

# Living within the Sacred Tension: Paradox and Its Significance for Christian Existence in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard

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LIVING WITHIN THE SACRED TENSION: PARADOX  
AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHRISTIAN  
EXISTENCE IN THE THOUGHT OF  
SØREN KIERKEGAARD

by

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ABSTRACT  
LIVING WITHIN THE SACRED TENSION: PARADOX  
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Matthew T. Nowachek, B.A.

Marquette University, 2016

This dissertation presents an in-depth investigation into the notion of paradox and its significance for Christian existence in the thought of the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. The primary aim of the study is to explore and to develop various expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's authorship in order to demonstrate the manner by which Kierkegaard employs paradox as a means of challenging his Christendom contemporaries to exist as authentic Christians, and more specifically to enter into the existential state I am identifying in this project as *living within the sacred tension*. With this aim in mind, I begin with a discussion of Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task in response to his Christendom culture and I provide a broad characterization of the notion of sacred tension as the *telos* of this task. For the majority of the study I then focus on four different expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought. These four expressions are: paradox that is associated with the faith of Abraham (as presented in *Fear and Trembling*), paradox that is associated with the nature of the self and the task of selfhood (as presented in *The Sickness unto Death*), paradox that is associated with the God-man (as presented in *Philosophical Fragments*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *Practice in Christianity*), and paradox that is associated with Christian love (as presented in *Works of Love*). In addition to arguing that Kierkegaard employs these expressions of paradox to help usher his contemporaries into a state of sacred tension, I also argue that such sacred tension can be understood in terms of various concrete Christian virtues. In this respect, I claim that Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task is not merely negative or deconstructive in nature, but rather it is infused with the robust positive content associated with Kierkegaard's particular understanding of Christianity. Viewing Kierkegaard's thought and writings in this manner helps to reaffirm the significance of the notion of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought and to highlight the value of the notion of sacred tension for a reassessment of both Kierkegaard's existentialism and its contemporary implications.

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Matthew T. Nowachek, B.A.

Every proper attempt to acknowledge one's gratitude should perhaps begin with an apology. Over the years leading up to the completion of this dissertation I have received a wealth of support from a great number of individuals. It is thus most certainly the case that I have forgotten to include many names in what follows. I sincerely apologize for this shortcoming, but at the same time I find it beautiful and humbling that the circle of those to whom I owe a debt of gratitude extends well beyond the limited reach of my own fallible memory.

This study is the conclusion of a long process that began nearly two decades ago in the philosophy department of Bethel University. It was there that the fire for philosophy was first lit in me and fanned into flames by good friendships and excellent teaching. In particular, I would like to thank my dialogue partners Joshua Bronson, Joshua Burden, and Ronnie "Isak" de Vries as well as my instructors David Dudrick, Andy Gustafson, Don Postema, and Paul Reasoner. I am especially grateful to my advisor David C. Williams for being an inspiring teacher and a concrete example of what it means to strive in Socratic fashion to care for one's soul and for the souls of others. It has been an honor to join him in climbing the peaks, both figuratively and literally, in the practice of philosophy.

As a brief aside, I would like to thank C. Stephen Evans. Oddly enough, it was a pile of dusty cassette tapes that I happened to stumble across in the back of a dark library in an old castle nestled in the mountains of Mittersill, Austria and on which was recorded a lecture series by Evans on Kierkegaard that was largely responsible for the beginning of my fascination with the great Dane. The impression these lectures left on me has lived on long after the tapes themselves have run their course.

Furthermore, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the philosophy department at Marquette University. I would like to thank the department secretary Beth O'Sullivan for her tireless work on my behalf as well as all of the faculty members under whom I have been given the incredible opportunity to study and to develop as a scholar. The department is gifted with a host of excellent teachers and mentors from whom I have received what has truly been a first-rate education. I would also like to thank the Smith Family Foundation for granting me a fellowship that allowed me to live in Sweden and study in Denmark for a good portion of my dissertation work. Finally, this process would not have been possible without the support of my Marquette colleagues. In particular, I would like to thank Jered Janes, Chad Kleist, Ryan Knott, Adriana Kowal, Agust Magnusson, Catlyn Origitano, Daniel Vecchio, Damon Watson, Kyle Whitaker, and Zachary Young.

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With respect to this particular study, there are several individuals who I would like to thank. First, a great thanks is due to my dissertation committee members: Thomas C. Anderson, John Jones, and Pol Vandeveld. I am grateful for their time and effort, and for giving me the privilege of studying for several fruitful years under their guidance. Second, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Iben Damgaard from the University of Copenhagen who served as my supervisor during my time in Denmark and who not only kindly read everything that I sent to her but who also took many hours out of her busy schedule to meet with me. Her excellent comments and encouragement are deeply appreciated. Last, but not least, I would like to offer a deeply heart-felt thanks to my advisor at Marquette, Noel S. Adams. His is the first name on the list of secondary sources in my bibliography, which is appropriate because he is also first on the list of those who have influenced me most in how I read and understand Kierkegaard. I am grateful for the countless hours he has spent in dialogue with me, for the support he has given both me and my family along each and every step of this process, and most of all for his friendship. It would not be an exaggeration to say that although studying Kierkegaard was the reason that Helena and I left our home in Sweden for Milwaukee, it was largely because of Noel that we found a new home at Marquette.

Finally, I would like to thank my closest friends and my family for their unceasing support throughout my work. This project would not have been possible without my incredible friendships in Milwaukee, particularly those with the Browns, the other Browns, the Jacobs, the Johnsons, the Maxceys, the Sharkeys, and the Wilkes. In addition, Helena's family has served as a solid foundation throughout our time in Sweden. Thank you to Paul and Birgitta, Klin and Joel, Jennifer and Viktor. Thank you as well to my family, to Beth and Dustin as well as to my parents Al and Mary for their constant support and encouragement. Furthermore, I am overwhelmingly thankful for my boys, Eskil and Eyvind. Although Papa was at times exhausted because of these two, they were nevertheless a constant source of joy and motivation as well as a much-needed reminder that sometimes the best way to move forward in my work was simply to turn off the computer and get back to the serious task of play. Most of all, thank you to my lovely Helena, of whom I have been given the honor of serving as her husband for the past eight years. She has accompanied me each and every step of the way and at times she has even been ahead of me beckoning me to keep moving forward. It is impossible in words to describe how grateful I am for all of her love and support.

Do you remember the question that I asked you, Helena, in the pouring rain on that small rock outcropping next to the lake in Växjö? This dissertation has been an attempt to work out in academic terms that same simple and beautiful idea.

*To Eskil,  
who came along during the proposal,*

*to Eyvind,  
who joined us in Chapter 4,*

*and to Helena,  
who has been there from the very beginning.*

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## ABBREVIATIONS FOR CITATIONS OF KIERKEGAARD'S WORKS

The following is a list of abbreviations used for Kierkegaard's works that are cited in this study. References will generally begin with the Danish edition of Kierkegaard's writings from the *Søren Kierkegaard Skrifter* series followed by the citation of the corresponding English translation.

*Collections and Selections*

- SKS*         *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vols. 1-28, vols. K1-K28. Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, Alastair McKinnon, and Finn Hauberg Mortensen. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997-2013.
- JP*           *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vols. 1-6. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (vol. 7, Index and Composite Collation). Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN and London: Indiana University Press, 1967-78.
- KJN*         *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, vols. 1-11. Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Söderquist. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007ff.
- Pap.*         *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, vols. 1-16. Edited by P.A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting. Supplemented by Niels Thulstrup. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-78.

*Individual Works*

- BA*         *The Book on Adler*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- CA*         *The Concept of Anxiety*. Translated by Reidar Thomte. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- CD*         *Christian Discourses*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- CI*         *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- CUP1*       *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- EO1*       *Either/Or*, part 1. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

- EUD*      *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FSE*      *For Self-Examination*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FT*        *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- JFY*      *Judge for Yourself!* Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- LD*        *Letters and Documents*. Translated by Henrik Rosenmeier. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- M*         *The Moment and Late Writings*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- PC*        *Practice in Christianity*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- PF*        *Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- PV*        *The Point of View*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- SLW*      *Stages on Life's Way*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- SUD*      *The Sickness unto Death*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- TA*        *Two Ages*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- TDIO*     *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- UD*        *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- WA*        *Without Authority* including *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air, Two Ethical-Religious Essays, Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays, An Upbuilding Discourse, Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- WL*        *Works of Love*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

## INTRODUCTION

*To explain the paradox would then be to comprehend even more deeply what a paradox is and that the paradox is the paradox.<sup>1</sup>*

*My life, like everything else in the sphere in which I belong, for which I work, is in the sphere of the paradox...<sup>2</sup>*

*It is impossible that what I have to say regarding the paradox should become popular.<sup>3</sup>*

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) is often considered to be the thinker of paradox *par excellence*. This title is certainly warranted, for Kierkegaard not only engages with the notion in numerous places within his authorship, but he also clearly understands it to be intimately tied to his life and authorial task.<sup>4</sup> For several years within Anglophone Kierkegaard studies, paradox received a great deal of attention. In particular, it was at the center of the debate concerning the (ir)rationality and (il)logicality of Kierkegaard's thought, with one side declaring Kierkegaard's account of paradox to be misologistic, anti-intellectualistic, and utter nonsense,<sup>5</sup> and with the other side defending it as being merely *supra rationem* as opposed to *contra rationem*.<sup>6</sup> In the decades following

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<sup>1</sup> SKS 7, 201 / CUP, 220.

<sup>2</sup> SKS 26, 191, NB32:104 / JP 6, 6918.

<sup>3</sup> SKS 22, 224, NB12:135 / JP 3, 3091.

<sup>4</sup> SKS 26, 191, NB32:104 / JP 6, 6918.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Herbert Garelick, *The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard: A Study of Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); Herbert Garelick, "The Irrationality and Supra-rationality of Kierkegaard's Paradox," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (1964), 75-86; Henry E. Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," *The Review of Metaphysics* 20, no. 3 (1967), 432-60.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Cornelio Fabro, "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic," in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, ed. Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 156-206; N.H. Søe, "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox," in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, ed. Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 207-27; Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard: 'Paradox' and Irrationalism," *Journal of Existentialism* 7, no. 27 (1967), 401-16; Alastair McKinnon, "Believing the *Paradox*: A Contradiction in Kierkegaard?" *Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 4 (1968): 633-6; Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard's Irrationalism Revisited," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1969), 165-76; Alastair McKinnon, "Paradox and Faith: A Kierkegaardian Contribution to Religious Thought," in *The Challenge of Religion Today: Essays on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. John King-Farlow (New York, NY: Science History Publications, 1976), 166-89; Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard and the 'Leap of Faith'," in *Kierkegaardiana* 16, ed. Joakim Garff, Arne Grøn, Eberhard Harbsmeier, and Julia Watkin (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1993), 107-18; C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 89-90, 117; C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press,

this debate, consensus has settled in favor of the latter view.<sup>7</sup> One important consequence of this has been that Kierkegaard's thought regarding paradox has since then received far less sustained and focused consideration, and certainly far less than I suggest it deserves. Although this shift has not been as pronounced in the Continental tradition where scholars have typically been more sympathetic to Kierkegaard's account of paradox and to paradox in general,<sup>8</sup> it appears that the Anglophone context (save for a handful of notable exceptions<sup>9</sup>) has relegated Kierkegaard's account to something of a

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1993), 9-27; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> For scholars siding with the latter view, see e.g., J. Heywood Thomas, *Subjectivity and Paradox* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 116, 119; Robert Herbert, "Two of Kierkegaard's Uses of Paradox," *The Philosophical Review* 70, no. 1 (1961), 49; Fabro, "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic," 174-5; Robert E. Larsen, "Kierkegaard's Absolute Paradox," *The Journal of Religion* 42, no. 1 (1962), 39; Søren, "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox," 207-27; Vernon C. Grounds, "The Postulate of Paradox," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 7 (1964), 18; Leroy Seat, *The Meaning of "Paradox": A Study of the Use of the Word "Paradox" in Contemporary Theological and Philosophical Writings with Special Reference to Søren Kierkegaard*, Dissertation (Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967), 143, 216-17; McKinnon, "Believing the Paradox," 165-76; Timothy Tian-min Lin, *Paradox in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard*, Dissertation (Boston, MA: Boston University, 1969), 102; Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard: 'Paradox' and Irrationalism," in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis, MN: Burgess, 1969), 107-11; Timothy Tian-min Lin, "Various Interpretations of Kierkegaard's Paradox: An Appraisal and Suggestion," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 3 (1971), 291; Benjamin Daise, "Kierkegaard and the Absolute Paradox," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (1976), 8; C. Stephen Evans, "Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith," *Religious Studies* 25, no. 3 (1989), 347-62; M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 89-90; Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 100-2; Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 87-90, 104, 117; Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality," 9-10; Sylvia Walsh, "Echoes of Absurdity: The Offended Consciousness and the Absolute Paradox in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994), 42; Stephen N. Dunning, "Paradoxes in Interpretation: Kierkegaard and Gadamer," in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 128; Murray A. Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 53-4; C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 78, 83; Christopher Insole, "Kierkegaard: A Reasonable Fideist?" *Heythrop Journal* 39, no. 4 (1998), 373; John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto, "Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998), 279-80, 286; Tim Rose, *Kierkegaard's Christocentric Theology* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001); George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University, 2005), 134-5; Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 66-7; Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 145; C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard and the Limits of Reason: Can There Be a Responsible Fideism?" *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 64, no. 2 (2008), 1022-3, 1028; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 120-1; F. Russell Sullivan, Jr., *Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 14.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., the work of the Danish scholar Arne Grøn, particularly *Subjektivitet og Negativitet: Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., the work of Noel S. Adams, Matthew Bagger, Ronald L. Hall, M. Jamie Ferreira, and Anthony Rudd.

place of peripheral importance. In dedicating this study to the notion of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, and particularly in attempting to place this notion into dialogue with Kierkegaard's reflections on Christian existence, I hope to make a worthwhile contribution to (re)focusing current Anglophone Kierkegaard scholarship on paradox and thereby to strengthening the line of Kierkegaard research that embraces paradox as a key component of Kierkegaard's view of what it means to exist as a Christian.<sup>10</sup> Before outlining the specific argument and structure of this study, we may begin with a few preliminary and definitional remarks on paradox and Kierkegaard that prove useful for setting up the argument of the chapters that follow.

### **Preliminary and Definitional Remarks on Paradox and Kierkegaard**

In beginning our study it will be helpful to touch upon the notion of paradox in general as well as to provide a brief outline of two broad descriptions and uses of it that we encounter in Kierkegaard's writings.<sup>11</sup> Paradox is itself a rich notion and as such it has historically been characterized in numerous and varied ways.<sup>12</sup> However, within much of contemporary philosophical discourse, and particularly within the Anglophone tradition, paradox is seen at best as something of an epistemic puzzle to be solved or at worst simply as an expression of hopelessly confused reasoning. For example, W. V. O. Quine, in his influential essay "The Ways of Paradox," characterizes a paradox as "just any

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<sup>10</sup> In his book *The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), Matthew Bagger attempts what on the surface appears to be a similar project. In my reading, however, by arguing that Kierkegaard employs paradox as an unintelligible, horrible, appalling, offensive, and absurd contradiction in order to harness it along with its accompanying cognitive dissonance as an instrument for ascetic self-transformation (see *The Uses of Paradox*, 17-18, 25-6, 52), Bagger offers a far too limited, one-sided, and even negative account of the existential implications of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought.

<sup>11</sup> Portions of this section are reproduced verbatim from Matthew T. Nowachek, "On the Non-Bracketing of Fairy Tale in Paradox Discourse: Kierkegaard, the Analytic Tradition, and the Importance of Inclusivity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2012), 5-20. Permission for reuse of this material has been granted by the publisher.

<sup>12</sup> For a survey of various uses of paradox in the history of philosophy, see Roy Sorensen, *A Brief History of the Paradox: Philosophy and the Labyrinths of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

conclusion that at first sounds absurd but that has an argument to sustain it.”<sup>13</sup> For Quine, any given paradox can be divided into three different classes, namely veridical, falsidical, and antinomical:

A veridical paradox packs a surprise, but the surprise quickly dissipates itself as we ponder the proof. A falsidical paradox packs a surprise, but it is seen as a false alarm when we solve the underlying fallacy. An antinomy, however, packs a surprise that can be accommodated by nothing less than a repudiation of our conceptual heritage.<sup>14</sup>

What this and many other Analytic descriptions of paradox implies is that paradox, despite how resistant to philosophical analysis it may initially appear, is ultimately something to be resolved through conceptual clarification and the progression of human understanding. Again, to quote Quine, “One man’s antinomy is another man’s falsidical paradox, give or take a couple of thousand years.”<sup>15</sup> In this view, then, although paradoxes may be interesting and might lead to interesting insights, they are ultimately meant to be overcome with more refined philosophical categories—a result considered by many to be the paragon of intellectual progress. It is largely due to the prevalence of this philosophical framework that many contemporary scholars writing on paradox within the Anglophone tradition have entirely ignored Kierkegaard.<sup>16</sup> Even scholars who are favorably disposed towards Kierkegaard’s thought have at times fallen under the influence of the Analytic tradition in their descriptions of paradox in Kierkegaard.

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<sup>13</sup> W. V. O. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Random House, 1966), 3. Bagger provides several additional descriptions of paradox developed from within the analytic tradition that include an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived by apparently acceptable reasoning from apparently acceptable premises (R.M. Sainsbury), an apparently acceptable argument with a puzzlingly unacceptable conclusion (J.L. Mackie), a collection of independently plausible, but jointly inconsistent propositions (N. Rescher), a statement assuming a form that conflicts with a conceptual truth (G. Matthews), and a riddle with a number of good answers (R. Sorensen). See *The Uses of Paradox*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Quine, *The Ways of Paradox*, 11. With antinomy, Quine is quick to point out that revisions of our conceptual heritage have indeed occurred, but under the auspices of the scientific enterprise.

<sup>15</sup> Quine, *The Ways of Paradox*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Roy Sorensen and R.M. Sainsbury in their major studies on paradox mention Kierkegaard not a single time in either the text or bibliography of their respective works. See Sorensen, *A Brief History of the Paradox*; R.M. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Timothy Jackson, for example, in an article on *Fear and Trembling*, employs Quine's own terminology and imagery in order to describe what he takes to be Kierkegaard's view on the relation between faith and paradox. As he remarks, "Faith (re)solves paradoxes, but...de Silentio is like someone who is unaware of leap-year day coming every four years and thus cannot understand how someone can be twenty-one having had but five birthdays. He lacks the crucial principle that would clarify how Abraham's paradox is truth-telling..."<sup>17</sup> Drawing on a brief remark Kierkegaard makes in his journals that faith "solves" (*løser*) the divine paradox of the God-man,<sup>18</sup> Jackson rounds off his interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* and even goes further in drawing out the consequence of faith for paradox in general:

[F]aith is able to "solve" the "divine" paradox of Christ, and it is but a small step to imagine an analogy to the Hebrew Abraham's "solving" the paradox of Isaac. As Anti-Climacus, the superlative Christian and the pseudonym closest to Kierkegaard's own personality, writes in *The Sickness Unto Death*: "...salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible—The believer has the ever infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment. This is the good health of faith that resolves [*løser*] contradictions."<sup>19</sup>

Although Jackson does not ultimately side with Quine's conclusion that it is philosophical analysis which removes the paradoxicality of paradox, he does argue that the person who is equipped with the "higher understanding"<sup>20</sup> associated with passionate belief in God is thereby able to transcend the apparent contradiction of the paradox and

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<sup>17</sup> "Is Isaac Kierkegaard's Neighbor? *Fear and Trembling* in Light of William Blake and *Works of Love*," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17 (1997), 116. In footnote 40 Jackson acknowledges his use of Quine's example from "The Ways of Paradox." See also Timothy P. Jackson, "Kierkegaard's Metatheology," *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (1987), 81.

<sup>18</sup> *SKS* 18, 176, JJ:111 / *JP* 3, 3077. Cf. *SKS* 11, 155 / *SUD*, 40. It is important to be cautious in drawing too strong of conclusions from single journal entries (in this case from 1843), especially when there are numerous journal entries that present an alternative view and when Kierkegaard develops contrary ideas in his later works.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson, "Is Isaac Kierkegaard's Neighbor?" 116.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, "Is Isaac Kierkegaard's Neighbor?" 115.

ultimately to (re)solve it.<sup>21</sup> Simply put, Jackson's view would therefore imply that paradox, as seen from within faith, simply ceases to be paradoxical.

In contrast to such accounts, I argue that Kierkegaard understands paradox in a far different manner.<sup>22</sup> Although he acknowledges the reality of a certain kind of paradox that should be subjected to philosophical analysis with the aim of overcoming it,<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard does not believe that *all* forms of paradox should be treated in this fashion. Indeed, for Kierkegaard paradoxes fundamental to the ongoing practice of the Christian life and that demand perpetual existential engagement such as those he associates with Abraham's faith, selfhood, the God-man, and Christian love (which we discuss in *Chapters 2-5*) are neither puzzles to be solved nor nonsense to be overcome through more refined philosophical categories. As Johannes Climacus remarks in *Postscript*, such "correction" as that carried out within the Analytic tradition ultimately destroys the paradox in that it "removes the paradox and makes it clear that there is no paradox. But [this approach] is certainly no explanation of the paradox but rather an explanation that there is no paradox."<sup>24</sup> For Kierkegaard, engagement with the paradoxes that he characterizes as existentially significant should instead assume the form of an explanation that, according to Climacus, "makes clear what the paradox is and removes the obscurity"<sup>25</sup> in order to help the individual "to comprehend even more deeply what a paradox is and that the paradox is the paradox."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Kierkegaard insists that paradox in its most important form is not something one (re)solves once one has come into faith, but rather remains something that demands perpetual existential engagement.

