is not necessarily ascribed to by the ironist in describing it as nice weather. In its simplest form yes, irony involves a contradiction in speech wherein one thing means precisely the other, but Cross examines a more nuanced radical verbal irony wherein an act of ironic speech can be interpreted by a listener or audience in a variety of ways without intending any one way to be the correct interpretation.[67] The intention here is not communication, not even in a deceptive sense as in simple irony, but in reveling in the freedom of not owning any meaning or intention of communication in the act of communication. It is then not that "nice weather" means "bad weather" but that however the listener hopes to interpret could be correct but is also always wrong because the ironist evades direct communication. If one tries to understand him as saying the weather is actually quite bad, he could avow his honest intent, whereas if one understands him as being honest, he can always reaffirm his irony in more oblique ways. It could even be the case that the ironist does not even have access to the knowledge of the weather, that he hasn't looked out the window at all today and is ironizing his lack of knowledge about the weather. Regardless, the intention of irony is a freedom towards communication.

> For the ironic subject, the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand, he does not possess the new. He knows only that the present does not match the idea… [H]e is continually pointing to something impending, but what it is he does not know.[68]

This freedom comes with a price, and it is that the ironist has only a negative subjectivity in their retreat from formed meaning in communication. What is important here is the idea that the ironist, in their rhetorical distance from concrete communication, is freed from the

[67] Ibid, 131-135.
[68] Ibid, as quoted in Cross, (CI 262; Cross 138).

immediacy of life. When the self is freed from immediacy by way of their irony, subjectivity also changes. The ironist—because they do not own their own thoughts but instead relegate them to ironies or pseudonyms—are unable to live a real life, engaged in the immediate and dedicated to themselves as thinkers.

> Irony [is] infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.[69]

Irony's relation to the absolute illustrates its ability to achieve truth, but it is important that this truth is also negative, and as Kierkegaard puts it "is a higher something that still is not." When the ironist speaks, he does not say what he means to say but invites his audience to achieve the truth through a negative relation to the given ironic statement. The essence of the ironist's life consists in the negative freedom with which irony operates on a social level, constraining one's positive freedom in its ability to form a life that is fully one's own.[70] The ironist chooses to not choose the intention of their statements, and so becomes anyone and no one. This is Kierkegaard: haunted by the shadows of his former self, the archetypes of his philosophy yet in no way in ownership of them other than being their God, and yet his philosophy still belongs to him in this negative form.

How does one move forward in positivity from this negative haunting? Cross writes about the end of irony here with remarkable yet unassumed implication of Kierkegaard in stating that the ironist, understanding this negative freedom and the implications it has towards individuality, dissociates from his own ironizing. "If the ironist does adopt an ironic attitude

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[69] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 261.
[70] Cross, "*Neither Either Nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony*," 138.

towards his own ironizing," Cross writes, "he loses another feature crucial to irony: the sense of his own difference from, and superiority to, that (and those) towards which his irony is directed."[71] Is this not the position of the sinister left hand with which the aesthetic works are signed, implied as independent from Kierkegaard's truer signed works? In this process though, the ironist loses all superiority over his ironies in lacking difference from those to which they are directed. The loss of the ironic attitude, especially in the case of Kierkegaard due to the eternal printedness of his pseudonymous works, does not resolve it in any way but simply extends it infinitely, ironizing one's own irony.

Kierkegaard's philosophy is uniquely his, and while his varied pseudonymity presents a complication to the assumption of philosophical objectivity, a tradition of which Kierkegaard is generally assumed under to those who only approach works like *Fear and Trembling* or *The Concept of Anxiety* without the rhetorical complications, they still only express a subjective desire; a truth that is arrived first and foremost by someone rather than in the service of the Absolute. Understood in this sense, we can see that the Kierkegaardian moods are perfectly made for someone like Kierkegaard.

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The majority of Kierkegaard's works are written under a varied set of pseudonyms ranging from the outrageously humorous—such as in the case of Hilarius Bookbinder—to the perhaps obliquely clever, like *Repetition's* Constantin Constantius or the fictional and reclusive editor of *Either/Or*, Victor Eremita (meaning victorious hermit). While the range of his pseudonymity has inspired a wealth of contradictory criticism on how one must engage in reading Kierkegaard, most are agreed that the later years of work, primarily concerning books

[71] Ibid, 139.

like *The Sickness Unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety*, are by and large privately respected by Kierkegaard even in their pseudonymity. Kierkegaard in fact nearly signed both works to himself before rendering them pseudonymous a short while prior to their respective publication.[72] Yet his early works are riddled with a secrecy of authority, and this career-spanning exploration comes to the forefront with *Either/Or*.

Alastair Hannay's introduction to the work explains that the pseudonymity's purpose is to "exhibit the existential relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in an existing individual […] what it means to *exist*, and what *inwardness* signifies."[73] In opposition to the Hegelian system of knowledge in its search for objective truths, Kierkegaard instead assumes the goal of being not to be the search for outward objectivity but inward subjectivity, in turn implying that there are truths that come from within just as much from without. It is not that the individual, in their reflective retreats of philosophical musing, achieves the kinds of knowledge associated with Truth, but rather that all knowledge reflects the individual who speaks such truth and commits to it. Truth here is not, as one might assume from Kierkegaard's Christianity, so much a divine revelation from above as it is form within, and in this sense is less about systematic organization of knowledge as it is about honest reflection. The ability to speak, reveal, or achieve such truths then relies on an ability to be honest to oneself, to face sensuous desire, to move forward with courage through anxiety's abyss, and to act with faith in the search for meaningful existence as an individual.

This also demonstrates the essential problem, still perhaps a heated concern to this day, with reading *Fear and Trembling*. It is important that we live *this life*, all-consuming in

[72] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, xvi.
[73] Alastair Hannay, "Introduction" in Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 10.

earthliness, and define our ethics from the ground up and between humanity. God's appearance to Abraham is the presence of faith unconcerned with ethics. It is the idea of God understood as wholly omnipotent, and that to have faith in such unknowing means that one's moral principles may be uprooted in sublime revelations. Abraham's story is parable, and understanding Abraham as the father of faith is not a manual for living, but a reminder of the essential incompatibilities of ethics and faith in their respective reason and unreason.

Either/Or attempts to dispel this objective formation of knowledge, the very same authority seen in most philosophy both before and since, by providing contradictory ones, each with their own caveats and intricacies. In a similar vein to ethics and faith in *Fear and Trembling*, *Either/Or* places aesthetics and ethics together in combat on the battleground of the page. It is not that, in the process of reading the work, the ethical wins over the aesthetic, or that the editor Eremita finally synthesizes them in the religious, but that philosophy itself is not an objective truth one reaches through the course of writing or reading—it is more importantly a subjective truth, differing for both the author and the reader in the aesthetic interaction with the text. Eremita even ends his preface in writing:

> One occasionally comes across novelettes where opposite life-views are expressed through particular persons. It usually ends with one of them convincing the other; rather than insisting on the view's speaking for itself, the reader is enriched with the historical result that the other party was convinced. […] Whether A wrote his aesthetic essays after receiving B's letters, whether his soul has continued since then to riot in wild abandon or has calmed down, of this I cannot see myself in a position to pass on a single piece of information since the papers contain none. Nor do they contain any clues as to how things have gone with B, whether he had the strength to stick to his view or not. Once the book has been read, A and B are

> forgotten; only the views confront each other and await no final decision in particular persons.[74]

Of note in this quote are the uses of the term "particular persons." The original Danish prints *personligheder*, designating not simply a particular person in the sense of a specific individual, as one might aim to read considering Kierkegaard's philosophical leanings, but is more accurately a personality. The difference between an individual and an individual's personality is that an individual may be considered in Kierkegaardian fashion as the soul of one's being: what kind of anxieties they have in their body and mind, what their faith is committed to, or what kind of despair they may be in. The Kierkegaardian individual, as is certainly enlightened in Adorno's reading of him as a bourgeois subject (which we will get to in due time), is particularly isolate.