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<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to ignore the striking similarities between this kind of language and that employed by Hegel.

<sup>22</sup> See Bagger, *The Uses of Paradox*, 3: "Many of [the analytic] analyses...exhibit a philosopher's bias. They give argument too prominent a place in the definition of paradox...Søren Kierkegaard, as if responding to Quine, even goes so far as to insist that there is no argument which could assuage the absurdity of the Christian paradox."

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., the paradox of inquiry that is discussed in *SKS 4*, 218-21 / *PF*, 9-13.

<sup>24</sup> *SKS 7*, 200 / *CUP*, 219.

<sup>25</sup> *SKS 7*, 200 / *CUP*, 219.

<sup>26</sup> *SKS 7*, 201 / *CUP*, 220.

Such resistance to analysis or (re)solution means, in Climacus' terminology, that such paradoxes are absolute rather than relative.<sup>27</sup> Or, as Kierkegaard writes in his essay "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle," such paradoxes are "essential" as opposed to the "transitory" or "immanent" paradoxes that vanish as they become assimilated into human knowledge.<sup>28</sup> In offering a reading of paradox in the thought of Kierkegaard we should therefore be careful to avoid any reductionistic framework that attempts, ultimately, to do away with paradox. As Climacus fittingly puts this cautionary point, the task for an existing individual centers on "becoming aware of the paradox and holding on to the paradox at every moment, and most of all fearing in particular an explanation that would remove the paradox..."<sup>29</sup>

In attempting to characterize paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, it is important to recognize that Kierkegaard describes and uses the notion in two broad senses. The first of these is what I am calling the *etymological* sense and that which is a reflection of the etymology of the term *paradox* itself. More specifically, the term is derived from two Greek words, *para* (meaning "beside" or "contrary to") and *doxa* (meaning "opinion" or "expectation") to form the construction *paradoxos*. According to Liddell and Scott, this constructed word connotes "contrary to opinion, unexpected, strange, marvellous,"<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> On this distinction, see *SKS* 7, 198-203 / *CUP*, 217-23. See also *SKS* 7, 527-9 / *CUP*, 579-81; Seat, *The Meaning of "Paradox,"* 257-66. Lin follows Kierkegaard's terminology in his distinction between absolute and relative paradoxes. See *Paradox in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard*, 23-4. Vernard Eller describes this distinction in terms of essential and transitional paradoxes. See "Fact, Faith, and Foolishness: Kierkegaard and the New Quest," *The Journal of Religion* 48, no. 1 (1968), 56.

<sup>28</sup> *SKS* 11, 98-9 / *BA*, 175-6. See, especially, *SKS* 11, 99 / *BA*, 175: "Insofar as the expression 'paradox' is used only in the inessential sense of the transitory paradox, of the anticipation that condenses into something paradoxical, which, however, in turn vanishes."

<sup>29</sup> *SKS* 7, 167-8 / *CUP*, 182. See also *SKS* 7, 195 / *CUP*, 213; *SKS* 7, 200 / *CUP*, 218-19.

<sup>30</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), 507. For the Danish definition, see *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, bind 1-28, udgivet af Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1918-1966), bind 16: "an utterance or claim that is contrary to general current beliefs" (my translation). Cf. William Little, H. W. Fowler, and J. Coulson, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Volumes I-II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, rev. and ed. C. T. Onions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967 [1933]), vol. 2, 1428: paradox is defined as "contrary to received opinion or expectation."

which is also a meaning clearly reflected in the Danish definition.<sup>31</sup> It is precisely this sense that Kierkegaard emphasizes when he claims that paradox is that which stands in contrast to human categories or human ability and thereby functions to reveal the limitations of human reason. Put in another way, in encountering the paradox, the understanding is confronted by something that runs contrary to what it could have expected or rationally anticipated, which is to say that the paradox operates as a form of alterity and as a challenge to the assumption that human knowledge is self-sufficient and complete.<sup>32</sup>

In their efforts to interpret the notion of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, several scholars have provided nice characterizations of this etymological sense. For example, M. Jamie Ferreira notes, "The paradox provides the occasion for the understanding to step aside, and it provides the occasion which allows it to do so."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Timothy Lin remarks that for Kierkegaard "the purpose of the paradox is not to reject but to limit reason. The paradox is a sign which shows the limitation of reason."<sup>34</sup> Leroy Seat, in his extensive study of paradox in Kierkegaard is even more explicit in pointing to what he identifies as "'paradox' in its etymological sense."<sup>35</sup> As he sees it, paradox within Kierkegaard's thought represents "situations or states of affairs that are unusual and unexpected and that are beyond man's natural capacity for understanding," which are "not logically self-contradictory, but...are contrary to normal expectations."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Christian Molbech, *Danske Ordbog*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1859), 406: "*som modsiger, strider imod en af de Allerfleste antigen Mening.*"

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 19, 390, Not13:23 / *JP* 3, 3073. Paradox in this sense is clearly directed at the systematic Danish Hegelians who make claims of going further than faith, paradox, etc., and going further with relative ease.

<sup>33</sup> Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Lin, *Paradox in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard*, 104.

<sup>35</sup> Seat, *The Meaning of "Paradox"*, 217.

<sup>36</sup> Seat, *The Meaning of "Paradox"*, 216.

The second broad sense in which Kierkegaard describes and uses paradox is what I am calling the *dialectical* sense or a *dialectical relation*. Before explaining this, however, we should touch briefly upon the notion of dialectic. Although dialectic is typically associated either with Greek philosophy as “the art of critical examination into the truth of an opinion”<sup>37</sup> or with Hegel’s rational process of *Aufhebung* that moves through the unification of opposites to higher syntheses,<sup>38</sup> the Danish term *dialektik* can also connote concepts that contain a relationship of opposites or a multiplicity of meanings held together in a state of ambiguity.<sup>39</sup> In Stephen Dunning’s description, dialectical structures “involve a series of opposed poles, and the way in which those oppositions are related to one another determines the character of the dialectic.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas one type of dialectic is that where two opposites negate one another (i.e., a contradiction) and another type is where two opposites are resolved in a higher synthesis (i.e., Hegelian *Aufhebung*), Kierkegaard’s dialectic is fundamentally of a different sort. As Dunning notes, “Kierkegaard himself is justly famous for advocating a dialectic of paradox. Here a genuine unity is achieved, but one that accentuates rather than supersedes the contradiction between the two poles.”<sup>41</sup> As Sylvia Walsh lucidly puts this point,

In Kierkegaard’s view the dialectical task is to sustain a dual or paradoxical perspective that emphasizes the opposition, duplicity, and tension between the concepts rather than a synthesis and mediation of them as in Hegelian dialectic. Opposites, however, do not always contradict each other; sometimes they are

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<sup>37</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 500.

<sup>38</sup> See Jon Stewart, “Introduction,” in *Mynster’s “Rationalism, Supernaturalism” and the Debate about Mediation*, ed. Jon Stewart (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, bind 3: “om begreber, der rummer et modsætningsforhold, en flertydighed.”

<sup>40</sup> Stephen N. Dunning, *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Inwardness: A Structural Analysis of the Theory of Stages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 8.

<sup>41</sup> Dunning, *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Inwardness*, 8. See also Ronald L. Hall, *The Human Embrace: The Love of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Love: Kierkegaard, Cavell, Nussbaum* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 2: “[A] paradox, or more precisely, a paradoxical relation, for Kierkegaard, is a particular kind of dialectical relation in which a positive reality is taken to include within itself what it, by its very nature, excludes. This dialectic of paradox is different from a Hegelian dialectic as follows: in Hegel, the tension of the negation of thesis and antithesis is relieved in a synthesis; in the dialectic of paradox, opposites form a structural unity in which the tension of negation is accentuated and not resolved.”

complements, and...this is especially true of the dialectical concepts and categories of Christianity as Kierkegaard understands them.<sup>42</sup>

This discussion of dialectic can thus be nicely summed up in Paul Ricoeur's succinct statement: "A dialectic without mediation—this is the Kierkegaardian dialectic."<sup>43</sup>

The concept of dialectic as defined here serves as a good basis for understanding how Kierkegaard describes and uses the notion of paradox in a dialectical sense. Lin, in his detailed study of paradox within Kierkegaard has correctly picked up on precisely this idea. As he describes it, paradox for Kierkegaard represents "the joint relationship between two opposite existential entities."<sup>44</sup> For Lin, it is crucially important to keep in mind that Kierkegaard's paradox plays out not merely on a conceptual level, but also as the dialectic between existential entities. Thus, as he notes, "Kierkegaard is concerned with paradox as a reality rather than paradox as a pure concept. He uses the word 'paradox' mainly in the sense of a reality rather than a concept. In his philosophy there is a duality of thought and existence, and his primary concern is existence rather than thought."<sup>45</sup> Armed with this foundational insight, Lin offers something of a general definition of paradox in Kierkegaard based around five central points:

First, Kierkegaard's paradox itself is a *category* or *concept* devised by him for interpreting the truth of Christianity...For him, paradox is a positive rather than negative category...Secondly, although paradox itself is a category or concept, Kierkegaard maintains...that paradox is not an empty concept but has *reference* to reality. This is the reason why he reacts against any attempt "to reducing the term paradox to a [mere] *rhetorical expression*." Thirdly, paradox refers to the *joint relationship* between two opposite existential entities. For example, Kierkegaard insists that the Incarnation is a paradox...According to him, the Incarnation is a

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<sup>42</sup> Walsh, *Living Christianly*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> "Two Encounters with Kierkegaard: Kierkegaard and Evil, Doing Philosophy After Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 320. Quoted in Seung-Goo Lee, *Kierkegaard on Becoming and Being a Christian: The Relation of Christianity to the Ethical Sphere of Existence in the Thought of Soren Kierkegaard* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 2004), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Lin, *Paradox in the Thought of Soren Kierkegaard*, iv. See also, Lin, "Is Kierkegaard's Paradox Paradoxical?" 21, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Lin, *Paradox in the Thought of Soren Kierkegaard*, 71. See also Walsh, *Living Christianly*, 6: "for Kierkegaard dialectic is never simply a dialectic of concepts; rather it involves the interpenetration of thought and existence. Existence is itself dialectical, but in a qualitative rather than a logical sense..."

paradox in the sense of a joint relationship between God and man...Fourthly, paradox involves two *opposite* existential entities...Lastly, paradox refers to the joint relationship between *two existential entities* rather than two pure concepts. In this sense, Kierkegaard's paradox is existential rather than logical, for it refers to existence rather than pure thought.<sup>46</sup>

With these five points, we may venture a general definition of Kierkegaard's dialectical description and use of paradox. I suggest the following: paradox may be understood as a positive unity of opposing existential entities whereby these entities are neither undermined nor mediated into a third synthesized entity, but rather are held together in a joint reciprocal relationship.

To conclude this section, we may summarize briefly the preliminary remarks on paradox made above. First, it is important to remember that for Kierkegaard paradox in its most significant form is not something to be overcome or to be (re)solved, but rather it is to be continuously and existentially engaged within its full paradoxicality. Second, Kierkegaard describes and uses paradox at times in an etymological sense with the primary purpose of limiting human understanding and ability as well as gesturing beyond them. Third, Kierkegaard also describes and uses paradox in a dialectical sense, which extends from his specific understanding of dialectic,<sup>47</sup> to connote and to emphasize the constructive relation of opposing existential entities. This is, of course, not to say that these etymological and dialectical senses should be understood as entirely distinct from one another. To the contrary, in most cases where Kierkegaard points to the term or the concept of paradox both of these senses are implied and intertwined. A clear example of this, to which we will return in *Chapter 4*, is Kierkegaard's account of the absolute paradox of the God-man. For Kierkegaard, this paradox represents not only the relation

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<sup>46</sup> Lin, "Is Kierkegaard's Paradox Paradoxical?" 21-2.

<sup>47</sup> It is, of course, important to reiterate that even though not limited to its historical context, such an account of dialectic certainly extends from a particular historical setting. For a helpful account of the polemical milieu within which Kierkegaard develops his view of dialectic, see Stewart (ed.), *Mynster's "Rationalism, Supernaturalism" and the Debate about Mediation*.

between the dialectical opposites of the eternal God and a particular finite human being, but it is precisely this paradoxical relation that remains beyond comprehension and thus serves as a fundamental challenge to human understanding and ability. Although we should thereby understand the etymological and dialectical senses of paradox as complementary to one another, there is also a certain value in following Kierkegaard's lead in recognizing their distinction. To borrow a metaphor from Merold Westphal,<sup>48</sup> just as one comes to see the full complexity and beauty of one and the same precious gem by marveling at its various distinct faces, so also can one receive a more complex and nuanced view of paradox by focusing on its different senses. Approaching Kierkegaard's account of paradox in this manner, I suggest, will not only help us remain in-line with Kierkegaard's own discussion throughout his writings, but it will also provide us with several interesting insights that would otherwise not be as apparent.

### **A Brief Outline of the Study**

For the remainder of this study, I develop my argument in five chapters and a conclusion. In what follows here, we may briefly outline the argument and structure of each of these.

In *Chapter 1* my central aim is to articulate the particular reading of Kierkegaard's thought that will serve as the foundation upon which I build the argument concerning paradox and Christian existence in *Chapters 2-5*. The argument I put forward may be summarized as follows. In response to the problem of his nominally Christian Danish culture (what Kierkegaard identifies as *Christendom*), Kierkegaard takes upon himself the ethico-religious task of (re)introducing Christianity into Christendom with the goal of helping his contemporaries to become authentic Christians. Becoming an authentic

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<sup>48</sup> Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 7-8.

Christian for Kierkegaard, however, does not mean that one attains a static state in which one ceases to develop or to grow. To the contrary, this goal can be better understood as the restless process of becoming characteristic of the existential stance I identify as *living within the sacred tension*. With the notion of sacred tension, I suggest that Kierkegaard is not primarily asking his readers to carry out specific moral actions or to perform specific religious practices, but rather he is encouraging each one *to adopt a general disposition where Christian faith can take root and can be perpetually fostered*. To demonstrate this point, I narrow in on the fundamental sacred tension Kierkegaard associates with the dialectic of grace/works. Furthermore, with respect to the overall project of the study in linking paradox and Christian existence in Kierkegaard's thought, I make the case that Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task is deeply existential in nature. More specifically, by modeling his account on that of Socrates and his "care for the soul," Kierkegaard likewise sees himself as undertaking a crucial existential task with the aim of fostering existential transformation. One consequence of construing Kierkegaard's task in this fashion is that if we are able to show that paradox has a key role to play in such a task, we then have good reason to believe that paradox will be an essential piece of a Kierkegaardian account of Christian existence. As I argue in conclusion, this chapter proves crucial for setting up the argument concerning paradox and Christian existence in *Chapter 2-5*.

For *Chapter 2*, I consider the first of our four expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, namely the expression that is identified with the faith of Abraham in the pseudonymous work *Fear and Trembling*. Furthermore, I draw out its significance for Christian existence. My argument can be summarized as follows. The notion of paradox in *Fear and Trembling* plays a significant role both in its dialectical and etymological senses within the faith of Abraham. In contrast to the loss of tension associated with the departures from paradox characteristic of the tragic hero and the

knight of infinite resignation, embracing paradox is precisely what underlies and informs Abraham's existential stance as one living within sacred tension. I claim, therefore, that Abraham serves as an exemplar for the person of faith, particularly with respect to the specific virtues he displays within the sacred tension. As such, we may say that *Fear and Trembling* and its discussion of paradox as tied to Abraham's faith offers valuable insight into the nature of ethics as well as into the manner by which ethics and Christian existence are related to one another. In this respect the text serves as an important challenge to Kierkegaard's Christendom contemporaries.

In *Chapter 3*, I take up the second of our four expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, namely the expression associated with the nature of the self and the task of selfhood as presented in the pseudonymous work *The Sickness unto Death*. Furthermore, I narrow in on the concrete implications this expression of paradox carries for Christian existence. The line of argument I trace out in this chapter can be summarized in the following manner. Anti-Climacus employs the notion of paradox in its dialectical and etymological forms in order to provide an account of what it means to become a self that is both properly related to itself and properly related to God. Moreover, in contrast to the loss of tension associated with despair and sin, this account functions as an expression of sacred tension that can be described in a concrete fashion in terms of the virtues of dedicated patience and humble courage. With this reading of *The Sickness unto Death* in which we focus on the relationship between paradox and the self, we are therefore afforded another perspective on Christian existence that Kierkegaard employs as part of his ethico-religious challenge to his Christendom contemporaries.

For *Chapter 4*, I turn to the third of our four expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, namely that associated with the God-man. In this chapter I develop the following argument. As a response to the Christological accounts of his era,

Kierkegaard develops his own view of the Incarnation by appealing to the notion of paradox. In particular, Kierkegaard offers two variations on which we will focus: first, the God-man as the dialectical unity of the eternal/temporal that transcends and challenges the understanding; and, second, the God-man as the dialectical unity of loftiness/lowliness that is the sign of contradiction and the possibility of offense. These Christological accounts in turn carry significant implications for Christian existence. In contrast to the loss of tension associated with either the indirect rejection of the paradoxical God-man by turning to the Christendom expression of faith in its civic or speculative forms, or the direct rejection of the paradoxical God-man that is offense, embracing the paradox of Jesus Christ represents a form of sacred tension characterized by passionate limitation, by holding on to security in insecurity as well as certainty in uncertainty, by the perpetual annulment of offense, and by imitation—the fundamental underlying virtue of which I argue is humble striving and which I argue is exemplified in the concrete manner that both John the Baptist and the Apostle Peter relate to Christ. In this respect, I suggest that Kierkegaard’s reflections on the paradox of the God-man prove crucial to his overall ethico-religious task of (re)introducing Christianity into Christendom.

In *Chapter 5*, I turn to the fourth and final expression of paradox we will consider, namely that which Kierkegaard associates with Christian love. My focus here on Kierkegaard’s foundational text *Works of Love* is meant to make a much needed contribution to my overall project by drawing out in explicit terms the fundamental role that love both for God and for human beings plays within Christian existence. My argument can be summarized as follows. Kierkegaard employs the notion of paradox both in a dialectic form in terms of dialectical vision and in an etymological form in terms of the grounding of love. In contrast to the enervation and loss of tension that Kierkegaard associates with improper forms of love, Christian love in its embrace of

paradox is ushered into a state of sacred tension—what I identify in this chapter as *loving within the sacred tension*, which is characterized by the lover who remains perpetually engaged in loving relationships with God and with others. Moreover, central to such loving within the sacred tension are the virtues of humility, courage, and hope. With such a reconceptualization of Christian love, Kierkegaard thereby levels a radical challenge to his Christendom contemporaries.

Finally, in the *Conclusion* I summarize the study as well as draw out in explicit terms its particular significance. In addition, I hone in on one particular possibility for future research regarding sacred tension and the issue of nihilism. Last of all, I conclude with a final personal note.

### **A Cautionary Note**

Having outlined the argument and structure of the study, I would like to end this introduction with something of a cautionary note. In articulating an account of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought and writings, it is important to re-emphasize that I am in no way attempting to explain paradox in the sense of objectifying it, that is, turning it into a mere object of academic study. Instead, my hope and desire for what follows is that in carrying out the necessary academic work I will nevertheless be challenged to remain consistent with Climacus' claim that "To explain the paradox would then be to comprehend even more deeply what a paradox is and that the paradox is the paradox."<sup>49</sup> Of course, this hope and desire does not mean that the risk of doing violence to the phenomenon of paradox within Kierkegaard is thereby overcome. To the contrary, such risk will accompany us every step of the way. Does this thereby entail that we should refrain from speaking or writing about paradox? In a word, no. Indeed, Kierkegaard's

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<sup>49</sup> SKS 7, 201 / CUP, 220.

ethico-religious purposes would be obscured and ill-served were we simply to adopt a position of silence in relation to paradox.<sup>50</sup> Instead, we are to speak and we are to write, doing so all the while with the constant reminder that because the paradox always remains in some sense elusive and ungraspable by human intellect and ability it cannot be fully encompassed by our academic endeavor in this study. Thus, it is precisely in this manner I suggest we proceed: in the spirit of fear and trembling as we oscillate between, on the one hand, speaking and writing as an attempt to describe and to understand, and, on the other hand, speaking and writing as an act of confession and repentance when we have overstepped our bounds. One way in which to remain in this position of tension is to ensure that this study is not undertaken alone. Rather, in moving forward it is crucial that we carry along with us the cautionary voices of other scholars—scholars such as Steven Shakespeare who, even if I do not agree with them on every point, can nevertheless keep us honest by perpetually whispering in our ears Kierkegaard’s own challenge to remember that the paradox is not a prize to be won or an object to be explained, but something through which one is to live and to which one is to remain in a perpetual relation of humility and striving.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This would perhaps be akin to the response of the early Wittgenstein to the transcendence of the understanding. See the seventh proposition in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1961).

<sup>51</sup> Shakespeare’s statement in the last few lines in the conclusion of his book *Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Transcendence*, for example, is of particular value for serving such a cautionary purpose. He writes, “As soon as I identify this or that as the paradox, I have misidentified it. I have subjected it to a schema of recognition. The time of the paradox is always that of coming into existence. In one sense, the paradox has no motion. It does not progress. It does not slow down, nor does it accelerate. It has no measure. In another sense, the paradox is the only principle of motion. It is the *kinesis* that makes every event possible as an event, and impossible to grasp in the deceitfulness of its becoming. As repetition, it is the coming into actuality of what is ideal. In one and the same movement, it is the unsurpassable contradiction between the actual and the ideal. The paradox is faithless. It is love/hate. It betrays everything. Including itself. But it never gives up on flesh and blood. The paradox refuses mediation. It is simple. It will not be what you call it, or where you put it. It is the point of maximum antagonism in any system. There is no one paradox. The paradox is not one.” See, *Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Transcendence* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 207.

## CHAPTER 1

### KIERKEGAARD'S ETHICO-RELIGIOUS TASK IN CHRISTENDOM AND THE NOTION OF SACRED TENSION

*What is commonly called Christendom...has made Christianity into utter nonsense.<sup>1</sup>*

*[W]hen the greatest possible restlessness [Uro] is brought about, in the tension [Spændingen] there can arise within a person the intensity which really can love God.<sup>2</sup>*

*Now if Christianity again rises up and regains its tension [Spændkraft], this Christian-world will become furious...<sup>3</sup>*

The overall aim of this chapter is to articulate and to argue for the particular reading of Kierkegaard's thought that will serve as the foundation upon which I build the argument concerning paradox and Christian existence in *Chapters 2-5*. The reason such preliminary interpretive work proves necessary is that the framework one employs in approaching Kierkegaard significantly shapes what one focuses on within his vast corpus as well as how one ultimately decides what, if anything, constitutes an appropriate characterization of his authorial project. Indeed, Kierkegaard has been interpreted through a diverse set of more or less appropriate lenses, and therefore it is important to base my reading on a careful exposition of Kierkegaard's writings.

The argument I put forward may be summarized in the following manner. In response to the problem of his nominally Christian Danish culture (what Kierkegaard identifies as Christendom), Kierkegaard takes upon himself the ethico-religious task of introducing Christianity into Christendom with the goal of helping his contemporaries to become authentic Christians.<sup>4</sup> Becoming an authentic Christian for Kierkegaard,

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<sup>1</sup> *SKS* 23, 39, NB15:59 / *JP* 3, 3035.

<sup>2</sup> *SKS* 26, 198, NB32:110 / *JP* 4, 4489.

<sup>3</sup> *SKS* 22, 245, NB12:168 / *JP* 1, 510.

<sup>4</sup> By employing the term ethico-religious I side with scholars who oppose the artificial dichotomy that is often drawn between ethics and religion in Kierkegaard's thought, and who rather see ethics and religion as crucially intertwined. See, e.g., Julia Watkin, *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*

however, does not mean that one attains a static state in which one ceases to develop or to grow. To the contrary, this goal can be better understood as the restless process of becoming characteristic of the existential stance I identify as *living within the sacred tension*. With the notion of sacred tension, I suggest that Kierkegaard is not primarily asking his readers to carry out specific moral actions or to perform specific religious practices, but rather he is encouraging each one *to adopt a general disposition where Christian faith can take root and can be perpetually fostered*.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, with respect to the overall project of the dissertation in linking paradox and Christian existence in Kierkegaard's thought, I make the case that Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task is deeply existential in nature. More specifically, by modeling his account on that of Socrates and his "care for the soul," Kierkegaard likewise sees himself as undertaking a crucial existential task with the aim of fostering existential transformation. One consequence of construing Kierkegaard's task in this fashion is that if we are able to show that paradox has a key role to play in such a task, we then have good reason to believe that paradox will be an essential piece of a Kierkegaardian account of Christian existence.

In order to develop this argument, I divide this chapter into four sections. In *Section 1.1*, I outline Kierkegaard's description of Christendom as well as the problems associated with it that inform Kierkegaard's response. In *Section 1.2*, I describe

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(Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 212: "[I]t is a mistake to see Kierkegaard separating the ethical from the religious...as if one somehow lost ethics when one entered upon the essentially religious life..." See also David J. Gouwens, "Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 10, no. 2 (1982), 216; Leslie Alison Howe, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Ethics*, Dissertation (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto, 1989), 163-4; C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 9-27; Ronald L. Hall, "Kierkegaard and the Paradoxical Logic of Worldly Faith," *Faith and Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (1995), 41, 50; Christopher Hamilton, "Kierkegaard on Truth as Subjectivity: Christianity, Ethics and Asceticism," *Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998), 63-4; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 59; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 211, 213. It is nevertheless important to keep in mind that Kierkegaard clearly sees a difference between ethics and religion. This point, however, must be understood dialectically. On the one hand, when it is assumed that faith can be reduced to ethics, Kierkegaard emphasizes their distinction (see, e.g., *Fear and Trembling*). On the other hand, when it is assumed that ethics and religion have little to do with one another, Kierkegaard emphasizes their contiguity (see, e.g., *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*).

<sup>5</sup> This is not, however, to say that Kierkegaard entirely disregards such actions and practices.

Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task by focusing briefly on the figure of Socrates and his influence on Kierkegaard. In *Section* 1.3, I sketch out a preliminary account of the notion of sacred tension as the broad and overarching *telos* of this task. I do so first by introducing what Kierkegaard sees as the problems both of evasion of tension and of destructive tension, in contrast to which I describe sacred tension by focusing on one of Kierkegaard's paradigmatic expressions of such tension, namely that associated with the paradoxical dialectic of grace/works.<sup>6</sup> In addition, I discuss the notion of restlessness as well as Kierkegaard's ontology of becoming underlying such restlessness—both of which I argue are central to sacred tension. Finally, in *Section* 1.4, I summarize the chapter and suggest how it sets up the argument concerning paradox and Christian existence that I develop in *Chapters* 2-5.

### 1.1 - Kierkegaard on Christendom and Its Problems

The aim of this section is to outline Kierkegaard's description of Christendom and several of its significant problems in response to which Kierkegaard carries out his ethico-religious task.<sup>7</sup> Although Kierkegaard discusses Christendom in more or less detail in several of his early writings, he affords extensive attention to Christendom in his journals and papers from 1846 onwards as well as in his later writings, especially *The Point of View* and *The Moment*. As such, I draw heavily on these texts for the following discussion.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This dialectic can also be construed as gift/task or gospel/law.

<sup>7</sup> As J. Michael Tilley points out, Kierkegaard, as he approaches his death, becomes quite pessimistic about the possibility of reforming Christendom. See "Christendom," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome I: Absolute to Church*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 207, 210. Despite this, Kierkegaard's more optimistic view that a response to Christendom can in fact be formulated is consistent throughout nearly all of his life and in the majority of the writings that we consider in this dissertation.

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars see focusing on these later works, and especially *The Point of View*—a text in which Kierkegaard attempts a retrospective survey of his entire authorship—as problematic in that these scholars view Kierkegaard's self-assessment to be largely suspect. See, e.g., Josiah Thompson, *The Lonely Labyrinth: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967);

*A General Characterization of Christendom*

Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard describes “Christendom” (*Christenbed*)<sup>9</sup> in consistently negative terms. For Kierkegaard, Christendom represents the cultural expression of Christianity in which authentic New Testament faith has been downgraded or traded for a problematic and enervated human substitute. Although Christianity as an established religion still exists in Kierkegaard’s 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark in the form of certain cultural religious practices or as a doctrine and a teaching, this conventional expression of Christianity has replaced the expression that takes as its central emphasis the task of existing in relation to the ideal picture of Christianity presented by Jesus and the apostles.<sup>10</sup> In more dramatic terms, the rise of Christendom means that genuine Christianity has been entirely abolished.<sup>11</sup> As Kierkegaard remarks, “What is commonly called Christendom (these thousands and millions) has made Christianity into utter nonsense. But, in addition, established Christendom’s orthodoxy has actually transformed Christianity to paganism.”<sup>12</sup>

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Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard, the Myths and Their Origins*, trans. George C. Schoolfield (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1980); Joakim Garff, “The Eyes of Argus: *The Point of View* and Points of View on Kierkegaard’s Work as an Author,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 75-102. In contrast to such readings, see Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, “The Retrospective Understanding of Søren Kierkegaard’s Total Production,” in *Kierkegaard’s Resources and Results*, ed. Alastair McKinnon (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 19-36; Sylvia Walsh, “Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff,” *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 38 (1999): 4-8; Mark A. Tietjen, “To Believe or Not to Believe: Toward a Hermeneutic of Trust,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Point of View*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 78-103. Although it is important to retain a healthy skepticism regarding Kierkegaard’s self-assessment, this does not preclude us from adopting something like a “hermeneutic of trust” in relation to Kierkegaard. On this point, see Tietjen, “To Believe or Not to Believe”; Mark A. Tietjen, *Kierkegaard, Communication, and Virtue: Authorship as Edification* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 79-80.

<sup>9</sup> This is in contrast to “*Christendom*,” the Danish term Kierkegaard employs to describe authentic Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> *SKS* 16, 112 / *PV*, 129-30.

<sup>11</sup> This claim is what Kierkegaard calls his “one thesis”: simply stated, “The Christianity of the New Testament does not exist at all.” See *SKS* 14, 169 / *M*, 39. See also *SKS* 22, 94-5, NB11:160 / *JP* 1, 383; *SKS* 22, 235-6 / *JP* 1, 385; *SKS* 14, 163, 174 / *M*, 35, 42-3. In addition, Kierkegaard claims that Christendom has made authentic Christianity impossible. See *SKS* 13, 133 / *M*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> *SKS* 23, 39, NB15:59 / *JP* 3, 3035. See also *SKS* 22, 316, NB13:70 / *JP* 1, 389; *SKS* 23, 81, NB15:115 / *JP* 1, 390.

What makes Christendom even more dangerous than paganism, however, is that unlike the honest and clear-eyed world-view of someone like Socrates, Christendom operates with the illusion or delusion that even though it has abolished Christianity it still represents authentic faith.<sup>13</sup> In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard offers a stinging caricature of this phenomenon:

What does it mean, after all, that all these thousands and thousands of a matter of course call themselves Christians! These many, many people, of whom by far the great majority, according to everything that can be discerned, have their lives in entirely different categories, something one can ascertain by the simplest observation! People who perhaps never once go to church, never think about God, never name his name except when they curse! People to whom it has never occurred that their lives should have some duty to God, people who either maintain that a certain civil impunity is the highest or do not find even this to be entirely necessary! Yet all these people, even those who insist that there is no god, they all are Christians, call themselves Christians, are recognized as Christians by the state, are buried as Christians by the Church, are discharged as Christians to eternity!<sup>14</sup>

Such individuals caught up within the illusion of Christendom do not feel the need to look to the New Testament or to the example of Christ to guide them in radical faith, but rather they are deluded into conforming to the collective cultural currents coalescing around them.<sup>15</sup> Yet, in this they nevertheless expect to be counted among the long line of Christian witnesses extending back to the apostles.<sup>16</sup>

### *Two Main Expressions of Christendom*

The general picture Kierkegaard offers of Christendom is that it represents the abolition of authentic New Testament Christianity in favor of the categories of secular Danish culture. For Kierkegaard, however, Christendom is not monolithic in nature.

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<sup>13</sup> *SKS* 22, 316, NB13:70 / *JP* 1, 389; *SKS* 23, 81, NB15:115 / *JP* 1, 390.

<sup>14</sup> *SKS* 16, 23-4 / *PV*, 41. See also *SKS* 10, 222 / *CD*, 214; *SKS* 23, 354, NB19:33 / *JP* 1, 395.

<sup>15</sup> See *SKS* 23, 81, NB15:115 / *JP* 1, 390.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 14, 123-5 / *M*, 3-8, and Kierkegaard's attack upon Bishop Mynster.

Rather, it is comprised of two main cultural forces, namely common Danish civility and Danish speculative thought.

With respect to common Danish civility, Kierkegaard has in mind the perception of the average Dane that merely being born within Denmark and carrying out one's Danish civic duty is sufficient for being a Christian. Characteristic of this expression of Christendom is the conflation of the values of radically transformative Christianity with the bourgeoisie values of the modern state. In *Postscript*, Climacus offers a humorous and sarcastic depiction of precisely such a view by describing what could be the typical response of a typical Danish wife to her typical Danish husband who has begun to have doubts about his typical Danish Christian faith:

Hubby, darling, where did you ever pick up such a notion [that you are not a true believer]? How can you not be a Christian? You are Danish, aren't you? Doesn't the geography book say that the predominant religion in Demark is Lutheran-Christian? You aren't a Jew, are you, or a Mohammedan? What else would you be, then? It is a thousand years since paganism was superseded; so I know you aren't a pagan. Don't you tend to your work in the office as a good civil servant; aren't you a good subject in a Christian nation, in a Lutheran-Christian state? So of course you are a Christian.<sup>17</sup>

In this view, then, to be a Christian means merely to join everyone else in becoming an upright citizen in an upright Christian nation.

With respect to Danish speculative thought, Kierkegaard intends primarily the vogue Danish Hegelianism practiced by cultural elites of the Danish academy.<sup>18</sup> In Kierkegaard's assessment, what is characteristic of this expression of Christendom is the construal of Christianity as something objective, or rather as an object of knowledge to which one can relate oneself objectively through speculation. As Kierkegaard remarks,

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<sup>17</sup> *SKS* 7, 55 / *CUP1*, 50-1.

<sup>18</sup> Notable examples include Johan Heiberg and Hans Martensen. On this point, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50-67. As Stewart points out, it is important to keep in mind that Danish Hegelianism is neither a simple nor an entirely unified school of thought.

“The state of ‘Christendom’ is as follows: the point of view of Christianity and of what Christianity is has been completely shifted, has been cast in terms of the objective, the scholarly...”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in *Christian Discourses* Kierkegaard notes: “Christianity is regarded as a sum of doctrines; lectures are given on it in the same way as on ancient philosophy, Hebrew, or any branch of knowledge whatever...”<sup>20</sup> As such, to be a Christian as mediated through Danish speculative thought requires one merely to be an intellectual (and perhaps even a professor<sup>21</sup>) within a Christian culture.

Although these two cultural forces represent vastly different perspectives in that one is largely practical and the other is largely theoretical, in Kierkegaard’s view they both converge on the same end, that is, an affirmation of Christendom culture to the detriment of authentic New Testament faith. Or, to put it differently, common Danish civility and Danish speculative thought represent merely two sides of the same coin.<sup>22</sup> For Kierkegaard, this Christendom coin is deeply problematic regardless of which side it displays. But what, exactly, are some of the specific problems Kierkegaard sees with Christendom?

#### *Kierkegaard on Several Specific Problems of Christendom*

Because the specific problems Kierkegaard associates with Christendom are numerous, we may limit ourselves to outlining briefly five of the more central issues he raises.

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<sup>19</sup> SKS 24, 406, NB24:131 / JP 6, 6780.

<sup>20</sup> SKS 10, 222-3 / CD, 214.

<sup>21</sup> For some of Kierkegaard’s critical remarks on professors, see the Hongs’ collection in JP 3, 3562-97.

<sup>22</sup> See Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), 146; Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 114.

First, Christendom is problematic because it excises from faith what Kierkegaard understands to be the most crucial notions and concepts associated with authentic Christianity. For example, absent from Christendom is any significant emphasis on sin,<sup>23</sup> the possibility of offense,<sup>24</sup> the need for striving,<sup>25</sup> notions such as conversion, rebirth, imitation, dying to the world, renunciation, self-denial, horror, struggling, suffering,<sup>26</sup> and, most relevant for our discussion, paradox. With respect to the latter, Kierkegaard notes in a journal entry, “By displacing the paradox Christendom has quite simply managed to restore the old paganism—trimmed with Christian expressions and phrases.”<sup>27</sup>

Second, the absence of such notions means that faith within Christendom can be both cheaply attained and easily preserved. As Kierkegaard whimsically notes, when faith loses its danger and difficulty or when nobody struggles and suffers, it becomes “as simple as pulling on one’s socks.”<sup>28</sup> With faith available on such cheap conditions, people who want to become Christians are not challenged, but rather they are coddled both *into* and *in* their belief. The result of the cheapness and ease of faith is that although hordes of people pour into the church, these people apparently experience no real transformation. For Kierkegaard, however, the authentic Christian transformation associated with genuine faith presupposes hard work,<sup>29</sup> and this is precisely the reason that within authentic Christianity “The way is narrow and the gate is strait that leads to life, and few are who find it.”<sup>30</sup>

Third, with such cheap and easy faith, the believer no longer needs passion and neither need he or she take any real risks. Of his present age, Kierkegaard remarks that it

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<sup>23</sup> *SKS* 12, 79-80 / *PC*, 67-8.

<sup>24</sup> *SKS* 9, 197-8 / *WL*, 198-9; *SKS* 12, 142-3 / *PC*, 140-1.

<sup>25</sup> *SKS* 14, 163 / *M*, 36; *SKS* 14, 179 / *M*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> *SKS* 21, 158, NB8:30 / *JP* 1, 380; *SKS* 22, 94-5, NB11:160 / *JP* 1, 383; *SKS* 23, 476, NB20:158 / *JP* 1, 397.

<sup>27</sup> *SKS* 26, 251, NB33:8 / *JP* 3, 3101. See also *SKS* 7, 344-5 / *CUP*1, 379.

<sup>28</sup> *SKS* 12, 49 / *PC*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> See *SKS* 13, 151-3 / *M*, 109-11. This is not to downplay the role of grace in such transformation. On this point see *Section 1.3* below.

<sup>30</sup> *SKS* 13, 152 / *M*, 110; Matthew 7:14.

“is essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.*”<sup>31</sup> To further explain this, Kierkegaard offers a parable:

If the treasure every one covets lies far out on a very thin crust of ice, guarded by the great danger to anyone venturing so far out, whereas...closer to shore the ice is thick and solid—in a passionate age the crowd would loudly cheer the bold, brave person who skates out on thin ice. They would shudder for him and with him in his perilous decision, would grieve for him if he meets his death, and would idealize him if he gets the treasure. The situation would be entirely different in a reflective age devoid of passion. In mutual recognition of shared prudence, they would sensibly agree that it certainly would not be worth the trouble to skate out on such thin ice—in fact, it would be foolish and ridiculous. Then an *inspired venture* would be transformed into an *acrobatic stunt*—in order to do something, for “something has to be done.” They would go out and from their safe vantage point appraise with the air of connoisseurs the expert skater who can skate almost to the very edge (that is, as far out as the ice is still safe and just short of being dangerous) and then turn back.<sup>32</sup>

As Kierkegaard suggests with this parable, in Christendom (as in modernity in general) nobody risks everything for the treasure of authentic faith. Rather, they are satisfied merely to gain hollow and short-lived social acclaim. Such a mentality of the aloof spectator who remains safe, impassionate, and uncommitted is for Kierkegaard a far cry from the faith of the New Testament.

Fourth, in transforming Christianity into an object of reflection and scholarship, Christendom leaves the individual indifferent to Christianity. It does so primarily by distorting the truth that Christianity is fundamentally an existence-communication (*Existents-Meddelelse*) that demands an active response on the part of the believer.<sup>33</sup> For Kierkegaard, Christianity is essentially “praxis, a character-task [*Charakteer-Opgave*],”<sup>34</sup> but in making reflection an end in itself Christendom has elevated thinking over action with

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<sup>31</sup> SKS 8, 66 / TA, 68. The italics are in the original.

<sup>32</sup> SKS 8, 69-70 / TA, 71-2 (the italicized emphasis is in the original). For a similar story, but rather about a pearl, see SKS 7, 386-7 / CUP1, 425-6.

<sup>33</sup> SKS 7, 345-6 / CUP1, 379-80.

<sup>34</sup> SKS 25, 249, NB28:43 / JP 4, 3864.

the ultimate result being that the latter is undermined altogether. Thus, the speculative thread of Christendom has taken a drastically different turn from the deeply practical and active nature of authentic Christian faith.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, one of the most fundamental problems of Christendom is that individuals within it have lost touch with the ethical in the sense they have entirely forgotten what it means to exist. As Kierkegaard notes, “No one boldly ventures, so to speak, to leap existentially into the ethical,”<sup>36</sup> but rather “the originality of the ethical” has been traded for a “desiccated ruin, a narrow-hearted custom and practice.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Kierkegaard remarks that in Christendom “The medium for being a Christian has been shifted away from existence and the ethical to the intellectual, the metaphysical, the imaginal; a more or less theatrical relationship has been introduced between thinking Christianity and being a Christian—and in this way has abolished being a Christian.”<sup>38</sup> Such a departure from ethical existence plays out in several ways such as in downplaying notions of law and duty to God,<sup>39</sup> in confusing the glittering virtues with glittering vices,<sup>40</sup> and through the abandonment of striving and imitation of Christ.<sup>41</sup> Christendom, therefore, comes up significantly short of the existential nature of authentic New Testament Christianity.

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<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Matthew 22:39: “But the second commandment is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This verse is the basis for the first part of Kierkegaard’s *magnum opus* of Christian ethics, *Works of Love*.

<sup>36</sup> *SKS* 22, 236, NB12:148 / *JP* 1, 385.

<sup>37</sup> *SKS* 8, 63 / *TA*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> *SKS* 16, 112-13 / *PV*, 130. See also *SKS* 7, 221 / *CUP1*, 243; *SKS* 7, 282 / *CUP1*, 310.

<sup>39</sup> See *SKS* 14, 179 / *M*, 47.