The Hannay translation aims to highlight this Kierkegaardian individuality in Eremita's preface, yet the original *personligheder* offers more than such a classical reading might achieve. A personality is a unique blend of private individuality and public appearance. One is not simply anxious or faithful, but seem so in their life and is understood in this way by others. Kierkegaard might have considered himself a being in desperate anxiety, but his life was well known and publicly mocked in his contemporary Denmark, so there's little holding one back from imagining a group of his peers spouting: "That Søren sure is an anxious sort; did you hear he left Regine?"

The understanding of *personligheder* as designating not simply individuality in a classically Kierkegaardian sense but also as one's public appearance gives us a greater understanding of the novelettes of which Eremita refers to, which oppose two varying life-views with the hope of a concluding synthesis. The opposition, though, rebels against Hegelian

[74] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 36.

synthesis and is instead meant to be held in its tension by the readers. The personalities of the Aesthete, the Judge, and even their synthesizer Eremita are constructed personalities who are to be understood not as "particular persons" but as personalities almost nearing the status of archetypes. They are not to be read in any real sense but simply as hypothetical; as personalities *without* individuality, which is what they are. The Aesthete, the Judge, Eremita, and all of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms are precisely that: pseudonyms.

Eremita further implies in his preface that this acknowledgement of disownership on the part of A may be a reaction of fear, that A would not want to bear the weight of consequence in writing so honestly of his experience with seduction.[75] This, to anyone who may have glanced at Kierkegaard's life in broad strokes, reflects a fear of ownership on the part of the philosopher, whose writings on seduction and anxiety bear a striking similarity to his personal engagement with Regine Olsen. A's writings are claimed by Eremita to have been written around 1834,[76] 6 years prior to Kierkegaard's proposal to Olsen, but *Either/Or* was compiled in 1843, two years after he broke off their engagement. It would not be amiss, then, to claim that there is a strange relationship between the fictional refusal of authority, in its intensity of layering from Eremita to The Aesthete to Johannes Climacus, and Kierkegaard's own fear of confronting his distaste over the inability to live his philosophy as his life.

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Judge Vilhelm, the subject of the second half of *Either/Or*, writes in his letter to The Aesthete:

> The truth in this whole exposition, the real aesthetic element, consists in the fact that love is represented as a striving, that this feeling is seen fighting its way through opposition. The fault is that this struggle, this

[75] Ibid,32.
[76] Ibid, 33.

> dialectic, is entirely external, and that love comes out of this fight quite as abstract as when it entered into it.[77]

Why is truth considered aesthetically? If there is an Absolute Truth, it would involve a kind of revelation on the questions that have plagued philosophy since its inception, and of these questions one grand one is that of the nature of the good, in which case the question of truth is ethical and not aesthetic—so why does Vilhelm refer to the truth of his exposition as "the real aesthetic element?" Is there goodness, and does human morality account for this goodness? Is anyone or anything on this Earth born assumed into goodness, or must the good be earned? Or rather, is goodness the wrong way of coming into whatever it is supposed to be understood as? Has humanity figured goodness the wrong way? The question of the good is a question of morality and ethics, and Vilhelm figures here that love is directly related to the ethical because it involves an aesthetic *feeling*—not simply a reasoning—about the good and the bad in both private and public existence.

The truth for B must account for humans as individuals, very much like Johannes' and Kierkegaard's argument for Hegel's lack of individuality in the logical system of Truth, and in doing so understand them not simply as perfect reasoning creatures but as those who feel before they think. Love, which exists as a kind of truth to oneself, is represented as a striving in the very same way Johannes represents truth as a striving because they abstractly exist towards the very same earthly revelation and distant unknowing that is alluded to in the Hegelian critique at the heart of the *Postscripts*.

The proposition of the work, that one must either choose between the aesthetic and ethical lifestyles or otherwise reason their synthesis (the religious stage for Eremita), extends

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[77] Søren Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (New Jersey: Princeton; 1946), 81.

further than its classical reach. It is not simply that there is an either/or between these lifestyles, but also between ways of reading the work itself. One does not read, as Eremita says of novelettes, to choose a side and to be persuaded, but also to unpack what kind of reading one is doing in the very act of consuming the book's information. The layered and perhaps even confusing state of a philosophy text that is also a novel that is at once written by a plethora of authors yet by only one author (Penguin's 2018 edition cleverly writes "Preface by Victor Eremita" on the front cover, confusing matters more) that is said both textually and meta-textually to be lacking in all kinds of authority makes it impossible to read simply as philosophy.

The pseudonymity illustrates what David S. Stern describes as a "hermetic obscurity" in the first half of *Either/Or*: both in A, who successively removes himself throughout his papers so that by the end he is no longer even the author of these treatises (as in "The Seducer's Diary"), and in Eremita, who withdraws from any internal relation with the works that he merely finds by chance, hinting at another—far more hidden yet clear in its historicity—layer of obscurity in Kierkegaard himself.[78] It is also worth mentioning that this hermetic obscurity reveals what is the case in all of Kierkegaard's pseudonymity: each of the names he wrote under are epithetic, not simply pen names but particular clues or obscured facts which in their own respect tell us something about the peculiar nature of each name's lack of—or desire for—authority.

The *Diapsalmata*, the first segment of A's writings, strewn about in a mess of loose aphoristic claims, reinforces this effect of subjective disruption more abstractly reflected in the pseudonymous layering. There is little to no unity to the work, save a passing comment from Eremita expressing that in organizing them (or rather, in lack of organizing them, as he claims to

[78] David S. Stern, "The Ties that Bind: The Limits of Aesthetic Reflection in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*," *in International Kierkegaard Commentary Vol. 3 Either/Or I* (Georgia: Mercer Press, 1995), 253.

have strewn them about by chance), he noticed a thematic similarity between the first and final lines, but this statement already claims to paradox in Eremita's insistence on its disorganization. Like the aesthete's desires, the *Diapsalmata* is both everywhere and nowhere, laying down at any given center a wealth of possibilities for comparison and reading, yet authoritatively removed from any conclusion of harmony. It leads nowhere but unto itself and its expression is that of content without form, or claim without argument.

Yet Eremita finds the form in its disunity, effectively endowing a unity without authority, perhaps autonomous, or perhaps even of Eremita's own aesthetic palate. "What is a poet? An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music."[79] So begins the *Diapsalmata*, meaning "refrains" in the biblical tradition (as in recurring words in the psalms of David). One of the larger segments of the collection, the author approaches a critique of spectatorship, claiming that the critics are most forward in their insistence that the poet sings his song, of themselves claiming the rules of aesthetics without acknowledging nor experiencing themselves the anguish the heart endures in the process of poetry. The final lines are too curious to synopsize:

> Something wonderful happened to me. I was transported into the seventh heaven. All the gods sat there in assembly. By special grace I was accorded the favour of a wish. 'Will you,' said Mercury, 'have any other of the many splendours we have in our chest of knick-knacks? So choose, but just one thing.' For a moment I was at a loss. Then I addressed myself to the gods as follows: 'Esteemed contemporaries, I choose one thing: always to have the laughter on my side.' Not a single word did one god offer in answer; on the contrary they all began to laugh….[80]

[79] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 43.
[80] Ibid, 57.

The significance of this tribunal of Gods—in the plural—is for Kierkegaard an aesthete's appeal to the Pagan ideals of faith which he continuously returns to. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, he explains that in Paganism, the nothing of anxiety—that sense of negative freedom which stops the individual in their tracks, taking the metaphorical form of the dark abyss—is signified as fate.[81] In this fatalistic turn, neither guilt nor sin exist in the individual because they simply exist by necessity of their existence.