<sup>40</sup> *SKS* 8, 82 / *TA*, 86. On the difference between what Kierkegaard calls the “glittering vices” (*glimrende Laster*) of the pagans and the “glittering virtues” (*glimrende Dyder*) of Christianity, see, e.g., *SKS* 11, 161 / *SUD*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> See *SKS* 14, 163 / *M*, 36. As John Elrod rightly perceives it, the failure of Christendom to foster imitation serves as one of the central targets against which Kierkegaard as an ethical thinker directs his attention. See *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 245.

## 1.2 - Kierkegaard's Ethico-Religious Task in Christendom

In this section, I outline Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task as it emerges in response to the problem of Christendom described above. To begin, I briefly discuss the question of Kierkegaard as a missionary, and I follow this by providing a characterization of Kierkegaard's task in relation to his understanding and appropriation of Socrates. As I point out, what is of particular importance here is the manner by which Socrates helps to sharpen Kierkegaard's focus on Christian existence.

### *Kierkegaard as Missionary?*

In describing Kierkegaard's authorial task, a handful of scholars have identified Kierkegaard as a missionary.<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, it is correct that at certain places in his writings Kierkegaard appears to adopt the status of missionary. For example, in *The Point of View* Kierkegaard seems to link his own task of “introduc[ing] Christianity again—into Christendom” with the work of a missionary.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, in an addendum to the same text Kierkegaard also identifies one of his central notions “the single individual” as “the missionary's category” that “*the missionary*” will use when he arrives within Christendom.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Kierkegaard also takes significant strides to distance himself from the status of missionary. In a journal entry Kierkegaard makes the following

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<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Edward John Carnell, *The Burden of Søren Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 32; C. Stephen Evans, “Kierkegaard: A Misunderstood Reformer,” *Christianity Today* (21 September 1984), 27; Robert R. Cook, “Søren Kierkegaard: Missionary to Christendom,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (1987): 311-27; C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 66; C. Stephen Evans, “Søren Kierkegaard: *Philosophical Fragments*,” in *Central Works of Philosophy: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Shand (Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 159-60; Andrew J. Burgess, “Kierkegaard, Moravian Missions, and Martyrdom,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Without Authority*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 191; C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-2; C. Stephen Evans and Robert C. Roberts, “Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 223-4, 228.

<sup>43</sup> SKS 16, 24 / PV, 42.

<sup>44</sup> SKS 16, 98 / PV, 123-4. Cf. SKS 20, 280-2, NB3:77 / JP 2, 2004. It is not entirely clear that Kierkegaard refers to himself with the title “the missionary.”

important remark about his own task within Christendom: “I was bound to the idea of trying to introduce Christianity into Christendom, albeit poetically and without authority (namely, not making myself a missionary).”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in another entry entitled “My Task: To Make Room,” Kierkegaard notes, “I am not an Apostle, who brings something from God, and with authority. No, I serve God, but without authority.”<sup>46</sup> In this respect, insofar as the missionary is someone who proclaims the Christian truth to others with divine authority such as the traditional Danish missionaries acting as emissaries to foreign lands,<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard clearly does not desire to be assigned such a status. Despite this, he nevertheless still retains a strong desire to see his contemporaries turn to authentic New Testament Christianity and to use his life and literary talents towards this end.<sup>48</sup> As such, even if we refrain from characterizing Kierkegaard as a missionary, we are still warranted in identifying his task as fundamentally religious in nature. However, in order to differentiate himself from the missionaries and evangelists of Christendom who merely add greater numbers of nominal Christians to the ranks of the millions already within Denmark,<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard does not look around his Christendom culture for a model of how to carry out his task. Neither does he look to the example set by the reformer Martin Luther. Rather, he casts his gaze further back, deep into antiquity and onto the figure of Socrates.

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<sup>45</sup> *SKS* 21, 289, NB10:60 / *JP* 6, 6356. This statement is consistent with other of Kierkegaard’s claims that he is nothing more than a poetic genius in a market town. See *SKS* 16, 74 / *PV*, 95; *SKS* 21, 359, NB10:192 / *JP* 6, 6390; *SKS* 21, 367-8, NB10:200 / *JP* 6, 6391.

<sup>46</sup> *SKS* 26, 416, NB36:11 / *JP* 6, 6936. Kierkegaard remarks repeatedly within his writings that he is “without authority.” See, e.g., the essay “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle” (*SKS* 11, 95-111 / *WA*, 91-108).

<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard may have in mind the Danish Moravian missionaries serving abroad and dying for their faith on the mission field. On Kierkegaard’s relation to the Moravian missionaries, see Burgess, “Kierkegaard, Moravian Missions, and Martyrdom.”

<sup>48</sup> See *SKS* 13, 410-11 / *M*, 346-7.

<sup>49</sup> *SKS* 16, 105-6 / *PV*, 125-6. With respect to evangelists, Kierkegaard likely has in mind N.F.S. Grundtvig and his followers.

*Kierkegaard on Socrates and the Socratic Ethico-Religious Task*

Socrates makes numerous appearances in Kierkegaard's writings,<sup>50</sup> yet undoubtedly the most significant role he plays for Kierkegaard is as an exemplar or forerunner for Kierkegaard's own engagement with his Christendom culture.<sup>51</sup> But what, exactly, does Kierkegaard understand to be the task of Socrates? To answer this question, we may begin with Plato's *Apology*.<sup>52</sup>

The *Apology* opens with Socrates facing a jury of his peers in order to defend himself against the dual charge of impiety and corrupting the youth. As a central piece of his defense, Socrates describes his specific task that he has carried out within Athens over the course of his life as well as the method he has employed in attempting to fulfil this task. To begin, Socrates points out that his work originates with the divine oracle at Delphi in which he is declared to be the wisest of all human beings.<sup>53</sup> In an attempt to (dis)prove this claim, Socrates seeks out the learned and respected of Athens as dialogue partners, but he quickly discovers that the claims to knowledge made by them are ultimately hollow. Consequently, Socrates concludes that the oracle is in fact correct because he, unlike all the others he meets, at least knows he is ignorant.

What concerns Socrates from his encounters with his contemporaries is not only their lack of wisdom, but also that they are neither bothered by this lack nor do they feel any need to remedy it. Rather, they are more than satisfied with their pursuit of wealth,

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<sup>50</sup> Over the span of Kierkegaard's short intellectual career beginning with his dissertation and ending with the final volume of *The Moment*, the figure of Socrates plays a hugely significant role in shaping the passion, content, and direction of Kierkegaard's thought. See, e.g., *SKS* 10, 247-8 / *CD*, 241; *SKS* 25, 225-7, NB28:15 / *JP* 6, 6839; *SKS* 13, 39 / *FSE*, 9. The number of entries from the journals and papers alone that Kierkegaard dedicates to Socrates is staggering. See *JP* 7 *Index*, 88-9.

<sup>51</sup> Some scholars have recognized this fact by assigning Kierkegaard the title of the "Danish Socrates." See, most notably, David F. Swenson, *Something about Kierkegaard*, ed. Lillian Marvins Swenson (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1945), 34-69.

<sup>52</sup> As Paul Muench argues, the *Apology* most certainly had a significant influence on Kierkegaard and his view of Socrates. See "Apology: Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View," in *Kierkegaard and the Greek World: Tome I: Socrates and Plato*, ed. Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 7-8.

<sup>53</sup> Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), 20d-21a.

reputation, and honors.<sup>54</sup> It is in response to this state of affairs that Socrates takes upon himself the burden of becoming the gadfly that stings the sleeping horse of his fellow citizens so as to awaken them from their slumber and to challenge them to trade the trappings of their Athenian society for the pursuit of caring for their souls.<sup>55</sup> Thus, although the Athenians perceive Socrates as a nuisance or even as a traitor, he views his task as nothing less than the response to a divine mandate for the purpose of the ethical and existential transformation of his contemporaries.<sup>56</sup>

For Kierkegaard, what stands out most of all in this account is the ethico-religious nature of Socrates' task. In Kierkegaard's view, the Socrates described in the *Apology* represents the premier ethicist of human history in that he is concerned first and foremost with the basic concrete question of how one ought to live—a question he addresses directly to individuals and not to the crowd as a whole.<sup>57</sup> In this, Socrates continually pushes for the single individual to pursue the human ideal: “Socrates doubted that one is a human being by birth; to become human or to learn what it means to be human does not come that easily—what occupied Socrates, what he sought, was the ideality of being human.”<sup>58</sup> As such, Socrates is focused strictly on the existential and thereby has no interest in articulating a philosophical system.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Kierkegaard views Socrates' task as a “divine mission” (*guddommelige Mission*)<sup>60</sup> that has required Socrates, out of a sense of divine duty, to venture his life “in the service of the god [*Guden*].”<sup>61</sup> Such a task represents a certain respect for and worship of God. With regard

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<sup>54</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 29d-e.

<sup>55</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 29e-31a.

<sup>56</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 30e.

<sup>57</sup> SKS 16, 102-3 / PV, 123-4. Kierkegaard also claims that Socrates invented the category of “the single individual.” See SKS 16, 49 / PV, 68-9.

<sup>58</sup> SKS 26, 363, NB35:2 / JP 2, 1767.

<sup>59</sup> SKS 22, 377, NB14:55 / JP 4, 4275.

<sup>60</sup> See SKS 1, 221 / CI, 173; SKS 1, 226 / CI, 179; SKS 1, 277 / CI, 236.

<sup>61</sup> SKS 13, 39 / FSE, 9. See also SKS 4, 173 / FT, 83.

to Socrates' expression of ignorance associated with his elenctic method,<sup>62</sup> Anti-Climacus remarks in *The Sickness unto Death*, "let us never forget that Socrates' ignorance was a kind of fear and worship of God, that his ignorance was the Greek version of the Jewish saying: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Let us never forget that it was out of veneration for God that he was ignorant..."<sup>63</sup> Although Kierkegaard does not think that Socrates' ethico-religious task is identical to his own in that Socrates is not working with Christian categories and he is, Kierkegaard nevertheless thinks that his task is analogous in important ways to that of Socrates.

*Kierkegaard's Appropriation of Socrates for His Own Ethico-Religious Aims*

Kierkegaard claims numerous times in his writings that what is needed in his Danish culture is a Socratic figure that can do for Christendom what Socrates did for Athens.<sup>64</sup> In his own assessment, Kierkegaard views his life as an author as serving precisely such a Socratic role.<sup>65</sup> As he remarks near the end of his life, "The only analogy I have [for my task] before me is Socrates..."<sup>66</sup> But what exactly is it about Socrates that Kierkegaard appropriates for his own aims?

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<sup>62</sup> With this method, Socrates begins with a profession of ignorance concerning some specific matter such as the nature of piety, after which he moves through a series of questions aimed at overcoming falsity and thereby advancing in wisdom. Kierkegaard was clearly enamored with this method. See, e.g., *SKS* 10, 226-7 / *CD*, 218-19.

<sup>63</sup> *SKS* 11, 211 / *SUD*, 99.

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 20, 318, NB4:65 / *JP* 1, 373; *SKS* 25, 272, NB28:70 / *JP* 4, 4296; *SKS* 11, 205 / *SUD*, 92.

<sup>65</sup> *SKS* 16, 12 / *PV*, 24; *SKS* 13, 404-11 / *M*, 340-7.

<sup>66</sup> *SKS* 13, 405 / *M*, 341. On this point, see Muench, "Apology: Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View," 6 (cf. Paul Muench, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View," in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 390); Benjamin Daise, *Kierkegaard's Socratic Art* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), vii. It is important to note, however, that by looking to Socrates in this strong manner, Kierkegaard is not returning to a pre-Christendom form of paganism. To the contrary, he remains firmly within Christianity and Christian categories. As Kierkegaard notes in *The Point of View*, "formally I can very well call Socrates my teacher—whereas I have believed and believe in only one, the Lord Jesus Christ." See *SKS* 16, 36 / *PV*, 55.

The most important thing Kierkegaard appropriates from Socrates for his own project is the latter's emphasis on existence.<sup>67</sup> Just as the Athenians had become distracted in the trappings of materialistic life and thereby had abandoned the question of what it means to exist, Kierkegaard believes the Danes of his time have become distracted by the trappings of Christendom culture and have similarly lost sight of the question of what it means to exist as a Christian. Harold Sarf makes this point well when he notes,

Kierkegaard saw himself as a Christianized analogue of Socrates, caring for souls and doing battle with the sophists—whether in the guises of educators, theologians, politicians, or philosophers—who falsely claimed to import genuine virtue and understanding within their domains. For Kierkegaard, a “gadfly” in the spiritual lineage of Socrates was required to sting people into perceiving the negative consequences of their indolence and hypocrisy, of their superficial materialism and misguided values, and to reveal their ignorance about how to fashion the best possible lives...<sup>68</sup>

For Kierkegaard, appropriating such a Socratic emphasis on existence means presenting Christianity in its full ideality. As he remarks in “Armed Neutrality,” “what I have wanted and want to *achieve* through my work, what I also regard as the most important, is first of

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<sup>67</sup> SKS 18, 298, JJ:477 / JP 4, 4265; Muench, “Kierkegaard’s Socratic Point of View,” 398. See also Harold Sarf, “Reflections on Kierkegaard’s Socrates,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 2 (1983), 256. There are, of course, other aspects of Socrates that Kierkegaard appropriates such as, for example, Socrates’ method of ignorance. Just as Socrates pronounces himself ignorant in relation to what others claim to know, Kierkegaard assumes a similar stance in which he claims not to have the faith that others in Christendom claim to have (see Carnell, *The Burden of Søren Kierkegaard*, 28; Muench, “Apology: Kierkegaard’s Socratic Point of View,” 13; Tilley, “Christendom,” 209). Thus, in the essay “My Task,” Kierkegaard remarks rather Socratically, “I do not call myself a Christian; I do not speak of myself as a Christian.’ It is this that I must continually repeat; anyone who wants to understand my very special task must concentrate on being able to hold this firm” (SKS 13, 404 / M, 340; see also SKS 16, 116-20 / PV, 15, 134-8). Kierkegaard’s purpose in assuming this Socratic stance is to level an ironic challenge against his Christendom contemporaries who all claim to be genuine Christians. More specifically, he intends this method as a nonjudgmental way to challenge his contemporaries to examine themselves so as to draw closer to authentic faith. Kierkegaard describes this missionary aspect of his authorship nicely in *Christian Discourses*: “It is not at all our intention to judge Christendom or any single person in Christendom; we are doing our best to come as close as possible to ourselves, the best way to keep us from coming judgmentally too close to others. But it is indeed our intention to give the listener occasion to become aware of where *he* is, to test himself, his life, his Christianity.” See SKS 10, 223 / CD, 215. This is also the reason Kierkegaard employs the method of indirect communication. On this point, see Matthew T. Nowachek, “Kierkegaard as Pedagogue: Some Insights for Teaching Introductory Philosophy Courses,” *Teaching Philosophy* 37, no. 3 (2014), 349-53.

<sup>68</sup> Sarf, “Reflections on Kierkegaard’s Socrates,” 260.

all to make clear what is involved in being a Christian, to present the picture of a Christian in all its ideal, that is true form, worked out to every true limit...<sup>69</sup>

Kierkegaard's hope is that presenting the ideal in this fashion would lead to a return to the question of existence in a way that inspires striving.

In the end, the Socratic aim Kierkegaard appropriates can be summarized in a single word: simplicity. For Kierkegaard, the overall purpose of his authorship is to help people traverse the narrow path that leads out of the complex confusion of Christendom and back to the simple truths of authentic New Testament Christianity. In genuinely Socratic fashion, Kierkegaard claims that precisely this is what it means “to *reach*, to *arrive at simplicity*”<sup>70</sup>: “Christianly, one does not proceed from the simple in order then to become interesting, witty, profound, a poet, a philosopher, etc. No, it is just the opposite; *here* one begins and then becomes more and more simple, arrives at the simple. This, in ‘Christendom,’ is *Christianly* the movement of reflection; one does not reflect oneself into Christianity but reflects oneself out of something else and becomes more and more simple, a Christian.”<sup>71</sup> One may be tempted to conclude here, insofar as Kierkegaard employs the language of reaching and arriving, that Kierkegaard views Christian simplicity as something static. To the contrary, Kierkegaard is clear throughout his authorship that his goal has always been the dynamic movement of becoming a Christian.<sup>72</sup> In the next section we may provide a more detailed picture of how this dynamic *telos* of Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task looks, and to do so we may introduce the notion of sacred tension.

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<sup>69</sup> SKS 16, 111 / PV, 129.

<sup>70</sup> SKS 13, 13 / PV, 7.

<sup>71</sup> SKS 13, 13 / PV, 7.

<sup>72</sup> As Kierkegaard remarks in a journal entry, Christian simplicity involves movement “in the direction of existing, of existentially expressing the essentially Christian. The simplicity is simply to exist.” See SKS 23, 480, NB20:162 / JP 3, 3095. Interestingly, Kierkegaard here connects Christian simplicity to the notion of paradox.

### 1.3 - Sacred Tension as the *Telos* of Kierkegaard's Ethico-Religious Task

Tension (*Spænding*)<sup>73</sup> is an important concept for Kierkegaard, and it shows up in several places and in several forms within his writings. The purpose of this section is primarily to offer a preliminary description of sacred tension as a constructive form of tension that I claim serves as the broad and overarching *telos* of Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task. This preliminary account will be nuanced and filled out in greater depth in later chapters as we move through several of Kierkegaard writings, both with respect to showing how sacred tension is manifested in various ways within Kierkegaard's thought and with respect to providing specific characterizations of such sacred tension. This introductory discussion, therefore, proves useful for outlining an initial account upon which we can later expand. To begin, we may touch upon two antitheses to constructive tension in contrast to which Kierkegaard develops the notion of sacred tension.

#### *Two Antitheses to Constructive Tension*

The first antithesis is simply the evasion of tension. Such evasion assumes two forms which coincide with each of the two main expressions of Christendom described above, namely Danish civility and Danish speculative thought.

For Danish civility, evasion of tension comes in the form of the pursuit of comfort and security. In *Christian Discourses* Kierkegaard describes this evasion by employing the metaphor of a weakened spring: "Ah, there is so much in the ordinary course of life that will lull a person to sleep, teach him to say 'peace and no danger'...Even that which in itself is awakening—thoughts, reflections, ideas—can completely lose meaning through the force of habit and monotony, *just as a spring can lose*

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<sup>73</sup> Kierkegaard also employs several linguistic variations of this term in his writings.

*the tension [Spændstigheden] by which alone it really is what it is.*<sup>74</sup> In Christendom, the average Dane “is unwilling to venture out into the dangers and decisions where faith comes into existence” and he or she “is not willing to risk everything,” but would rather pursue a life of habitual comfort.<sup>75</sup> Although the Danish state church is one place in which tension should be encouraged, for Kierkegaard it is especially implicated in the problem of evasion characteristic of the pursuit of comfort and security:

[I]n God’s house, in the magnificent house of God when the pastor preaches—for tranquilization [*Beroligelse*]! Especially if he is trying to satisfy the human demands or what are called the demands of the times. While people in these times are becoming more and more timorous, more and more afraid of personally experiencing in actuality the terror implicit in the power of circumstances, they on the other hand are becoming more and more fastidious in craving the trumpery of eloquence. They do not want to hear in earnest anything about the terror; they want to play at it, much as soldiers in peacetime, or rather nonsoldiers, play war...<sup>76</sup>

In the end, both average Danish citizens and Danish clergy are guilty of a certain kind of willful blindness in which they turn away from the tension that they know they ought to pursue, and instead pursue the comfort and security of mere social trivialities and aesthetic experiences.

In a similar fashion as with Danish civility, the proponents of speculative thought evade tension by retreating into the comforts both of scholarship and tidy philosophical systems. For Kierkegaard, such an evasion is characteristic of the “professors” and their scholarly exercises:

From generation to generation these hundreds and again hundreds of professors—in Christendom, consequently Christians, no doubt, to say nothing of their being professors in theology. They write books and then books about books, and books to give synopses of the books—periodicals arose merely to write about them, and book publishers flourish, and many, many thousands have

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<sup>74</sup> *SKS* 10, 177 / *CD*, 165 (the italicized emphasis is my own).

<sup>75</sup> *SKS* 10, 251 / *CD*, 245. See also *SKS* 7, 52-3 / *CUP1*, 47; *SKS* 7, 311 / *CUP1*, 340; *SKS* 7, 331 / *CUP1*, 364.

<sup>76</sup> *SKS* 10, 176-7 / *CD*, 164-5.

jobs— — —and not a single one of these hired hands even remotely resembled in his life a truly Christian existence...<sup>77</sup>

This scholarly evasion of tension is also intimately tied to the philosophical method employed by the speculative thinkers, especially in their reliance on Hegel's notion of mediation. With mediation, one can always find harmony, balance, and resolution through the philosophical system and thereby keep a safe distance from the existential difficulties, demands, and ultimately tensions of authentic Christianity. As Merold Westphal insightfully puts it, in mediation the "tension disappears! Just as Christendom is a *Sittlichkeit* of relaxation, so the triumph of speculation over dialectic in Hegelian mediation means that all tensions, oppositions, and contradictions are overcome. Every dissonance is resolved, and we have reached the point in the story where 'they lived happily ever after.'"<sup>78</sup> In short, then, speculation allows the professor to adopt the guise of objectivity so as to evade the tensions associated with concrete subjective existence, and particularly existence tied to authentic Christianity.