Paganism is also described in Kierkegaard as on par with the demonic, which, in its anxious unfreedom, closes off an individual from the language and words which demonstrate the necessity of freedom.[82] Speaking is in fact the very way through which one escapes the demonic incessance of fatalism, and in this sense is understood as aesthetic in character in reference to the archetypal poet who spends his days alone, lost in thought and cast to the throngs of fate, or worse yet, doom. The important difference here is that the phenomenon of the demonic is understood as one who is under the bondage of sin, in a sense not in control of their actions,[83] whereas the Pagan is one who sees their actions as the subject of fate's decision. Each have a negative relation to freedom, yet one is Pagan and one Christian. The Pagan character of this aphorism holds choice in his hands and opens up language in holding laughter on his side, for the appeal to humor is a social one, particularly in the case of its external, bodily manifestation in laughter. The pagan then is not particularly Pagan in any sense, yet neither is he Christian.

The peculiarity of the final aphorism is not in the strange appeal to Roman Gods but rather the story itself and its misrelation to the way Kierkegaard describes the fatalistic nature of paganism. The character *chooses*, which is precisely what Kierkegaard finds to be lacking in

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[81] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980) 96.
[82] Ibid, 123.
[83] Ibid, 118.

such a character, distinguishing himself but in turn disturbs both ours and Eremita's reading. The story deceptively begins with a passive action, that of *something happening to him*, but immediately follows with a tale of radical individuality in how the character decides on laughter as his infinite repose.

In the first instance, we must wonder what it is that Eremita could have seen in these aphorisms? Both he and Kierkegaard existed before the wealth of commentary on paganism and its fatalistic nature in his later work, so one cannot interpret on such a basis if they are attempting to engage with the pseudonyms as quasi-independent. Instead, one might approach it by saying that Eremita sees the connection as a distinctly aesthetic one: the question "What is a poet?" is not in fact answered in the first aphorism alone but in the last as well, in turn implying that all of A's writings are answering this question. In the first, he is "an unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart" and in the last he is the same yet different: plagued by the negative freedom of his submission to fate, yet peculiarly related to a deep sense of freedom and choice but only in a poetic manner. He is free in a bodily way—seductive and earthly—but not spiritually.

In the second instance, our reading is disrupted because we are confronted with all of these particular disturbances: the later pagan commentary and its effect on interpretation of this aphorism, the strange unity between the first and final aphorisms as pointed to by Eremita, then in turn the possibilities of having been written without authority and therefore meant to be approached with philosophical caution, and also the literary effect of all of this confusing irony.

Aage Henriksen distinguishes his "New Critical" approach to reading *Either/Or* as built on a literary convention that dialectically opposes a "poet" and an "ironic observer" who lift the

veil on one another's respective illusions of reality.[84] In the context of "The Seducer's Diary," A in his frightful handling of the Seducer's entries reveals to us an ironic distance with which we are lead to read them as negatively poetic, engaging in the illusion of seductive dreaming and plotting which remove him from the immediacy of reality. A begins his short preface to the diary thus:

> I cannot conceal from myself, can scarcely master, the anxiety which grips me at this moment, as I resolve for my own interest to make a fair copy of the hasty transcript I was able at that time to secure only in the greatest haste and with much disquiet.[85]

This introduction quite similarly resembles Eremita's in its hasty and disquieting interest. Both distance themselves from the ideas held within the respective pages, resolving to lack ownership for their own interest, removing themselves from the immediacies of their realities, understood within the context of philosophical diatribes. The Diapsalmata, the Seducer's Diary, even Eremita's introduction all toe the line between philosophy and literature, never fully one or the other, and this is precisely their implicit desire: to approach the conclusions of philosophy without any of the rigor of objective reasoning; to explore ideas through passion rather than intense thought.

We are to read them as A reads them, yet this negative unity Henriksen writes of, where does it end? A is not an ironic observer in any strict sense, for he too is a poet in his own right. He is the dreamer of Mozart, the aphoristic flaneur of his "Diapsalmata," and he too is drunk from poetry, where stern reality and faith towards commitment are cast aside in favor of the immediacy of the sensuous.

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[84] David J. Gouwens, "Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, Part One: Patterns of Interpretation," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary Vol.3: Either/Or I*, 9.
[85] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 248.

The further we move backwards, lifting our own veils as readers, searching for the ideal ironic observer, the more we find they are all revealed in their hermetic obscurity. Eremita, the hermit victorious in his title as edit, claims his distance from *Either/Or* as a collection engaged in the king of negative unity Henriksen reads, is himself a poet who organizes the "Diapsalmata," choosing to not choose and in doing so finding there to be curious observations that must be encountered in its first and final lines. We pull back the cover of the book and find Kierkegaard's name, the rotten puppet master who is no more distanced or ironic in his observations than Eremita, A, or Johannes The Seducer, but himself illusory to the mild taste of reality in his obsessive toying with these twice-removed "shadowgraphs," these silhouettes of poets and far-from-real figures.

If we return at once to the opening comments by Eremita, writing on his judgements of the two authors of *Either/Or*, we find this passage again:

> Whether A wrote his aesthetic essays after receiving B's letters, whether his soul has continued since then to riot in wild abandon or has calmed down, of this I cannot see myself in a position to pass on a single piece of information since the papers contain none.[86]

These personalities are not meant to be interpreted in any kind of concrete sense or as a kind of "world" of Kierkegaard's philosophy, where one attempts to find the connections between the characters in *Either/Or* as showing up in later works, like the dinner party in *Stages in Life's Way*. They simply exist as philosophical archetypes of being whose personality is their thoughts in writing, and whose oppositions and inadequacies are to be held as essential to them. To read into them as part of a universe is to miss their ironic presence as individuals who are defined, like anyone, with misgivings, unformed opinions, and ideas which may not be defended

[86] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 36.

with the kinds of thoughtful intensities one hopes to build upon a first thought's glance. The position of the pseudonymity in Kierkegaard is—regardless of what Kierkegaard hoped to achieve—a critique of the status of philosophy as an oasis of perfect reason, filling its water not with philosophy but with its bastardized reflection.

ADORNO'S DISINTEREST IN THE PSEUDONYMITY

"All attempts to comprehend the writings of philosophers as poetry have missed their truth content,"[87] writes Adorno in the opening sentence of his first published work, a treatise on Kierkegaard. The book explores Kierkegaard's existential philosophy—both aesthetic and ethical/religious—in order to frame him as a distinctly bourgeois figure whose status as a *rentier* in the typical European *intérieures* of the 19th century both explains his desire for the inward turn but in doing so render him impotent to the real problems of a Denmark in the throngs of a budding capitalism.

In this central argument Adorno writes that "the *intérieure* is polemically posited on the boundary of space as the sole determinate being; it is polemically the equivalent of Kierkegaard's 'subjective thinker.'"[88] This bourgeois space is how inwardness for Kierkegaard is metaphorically defined: quiet, solitary, and available only to those with a determinate wealth to engage in such philosophical privilege. The very architecture of one's private space defines the metaphoric capabilities of their thought, and Adorno finds that in the case of Kierkegaard it is the window mirror which acts as the characteristic piece not simply of the nineteenth century apartment, but also of his aesthetic philosophy.

The window mirror is one which is posed in one's room as to grant the secluded *rentier* the ability to see outside without putting themselves in the assumedly vulnerable position of

[87] Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3.
[88] Ibid, 43.

being in front of the window, subject to objectification by onlookers; the dastardly European equivalent to the two-way mirrors one recognizes from the interrogation room in detective stories. Their unique placement in one's room creates what Adorno refers to as the semblance of space, constructing images out of the real world without placing the observing subject into said world. What happens when space is semblance rather than actuality is a kind of reasoning, thinking privilege in which one is granted to philosophize without considering the reality of one's existence. For Adorno, the window mirror is the ironic twist of Kierkegaard's life, projecting a semblance which grants him the seclusion to find a philosophy of existence, but in so doing resists the social sphere which so necessarily defines one's existence as much as the private self.

Window mirrors were commonly called "spies" in Kierkegaard's age, and the connection is drawn through a longer quote from his late, posthumous work *The Point of View*:

> I am, that is, like a spy in a higher service, in the service of the idea and as such must keep watch on the intellectual and the religious and spy out how 'existence' matches up with knowledge and 'Christendom' with Christianity.[89]

For Kierkegaard this scopophilic gaze of looking without being looked back is exposed in a positive light, perhaps indicative of another appeal to a Hegelian perspective wherein one sees through the concreteness of everyday life into a more divine and abstract truth, framed by Kierkegaard as part of his Christian duty without confronting its perverse nature. Even the seducer of *Either/Or*, that very shameful archetype of aestheticism's dire obsessions, engages with this act of looking while observing seventeen-year-old Cordelia shopping in public:

> As yet she has not seen me; I am standing at the other end of the counter, far off by myself. There is a mirror on the opposite wall; she is not

[89] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View of my Work as an Author* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 87.

> contemplating it, but the mirror is contemplating her. How faithfully it has caught her image…[90]

The seducer, in observing Cordelia not directly but through the mirror, captures the image of Cordelia, but not her. The faithfulness which thus catches her image is an ironic one whose mimesis is doubled—the object of the seducer's gaze is not Cordelia herself but her representation. In this contemplation, the object is nothing but semblance and lacks all reality, and the subject does not reach outward in thought but further inward.

This description—not of the window mirror but of the inward turn's disavowal of the public—echoes other claims from *The Point of View* that are not explored by Adorno. Kierkegaard there describes the crowd and its essential mentality as "irresponsible and unrepentant."[91] This irresponsible nature of the crowd highlights what Adorno finds as the subtle features of Kierkegaard's work—appearing for him only in the metaphor of the window mirror—and brings it to the forefront. Kierkegaard cared only for the single individual and the inward turn, and his works only have either ironic or unintended declarations of admiration towards the public sphere and its effect both on and by the inward self. Adorno writes,

> In the image of the *intérieure* therefore draws all of Kierkegaard's philosophy into its perspective, because in this image the doctrine's elements of ancient and unchanging nature present themselves directly as the elements of the historical constellation that governs the image.[92]

Kierkegaard's ultimate issue is his inability to confront himself as this bourgeois figure. The "unchanging nature" of his existence—and his construction of existentialism—is precisely the social forces of both the general public and of capitalism's affect on that public to which he refuses to admit shape our existence. Kierkegaard's inability to confront this is what permits the

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[90] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1987), 288.
[91] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 11.
[92] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 42.

very kind of privilege that allows for Kierkegaard to flourish as an academic. The image projected through the window mirror is Kierkegaard's own image as philosopher; egoistic in his privilege and status and able to disavow the plights of the public sphere in favor of the mystical musings of the inward self.

There is an important dilemma in Adorno's critique though. He reads certain arguments—like the struggle with history in *Stages on Life's Way* which attacks concrete history as lacking the depth of inward history or otherwise any of the aesthetic arguments in the first half of *Either/Or*—as "invariably represent[ing] Kierkegaard's own doctrine."[93] Here is one of many instances where Adorno refuses to accept the integrity of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonymity, as both *Stages* and *Either/Or* are the two works in which the author engaged in not simply a pseudonymous publication, but one in which a single text is enveloped in a complex string of fake authors and editors who are engaging with the reader, the genre of philosophy, and the social and moral problems they encounter.

Adorno's political argument—that Kierkegaard's philosophy is determined and advantaged by his bourgeois status—is entirely valid and it is not my intention to attempt to undo or critique it. Prior to this interpretation, though, Adorno attempts to understand why poetry is wrongly understood as philosophy and why the two are mutually exclusive modes of being and communication. It is my intention to explore these earlier arguments in relation to my acceptance of Kierkegaard's pseudonymity as an aesthetic quality whose nature intends to directly confront and question the objective philosophy which Adorno hopes to exclude from aesthetics' realm. That Adorno seeks to explain Kierkegaard's philosophy as never escaping the aesthetic stage as

[93] Ibid, 36.

an "objectless inwardness"[94] is not at issue; rather it is that this aesthetic stage is at the very heart of all philosophy—including Adorno himself.

Let us return to the very first sentence of Adorno's text: "All attempts to comprehend the writings of philosophers as poetry have missed their truth content,"[95] What does Adorno mean in this opening statement? What is of importance to him is to highlight the way that the interpretation of philosophy as poetry—the kind which he finds plaguing Kierkegaardian analysis[96]—opposes the attempt to comprehension by stripping away from the standard of the real. All philosophy, in its assumption of authorial objectivity, confronts the question of *what is real*. The standard is that philosophy demands or requires the grappling of this question in its varied formations.

Poetry is then the externalization of subjectivities whose standards are towards the poetic in opposition to the real. The general introduction to the *Lyric Poetry Reader* offers insight into the term "lyric" and how it is confused over history; the same is true of poetry. Poetry, like "lyric," has been described to mean songs, poems with musical elements, an essence that is contained in lyrics, anything that is short or can be put in opposition—as Adorno aims too—with philosophy.[97] While the Reader in its varied essays attempts to find different definitions of what both lyric and poetry means, they are also aware that "perhaps [they have] become so difficult to

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[94] David J. Gouwens, "Kierkegaard's *Either/Or,* Part One: Patterns of Interpretation," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Either/Or Part I*, ed. Robert Perkins (Georgia: Mercer University Press; 1995), 25.
[95] Ibid, 3.
[96] Adorno finds many of these authors throughout this first chapter. There is Herman Gottsched, an early German translator of his, who praises Kierkegaard's poetic capabilities; Theodor Hacker, who accepts the pseudonymity as essential but also believes them to all have equal authorial objectivity; and Christoph Schrempf, who even in critiquing the aesthetic mode of the first half of Either/Or, for Adorno still—as with the other authors—fall under the spell of his "apostolic claim." (11)
[97] Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds, *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2014), 1.

define because we need [them] to be blurry around the edges, to remain capacious enough to include all kinds of verse and all kinds of ideas about what poetry is or should be."[98] Poetry has no static definition, and this is its particular power throughout history.

Hegel's definition is surely important in this distinction, as both Adorno and Kierkegaard work both with and against his concepts. The poet for Hegel was "the centre which holds the whole lyric work of art together," and "must identify himself with this particularization of himself as with himself, so that in it he feels and envisages himself."[99] This conception of poetry as essentially the product of a poet presents an important distinction of subjectivity. It doesn't particularly matter what poetry is—because such definitions will change—but that the poet must understand what he is doing as such. The poet holds responsibility in his dialectical accomplishments, and in Hegel's idea, "moves us all forward toward enlightenment."[100] The standard of poetry has no held definitions in its representation. That is, lyrics and poems advance through history with experimentation. The standards are then not its representation but the truth they hold and unfold both for the audience and for the poet as poetic subject.

Reality exists for artworks insofar as they must exist objectively, but this objectivity has no access to their truth existing only as the outer shell—the representation—through which its truth lies. Artworks for Adorno an only be thought of as true in their interiority. Adorno's defense here turns to Kant in his formation of discursive knowledge, which argues that we know things as we receive sensory information, in turn only forming the whole of a thing from its parts. A painting is a combination of acrylics or oils, transferred from brush to canvas, possibly framed – but is it never immediately the interiority of a painting. Such a knowledge, if possible at all, only

[98] Ibid, 2.
[99] Hegel as quoted in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 3.
[100] Ibid.

occurs when reflection on the whole of its parts, and not an immediate recognition of the whole itself.