The second antithesis to sacred tension is a type of tension, but tension that is fundamentally destructive in nature. In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard identifies this in two different forms, namely as "an enervating tension" (*en afmattende Spænding*) and as "the tension of reflection" (*Reflexions Spænding*).<sup>79</sup> With these two phrases, Kierkegaard nevertheless refers to the same phenomenon, that is, a type of misrelation between individuals within Christendom: "[T]he relation [between individuals]...is on its last legs inasmuch as they do not relate to each other in the relation, but the relation itself has become a problem in which the parties like rivals in a game watch each other in the relation, but like rivals in a game watch each other instead of relating to each other...as a

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<sup>77</sup> SKS 23, 200, NB17:59 / JP 3, 3568.

<sup>78</sup> Westphal, "Becoming a Self," 154. See also Frederick Sontag, *A Kierkegaard Handbook* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 104.

<sup>79</sup> SKS 8, 74 / TA, 77; SKS 8, 77 / TA, 80; SKS 8, 78 / TA, 81.

substitute for mutual giving in the relation.”<sup>80</sup> Unlike an empowering form of tension that “strains every nerve to the point of denouement,”<sup>81</sup> such tension enervates life in that it keeps the relation between parties intact, but only to undermine the vitality of those parties. The result of this destructive tension, then, is the destruction of the entire relationship:

The coiled springs of life-relationships, which are what they are only because of qualitatively distinguishing passion, lose their resilience [*Elasticiteten*]; the qualitative expression of difference between opposites is no longer the law for the relation of inwardness to each other in the relation. Inwardness is lacking, and to that extent the relation does not exist or the relation is an inert cohesion. The negative law is: they cannot do without each other and they cannot stay together; the positive law: they can do without each other and they can stay together, or more positively, they cannot do without each other because of the mutual bond. Instead of the relation of inwardness another relation supervenes: the opposites do not relate to each other but stand, as it were, and carefully watch each other, *and this tension [Spænding] is actually the termination of the relation.*<sup>82</sup>

What is especially relevant about this passage is how it reveals that for Kierkegaard not all tension is constructive in nature. This is especially true of tension in which the dialectical elements that are being related to one another are ultimately unable to be held together without destroying one another and thereby the entire relation.<sup>83</sup> It is in contrast to such destructive tension as well as to the evasion of tension that we may characterize Kierkegaard’s constructive account.

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<sup>80</sup> SKS 8, 76 / TA, 79. Such a misrelation between individuals is what Kierkegaard diagnoses as envy (*Misundelse*), and which he notes emerges in the absence of passion and inwardness.

<sup>81</sup> SKS 8, 76 / TA, 80.

<sup>82</sup> SKS 8, 76 / TA, 78. For a good discussion on this point see Howard N. Tuttle, *The Crowd is Untruth: The Existential Critique of Mass Society in the Thought of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Ortega y Gasset* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Such tension, insofar as it is self-destructive, is therefore not a tension that can be perpetually sustained.

*Constructive Tension and Sacred Tension*

Kierkegaard expresses the notion of constructive tension in several ways within his writings.<sup>84</sup> Yet, common to all of these expressions is that they avoid the existential slackness exhibited in the antitheses to tension described above while at the same time preserving a certain type of existential vitality. Again, the metaphor of a tightened spring is appropriate: just as the tension in a spring acts as the driving force in a machine such as a clock that allows the machine to function properly, so also does constructive tension serve as the existential driving force for human beings. In this sense, then, such tension for Kierkegaard is fundamentally positive and productive.

As I have remarked above, the central form of constructive tension I identify in Kierkegaard's thought is what I call sacred tension.<sup>85</sup> It is important to note that by employing the qualifier "sacred" I am pointing to the constructive tension Kierkegaard explicitly connects to Christian categories. More specifically, this is a tension that takes form fundamentally in relation to God<sup>86</sup> and with God as its grounding (*i Grunden*).<sup>87</sup> As Kierkegaard notes in a journal entry from 1854, it is precisely within such tension (i.e., *Spændingen*) that there "can arise within a person the intensity which really can love God."<sup>88</sup> Indeed, if such tension were lost or diminished, this would mean that one has left Christianity for other religious or even pagan categories.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, it is such

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<sup>84</sup> These include the "tension of actuality" (*Virkelighedens Spænding*), the "tension of the inner being" (*Inderlighedens Spændkraft*), "the tension of life" (*Livets Spænding*), "dialectical tension(s)" (*dialektiske Spændinger* or *den dialektiske Spænding*), and "the tension of eternity" (*Evighedens Spændkraft*).

<sup>85</sup> Whereas the term "sacred tension" does not occur in Kierkegaard's writings, my claim is that the concept certainly does.

<sup>86</sup> As such, although Judge Williams suggests that marriage represents the harmonized tension between freedom and necessity, insofar as such marriage is not essentially related to God it does not qualify as *sacred* tension. See Sheridan Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 70.

<sup>87</sup> With this point, Kierkegaard does not intend the type of foundationalism presented by Descartes in the *Meditations*, that is, God is not meant to be the rational basis on which a philosophical system is constructed. Rather, God allows the individual to overcome a certain form of nihilism precisely so that human existence can be meaningful. Cf. *SKS* 13, 26 / *PV*, 19-20.

<sup>88</sup> *SKS* 26, 198, NB32:110 / *JP* 4, 4489.

<sup>89</sup> For example, as Kierkegaard points out in *SKS* 26, 166-7, NB32:67 / *JP* 3, 2554, any attempt to resolve the tension of life within this life is not Christianity, but rather a form of Judaism. See also *SKS* 23,

tension that allows one to live properly as a Christian, and in this manner to receive true blessedness (*Salighed*) and true blessing (*Velsignelse*).<sup>90</sup>

In order to describe the notion of sacred tension in more detail, we may begin by focusing on what I suggest is the paradigmatic expression of such tension in Kierkegaard's thought, namely that associated with the paradoxical dialectic of grace/works. This discussion proves important because, as we will see in *Chapters 2-5*, the specific descriptions of sacred tension that emerge in relation to the various expressions of paradox are in one way or another developments or reflections of this paradigmatic form. Let us begin, then, with the notions of grace and works.

### *The Grace/Works Dialectic and Sacred Tension*

Throughout his authorship Kierkegaard stresses the importance of conceiving of the notions of grace and works in a dialectical fashion.<sup>91</sup> For example, in his journals and papers Kierkegaard writes, "Christianity requires everything, and when you have done this, it requires that you shall understand that you are nevertheless saved simply and solely by grace."<sup>92</sup> In another entry, he stresses that the dialectic emerges in a proper relation to God where God pays "the earnest money of grace," but yet still demands of the Christian believer "genuine earnestness" in her works.<sup>93</sup> Thus, for Kierkegaard, the grace/works dialectic is at the very heart of Christianity.

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400, NB20:17 / JP 2, 1479. In addition, the tension associated with exertion (i.e., *Anstrængelsens Spænding*), such as that characteristic of Sartrean existentialism, does not qualify as sacred tension precisely because it lacks the condition of "divine guidance" (*guddommeligt Veiledning*). See SKS 8, 349 / UD, 250.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., SKS 10, 249 / CD, 243. For Kierkegaard, the concepts of *Salighed* and *Velsignelse* are both inherently theological.

<sup>91</sup> Portions of this section are reproduced verbatim from Matthew T. Nowachek, "Living within the Sacred Tension of Faith: Kierkegaard's Climacean Works as a Guide for Christian Existence," *Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 5 (2014): 883-902, especially *Section 2* entitled "The Theological and Polemical Background to Christian Existence as Tension." Permission for reuse of this material has been granted by the publisher. For a good definition of dialectic in Kierkegaard, see Alejandro Cavallazzi Sánchez, "Dialectic," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 165-9.

<sup>92</sup> SKS 23, 444, NB20:93 / JP 2, 1480.

<sup>93</sup> SKS 22, 383, NB14:65 / JP 2, 1475.

Furthermore, in Kierkegaard's view the grace/works dialectic also serves as an important polemical tool for identifying and assessing the problematic tendency to slide to one side of the dialectic to the exclusion of the other.<sup>94</sup> In his first essay from *For Self-Examination*, Kierkegaard describes this tendency in a concrete fashion by offering something of a genealogy of grace and works in the western Christian tradition from the medieval times up to his present time. In Medieval Christianity, “[e]verything had become works”<sup>95</sup> in the sense that Medieval Christians made the mistake of emphasizing works to the exclusion of grace. The result of this movement was that works were not only “tortured, laborious, and unpleasant” but also shot through with “hypocrisy, the conceitedness of merit, [and] idleness.”<sup>96</sup> In response to these excesses, Luther entered the scene, preaching the Reformation message of *sola fide*. Because the situation was so dire, however, Luther pushed Christianity to the opposite dialectical extreme in which grace thereby became emphasized to the detriment of works—even up to the point that Luther, to Kierkegaard's amazement, rejects the book of James.<sup>97</sup> In Kierkegaard's view, the theological trajectory initiated by Luther leads in an unbroken line directly to the cheap grace mentality of the present age of Christendom:

There is always a secular mentality that no doubt wants to have the name of being Christian but wants to become Christian as cheaply as possible. This secular mentality became aware of Luther. It listened; for safety's sake it listened once again lest it should have heard wrongly; thereupon it said, “Excellent! This is something for us. Luther says: It depends on faith alone. He himself does not say that his life expresses works, and since he is now dead it is no longer an actuality. So we take his words, his doctrine—and we are free from all works—long live Luther!”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> This tendency is not as pronounced in the eastern orthodox tradition as in the Western tradition in that the former is far more at home with paradox.

<sup>95</sup> *SKS* 13, 44 / *FSE*, 15.

<sup>96</sup> *SKS* 13, 44 / *FSE*, 15.

<sup>97</sup> *SKS* 13, 45 / *FSE*, 16. See also *SKS* 7, 33-4 / *CUP1*, 26.

<sup>98</sup> *SKS* 13, 45 / *FSE*, 16. On the Christendom misappropriation of Luther's message of grace, see also *SKS* 23, 400, NB20:17 / *JP* 2, 1479; *SKS* 24, 190-2, NB22:159 / *JP* 2, 1482.

In this manner, the pendulum of Christianity had swung from one extreme to the other with the Lutheran view now representing a modern anti-works perversion of the understanding of grace.

It is important to note that the issue Kierkegaard has with the Medieval and Lutheran understandings of grace and works is not simply that the Medieval Christians emphasized works and that Luther emphasized grace, but rather that in doing so both sides missed the necessary dialectical relationship at play between grace and works. This criticism is especially clear in Kierkegaard's assessment of Luther. Although Kierkegaard has some positive things to say about Luther,<sup>99</sup> at many places in his writings he attacks Luther for being undialectical and only seeing "one side of the matter."<sup>100</sup> In Kierkegaard's view, Luther was certainly correct to emphasize grace in response to the abuses of Medieval Catholicism, but he should also have emphasized that the life of the spirit is at the same time extremely strenuous.<sup>101</sup> In other words, Luther ought to have done everything in his power to remove self-righteousness from works, while leaving such works standing as a radical demand upon the Christian individual.<sup>102</sup> The point for Kierkegaard, therefore, is not to react to one exaggeration with the opposite exaggeration, as if one's view is incessantly swinging between dialectical extremes, but rather to oppose the hypertension (*Overspændthed*)<sup>103</sup> of the Medieval and Lutheran views by pursuing a proper tension (*Spænding*) that holds both together in a dialectical

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<sup>99</sup> See, e.g., the Hongs' collection of journal entries: *JP* 3, 2461, 2465, 2468, 2472, 2475, 2485, 2488, 2491, 2492, 2499, 2500, 2501, 2503, 2505, 2506, 2510, 2511, 2518; See also *SKS* 13, 24 / *PV*, 17.

<sup>100</sup> *SKS* 24, 414, NB24:141 / *JP* 3, 2541. See also *SKS* 23, 367-8, NB19:57 / *JP* 3, 2521.

Kierkegaard's critique, however, is not without ambiguity: at times he places the blame directly on Luther and at other times he blames the Christendom appropriation of Luther's view. With respect to the latter, see, e.g., *SKS* 16, 240 / *JFY*, 194; *SKS* 23, 152, NB16:86 / *JP* 3, 2513; *SKS* 23, 323, NB18:101 / *JP* 3, 2518.

<sup>101</sup> See *SKS* 21, 296-7, NB10:76 / *JP* 3, 2481; *SKS* 22, 203, NB12:108 / *JP* 3, 2502; *SKS* 23, 152-3, NB16:87 / *JP* 3, 2514.

<sup>102</sup> *SKS* 23, 368, NB19:57b / *JP* 3, 2522.

<sup>103</sup> This point does not come out very clearly in the Hong's translation. In *JP* 3, 2484 the Hongs translate the word *overspændte* with "exaggeration." Although this is a decent enough rendering, it masks the etymological connection to the notion of tension, a connection which appears to be relevant in this passage given its context.

relationship.<sup>104</sup> For Kierkegaard, this latter task is what it means to have a “comprehensive view” of Christianity<sup>105</sup>—something both Luther and the Medieval Christians failed to achieve.<sup>106</sup>

As Kierkegaard sees it, the absence of the dialectical tension between grace and works is a reflection of a certain lethargy and deficiency of passion as well as a certain human cunning. With respect to the former, the person drifting either to works or to grace to the exclusion of the other is like the drunken peasant who, when helped up onto one side of his horse, merely falls off the other side.<sup>107</sup> With respect to the latter, Kierkegaard draws attention to the crafty manner by which human beings attempt to skirt around the tension of the grace/works dialectic:

[I]n every human being there is an inclination *either* to want to be meritorious when it comes to works *or*, when faith and grace are to be emphasized, also to want to be free from works as far as possible. Indeed, “man,” this rational creation of God, certainly does not let himself be fooled... “No, it’s one or the other,” says man. “If it is to be *works*—fine, but then I must also ask for the legitimate yield I have coming from my works, so that they are meritorious. If it is to be *grace*—fine, but then I must also ask to be free from works—otherwise it surely is not grace.”<sup>108</sup>

This cunning mentality is nothing less than an expression of human selfishness Kierkegaard sees at work in his Christendom culture.<sup>109</sup> It is precisely because of his opposition to such selfishness that Kierkegaard rejects this specific either/or employed by the cunning person in favor of the both/and of tension.<sup>110</sup> To return to the image of

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<sup>104</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 14, 44 / *FSE*, 15. As J. Michael Tilley points out, for Kierkegaard the corrective to a flawed position must not itself then become the new problematic norm, but rather it must at all times keep an “eye toward altering the whole.” See “Corrective,” in *Kierkegaard’s Concepts: Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 84.

<sup>105</sup> *SKS* 25, 401, NB30:22 / *JP* 3, 2550.

<sup>106</sup> For Kierkegaard, had Socrates engaged this issue, he most certainly would have assumed a properly dialectical position. See *SKS* 23, 152-3, NB16:87 / *JP* 3, 2514.

<sup>107</sup> *SKS* 13, 52 / *FSE*, 24. This is an image that Kierkegaard attributes to Luther.

<sup>108</sup> *SKS* 13, 45-6 / *FSE*, 16-17.

<sup>109</sup> On this point, see the following relevant journal entries: *SKS* 22, 311, NB13:63 / *JP* 1, 763; *SKS* 23, 400, NB20:17 / *JP* 2, 1479.

<sup>110</sup> This statement may strike readers as odd given that Kierkegaard is known as the champion of the either/or. Kierkegaard is, of course, committed to the either/or in response to what he sees as the

the peasant and the horse, we may therefore say that in Kierkegaard's view the proper relation of grace and works in contrast to lethargy and human cunning is best represented by the person who remains tensely positioned in the saddle while riding with vigor and fury. In order to prevent misunderstanding, however, it is important to note here that sacred tension construed in this fashion at the same time represents a radical challenge to human self-sufficiency. More specifically, Kierkegaard's insistence upon grace entails that one's striving alone is insufficient, and that such striving must be paired with humble receptivity to divine provision. To put it in another way, one cannot remain in sacred tension by virtue of one's own efforts, but rather such tension is fundamentally a divine-human cooperation.

Sacred tension as it emerges in relation to the dialectic of grace/works therefore serves for Kierkegaard as a representation of what it means to exist properly as a Christian. In this respect, Kierkegaard is asking his readers to adopt such sacred tension as something of a disposition and an existential stance, that is, to learn how to live in such a way that one affirms, preserves, and fosters the tension. As M. Jamie Ferreira rightly notes about tension in general, and which is especially applicable to the notion of sacred tension, for Kierkegaard "the task is not to erase the tension (even if we could), but to sustain it at the highest pitch possible."<sup>111</sup> Closely conceptually tied to sacred tension as a lived existential stance and that which has a crucial role to play in how sacred tension is to be understood is Kierkegaard's notion of restlessness (*Uro*) as well as Kierkegaard's ontology of becoming underlying such restlessness. In order, then, to fill

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mediating project of the Danish Hegelians, but he is at the same time critical of the either/or when it is used to deny central aspects of Christian faith and existence. As such, with respect to grace and works, Kierkegaard rather adopts a both/and view in which he holds firmly to both grace and works. For a good account of Kierkegaard's use of either/or and both/and, see Jakub Marek, "Contradiction," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 73-80; M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 94-5.

<sup>111</sup> *Transforming Vision*, 5.

out our description of sacred tension, we may conclude this section by briefly focusing on these concepts.

*Sacred Tension: Restlessness and Becoming in Relation to God*

With restlessness, Kierkegaard does not simply imply the destructive notions one might typically associate with it such as worry, anxiety or boredom, but rather he also employs the concept in a constructive fashion.<sup>112</sup> For example, in an 1854 entry from his journals and papers entitled “*Restlessness [Uroen]*” Kierkegaard writes about how God employs restlessness as a necessary aspect of the Christian life meant to counteract worldly rest (*Rø*) and security (*Tryghed*):

Christianity is the greatest, the most intense, the most powerful restlessness [*Uro*] imaginable; it disturbs [*uroligere*] human existence at its deepest level (such, in fact, was the effect of Christ’s life), it explodes everything, bursts everything. So it is that God uses restlessness [*Uro*]*—*he utilizes unrest [*Uro*] to hunt men who will love him. But...God does not use restlessness [*Uro*] to capture all the more, does not use it for the sake of numbers, but for the sake of intensity*—*that is, when the greatest possible restlessness [*Uro*] is brought about, in the tension [*Spændingen*] there can arise within a person the intensity which really can love God. But man loves rest [*Rø*], security [*Tryghed*]. However, it is certain that in security [*Tryghed*], at rest [*Rø*], no one can become a Christian, and it is no less certain that no Christian can remain in security [*Tryghed*] and at rest [*Rø*]. If one is to become a Christian, there must be restlessness [*Uro*], and if one has become a Christian, restlessness [*Uro*] continues.<sup>113</sup>

In a similar fashion, in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* Kierkegaard identifies restlessness as centrally tied to authentic Christian faith as such faith manifests itself in discipleship and the task of following Christ: “Faith expressly signifies the deep, strong, blessed restlessness [*den dybe, stærke, salige Uro*] that drives the believer so that he cannot settle down at rest [*Rø*] in this world, and therefore the person who has settled down

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<sup>112</sup> For an interesting discussion on the restlessness of faith in relation to spiritual trial, see Simon D. Podmore, *Struggling with God: Kierkegaard and the Temptation of Spiritual Trial* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2013), 204-9.

<sup>113</sup> SKS 26, 198, NB32:110 / JP 4, 4489.

completely at rest [Rø] has also ceased to be a believer, because a believer cannot sit still [stille] as one sits with a pilgrim's staff in one's hand—a believer travels forward.”<sup>114</sup> It is precisely because such restlessness stands in opposition to the categories of comfort, rest, and security as defined by the world that Kierkegaard calls it “Christian restlessness” (*christelig Uro*)<sup>115</sup> and identifies it with the Christian notion of spirit.<sup>116</sup>

To connect this discussion of restlessness back to our discussion of grace/works above, we may point out that in the first essay to *For Self-Examination* Kierkegaard develops the notion of restlessness specifically in terms of the dialectical tension between grace and works. As he notes in several places in the essay, “faith is a restless thing” (*Troen er en urolig Ting*).<sup>117</sup> In this context, restlessness functions for Kierkegaard as a type of “health” (*Sundhed*), which is “stronger and more violent than the most burning fever” and which acts as the “pulse” of one's life.<sup>118</sup> In addition, restlessness represents an inward deepening and the vitality of existence<sup>119</sup> that Kierkegaard contrasts with a kind of existential disorder he calls “the stillness of death, a dying out” (*Dødsstilheden, Uddøetheden*)<sup>120</sup> that is characteristic of the spiritlessness and lifelessness of Christianity when it has fallen into one dialectical extreme of grace or works to the exclusion of the other.<sup>121</sup> Whereas this disorder, similar to the two evasions of tension associated with common Danish civility and Danish speculative thought described above, is a form of

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<sup>114</sup> SKS 8, 320 / UD, 218.

<sup>115</sup> SKS 24, 189, NB22:157 / JP 6, 6717.

<sup>116</sup> See, SKS 27, 650, *Papir* 546 / JP 4, 4361: “Spirit is restlessness [Uro]; Christianity is the most profound restlessness [Uro] of existence—so it is in the New Testament. In Christendom Christianity is tranquilization [Beroligelse] ‘so that we can really enjoy life.’”; SKS 27, 630, *Papir* 512 / JP 4, 4362: “Man desire tranquility [Rø] so that he may enjoy (*vil beatum nisis quietum—Epicurus*). God (according to Christianity does not want men to have tranquility [Rø]—spirit is restlessness [Uro]. Here alone there is an irregularity in Protestantism inasmuch as it tends exclusively towards tranquilizing [at berolige].”

<sup>117</sup> SKS 13, 46 / FSE, 17.

<sup>118</sup> SKS 13, 47 / FSE, 18.