The interiority of artworks is always at a distance from its observers, and Adorno figures that the way into this interiority—if we are disrupted by our discursive curse—is through reflection on imitation. "If in Kant discursive knowledge is to renounce the interior of things," he writes, "then artworks are objects whose truth cannot be thought except as that of their interior. Imitation is the path that leads to this interior."[101] Imitation is this very path precisely because the only other path is one which jumps over imitation and towards imitation's object; thinking artworks as devoid of interiority other than as an exterior signpost of a thing's interiority. What is important for Adorno is to course a path which is both mediated by the imitation but striving for the truth within the object, both as object and truth but in a hierarchical structure where the object belongs to its truth and not vice versa.

It is not simply that in our assumption of discursive knowledge we are to renounce the interior of things altogether, but rather that direct confrontation with interiority as such gives observers the opportunity to obtain a sliver of truth in art's interiority rather than in the spectacle of classical representation. A simple haiku describing a landscape might remind one of the beauty of objective reality. What may be truthful about it is not the landscape to which it holds its representation, nor is it a truth about landscapes. It is instead the particular truth that is involved in poetry's process of being, both in itself and necessarily for an audience and by a poet.

What is truth content? It is philosophy. It must be maintained that in these definitions, poetry is not art and art is not poetry. For Adorno, primarily in his *Aesthetic Theory*, in

[101] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 126.

continuing his aesthetic assessment of discursive knowledge's place art contains truth in questioning, and the essential question that all pondering on or of art boils down to is *"What is it all about?"* This question in turn is narrowed by Adorno as in fact meaning: *"Is it true?"*[102] But how does this narrowing occur? The first question for Adorno cannot be sufficient for reflection because it avoids asking of the truth content in a given artwork. *"What is it all about?"* is for Adorno a poetic question lacking the reflective rigor of confronting truth. Alternatively, asking *"Is it true?"* fulfills the philosophical requirement of artistic reflection in directly confronting the enigmatic nature of artworks. Art is fractured and complicated, always struggling both with and against its mimetic structure, and in so doing imparts truth content that is just as equally struggled with in its enigmatic quality.

For Adorno, manifestations of thinkers' subjectivities do not constitute philosophy in its requirement towards interpreting the real and confronting truth. Instead, these poetic instances retreat into the kinds of slippery consciousnesses of authors in their subjective attempt to interpret and project reality. Yet the line is thin, especially concerning Kierkegaard, since the pseudonymity is both an aesthetic decision meant to influence the authority of his philosophy and yet also a deeply personal decision, reflecting the hermetic anxieties in producing these works. It is impossible to describe Kierkegaard's work as objective philosophy since it is consistently imbedded, even into the posthumous *Point of View*, with manifestations of his own subjectivity—both as himself and his pseudonyms—and in doing so musings on the essence of individuality.

[102] Ibid, 127.

The difference between the aesthete and the philosopher is dialectics in a classically Hegelian sense. In this dialectical process, one is engaged in the fruitful outcomes of reason in synthesis. I should clearly delineate between a poet and an aesthete, as Hegel in fact adored poetry—and as Michael Inwood phrases it in his introduction to Hegel's lectures on aesthetics—"saw art and aesthetic experience as the key to resolving the oppositions that fragment and alienate man."[103] It is not that poetry itself lacks dialectics. Poetry in fact both reveals and realizes the absolute when reflected on dialectically. What is at issue is the sensuality with which man understands when aesthetic experience is taken as an end in itself.

Poets are not sinful in their creation of sensuous objects. Hegel clearly states that one of the necessary features of a work of art is to "be more or less borrowed from the sensuous and addressed to man's sense."[104] The poets for Hegel possess great power in being able to sensually represent objects which can impart truth on their audience. It is the aesthete who is in danger of getting lost in the immediacy of sensuality and forgetting that art must have an end whose object is truth. The philosopher's dialectical process opposes the way it operates in the aesthete, who is consistently distracted by the immediate pleasures of sensing certain structures of communication; the way the words fall on the page or the sweet way a sentence sounds when spoken aloud. Philosophy strives for the object distance which is lacking in aesthetic comprehension. What aestheticism does is alter the real in the process of mimesis by treating representation as a sensuous phenomenon. The aesthete doesn't comprehend the real as fixed and absolute, but as tangible and malleable and as a distinctly subjective endeavor lacking entirely the objectivity Hegel strived for in his philosophy.

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[103] Michael Inwood, "Introduction," in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (New York: Penguin, 1993), xii.
[104] Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 30.

Kierkegaard's definition of poetry—according to Adorno—is metaphysics' deceptive claim that there is some kind of revelation of truth. "For Kierkegaard," he writes, "poetry is the mark of deception borne by all metaphysics in the presence of positive revelation."[105] Philosophy rightfully claims the presence of positive revelation towards truth, but in poetry this claim is deceptive; poetry speaks only to itself in its total freedom, without responsibility towards truth. The revelation is thus not positive because it holds no relationship to truth as objectivity.

There is nothing to posit in poetry because it lacks respect for metaphysics insofar as it actively alters truth in its happening, holding then not a positive relation towards truth but holding truth itself and molding it. What this demonstrates then is that what Adorno means by poetry here is really the aesthetic sensibility. Following his discussion of poetry as the mark of deception Adorno writes that "[Kierkegaard] calls himself a poet when he undertakes to recapitulate the poetic existence that constitutes, according to his hierarchy of the spheres of spiritual life, the location of depravity in human life."[106] This further accentuates the argument that in these segments, what Adorno refers to as "poetry" is not a way of describing lyric texts or aesthetic works, but rather a way of living poetically which is akin to Kierkegaard's conception of the aesthetic life seen in *Either/Or*. It is not so much poetry that lacks respect for metaphysics as it is poeticism, which in its relationship to artworks transforms the real in its total freedom towards it.

Poetry can only approach the standard of the real in its re-configuration. This means that, when reflecting poetically, one engages in an aesthetic thought that mimetically constructs truth content. Yet at the same time, the aesthetic thought can never engage with truth directly but only

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[105] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 6.
[106] Ibid.

with objective reason and distance, which is not truth itself but ways of revealing only slivers of it.

Yet if, in Kierkegaard's philosophical desire to give furthered agency to the notion of one's subjectivity, we take it that the revelation of truth is a dialectical experience, then this experience involves communication between subjects. As in Adorno's late aesthetics, there is a discursivity in autonomous art and this discursivity holds truth insofar as it is in communication with its mimetic matrix. The philosopher has access to this truth content when they engage in mimetic reflection—on thinking of that ephemeral in-between state of representation—but what prevents the aesthete from approaching truth?

Adorno sheds some light on this border of understanding in *Aesthetic Theory*:

> Whether by reflection or unconsciously, modern art has undermined the dogma of intuitability. What remains true in the doctrine of intuitability is that it emphasizes the element of the incommensurable, that which in art is not exhausted by discursive logic, the sine qua non of all manifestations of art. […] The word *Anschaulichkeit* [intuitability], itself borrowed from the theory of discursive knowledge, where it stipulates a formed content, testifies to the rational element in art as much as it conceals that element by dividing off the phenomenal element and hypostatizing it.[107]

The shift with which modern art has undermined intuition's "dogma"—what we might understand as the assumption of aesthetic judgement in individuals—is not particular to this modern shift. While he argues that intuition belongs to discursive knowledge insofar as it rationalizes the truth of a given art object (while concealing and hypostatizing it), it is only discursive in this concealment. Yet the concealment of intuitiability is not simply in the object itself but in the subject, where aesthetic judgement habitualizes itself in such a way that it treats

[107] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 96-97.

aesthetic encounters without necessarily thinking with the same rational rigor as it would have prior to this state of intuition.

The mimetic reflection that is so vital to the revelation of truth content for Adorno—both in Kierkegaard and Aesthetic Theory—must happen with an intensive attention. This is what the philosopher offers which the aesthete cannot: attention and decisiveness, the ability to look at art and not get lost both in the sensuous nature of the object itself and more importantly in one's own intuition and habit. It is important that one understands Kierkegaard's philosophy not as one of stages but as one of moods. In this understanding, aestheticism is not something one loses with philosophical training, but can always slip into at any moment. It is not a stage of existence but a mood proper to being. There are no philosophers who have lost touch with the aesthetic innocence they once thought with.

All philosophers are writers and writing *is* an aesthetic activity. In an ideal frame of mind, the philosopher is the ultimate dialectician, and in Hegel's mind they write in the pure frame of objective reason, but such an idealism is predicated on the annihilation of anxiety's curse in the subject. Kierkegaard's writings on anxiety show us that it is impossible to live without the anxiety of choice, and this very anxiety is the curse of the poet, unable to choose and either desiring too much or happy to sit in idle thought without the need for dialectical synthesis. How does a philosopher reason without also thinking of the poetry of the words themselves, of the lilting lines or seductive phrases? All philosophers are also aesthetes in partaking in the creative decisions associated with writing not simply as communicative reason but as poetry.

A note should be made here on the confusion of terms at play in both Kierkegaard and Adorno. Both authors consistently refer to a variety of interwoven terms with indeterminate meanings. What is the difference between poetry and art, or poetry and aesthetics, or aesthetics

and art, and why do any of these distinctions matter? Adorno offers three definitions of what Kierkegaard means when he refers to the "aesthetic" throughout his works, and these three definitions reveal an interpretation that—perhaps confusingly—does in fact envelope all these terms together.

The first is the classical definition, discussed in the same sense by Kant and Hegel before him, simply denoting the theory of art and the realm of art works.[108] We find this definition in discussion at the improvised address to the *Symparanekromenoi* in "Shadowgraphs," where the author references an essay on the famous sculpture of Laocoon which, to him, adequately separates art and poetry in placing the former in the realm of repose and the latter in that of movement. He writes that "whatever […] is to be an object of artistic representation must have that quiet transparency in which the inner reposes in a corresponding outer."[109]

Kierkegaard, or rather The Aesthete, or otherwise some deeper ironic pseudonym, believes the poetic to exist in the realm of inner repose. Yet it would seem that the large contribution of Kierkegaard's aesthetic theory—as discussed and understood by Adorno among others—holds the poetic sensibility to be inward, but specifically a kind of inwardness that is in repose in an un-peaceful sense. The poet's mind is free to wander but makes no choices and in doing so is afflicted with a deep yet repressed sense of anxiety.

Perhaps then, Laocoon's inner repose as imagined in "Shadowgraphs" reflects the later Kierkegaard of anxiety in its repose of horror; the horror of torture by divine snakes to which his representation and myth makes its subject. But does one attempt to understand this inner repose as an anxious one with the added irony of its outer being a representation of movement in repose

[108] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 14.
[109] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 168.

in the form of sculpture? Laocoon is portrayed in harrowed movement yet is itself a representation without movement. The position of his body implies swaying and flaying, yes, perhaps, but it of course doesn't and this outer manifestation is the only way in which one can poetically move towards its interior. The more one attempts to poke into this interpretation of aesthetics in "Shadowgraphs," the more it speaks to its improvised nature as a confused and nearly meaningless aesthetic philosophy, which if anything is aided best by an acceptance of its pseudonymous nature without authority than it ever could be by a serious philosophical treatment. It should also be clarified that Adorno, in this first definition, does not in fact observe such a granular analysis of this kind of aesthetic in Kierkegaard, content simply with referring to a variety of sections and chapters from *Either/Or* as explicative in and of themselves.

How can Adorno construct an aesthetic of Kierkegaard when Kierkegaard's aesthetics exist in opposition to each other as pseudonymous instances? How can the poetic be understood in any given way when at one point Kierkegaard admires its willful repose while at another renouncing aesthetic repose as a repressed inhibition towards anxiety as a product of faithlessness? Adorno's refusal to contend with the pseudonymity—that which makes the author of "Shadowgraphs" nothing more than the author of "Shadowgraphs" who places art works in realms without any necessary authority or contention—leads to this confusion with Kierkegaard's oeuvres as organized in any traditional or linear sense.

In the second definition, aesthetic refers to a kind of comportment or lifestyle.[110] This definition exists within the subject entirely in how it commands the inward. The aesthetic comportment is, in Kierkegaard's stages, immediate in being. Again, one can turn to *The Concept*

[110] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 15.

of Anxiety and its description of innocence as a comparison to the immediate aesthetic character, in which "man is not qualified as spirit but is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition."[111] We all are born with an inner state of repose and peace within us, but this dreaming spirit is an innocence which is forever lost when we decide to take life into our hands and make choices. At this point guilt begins to plague us in its anxiety as the possibility of possibility. This dreaming spirit is the free and poetic nature written of in this second definition, that which lives freely towards possibility instead of feeling guilty towards the problem of choice.

There is a promise in Kierkegaard's philosophy of stages that the ethical betters the aesthetic temperament in its "baptism of the will," as Judge Wilhelm writes, wherein one is freed of the sinful nature of poetry whose gaze never shies from possibility's temptations, instead grounding the self in the concrete reasoning of choice. Yet Adorno doesn't seem to find the ethical in Kierkegaard all that rigorous in opposition. He infers that the ethical man in Kierkegaard "recedes behind his doctrine of the paradoxical-religious."[112] Opposing the free, imaginative, immediate and sensuous nature of the aesthete against the unreasonable man of faith, reclusive not in seduction but in doctrinal command, Adorno finds that these two deportments are in fact not very different. Both disavow the secular nature of objective reason: aestheticism in its lack of will and faithfulness in its appeal to the will of God rather than the will of oneself.

This reading fails to attend to the alternative ethics and faith revealed in Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* (as discussed in Chapter 2), where the omnipotent

[111] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 41.
[112] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 15.

power of God is not a way to dictate one's life but rather the unknowing presence with which one defines one's life as essentially bound to earth. God exists as a border of understanding and not a way to define ethics through doctrine. Adorno's reading fails in assuming Kierkegaard as simply an ethical-religious author, which he does in fact hope himself to be even in his very last works yet is not and remains an aesthetic thinker without authority. The pseudonyms take hold of themselves and exist in an ironic rebuttal independent from Kierkegaard's desires; for better or for worse they are consistent as a critique of the nature of object philosophy.

The paradox of religion is not the call to doctrinal command. Ethics is strictly the product of earthly, human thinking from the ground up. The difference between the aesthetic and the ethical is then not creative freedom against the paradoxical-doctrinal, but rather anxiety-ridden against the paradoxical-ethical. The paradox here is less strict in how it holds the paradox of faith over morality, yet morality exists somewhat independent in its definitions; not doctrinal but still subject to the whims of a God who may not approach human morality with any kind of sympathy.

In the third sense, the aesthetic is a kind of communication with oneself., wherein aesthetic "refers to the form of subjective communication and justifies itself on the basis of Kierkegaard's concept of existence."[113] This is different than a deportment or lifestyle in the way it reflects on one's inwardness rather than immediately being it. The aesthetic in this sense is the manner in which inwardness is manifested in the subject.

Adorno's reference to Kierkegaard's concept of existence turns to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*—the middle ground between the aesthetic and ethical works which may

[113] Ibid.

comfortably be spoken of as the nexus of his philosophies—in its description of thought as having its own kind of reflection. Kierkegaard puts it thus: "The reflection of inwardness gives to the subjective thinker a double reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal; but as existing in this thought and as assimilating it in his inwardness, he comes more and more subjectively isolated."[114] One assimilates the thought in one's reflection of inwardness because to be immediate in one's thought is to be open to the entire freedom of possibility, which, as explained in his *Concept of Anxiety*, is the kind of innocence one finds impossible to reach at the moment one first posits the existence of choice. Therefore, one separates the reflecting thought with the reflecting self to allow thought to relish in its freedom to reflect.