<sup>119</sup> Although Kierkegaard identifies two distinct forms of Christian restlessness, one that he associates with Christian witnesses and their attempts to bring about reform and one with inward deepening, it is the latter on which Kierkegaard focuses his philosophical attention in *For Self-Examination*. See SKS 13, 50 / FSE, 21; SKS 13, 52 / FSE, 24.

<sup>120</sup> SKS 13, 49 / FSE, 20.

<sup>121</sup> SKS 25, 400, NB30:22 / JP 3, 2550: “But soon the restlessness [Uroen] is diminished in ‘Christendom’, this dead mass devoid of spirit [*denne døde aandløse Masse*].”

superficial soothing rest that results in the cessation of all significant change and growth, restlessness is rather a continuous movement of existential development.<sup>122</sup> In the end, such restlessness may look slightly different in different contexts,<sup>123</sup> but the uniform idea is that of remaining in perpetual motion despite the straining and demanding nature of such motion.

Although Kierkegaard identifies restlessness as central to the life of faith, we should point out that he nevertheless also associates faith with a certain kind of rest.<sup>124</sup> For example, Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity* writes an entire reflection on Matthew 11:28 in which Christ invites all who labor and are burdened to come to him in order to find rest (*Hvile*).<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard connects proper rest explicitly to obedience to God: “On the whole there is only one way in which rest [*Hvile*] is to be found: to let God rule in everything...”<sup>126</sup> In describing this type of rest, however, Kierkegaard is careful to distinguish it from the destructive form of rest outlined above. Whereas the latter is the type of rest that is

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<sup>122</sup> *SKS* 13, 52 / *FSE*, 24. Compare this to *SKS* 16, 119 / *PV*, 137: “But the ideality with regard to being a Christian is a continual inward deepening.”

<sup>123</sup> For example, restlessness may take the form of the anguished conscience which turns to a savior for the forgiveness of sin (*SKS* 25, 399-401, NB30:22 / *JP* 3, 2550) or it may take the form of witnessing, sacrificing, suffering persecution, self-denial, and renunciation (*SKS* 13, 47 / *FSE*, 18).

<sup>124</sup> In describing this rest, Kierkegaard employs two different words, namely *Ro* (which carries connotations of peace or calm) and *Hvile* (which carries connotations of physical repose), though he draws heavily on the latter in his description of the characteristically Christian rest. Although these distinctions hold generally, the *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* notes that they can in certain contexts also be used interchangeably.

<sup>125</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 12, 21-33 / *PC*, 11-22.

<sup>126</sup> *SKS* 8, 356 / *UD*, 258. See also *SKS* 8, 356-7 / *UD*, 258-9: “That there is reconciliation for the person who is brokenhearted—there is rest [*Hvile*] in that, but he cannot find rest [*Hvile*] in this eternal thought if he does not first find rest [*hviler*] in the thought of obedience: that God must rule in everything, because reconciliation is indeed God’s plan for the salvation of humankind. That satisfaction has been made for guilt—there is rest [*Hvile*] for the penitent in that, but he cannot find rest [*Hvile*] in this eternal thought if he does not first rest [*hviler*] in this: to let God rule in everything, because making satisfaction in indeed God’s plan from eternity. That God will forgive you—there is rest [*Hvile*] in that, but you cannot find rest [*Hvile*] in this eternal thought if you do not rest [*hviler*] in the thought that God is to rule in everything. Otherwise God’s grace would become your merit, and it would not be God who gives both to will and to do, gives the growth and gives the completion, something that all your own effort cannot achieve...[I]n relation to God and the eternal the appropriation is obedience, and in obedience there is rest [*Hvile*]. There is rest [*Hvile*] in the eternal. This is the eternal truth, but the eternal can rest [*hvile*] in obedience—this is the eternal truth for you.” In contrast, then, Kierkegaard associates disobedience with unrest (*Uro*). See *SKS* 8, 357 / *UD*, 259.

grounded in sources other than God, and is achieved by repressing or attempting to overcome tension, the former is the kind of rest that, although never perfectly achieved in existence,<sup>127</sup> is grounded entirely on God. As Kierkegaard remarks, “Wherever the eternal is, there is rest [Rø]; but there is unrest [Uro] where the eternal is not present. There is unrest [Uro] in the world, but above all there is unrest [Uro] in a person’s soul when the eternal is not present in it and he is only ‘full of unrest [mattes med Uro].’”<sup>128</sup> In this respect, we can say that even though Kierkegaard associates faith with a certain kind of rest, such rest is not that which leads to the “stillness of death” precisely because it rests in God and thereby fundamentally upholds and encourages the tension associated with faith as the believer perpetually strives to become more Christ-like.<sup>129</sup> As Kierkegaard puts it in *Works of Love*, “the person who relates himself to God’s love...is bound to have an unforgettable fear and trembling, even though he rests [hviler] in God’s love.”<sup>130</sup> It is precisely this dialectical sense of the concept of rest that allows Kierkegaard to make the paradoxical claim that the Christian is to find rest in the eternal while all the while retaining a “blessed restlessness” (*salige Uro*) that does not allow one to settle down in comfort but rather pushes one in restlessness to travel forward.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> To achieve such rest perfectly within existence would presuppose that one has subjected oneself in perfect (*fuldkommen*) and unconditional (*ubetinget*) obedience to God (see *SKS* 8, 356 / *UD*, 258)—something that Kierkegaard does not view as humanly possible. It is noteworthy, however, that Kierkegaard appears to believe that perfect rest is nevertheless possible in eternity. Consider, for example, the hymn by Hans Adolf Brorson that Kierkegaard selects as the text for his gravestone: “In yet a little while / I shall have won; / Then the whole fight / Will all at once be done. / Then I may rest [*saa kan jeg hvile mig*] / In bowers of roses / And perpetually [*uafladelig*] / Speak with my Jesus.” Quoted in Christopher B. Barnett, “Hans Adolph Brorson: Danish Pietism’s Greatest Hymn Writer and His Relation to Kierkegaard” in *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions: Tome II: Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 63 (I have made a slight revision to the translation).

<sup>128</sup> *SKS* 8, 356 / *UD*, 258. The quotation is a reference to Job 7:4.

<sup>129</sup> There is an important dialectical point to be made here concerning Kierkegaard’s account of rest. The rest of faith plays out in a dialectical fashion: on the one hand, if one has settled down in worldly comforts and refuses to follow Christ and carry his or her cross, then there is no rest offered (see *SKS* 8, 320 / *UD*, 218); on the other hand, if one is faithfully following Christ and thereby is burdened, then rest is offered (see *SKS* 8, 355-7 / *UD*, 258-9).

<sup>130</sup> *SKS* 9, 378 / *WL*, 386.

<sup>131</sup> *SKS* 8, 320 / *UD*, 218. This discussion provides additional support for why the tension I describe above warrants the title “sacred”: such tension is possible only through a relationship with God, and, as I argue in *Chapter 4*, through a relationship with Christ as the paradoxical God-man.

Underlying the restlessness of faith outlined above as well as sacred tension in general, is Kierkegaard's commitment to an ontology of becoming.<sup>132</sup> Within his writings, Kierkegaard draws an important distinction between being (*Væren*) as a description of that which is and becoming (*Vorden*) as a description of that which is in process.<sup>133</sup> Claudine Davidshofer describes this distinction nicely in relation to the concepts of eternity and temporality:

For Kierkegaard, the metaphysical whole is split into two realms, the realm of eternal being (God) and the realm of temporal becoming (the earthly). God is transcendent, eternal, pure being. He is the only being that is full being and is not mixed with becoming. Temporal being is the immanent, concrete, earthly realm in which humans have their daily existence. Temporal becoming is unfinished and continually changing. The two realms are not completely separate, however. The Incarnation, the absolute paradox of Christianity, affirms that eternal being freely descended into temporal becoming in the form of a human being, Christ. Kierkegaard believes that the realms of eternal being and temporal becoming are connected through the composite nature of human being.<sup>134</sup>

As Davidshofer suggests here, one of the reasons the distinction between being and becoming is important is because of what it entails for human persons. For Kierkegaard, insofar as the human being exists (*være til, existerre*),<sup>135</sup> she is necessarily tied to the realm of

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<sup>132</sup> See Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005). Cf. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century: The Paradox and the "Point of Contact"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 218: "Kierkegaard's world is a world of perpetual motion..."

<sup>133</sup> For Kierkegaard, humans participate in being, but being as informed by temporality and spatiality. As the Hongs put it in a helpful endnote to *Philosophical Fragments*, "The Danish *blev til* (as well as *tilblive*, *Tilblivelse*, *være til*, and *Tilværelse*) refers to temporal and spatial modes of becoming and being. The eternal as timeless being does not come into being but comes into time and space as a specific embodiment of the eternal. The moment, therefore, is an atom of eternity and has a significance qualitatively different from that of transient instants of time. Existence is a mode of being, but not all being is existence." See *PF*, 280n25.

<sup>134</sup> "Being/Becoming," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome I: Absolute to Church*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 138. See also Anton Hügli, "The Principle of Contradiction," in *Concepts and Alternatives in Kierkegaard*, ed. Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1980), 276.

<sup>135</sup> Watkin's explanation of the various forms of existence in Kierkegaard proves helpful here. See Watkin, *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy*, 80: "Kierkegaard uses the word *existence* (*Tilværelsen*) of the world as the sphere of human activity. In this sense it parallels the term actuality. Existence can also, however, refer to the fact of a person's ethical-religious striving and personal development in life (where 'to exist' is expressed by the Danish word '*existerre*') as opposed to the fact of a person's concrete physical existence in the world, where to say that a person exists simply means she or he is there in the world (in Danish this is expressed by the verb '*være til*')."

becoming.<sup>136</sup> As Climacus puts it in *Postscript*, “Since the existing subject is existing...he is indeed in the process of becoming.”<sup>137</sup> Or, as he remarks a few pages later, “One who is existing is continually in the process of becoming...The perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthy life, in which everything is uncertain.”<sup>138</sup> For the human being in this state of continuous becoming and continuous uncertainty, the focus of life cannot therefore be the tranquility (*Rø*) that leads to the stillness of death, but rather it must be the restlessness (*Uro*) of the movement of perpetual striving.<sup>139</sup> Such striving does not merely seek a finite end that one can easily achieve, but rather it is a striving after an infinite goal that will never be perfectly fulfilled within existence.

The significance of such a view of persons for the authentic Christian should be unmistakable in that the same ontology applies to both.<sup>140</sup> Again, to quote Davidshofer,

Christianity is not a settled state, not something that the individual simply is once and for all. Being a Christian is always becoming a Christian. The individual must, at every moment, continually renew and repeat the double movement of Christianity. He does not become in the sense of moving on, of going beyond Christianity, but in the sense of continually re-enacting the decision and the task of being a Christian.<sup>141</sup>

This description of Christianity is precisely what is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s repeated claim in his authorship that the fundamental task of every individual human being is that of “becoming a Christian.”<sup>142</sup> To become such a Christian, however, and a Christian

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<sup>136</sup> For Climacus, in contrast, God does not “exist” until he enters time in the Incarnation. See, e.g., *SKS* 4, 222 / *PF*, 13; *SKS* 7, 303 / *CUP1*, 332.

<sup>137</sup> *SKS* 7, 80 / *CUP1*, 80. Cf. Kierkegaard’s description of existence as motion in *SKS* 7, 284 / *CUP1*, 312.

<sup>138</sup> *SKS* 7, 85 / *CUP1*, 86.

<sup>139</sup> As Carlisle notes, it is this aspect of his ontology of becoming that gives Kierkegaard the feel of an existentialist: “The ‘existentialist’ perspective that Kierkegaard brings to the spheres of philosophy and faith accentuates the priority of becoming over being; the priority of freedom and action (‘the ethical’) over reflection and knowledge (‘the aesthetic’).” See *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming*, 3.

<sup>140</sup> This does not mean that becoming a human being and becoming a Christian occur in the same manner or that the latter can be collapsed into the former. To assume so would be to slide back into the categories of Christendom. See *SKS* 7, 546 / *CUP1*, 602: “it is...a deceitful device to want to identify becoming a Christian as closely as possible with becoming a human being and to want to make someone believe that one becomes that decisively in childhood.”

<sup>141</sup> “Being/Becoming,” 142.

<sup>142</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 16, 11, 72-3 / *PV* 8, 23, 93-4.

whose existence is characterized fundamentally by the sacred tension of faith, means that one must step out of the categories of Danish civility and speculative thought insofar as these categories represent a static view of existence, and instead embrace the dynamic categories of restlessness and becoming in relation to God. In the end, therefore, because all people are constantly in motion and becoming, the important question for Kierkegaard is whether one is moving away from God in the despairing attempt to find peace and security in sources other than God, or whether one is moving towards God by recognizing and fostering one's grounding in God.<sup>143</sup>

In conclusion we may reiterate that for Kierkegaard the restless becoming central to sacred tension, what he also identifies in certain places as fear and trembling,<sup>144</sup> is precisely that which characterizes authentic Christian existence. It is important, however, to keep in mind an important dialectical point, namely that such existence of restless becoming is not simply self-created, self-motivated or self-achieved.<sup>145</sup> Rather, it plays out in relation to the God who, from his position of divine stability, pushes and draws individuals to himself and thereby enables the entire process of restless becoming comprising the sacred tension of faith.<sup>146</sup> It is therefore this aspect of the tension—that it

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<sup>143</sup> This is essentially the definition of faith that Anti-Climacus develops in *SKS* 11, 242 / *SUD*, 131: “in relating to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently [*grunder Selvet gjennemsigtigt*] in the power that established it.”

<sup>144</sup> This phrase originates with the Apostle Paul's paradoxical command concerning grace and works in Philippians 2:12-13 to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” For Kierkegaard, fear and trembling assumes several forms: it is the “dialectical hovering” (*dialektiske Svæven*) one experiences when one does not have certainty about faith, but yet one continues to believe despite such uncertainty (*SKS* 20, 382, NB5:30 / *JP* 1, 255); it is the state of vigilant wakefulness in which one remains in perpetual readiness to obey and to follow God (*SKS* 10, 220 / *CD*, 212; *SKS* 17, 273, *DD*:185 / *JP* 3, 3369); it means that one is constantly relating to God in a tense state equidistant from security and despair (*SKS* 10, 219 / *CD*, 211), yet at the same time paradoxically resting (*hviler*) in God's love and blessing (*SKS* 9, 378 / *WL*, 386). But most importantly for the discussion of this chapter, fear and trembling is fundamentally a movement of becoming. As Anti-Climacus notes, “Fear and trembling signify that we are in the process of becoming [*Vorden*]; and every single individual, likewise the generation, is and should be aware of being in the process of becoming [*Vorden*]” (*SKS* 12, 97 / *PC*, 88).

<sup>145</sup> As Climacus notes in *SKS* 7, 394 / *CUP1*, 433: “the individual is unable to transform himself [or, alternatively, “to recreate himself”: *skabe sig selv om*].” See also *SKS* 11, 130 / *SUD*, 13-14.

<sup>146</sup> See Kierkegaard's essay “The Changelessness of God” in *SKS* 13, 321-39 / *M*, 263-81. With respect to God pushing and drawing individuals, see, e.g., *SKS* 12, 21-33 / *PC*, 11-22.

plays out before God, is in relation to God, and is predicated upon divine provision, which is precisely that which reveals it in fact to be *sacred* tension.

#### **1.4 - Concluding Remarks: Kierkegaard's Ethico-Religious Task and the Possibilities for Paradox**

In this chapter, I have argued for and articulated a particular reading of Kierkegaard's thought in relation to which I develop the argument in *Chapters 2-5*. Towards this end, I have outlined Kierkegaard's view of the problem of Christendom, followed by his Socratic response to this problem in the form of his ethico-religious task to introduce Christianity into Christendom. I have also introduced the broad and overarching *telos* towards which Kierkegaard directs his task, namely that of guiding his contemporaries into the existential stance of living within the sacred tension of faith characterized by restlessness and becoming in relation to God, which I have illustrated with reference to the tension Kierkegaard associates with the dialectic of grace/works. In short, then, I have set up the problem informing Kierkegaard's authorship, outlined Kierkegaard's response, and given an introductory description of the general goal towards which Kierkegaard is aiming. What this discussion leaves largely untouched, however, is the specific *means* Kierkegaard employs for fulfilling his ethico-religious task. As such, the suggestion with which I conclude this chapter, and that on which I focus in *Chapters 2-5*, is that Kierkegaard intends paradox to serve as precisely such a means.

As I have remarked in the introduction to the dissertation, paradox is clearly a central notion for Kierkegaard and for his view of Christianity. In light of the discussion developed within this chapter, we are now at a place where we may suggest an initial response to the question of *why exactly* paradox proves so crucial to Kierkegaard's thought. Simply stated, paradox is Kierkegaard's foremost instrument in his ethico-

religious task as that with which he requires his contemporaries to engage if they are to be properly situated in the ongoing process of becoming authentic Christians. Put differently, paradox plays a crucial role both in helping people to live within the sacred tension of faith and in helping to clarify the nature of sacred tension itself. As I have remarked elsewhere, “It is because of [his] account of Christian existence [as sacred tension] that Kierkegaard makes continual reference in his writings to notions such as paradox, and he employs these notions in order to combat the philosophical and cultural tendency within his 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish context to reduce faith to something understandable, manageable, and ultimately, devoid of dialectic.”<sup>147</sup> In this sense, if we are to take into consideration the earnestness with which Kierkegaard undertakes his ethico-religious task, then we will certainly need to assign paradox a central role within this task. As we will see in the chapters that follow, paradox carries significant implications for the project of articulating a robust and detailed account of what Kierkegaard understands as essential to Christian existence, particularly as it is construed in terms of sacred tension.

In order to bring this section and this chapter to a close, we may return to the essay “Armed Neutrality” and Kierkegaard’s description of his ethico-religious task. As Kierkegaard remarks, “I do not say of myself that I am a remarkable Christian...But I do maintain that I know with uncommon clarity and definiteness what Christianity is, what can be required of the Christian, what it means to be a Christian.”<sup>148</sup> To counteract the destructive influence of Christendom, Kierkegaard believes that it is crucial to get clear about the concepts that are central to Christianity. Paradox, for Kierkegaard, is certainly one of the more important of these concepts. Therefore, in order to continue the argument we have begun in this chapter, it is imperative to undertake a close analysis of

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<sup>147</sup> Nowachek, “Living within the Sacred Tension,” 884.

<sup>148</sup> *SKS* 16, 119 / *PV*, 138.

the notion of paradox as it appears in its various expressions within Kierkegaard's thought and writings and to draw out the significance of this for Christian existence. This undertaking will serve as the focus of the next four chapters.

## CHAPTER 2

### PARADOX AND FAITH: ON ABRAHAM, ETHICS, AND CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

*Let us then either cancel out Abraham or learn to be horrified by the prodigious paradox that is the meaning of his life, so that we may understand that our age, like every other age, can rejoice if it has faith.<sup>1</sup>*

*The tragic hero... finds rest [Hvile] in the universal; the knight of faith is constantly kept in tension [Spænding].<sup>2</sup>*

*[C]ontinue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.<sup>3</sup>*

In this chapter we may consider the first of our four expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, the expression that is identified with the faith of Abraham in the pseudonymous work *Fear and Trembling*,<sup>4</sup> and begin to draw out its significance for Christian existence. There are at least two important reasons for engaging with *Fear and Trembling*. First, this text is central to Kierkegaard's corpus and it has been read and studied by scholars perhaps more than any other of Kierkegaard's writings. As such, a proper investigation of paradox and Christian existence, especially as this study relates to the secondary discussion, will need to afford this text significant attention. Second, *Fear and Trembling* is one of several of Kierkegaard's works in which both the term and the concept of paradox make significant appearances, and therefore it serves as a good resource for engaging with the notions of paradox and Christian existence as well as for articulating the relationship between them.

The argument I put forward can be summarized as follows. The notion of paradox in *Fear and Trembling* plays an important role in *de silentio*'s challenge to

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<sup>1</sup> *SKS* 4, 146 / *FT*, 52-3.

<sup>2</sup> *SKS* 4, 170 / *FT*, 79.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:12-13 (NIV).

<sup>4</sup> The form of the pseudonym I employ hereafter is Johannes *de silentio*. In this chapter I have changed any variations of the name in quotations for the sake of consistency.

Christendom and its characterization of ethics, and, in addition, paradox in both its etymological and dialectical forms is that which underlies and informs Abraham's existential stance as one living within the sacred tension. I claim, therefore, that Abraham can serve as an exemplar for the person of faith, particularly with respect to the specific virtues he displays within the sacred tension. As such, we may say that *Fear and Trembling* and its discussion of paradox as tied to Abraham's faith offers valuable insight into the nature of ethics as well as into the manner by which ethics and Christian existence are related to one another.

In developing my argument I divide this chapter into five sections. In *Section 2.1*, I make a few preliminary remarks on *Fear and Trembling*. For *Section 2.2*, I outline the notion of paradox, which I follow in *Section 2.3* with a discussion of the notion of sacred tension as this is manifested in the text and is related to paradox. In *Section 2.4*, I turn to Abraham as a concrete figure living within the sacred tension, and I discuss the manner by which he serves as an exemplar for Christian existence. Towards this end, I touch upon the implications that *Fear and Trembling* carries for ethics. In *Section 2.5*, I bring the chapter to a close with a few concluding remarks.