Individuality is therein defined as one's interest in one's own thoughts, and in so doing there is a double reflection: both within the individual towards his own thoughts, but also in the thoughts towards themselves. This second reflection is more intrinsic to the ephemeral constitution of inwardness in its ability to wade in the freedom of possibility without the more concrete self's access to the guilt with which these choices are reckoned with. The self communicates with this reflective thought and in this sense is an aesthetic communication in the creation of an ironic distance. One manifests the idea of a deeper self to communicate with, but in this process it is othered in an aesthetic fashion.

Often this manifestation is epitomized in the phrase "choose yourself," written of in Judge William's letter to the Aesthete wherein self-knowledge is opposed to the contemplation of the aesthetic lifestyle. The Judge writes thus:

> So the fault of the mystic is not that he chooses himself, for in my opinion he does well in doing that, but his fault is that he does not choose rightly, he chooses with freedom and yet he does not choose ethically; but one can

[114] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 68.

> choose oneself with freedom only when one chooses oneself ethically, but one can choose oneself ethically only by repenting oneself, and only by repenting does one become concrete, and only as a concrete individual is one a free individual.[115]

The mystic and the aesthete here are understood as the same by the Judge because they both contemplate with freedom and not with concrete ends in sight. It is not that these comportments lack choice altogether, but that the way they choose is without any good reason, simply existing in the basest state of human experience by refusing to contemplate one's choices. The judge's statement that one can choose oneself ethically importantly recalls the later *Concept of Anxiety*, which describes repentance as an ethical contradiction in its inability to have any command over what it feels guilt over. The repentant character is in this sense despairing, and so for the Judge to insist in repentance as a necessary step towards ethical freedom is an instance where a seemingly authoritative character must be questioned as having his own aesthetic misgivings. The Judge may *know* what is right, but repentance only allows oneself to think about what is right. It does not grant the courage to act on it, which, as is claimed later in *Anxiety*, is "precisely what ethics requires."[116]

Whether or not one chooses oneself with the complete freedom of the aesthete or the repentant guilt of the ethical, both are ultimately aesthetic in how they must "choose oneself" as exterior to themselves. The aesthete has self-knowledge as a goal but cannot reach it because he does not have self-knowledge as the beginning to which he can set goals through. William then believes self-knowledge to be inherent in the self regardless of cognition, but through the abstraction of one's concrete self with one's inner spiritual self there are deeper connections to be

[115] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* (New Jersey, Princeton, 1987), 207.
[116] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 118.

made; goals whose beginning is the acquisition of an existent self-knowledge rather than the hopeful contemplation of one to be discovered.

This position is aesthetic insofar as it advances the essential inhibitions of the ironist; not just separating oneself from other individuals through rhetorical distance but more importantly through a dissociation of oneself from oneself. The metaphorical "separation" of these two selves in the allusion to a double reflection is sincere—in this position one is genuinely separated between an inner and outer self and in this sense loses a unified agency. The classical ironist simply plays at being and only communicates insofar as they are in fact not really communicating. They are distanced from themselves as essentially social beings; not simply individuals living in constant retreat but also necessarily existing in social landscapes. The advanced ironist, in the position heretofore explained, is distanced from themselves both as social beings and as beings in and of themselves.

Kierkegaard's extensive pseudonymity is precisely the product of this kind of poetic subjectivity in its ironic-aesthetic character. what removes his work from the status of canonical philosophy and towards more loose configurations—as in the philosophical novels of Sartre and Murdoch or the quasi-fictionalized dialogues of Plato—is the meta-textual exploration of the implications of holding opinions towards the real; of trying to understand what it means to do philosophy.

Adorno's disinterest in the pseudonymity is precisely where his critique allows the space for a standard of the real to exist. But to confront the essential lack of authority with which Kierkegaard's works were both published and read as is to understand that within the whole is an overwhelming critique of the paradox of philosophy; that one writes objectivity in a thinking subjectivity. The pseudonymity is the defining characteristic of these works because the double

reflection of the ironist (Adorno's third "aesthetic") separates oneself from oneself and in so doing the reflected image of the self—either in the form of Johannes, Eremita, Anti-Climacus, Judge Vilhelm or Vigilius Haufniensis—becomes its own and no longer requires the real self. His philosophy then is "without authority" because the pseudonyms take on an authority of their own. It holds as well that the original meaning of "without authority" remains, as Kierkegaard meant it, as a signpost of the paradox of philosophy as objective subjectivity, but this second meaning is where Adorno's critique falls short.

Adorno writes that philosophy as subjective thought "renounces totality altogether."[117] This is because philosophy strives for the standard of the real as defined by Hegelian notions of pure and abstract ideals, over and above the kinds of truths which are respective to the self whose position towards truth lies inward and not outward. This position cannot accept Kierkegaard's pseudonymity. Adorno even states that Kierkegaard had rejected the title of a poet, and in doing so rejected reading these pseudonyms as in any way constitutive of his philosophy. But these ironic figures are rhetorical experiments in the very authority that philosophy has in principle. The issue then with such a reading—both by Adorno *and* Kierkegaard—is that in attempting to distance himself from the pseudonyms Kierkegaard entered an infinite regress of ironic distance in which all superiority is lost.

Adorno's later "The Essay as Form" reveals an interest in the freedoms of poetry granted to the essay in opposition to the rigid science of philosophy. The essay for Adorno is a unique case in which art can be written of aesthetically—that is, with a significant presence of form—with a claim to truth that distances it from aesthetic writing which is "devoid of semblance to the

[117] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 5.

subject matter, […] falling into philistinism and losing touch with the object a priori."[118] Truth content remains the signal of philosophy for Adorno and is precisely where the essay distinguishes itself from art. The philistinism is its inability to confront truth—the aesthetic work only confronts its object with interest and no real intention to uncover or reveal.

What do these aesthetic tendencies of the essay as form look like to Adorno? Peter Burgard in his reading of Adorno's essay on essays brings up Benjamin's "On the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as using italics to call attention to the main points of his arguments.[119][120] This is the perfect example of what Adorno strives for as the middle ground between the fancy-free meanderings of aesthetic texts and the scientific rigor of philosophy in which creative freedoms may be toyed with but only in the service of the confrontation of the truth content of its object. Benjamin's italics are used as a creative device in service of its idea, and this is precisely what kind of creativity Adorno allows for in his vision of the essay as an aesthetic endeavour.

The essential quality of Kierkegaard's "essay"—that is, a work that balances its status as both art and philosophy—is the pseudonymity. The issue for Adorno is that this quality does not belong to the writing itself in the way Benjamin's italics do, but in a more nuanced fashion belongs to the writings as they exist in the reader's imagination rather than how they are read. Italics imply a certain fashion of reading in which sentences are highlighted for the reader's attention; they are signposts of important sentences. This is precisely what Adorno appreciates in

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[118] Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature, Volume One* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 5.
[119] Peter J Burgard, "Adorno, Goethe, and the Politics of the Essay," in *Literaturwissenschaft und Gestesgeschichte* 66 (March 1992), 162.
[120] Burgard's reference to Benjamin's use of italics is in the original German *Gesammelte Schriften* but not in Zohn's standard English translations.

them: a gentle aestheticism which only exists in the service of the idea. Kierkegaard's aesthetic expression belongs more to an idea in service of an aestheticism. Rather than have an italic which guides the reader to understanding, the pseudonymity confronts the reader with a confusing array of decisions without obvious answers, and instead of guiding them to a firm truth it asks them to confront the truths an essay or a philosophy text traditionally assumes.