## **2.1 - Preliminary Remarks on *Fear and Trembling***

On a general reading, *Fear and Trembling* deals with the story of the *Akedah* in which one follows Abraham on his journey from receiving a command from God to sacrifice his son Isaac up to the point on Mount Moriah where God intervenes (via a messenger) in order to prevent the sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> In the course of tracing out this account, *de silentio* raises several important questions concerning the nature of faith as well as the

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<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 22 and Hebrews 11.

relation between faith and ethics/social morality.<sup>6</sup> A closer reading of the text, however, begins to reveal its complexity, and scholars have offered a wide range of interpretations varying from seeing the text as an expression of crass fideism or irrationalism<sup>7</sup> to seeing the text as an allegory or a vehicle for communicating hidden messages.<sup>8</sup> In light of such interpretive diversity, how should we move forward in our reading of the text?

A good place to begin is with *de silentio*'s own commentary on how to read the Christian scriptures. For *de silentio*, it is important to avoid reading in a way that trivializes or dilutes the text by turning it into an object of mere aesthetic enjoyment or by tinkering with the words in such a fashion that their force is undermined.<sup>9</sup> This latter point is precisely what lies behind his critique of the slick exegete who tries to explain away the text, or at least to protect himself from taking it at face-value in all its difficulty.<sup>10</sup> Rather, *de silentio* recommends the words of the text be read and understood seriously, *just as they are written* (i.e., “*forstaaes lige efter Ordene*”).<sup>11</sup> As Ryan Kemp puts it in his argument for a straightforward reading of *Fear and Trembling*, “interpreters should be considerably more open to the possibility that *Fear and Trembling* means what it (explicitly) says. After all, it wouldn't be so odd if it turned out that Kierkegaard intends *Fear and Trembling* to be read in the same way *de silentio* recommends we read [scripture]...”<sup>12</sup> Thus, although it is important to read *Fear and Trembling* in a nuanced manner that avoids hasty conclusions

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<sup>6</sup> With respect to these concepts, Kierkegaard employs several Danish terms including *det Ethiske* and *det Sædelige*.

<sup>7</sup> On this view see Jerome I. Gellman, “Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*,” *Man and World* 23 (1990), 295; Andrew A. Cross, “Faith and the Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*,” *Inquiry* 46, no. 1 (2003), 11; Ryan Kemp, “In Defense of a Straightforward Reading of *Fear and Trembling*,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2013*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 49.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (University Park: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 290; Ronald M. Green, “Deciphering ‘Fear and Trembling’s’ Secret Message,” *Religious Studies* 22, no. 1 (1986): 65-111; Jerome I. Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> For a parallel point, see Kierkegaard's essay “What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?” in *SKS* 13, 37-76 / *FSE*, 7-51.

<sup>10</sup> *SKS* 4, 164 / *FT*, 72-3; cf. *SKS* 13, 62 / *FSE*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> *SKS* 4, 165 / *FT*, 73. For a discussion on this Danish phrase, see Kemp, “In Defense,” 67.

<sup>12</sup> “In Defense,” 70.

and to be sensitive to the multiple levels that may be at work in the text,<sup>13</sup> it is also important to give due consideration to the text's apparent and explicit meaning. Again, to quote Kemp, "the person who earns her spiritual bread isn't the one who cracks *de silentio*'s rhetorical code...but rather she is the one who...dares to see Abraham's story as addressing herself..."<sup>14</sup> With the goal of reading *Fear and Trembling* in this manner—a manner which justifies raising the question of the implications that the text carries for Christian existence—we may therefore begin with *de silentio*'s own description of two problems informing his polemic within the text.

Just as Christendom operates as the broad polemical context for Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task, Christendom serves as the background with which *de silentio*, himself a character embedded within Danish society, engages in *Fear and Trembling*. Specifically, *de silentio* describes the issues of Danish civility and Danish speculative thought in relation to two central problems. First, *de silentio* notes that his age has thoroughly devalued faith. In the preface to *Fear and Trembling*, he makes this point by leading off with economic imagery infused with biting sarcasm: "Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf*. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid."<sup>15</sup> To conclude his text, *de silentio* employs another economic image of Dutch merchants who, facing falling prices, sink a few ships in order to jack up the value of their cargo. In relation to this, he asks, "Do we not need something similar in the world of spirit?"<sup>16</sup> *De silentio*'s point here is simply that since faith has become so cheap and easy nobody views it as something for which one should work or struggle.<sup>17</sup> People in

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<sup>13</sup> See Ronald M. Green, "Developing 'Fear and Trembling,'" in *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 257-81.

<sup>14</sup> "In Defense," 69. See *SKS* 4, 123-4 / *FT*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> *SKS* 4, 101 / *FT*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> *SKS* 4, 208 / *FT*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> *SKS* 4, 124 / *FT*, 28.

Christendom therefore no longer take the time “to walk slowly alongside Abraham” on the long path to Mount Moriah, but rather they “mount a winged horse” and are taken directly to the end of the story where everyone lives happily ever after.<sup>18</sup> In making this move, however, something has gone awry, for, as *de silentio* sees it, faith cannot be obtained easily or at a bargain price.<sup>19</sup>

Second, *de silentio* points out that within Christendom people are not satisfied to remain with what they perceive to be a naïve form of faith, and therefore they impatiently attempt to go further to an improved expression of Christianity. This issue is especially prominent with the Hegelian speculative thinkers and their method of *Aufhebung*.<sup>20</sup> Thus, as *de silentio* sarcastically remarks, “To go beyond Hegel is a miraculous achievement, but to go beyond Abraham is the easiest of all.”<sup>21</sup> The problem, though, with going further while all the while claiming to remain a Christian, is that in such a process one undermines precisely what one is attempting to improve. For *de silentio*, this is equivalent to being dissatisfied with the miracle of turning water into wine and thus instead going further by turning wine into water,<sup>22</sup> or to Cratylus’ attempt to improve his master’s philosophy, which results in undermining altogether the Heraclitean position.<sup>23</sup> Faith as practiced by Abraham, however, is not something that one simply goes beyond. As *de silentio* emphatically remarks concerning the father of faith, “In 130 years you got no further than faith.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *SKS* 4, 145-6 / *FT*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> See *SKS* 4, 171 / *FT*, 80-1.

<sup>20</sup> As Jon Stewart argues, much of Kierkegaard’s critique is levelled specifically at Danish Hegelians such as J.L. Heiberg and H.L. Martensen. On this point, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Merold Westphal convincingly argues that focus on specific Danish Hegelians does not preclude that Kierkegaard also attacks Hegel. See *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 20-1. As such, we may be better served to characterize Kierkegaard’s target as Hegel and the (Danish) Hegelians.

<sup>21</sup> *SKS* 4, 128 / *FT*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> *SKS* 4, 132 / *FT*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> See *SKS* 4, 210 / *FT*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> *SKS* 4, 119 / *FT*, 23.

It is in relation to the two problems outlined above that we can understand *de silentio*'s broad polemical task in *Fear and Trembling*. Because Christendom represents a challenge to the view of faith represented by Abraham, *de silentio* dedicates his attention to a re-characterization of such faith. In response to the first problem, he accentuates the difficulty and anxiety of faith,<sup>25</sup> and in response to the second problem, he emphasizes the importance of remaining and dwelling with faith. As he remarks in numerous places within the text, the point for the person of faith is not to leave behind faith and to run off in pursuit of something that appears greater, but rather one is to remain with faith and to treat it as "a task for a whole lifetime."<sup>26</sup> Underlying both points here is *de silentio*'s overall task to level a radical challenge against his Christendom contemporaries by demanding an honest ongoing engagement with Christianity. This challenge is encompassed well in what we may identify as the great disjunction at the heart of the text. For *de silentio*, those engaging with the story of Abraham and his faith are offered only two options: either cancel out Abraham and thereby cease to recognize him as the father of faith, or embrace the horror and difficulty of his situation in order that "we may understand that our age, like every other age, can rejoice if it has faith."<sup>27</sup> Central to *de silentio*'s challenge described here, and that which provides it with its force, is the notion of paradox. To this we may now turn.

## 2.2 - Paradox in *Fear and Trembling*

Paradox is a central notion in *Fear and Trembling*. Not only is the term employed in the text eighty-four times in various forms,<sup>28</sup> but the concept also makes an important

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<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 4, 146 / *FT*, 52; *SKS* 4, 156-9 / *FT*, 63-6; *SKS* 4, 167 / *FT*, 75.

<sup>26</sup> *SKS* 4, 102 / *FT*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *SKS* 4, 146 / *FT*, 53. For various formulations of this either/or, see *SKS* 4, 146 / *FT*, 52-3; *SKS* 4, 159 / *FT*, 66; *SKS* 4, 201 / *FT*, 113; *SKS* 4, 207 / *FT*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> The breakdown of the word paradox in its various forms in *Fear and Trembling* can be summarized as follows: Preliminary Expectoration: 11 occurrences (*Paradox*: 8; *Paradoxet*: 1; *paradoxce*: 2).

appearance. In this section I survey and analyze several of Johannes *de silentio*'s key uses of paradox, first as they occur in the “problemata” and second as they occur in the section entitled “Preliminary Expectoration.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Paradox in the Problemata*

The majority of the uses of the term paradox and its various forms in *Fear and Trembling* occurs in the section of the text that *de silentio* entitles “Problemata” and that he divides into three problems.<sup>30</sup> As *de silentio* notes in the introduction to this section, his purpose with these problems is to elucidate in a specific manner the paradox at work in the Abraham account:

In order to perceive the prodigious paradox of faith, a paradox that makes a murder into a holy and God-pleasing act, a paradox that gives Isaac back to Abraham again, which no thought can grasp, because faith begins precisely where thought stops—in order to perceive this, it is now my intention to draw out in the form of problemata the dialectical aspects implicit in the story of Abraham.<sup>31</sup>

But what exactly do the problemata reveal concerning the nature and function of paradox? To answer this, we may begin with the problemata themselves.

Each of the three problemata is framed around a distinct question, and as such each offers a slightly different perspective on the notion of paradox. To lead off the problemata, *de silentio* engages with the question of the first problema, “*Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?*” by offering a succinct characterization of faith in terms of paradox:

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Problema I: 23 occurrences (*Paradox*: 10; *Paradoxet*: 9; *Paradoxets*: 1; *paradoxæ*: 3). Problema II: 23 occurrences (*Paradox*: 12; *Paradoxet*: 8; *Paradoxets*: 1; *paradoxæ*: 2). Problema III: 27 occurrences (*Paradox*: 6; *Paradoxet*: 20; *Modparadoxet*: 1).

<sup>29</sup> I follow the Hong's translation of “Preliminary Expectoration” here, though Alastair Hannay's “Preamble from the Heart” or Sylvia Walsh's “A Preliminary Outpouring from the Heart” better captures the spirit of the section.

<sup>30</sup> In the three problemata, the term paradox in its various forms occurs a total of 73 times.

<sup>31</sup> *SKS* 4, 147 / *FT*, 53.

Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal—yet, please note, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that after having been in the universal he as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal. If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed.<sup>32</sup>

With respect to the question of the second problema, “*Is there an Absolute Duty to God?*” *de silentio* writes, “The paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority [i.e., that there is an absolute relation to God], an interiority that is not identical, please note, with the first but is a new interiority.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, in the third problema *de silentio* takes a slightly different turn by characterizing paradox in relation to hiddenness. Thus, in response to the question “*Was It Ethically Defensible for Abraham to Conceal His Undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac?*” he remarks concerning Abraham, “But if there is such a hiddenness, then we face the paradox, which cannot be mediated, since it is based precisely on this: the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal...”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the apparent differences in these descriptions of paradox, the same fundamental issue is at work in all three, namely the relation between faith and what *de silentio* calls “the ethical” or “the universal,” and more specifically, what it would mean to talk about faith being higher than the ethical/universal. This is made especially clear in *de silentio*’s discussion of what it means to relate to the absolute: “The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual—to recall a distinction in dogmatics rather rare these days—determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal.”<sup>35</sup> In order to understand this statement, however, it is important to focus

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<sup>32</sup> *SKS* 4, 149 / *FT*, 55. See also *SKS* 4, 149-50 / *FT*, 55-6; *SKS* 4, 150 / *FT*, 56; *SKS* 4, 155 / *FT*, 62; *SKS* 4, 159 / *FT*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> *SKS* 4, 161 / *FT*, 69. See also *SKS* 4, 163 / *FT*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> *SKS* 4, 172 / *FT*, 82. See also *SKS* 4, 183 / *FT*, 93.

<sup>35</sup> *SKS* 4, 162 / *FT*, 70.

briefly on the particular nature of the target against which the paradox described here is specifically directed.

As I suggested in the preliminary remarks above, one of the major targets for *de silentio*'s polemic is Hegel and the Danish Hegelians, and it is quite clear that paradox in the problemata has been conscripted in this fight. More specifically, *de silentio* takes on the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*. In developing his social and moral philosophy, Hegel is critical of Kant's account and what he views as its overly abstract and formal nature. Thus, in *Philosophy of Right* Hegel draws a close connection between morality and the concrete customs and institutions of a concrete culture such those embodied by the family and the state. As he notes, "But if it is simply *identical* with the actuality of individuals, the ethical [*das Sittliche*], as their general mode of behavior, appears as *custom* [*Sitte*]; and the *habit* of the ethical appears as a *second nature* which takes the place of the original and purely natural will and is the all pervading soul, significance, and actuality of individual existence [*Dasein*]."<sup>36</sup> For Hegel, then, a proper account of morality requires a continuous overcoming of the individual's inner will and intentions (what Hegel identifies as *Moralität*) in favor of a public expression of morality in which the individual brings his or her will into conformity with the norms of the culture (what Hegel identifies as *Sittlichkeit*).<sup>37</sup> This account, when absorbed into the Danish context by thinkers such as J.L. Heiberg and H.L. Martensen, becomes the perfect basis for Christendom. To be a good Christian in Denmark, therefore, means that one moves beyond "naïve idiosyncratic" faith into "enlightened" Christianity by adopting the categories of enlightened Danish society.

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<sup>36</sup> *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §151; discussed in Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, 311.

<sup>37</sup> See John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 86.

It is in relation to this target that *de silentio* introduces the distinction in the problemata between what he calls the tragic hero and the knight of faith. Although *de silentio* offers three examples of the tragic hero, he dedicates the greatest attention to the figure of Agamemnon.<sup>38</sup> Agamemnon, as the king of Greece, has set sail in war against his enemy Troy only to become stranded without wind on a remote island. In order to bring back the wind Agamemnon is commanded to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis, which he does with both great sorrow and great pride. For *de silentio*, Agamemnon is a tragic hero in that although he overrides his fatherly duty in sacrificing his daughter, he nevertheless fulfills a higher duty to the state. In doing so, Agamemnon remains fully within the norms of his Greek society and is therefore understood and lauded by his contemporaries. In contrast, Abraham as the knight of faith has no higher duty within his social structure in relation to which he offers Isaac.<sup>39</sup> For the knight of faith, his duty goes beyond the ethical, and in this sense Abraham suspends the ethical in his obedience to God. The paradox here, then, is precisely that Abraham relates to God absolutely and directly without being mediated through his social structure. For *de silentio* the challenge of this account of paradox to his Christendom culture, and that which informs the great disjunction of *Fear and Trembling* is clear: “During the time before the result [i.e., Isaac being returned], either Abraham was a murderer every minute or we stand before a paradox that is higher than all mediations.”<sup>40</sup>

This discussion of the tragic hero and knight of faith provides good insight into the general function of paradox within the problemata. It is a paradox when the ethical categories of social morality are suspended for a higher duty; it is a paradox when one stands in a direct and absolute relation to God that is unmediated through one’s society; and it is a paradox when one remains publicly silent despite the moral demand that one

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<sup>38</sup> See Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* (New York, NY: Start Publishing, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> SKS 4, 152-3 / FT, 59.

<sup>40</sup> SKS 4, 159 / FT, 66.

speak. Running through all of these descriptions of paradox is the unified point that faith is ultimately irreducible to human categories, and that paradox therefore operates here in its etymological sense as a limitation.<sup>41</sup> This is entirely consistent with an earlier remark made by *de silentio*: “I am constantly repelled [by Abraham’s account], and, despite all its passion, my thought cannot penetrate it, cannot get ahead by a hairsbreadth. I stretch every muscle to get a perspective, and at the very same instant I become paralyzed...I cannot think myself into Abraham; when I reach that eminence, I sink down, for what is offered me is a paradox.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, paradox here is not only beyond human understanding, but it also stands in the path of any ideology that threatens to disrupt the proper ordering of faith and reason by claiming that a person of faith needs to relate to God through finitude rather than to everything finite through a relation with the infinite God. We can therefore agree with Merold Westphal that *de silentio* employs paradox “because he wants his readers to notice the deep incompatibility between [reason’s] explicit or implicit hegemony (Hegel and Christendom, respectively) and biblical faith.”<sup>43</sup> In the end, this account of paradox is precisely what allows *de silentio* to conclude that “either there is a paradox, that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is lost.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> There is, nevertheless, also a dialectal aspect of paradox at work in the problemata. This is associated with the position Abraham assumes as the knight of faith in contrast to the tragic hero, that is, that he both respects the ethical and at the same time suspends it in the service of an absolute relation to God. This stance is moreover that which is responsible for the anxiety and distress that Abraham most certainly experiences, and it is that which differentiates Abraham from the immoral aesthetes or what *de silentio* calls “fly-by-nights and itinerant geniuses” (*SKS* 4, 167 / *FT*, 75). Whereas figures in the latter category such as Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov in the beginning of *Crime and Punishment* or Johannes the seducer from *Eiðher/Or I* violate the *Sittlichkeit* of their society without apparent problem, Abraham, in both suspending and valuing the ethical, enters into the realm of the paradoxical. As *de silentio* notes, the knight of faith “knows that it is glorious to belong to the universal...But he also knows that up higher there winds a lonesome trail, steep and narrow” (*SKS* 4, 167 / *FT*, 75-6).

<sup>42</sup> *SKS* 4, 128 / *FT*, 33.

<sup>43</sup> *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> *SKS* 4, 207 / *FT*, 120.

*Paradox in the Preliminary Expectoration*

Although the term paradox is used far less in the “Preliminary Expectoration” than in the problemata,<sup>45</sup> the concept of paradox nevertheless plays a crucial role in the argument of the section. But what is the general purpose of the “Preliminary Expectoration”? Briefly put, *de silentio* undertakes the task of offering a heartfelt introduction to Abraham as the father of faith which goes further than the adoration of the preceding “Eulogy on Abraham”<sup>46</sup> and attempts to circle around faith by providing several concrete characterizations of it.<sup>47</sup> In recognizing this purpose, it is important not to succumb to the temptation of overemphasizing “preliminary” and thereby relegating the content of the section to a secondary place behind that of the “more philosophical” problemata.<sup>48</sup> This would be improper because Kierkegaard not only regularly employs introductory remarks to make significant points, but also because, if we return to the quote from above introducing the problemata, *de silentio* appears to present us with two different but nevertheless important types of paradox that he relegates to each of the different sections: for the problemata he focuses on the “paradox that makes a murder into a holy and God-pleasing act” and for the “Preliminary Expectoration” he focuses on the “paradox that gives Isaac back to Abraham again...”<sup>49</sup> As such, *de silentio* does not set up a hierarchy between the two accounts so much as he provides two different perspectives on the same general phenomenon.

With these remarks in mind, let us turn to the description of paradox in the “Preliminary Expectoration.” What stands out immediately is that although *de silentio*

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<sup>45</sup> The term paradox in its various forms occurs in the “Preliminary Expectoration” a total of 11 times.

<sup>46</sup> SKS 4, 112-19 / FT, 15-23.

<sup>47</sup> Because he does not understand faith, *de silentio*'s reflections are necessarily limited. This, however, does not entail that they lack all value.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 69-70. In claiming this, it is important to note that other scholars such as Mooney, Davenport or Krishek may very well make too much of the “Preliminary Expectoration” at the expense of the problemata.

<sup>49</sup> SKS 4, 147 / FT, 53.

does employ paradox at certain places to signify something beyond human comprehension,<sup>50</sup> he is far more interested in drawing on the notion of paradox in order to describe Abraham's life and experience throughout his testing. As he notes early on, "I am constantly aware of the prodigious paradox *that is the content of Abraham's life...*"<sup>51</sup> Or later, he remarks, "Let us either cancel out Abraham or learn to be horrified by the prodigious paradox *that is the meaning of his life...*"<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, *de silentio* writes in terms of the "paradox of existence" (*Tilværelsens Paradox*)<sup>53</sup> and he ties this to Abraham's ability to embrace the realm of temporality,<sup>54</sup> which he also identifies as the "paradoxical movement of faith."<sup>55</sup> What *de silentio* sees as the unifying element running through all of these references is that they describe the paradox of Abraham's faith as this relates specifically to receiving Isaac,<sup>56</sup> or, more accurately stated, as Abraham *both* resigns Isaac *and* receives Isaac back again. At work here, then, are two movements, and it is precisely this "double-movement"<sup>57</sup> that comprises the paradox. As such, to understand adequately the nature of paradox in the "Preliminary Expectoration" it is important to clarify what *de silentio* means with each of these movements and how he understands them to relate to one another.

The first movement is what *de silentio* calls the movement of infinite resignation, which, appropriately so, is characteristic of the figure he identifies as the knight of infinite resignation. To explain this movement, *de silentio* offers the example of a lad who falls in love with a princess even though it remains impossible for this love to be realized. In response to this problem, the lad, without abandoning his identity as the lover of the

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<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 4, 128 / *FT*, 33.