Before "The Seducer's Diary" is a lengthy introduction on the part of A describing Johannes' character. A is adamant from the start that the entries within are not his, and that even releasing them causes him a great deal of anxiety for he does not know if it will do the public any good to forego the perversity of Johannes' deepest thoughts. In it, he describes the symptoms of this aesthetic life as being unable to treat the other individuals he meets as such. Johannes is only able to understand them as objects for his own pleasuring seduction. Johannes is completely self-observed, with no access to the concrete world. A, halfway through this introduction, writes that "a person who goes astray inwardly has less room for manoeuvre; he soon finds he is going round in a circle from which he cannot escape."[121] While this serves clearly as a description of Johannes in his inability to exist beyond self-absorption, it also serves as reflections of the other pseudonyms, each reflecting Kierkegaard as the ironist who resolves himself deeper and deeper into his own ironic subjectivity. Even within the folding confusion of ironic distance, Kierkegaard is in the very deepest pseudonyms of *Either/Or* still able to reflect—albeit ironically—on the curse of hermetic obscurity which causes the inward character of an individual to go astray in one's inability to commit to their own interests, claims, or ideas.

[121] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 252.

In acknowledging the pseudonymity and—in accord with Adorno's wishes—the rejection of the title of poet on the part of Kierkegaard, one still must hold the pseudonyms as in some way constitutive of his philosophy in its inability to escape the rhetorical grips of irony. In this sense, Kierkegaard has never evolved past the status of aestheticism. His philosophy was never philosophy, a feeling he contended with in *The Point of View* but never actually moved beyond because such a movement was impossible unless he was to publicly avow his absolute authority.

Kierkegaard's philosophy is doubly self-reflexive, not simply in its call to individuality and inner reflection, but towards philosophy itself as an inherently self-reflective act. Philosophy in this sense in inseparable from the aesthetic deportment and all philosophers are in fact poets. Adorno's critique is that Kierkegaard's philosophy never advances beyond the aesthetic stage which he inherently critiqued; the issue with both authors is that philosophy's paradox makes it that it never can escape the aesthetic stage as defined by both.

All philosophers are poets, and Adorno is no exception. Anyone familiar with his works can attest to his difficult writing style, so intense that nearly each sentence stands alone as its own thesis, as hopefully shown through my exploration of nearly only his very first sentence. Roland Boer explains that the general understanding is that Adorno's sentence structure is made so that each are wholly self-contained—almost as aphorisms—to eschew the idea of linear argumentation, which "creates a false impression concerning the nature of thought as a procession of concepts."[122] The inner self which thinks without the outer's need for reflection of one's thought is utterly free and in this freedom exists in a non-linear, non-spatial realm where ideas flow through and against each other openly. Adorno's style cannot fully comprehend or

[122] Roland Boer, "A Totality of Ruins: Adorno on Kierkegaard," in *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 83 (Winter 2013), 4.

approach representation of this in its fullness, but he nevertheless approaches a style which can toy with its idea.

Boer thinks Adorno's style is in fact more nuanced in its experimentation, writing that "Adorno sought to transform the very nature of linear argumentation through hermetically sealed sentences."[123] Hermetic sealing here implies a distance from direct communication, hoping that in this triangulated distance between a thought, a sentence, and a reader, the space for critical thought is enhanced rather than engaged with in vague assumption. In this sense, then, if one reads Adorno as not simply a philosopher but an aesthetician in his own right, with every work experimenting with what it means to write a sentence, as philosophy, to a reader with all their expectations, he is taking similar steps as Kierkegaard did in toying with the notions of philosophical objectivity through irony. There is no philosophy without poetry, and just as well there is no objective truth without a subjective interrogation of one's truth, and this is what Kierkegaard as a writer, both intrinsically and experimentally, sought to reveal.

[123] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

It is with this thesis that I aimed to demonstrate that in reading the pseudonymity as an essential feature of Kierkegaard, an understanding unfolds in which aestheticism is not a stage to move past but a mood to which we consistently return to. The traditional image of philosophers—as those who think with objective reason—uphold only a semblant image of philosophy whose falsity lies in its inability to confront self-understanding.

To understand oneself means to see oneself outside oneself, and therefore to comprehend the self aesthetically by reaching into the reality of being and attempting to unfold it by looking at it from the outside. It is a paradox to which only the aesthetic aptitude can understand. Only aesthetes can embrace the paradox because it is can only be comprehended negatively—as in an ironic stance—and to see when knowledge reaches an impasse, yet to *embrace* the impasse as imparting a special kind of knowledge which direct communication can't. What the aesthetic tendency can do is use this negative freedom to embrace a knowledge which is more proper to the inward self than it is any outward absolute.

Adorno's disinterest in accounting for Kierkegaard as a poet and only a philosopher fails to comprehend the essential aestheticism of individuality because it holds too strong a desire to maintain the standard of the real. This earlier understanding of the nature of truth relies too heavily on Hegelian concepts of the Absolute. In this assumption the argument fails to see Kierkegaard's subjective truth. While Adorno very aptly refers to the aesthetic as a comportment, he does not refer to this comportment as itself imparting its own kind of truth. This seems to be

only partial to his first work though, and in some later essays—as in "The Essay as Form"—these opinions dwindle, and his conceptions of truth become more and more complex.

As with any research, the author is often left with more questions than they began with, and I am no exception. There were a variety of paths that opened themselves up to me, and I believe them all to be worth exploring in the future. Firstly, there is a more comprehensive analysis of Adorno's early aesthetic with his later formations. I began my third chapter with this in mind before quickly apprehending the intensity of what a project would entail. Adorno is not easy in any capacity, and so to spend such a limited time exploring and explaining his entire aesthetic journey would be an insult to the academics who have far more experience with him than I do myself. My familiarity with Adorno stays only in the aesthetic texts, and even therein I have missed a few essays.

Otherwise, I could have reached further into the contemporary conception of the pseudonyms. I did some preliminary primary research into this topic, but one thing I am still not certain of is how real his aliases were considered in publication. Was Eremita thought of to be real, and was there anyone who ever attempted to track him down? Surely those close to him—like Regine—would have known of them but what of distant friends and relatives? I cannot ask to what extent this is true nor how it would affect any readings of Kierkegaard, but I will continue reading into this to see what kind of facts can be found on the matter.

Hägglund's *This Life* remains the most prevalent contemporary reading of Kierkegaard. His critique is important whichever side you land on because it understands that regardless of interpretation, Kierkegaard remains a Christian thinker. While Taylor's *A Secular Age* was by no means the end of religious thought in the Western world, it must be said that a severe decline in religious belief has been a notable feature of the centuries since Kierkegaard's time, and this

deeply affects the way we must read him. Still, he was complicated in his faith; I have even heard a professor once describe him as a closet atheist!

That being said, exploring Hägglund's influence on contemporary conceptions of faith remains another path to be explored. What does Kierkegaard have to say about the difference between love and care to which Hägglund bases his opposition of religious and secular faith on? I would like to spend more time in the future contemplating Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham. Hägglund's critique of this section of *Fear and Trembling* doesn't seem to reach into the complexities with which Kierkegaard understands faith to operate without salvation. Regardless of Hägglund's possible shortcomings, I find his work thoroughly engaging and his overall argument quite compelling.

As compelling as Hägglund might be, there is clearly no comparison to my interest in Kierkegaard, who I assumed at first was nothing more than a rudimentary existentialist whose claims were nearly all proven outdated by the time Nietzsche or Heidegger took him on. I had read *Fear and Trembling* as a young academic and tossed it aside before moving onto the next new thing, and it was only three years ago when two colleagues of mine took a seminar on Kierkegaard and I overheard countless conversations about his life and his work. Nothing could have prepared me for the discovery of his pseudonymity and everything that instructed me about the nature of how one does philosophy. The discovery of the pseudonymity imparted in me the negative freedom to discover for myself what it means for subjectivity to be truth.

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