<sup>51</sup> *SKS* 4, 128 / *FT*, 33 (the italicized emphasis is my own).

<sup>52</sup> *SKS* 4, 146 / *FT*, 52-3 (the italicized emphasis is my own).

<sup>53</sup> *SKS* 4, 141 / *FT*, 47.

<sup>54</sup> *SKS* 4, 143 / *FT*, 49.

<sup>55</sup> *SKS* 4, 145 / *FT*, 51.

<sup>56</sup> *SKS* 4, 147 / *FT*, 53.

<sup>57</sup> The terms *de silentio* employs for this construction is *Dobbelt-Bevægelse* or *Dobbeltbevægelsen*. See *SKS* 4, 131 / *FT*, 36; *SKS* 4, 206 / *FT*, 119.

princess,<sup>58</sup> undertakes an infinite movement by unequivocally resigning the possibility of tangibly realizing this love while nevertheless keeping it alive and young by “expressing it spiritually.”<sup>59</sup> With this movement, the concrete person of the princess fades out of the picture precisely because the idea of the love has been made eternal in the movement itself. It is for this reason that *de silentio* remarks that “[f]rom the moment [the lad] has made the movement, the princess is lost.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, because the resignation requires a total commitment that draws on all of one’s strength and because such resignation is complete, the knight of infinite resignation is unable to reclaim what has been resigned.<sup>61</sup> Although this movement is deeply painful not least of all because one resigns precisely what one in a certain sense does not want to resign,<sup>62</sup> the knight nevertheless finds meaning in his effort of resignation and he is entirely at home in it. As *de silentio* notes, “I can resign everything by my own strength and find peace and rest in the pain... find joy and peace and rest in my pain...”<sup>63</sup>

The second movement is characterized fundamentally by the reception of what is resigned.<sup>64</sup> Whereas the first movement is the movement of infinity, *de silentio* explicitly identifies this second movement as that of finitude in the sense that Abraham’s movement is not an expression of other-worldly faith or some general belief that all

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<sup>58</sup> *SKS* 4, 138 / *FT*, 43. As *de silentio* notes, “Only the lower natures forget themselves and become something new.”

<sup>59</sup> *SKS* 4, 138 / *FT*, 44.

<sup>60</sup> *SKS* 4, 138 / *FT*, 44.

<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the knight of infinite resignation, were he to be placed in the position of Abraham, would find it “awkward” to receive back Isaac. See *SKS* 4, 130 / *FT*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> As Sharon Krishek insightfully points out, this fact means that the movement of infinite resignation is itself in some sense already paradoxical. See *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 89-90.

<sup>63</sup> *SKS* 4, 143 / *FT*, 49. We should point out in agreement with Clare Carlisle that this movement is made continually by the knight of infinite resignation; however, as this quote makes clear, Carlisle is not entirely correct in noting that this “endless striving” is one that “never finds a resting-place.” See *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: A Reader’s Guide* (London and New York, NY: Continuum, 2010), 82.

<sup>64</sup> Insofar as *de silentio* describes infinite resignation as the “last stage to pass from [Abraham’s] view” and that which he goes beyond in coming to faith (*SKS* 4, 132 / *FT*, 37), it may be tempting to see resignation as something that is abandoned in faith. However, as several scholars correctly emphasize in their studies of *Fear and Trembling*, resignation has a crucial constructive role to play in faith. See John J. Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*,” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 227; Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, 88; Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, 93-4.

things will work out for the good in the end,<sup>65</sup> but rather it is the declaration that faith is fulfilled now, in this world, and in the concrete. As *de silentio* remarks, “Abraham had faith and had faith for this life. In fact, if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world to which he did not belong. But Abraham’s faith was not of this sort...Abraham had faith specifically for this life...”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, whereas the first movement of resignation is one that the individual can carry out on her own strength, the second movement of reception, although something the individual must strive for by retaining a certain disposition of openness, depends in part, as Edward Mooney puts it, “on powers beyond our ken or control.”<sup>67</sup> It is for this reason that the language of gift is certainly appropriate to describe the second movement.<sup>68</sup> Still, receptivity requires that one welcome and embrace the gift, just as the knight of faith, after making the movement of infinity, must be perfectly willing and able to embrace the finite.<sup>69</sup> Receptivity, then, need not preclude an active embracing.

When taken individually, these the two movements described here do not comprise the paradox, but rather, as we have noted above, the paradox emerges only when these two movements are held in tandem as the double-movement of *both* resigning *and* receiving. As such, the paradoxical aspect of Abraham is not merely that he goes up the mountain or that he comes down again, but rather that he makes the entire journey. Or similarly, just as the wonder of the ballet dancer is not merely that she leaps well or lands well, but that she both leaps and lands in such a way that she continues to

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<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust.”

<sup>66</sup> *SKS* 4, 116 / *FT*, 20. See also *SKS* 4, 131 / *FT*, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 131.

<sup>68</sup> See Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook*, 51; Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, 7, 83.

<sup>69</sup> *SKS* 4, 133-4 / *FT*, 38-9. In this respect, the knight of faith is externally indistinguishable from the average individual who has not made the movement of infinity. On this point, see *SKS* 4, 133-5 / *FT*, 38-40.

move forward.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that within faith the two movements of resignation and reception occur simultaneously and continuously, with both perpetually present in their complete fullness. As *de silentio* remarks, the movement of faith “must continually be made [*bestandig gjøres*]”<sup>71</sup> and the knight of faith “has made and at every moment [*hvert Øieblik*] is making the movement of infinity...[and] is continually making [*gjør bestandig*] the movement of infinity...”<sup>72</sup> Near the end of *Fear and Trembling* he also notes that “Abraham makes two movements. He makes the infinite movement of resignation and gives up Isaac...but next, at every moment [*i ethvert Moment*], he makes the movement of faith.”<sup>73</sup> Several scholars have picked up on this point,<sup>74</sup> and Sharon Krishek’s commentary is especially lucid:

Faith, it is important to remember, is defined by Johannes as a *double* movement—in spite of being very different from resignation, it necessarily includes resignation as an essential part of it. *Resignation is a permanent component within faith.* Accordingly, the knight of faith also makes the movement of resignation—but in contrast with the other knight he believes in receiving back his renounced princess. This is the paradox of faith: the knight of faith undertakes the movement of resignation and another, simultaneous movement, that seems to contradict it.<sup>75</sup>

In summary, then, the paradoxical double-movement entails that resignation and reception in their fullness are both essential to faith and must therefore be perpetually

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<sup>70</sup> SKS 4, 136 / FT, 41. Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, 86-8.

<sup>71</sup> SKS 4, 132 / FT, 37.

<sup>72</sup> SKS 4, 135 / FT, 40-1.

<sup>73</sup> SKS 4, 203 / FT, 115.

<sup>74</sup> See, e.g., Mark C. Taylor, “Journeys to Moriah: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 3 (1977), 324; Seung-Goo Lee, “The Antithesis between the Religious View of Ethics and the Rationalistic View of Ethics in *Fear and Trembling*,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 122; Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, 93-4.

<sup>75</sup> *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, 76 (the italicized emphasis is in the original). In response to this characterization of the double-movement, one could nevertheless object that it is crucial to retain the temporal aspect of the movement: first one resigns and then one receives. Indeed, this appears to be what *de silentio* intends with the dancer metaphor, in that the dancer must first leap before landing. In response, we may say simply that the temporal presentation of the movements is due to *de silentio*’s use of narrative imagery (e.g., going up and going down the mountain; leaping and landing), but that *de silentio* is clear that in the life of the believer the movements happen contemporaneously and continuously, and not as discrete phases.

held together in an un-tempered dialectical relation. Anything less than this would fail to qualify as paradox.<sup>76</sup>

To conclude this investigation of paradox in the “Preliminary Expectoration,” we may note that paradox functions here overwhelmingly in the dialectical sense as the joint reciprocal relation between opposites.<sup>77</sup> Again, to recall our discussion from the introductory chapter, paradox as dialectic signifies, in Westphal’s description, “a structure of opposition in which divergent elements are in unresolved tension with each other,”<sup>78</sup> and this is precisely the sense in which *de silentio* presents the double-movement of faith. In faith, both of the divergent movements of resignation and reception are held together without undermining the other, and for *de silentio* it is precisely this dynamic that underlies the power of Abraham’s faith as a lived existential stance.

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<sup>76</sup> The understanding of the double-movement in terms of paradox presented here reveals where certain interpreters run the risk of falling short in their readings. Consider two examples. First, in contrast to Andrew Cross, we may note that it is not the case that Abraham *only* believes that Isaac will die, if this means that Abraham really only makes the first movement of resignation. More fundamentally, however, Cross’ one-sided conclusion, which is a consequence of his desire to avoid a logical contradiction (i.e., Abraham believes that Isaac will *die* and that he will *not die*) is itself unnecessary in that it construes the double-movement in a manner that is foreign to *de silentio* (see “Fear and Trembling’s Unorthodox Ideal,” *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 2 (1999): 227-53). Rather, for *de silentio* the paradox of the double-movement centers on the dialectical opposing beliefs of Abraham that he will sacrifice Isaac and at the same time that God will (miraculously) fulfill his promises to Abraham through Isaac. Krishek describes this dynamic well when she writes, “[I]t is important to note that the paradox [in the “Preliminary Expectoration”] does not amount to a *logical* impossibility. Abraham does not believe that Isaac will be both dead and alive *at the same time*. Rather, he believes that Isaac will live in accordance with God’s promise to him, despite being unable to understand (or predict) the way in which this will happen. In other words, Abraham believes in the fulfillment of God’s promise even while acting in a way that *contradicts* this promise. As far as his human understanding is concerned, Abraham is well aware that he is about to kill Isaac; nevertheless he continues to believe in the fulfillment of God’s word to him. His faith is therefore paradoxical in the sense that there is an irresolvable tension between the different aspects of his faith” (*Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, 80). Second, in contrast to Ronald M. Hall and John Lippitt, we have good reason to believe that Abraham’s belief concerning the sacrifice of Isaac is more than an “annulled possibility” if by this phrase is meant that Abraham never fully resigns Isaac (see Hall, *The Human Embrace: The Love of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Love: Kierkegaard, Cavell, Nussbaum* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2000; Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guide*). Recalling a point made above, for *de silentio* infinite resignation is only possible if carried out completely; in other words, there are no shortcuts around this movement.

<sup>77</sup> There are, nevertheless, some elements of the etymological sense of paradox at work in the double-movement. For example, when *de silentio* remarks that “Abraham withstood the temptation, kept the faith, and, contrary to expectation [*mod Forventning*], got a son a second time” (*SKS* 4, 105 / *FT*, 9) or when he notes that the double-movement of faith is that “which no thought can grasp” (*SKS* 4, 147 / *FT*, 53), he is clearly alluding to the fact that even the dialectical expression of paradox eludes human understanding. This point, however, need not take away from our claim that the main description of paradox in the “Preliminary Expectoration” is that of the dialectical account.

<sup>78</sup> *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 220.

### 2.3 - Sacred Tension in *Fear and Trembling*

In this section, I make the case for understanding the notion of sacred tension to be at work within *Fear and Trembling*, and particularly as it emerges in relation to the accounts of paradox outlined above. The connection between paradox and sacred tension proves crucial for *Section 2.4* in which I suggest that Abraham's concrete task of becoming a person who lives within such sacred tension carries significant implications for both ethics and Christian existence.

#### *Heroes, Knights, and Evasion of Tension*

Before we articulate an account of sacred tension with reference to Abraham, we may begin by discussing the notion of tension in general in relation to the figures of the tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation. Although these figures represent two different substitutes (*Surrogater*) for faith, they are nevertheless similar in the sense that each is involved in the evasion of tension.

The tragic hero evades tension by seeking comfort and security in the social standards and the *Sittlichkeit* of his culture. This point becomes clear when we return to *de silentio's* example of Agamemnon. In sacrificing his daughter, Agamemnon still submits to a higher duty that remains within the ethical, and it is precisely for this reason that *de silentio* identifies the tragic hero as "ethics' beloved son in whom it is well pleased."<sup>79</sup> With such an identification, *de silentio* alludes to the gospel account where the spirit of the Lord descends on Jesus following his baptism,<sup>80</sup> and with this allusion he makes a clear point: for the tragic hero, the universal is divinized and thus the tragic hero finds security and comfort in it without the fear and trembling that is required if he were, like Abraham, to

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<sup>79</sup> *SKS* 4, 177 / *FT*, 87. See also *SKS* 4, 177 / *FT*, 88.

<sup>80</sup> See Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-2.

stand alone before the living God. In this respect, his flight to the socially recognized universal is at the same time a flight away from tension.

The knight of infinite resignation also takes significant steps to evade tension, but rather than turning to his society, he seeks security and comfort in the pain of his resignation, in the eternal, and ultimately, in his own strength. If we recall our discussion above, to resign is to resign everything completely and unequivocally. Thus, the lad must entirely reconcile himself with the impossibility of realizing his love for the princess<sup>81</sup>—a movement that Ronald Hall describes as disengagement from the concrete world via absolute commitments to something else.<sup>82</sup> These other commitments are to the eternal, which makes this movement akin to an escape to the monastery where one finds rest (*Hvíle*).<sup>83</sup> *De silentio* describes this dynamic by pointing to the case of the lad and the princess:

[The lad's] love for the princess would become for him the expression of an eternal love, would assume a religious character, would be transfigured into a love of the eternal being, which true enough denied the fulfillment but nevertheless did reconcile him once more in the eternal consciousness of its validity in an eternal form that no actuality can take away from him.<sup>84</sup>

The issue at stake here is ultimately one of protection in the sense that one gives up the finite that would put one at risk. To explain this, *de silentio* employs a metaphor: “Infinite resignation is that shirt mentioned in an old legend. The thread is spun with tears, bleached with tears; the shirt is sewn in tears—but then it also gives protection better than iron or steel.”<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, this evasion is to fall back into self-sufficiency. As *de silentio* remarks, “This movement I make all by myself, and what I gain thereby is my

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<sup>81</sup> In this sense, the lover and the beloved no longer interact directly with one another, but rather, as is the case with Leibniz's monads, they move in unison with, as *de silentio* notes, “a rhythmic *harmonia praestabilita*.” See *SKS* 4, 139 / *FT*, 45.

<sup>82</sup> *The Human Embrace*, 43.

<sup>83</sup> See *SKS* 4, 189-90 / *FT*, 100-1. Hall, *The Human Embrace*, 70.

<sup>84</sup> *SKS* 4, 138 / *FT*, 43-4.

<sup>85</sup> *SKS* 4, 140 / *FT*, 45. See Cross, “*Fear and Trembling's* Unorthodox Ideal,” 249.

eternal consciousness in blessed harmony [*i salig Forstaaelse*] with my love for the eternal being.”<sup>86</sup>

When we assume as our lens the notion of rest (i.e., *Ro*, *Hvile*) discussed in *Chapter 1*, the specific nature of these two evasions becomes more apparent. With respect to the tragic hero *de silentio* notes that he “finds rest [*Hvile*] in the universal”<sup>87</sup> in that the universal “rests [*hviler*] immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *τελος* but is itself the *τελος* for everything outside itself...”<sup>88</sup> More specifically, *de silentio* remarks that “Agamemnon gives up Iphigenia and thereby finds rest [*Hvile*] in the universal, and now he proceeds to sacrifice her”—an act in which those within Agamemnon’s society can likewise rest.<sup>89</sup> As *de silentio* puts it in reference to Abraham but in making a point about the tragic hero, “[Abraham] knew that it is kingly to sacrifice a son...to the universal; he himself would have found rest therein [*Hvile deri*], and everyone would have rested [*hvilet*] approvingly in his deed, as the vowel rests [*hviler*] in its quiescent letter [*Hvilebogstav*].”<sup>90</sup> Regarding the knight of infinite resignation *de silentio* notes,

In infinite resignation there is peace and rest [*Fred og Hvile*]; every person who wills it, who has not debased himself by self-disdain—which is still more dreadful than being too proud—can discipline himself to make this movement, which in its pain reconciles one to existence...In infinite resignation there is peace and rest and comfort [*Fred og Hvile og Trøst*] in the pain...<sup>91</sup>

Or later, in identifying himself with the knight of infinite resignation, *de silentio* claims “I can resign everything by my own strength and find peace and rest [*Fred og Hvile*] in the pain...find joy and peace and rest [*Glæde og Fred og Hvile*] in my pain...”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *SKS* 4, 142 / *FT*, 48.

<sup>87</sup> *SKS* 4, 170 / *FT*, 79.

<sup>88</sup> *SKS* 4, 148 / *FT*, 54.

<sup>89</sup> *SKS* 4, 170 / *FT*, 79.

<sup>90</sup> *SKS* 4, 168 / *FT*, 77. See also *SKS* 4, 154 / *FT*, 60: “the tragic hero gives up the certain for the even more certain, and the observer’s eye views him with confidence [*hviler trygt paa ham*].”

<sup>91</sup> *SKS* 4, 140 / *FT*, 45.

<sup>92</sup> *SKS* 4, 143 / *FT*, 49. See also *SKS* 4, 130 / *FT*, 35.

The overall idea *de silentio* presents here in relation both to the tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation is evident. The rest attained by both figures is a rest by which one avoids risk and seeks comfort—even comfort within the pain of sacrifice or resignation. As *de silentio* himself seems to recognize, this rest is merely a substitute (*Surrogate*) for faith in that it moves in a trajectory away from an intimate relationship with God.<sup>93</sup> In this respect, it fails to qualify as sacred tension.

*Abraham as the Knight of Faith and Sacred Tension*

The claim I would like to develop in what follows is that Abraham's lived existential stance, in contrast to that of the tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation, represents a lucid example of what it means to live within sacred tension. But what exactly does such sacred tension look like? *De silentio* provides a few hints in this direction when he describes Abraham as “the first to know that supreme passion, the holy, pure, and humble expression for the divine madness that was admired by the pagans,”<sup>94</sup> or when he later distinguishes Abraham from the tragic hero with respect to how each relates to what he calls “passionate concentration”:

Most men live in adherence to an ethical obligation in such a way that they let each day have its cares, but then they never attain this passionate concentration, this intense consciousness. In achieving this, the tragic hero may find the universal helpful in one sense, but the knight of faith is alone in everything. The tragic hero does it and finds rest [*Hvile*] in the universal; the knight of faith is constantly kept in tension [*Spænding*].<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, *de silentio* never describes Abraham as growing old or moving towards the stasis and stillness of death, but rather he notes that in his faith Abraham preserves an

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<sup>93</sup> SKS 4, 130 / FT, 35.

<sup>94</sup> SKS 4, 119 / FT, 23.

<sup>95</sup> SKS 4, 169-70 / FT, 78-9.

“eternal youth.”<sup>96</sup> This is in stark contrast to the false Abraham *de silentio* describes in the second vignette of the “Exordium” who becomes an old man with darkened eyes, thoroughly devoid of any joy.<sup>97</sup>

A central part of what allows Abraham to preserve his passion and vibrancy is that he does not seek security or rest in any human foundation—whether cultural or philosophical. As *de silentio* remarks, Abraham “has no stronghold [*Tilbold*] in the universal”<sup>98</sup> even though he knows fully well that it is good to be able to “rejoice in the security [*Tryghed*] of the universal.”<sup>99</sup> Thus, in contrast to the tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation who find peace and harmony by fleeing tension, Abraham rather embraces tension and allows his entire lived existential stance to be saturated by it in such a manner that gives energy and driving force to his life. This is precisely what it means for Abraham to be in the midst of terror and anxiety, and yet to find in this state both hope and joy. In *de silentio*’s terms, “...to live happily every moment this way by virtue of the absurd, every moment to see the sword hanging over the beloved’s head, and yet not to find rest [*Hvile*] in the pain of resignation but to find joy by virtue of the absurd—this is wonderful.”<sup>100</sup>

Another way of describing sacred tension in Abraham’s case is to say that Abraham, in his relation to God, remains in perpetual vigilant motion. As *de silentio* puts it, “The tragic hero is soon finished, and his struggles are soon over; he makes the infinite movement and is now secure in the universal. The knight of faith, however, is kept in a state of sleeplessness [*holdes søvnløs*]...”<sup>101</sup> Such a state requires an “endearing earnestness” (*den elskelige Alvor*) in which one remains with faith and does not attempt to

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<sup>96</sup> SKS 4, 115 / FT, 18.

<sup>97</sup> SKS 4, 109 / FT, 13.

<sup>98</sup> SKS 4, 170 / FT, 79.

<sup>99</sup> SKS 4, 167 / FT, 76.

<sup>100</sup> SKS 4, 144 / FT, 50.

<sup>101</sup> SKS 4, 169 / FT, 78.

go further.<sup>102</sup> It is precisely for this reason that *de silentio* repeatedly identifies Abraham with the phrase “*blive staaende ved Troen*.”<sup>103</sup> To describe in a deprecating manner one who is tempted to stop growing and developing in faith, *de silentio* employs “*blive staaende ved*” negatively to mean something akin to “coming to a standstill”—a stance which he vehemently opposes.<sup>104</sup> However, for the one attempting to go further than faith, *de silentio* employs “*blive staaende ved*” in a positive sense. For example, he asks, “Would it not be best [for the one going further than faith] to *remain standing at [blev staaende ved]* faith and for him who stands to see to it that he does not fall...”<sup>105</sup> As the Hongs note, this statement, as used here, is an allusion to 1 Corinthians where the Apostle Paul writes “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”<sup>106</sup> The phrase thus connotes a state of watchful vigilance, much like that which is in stark contrast to the foolish bridesmaids who slumber unprepared while awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom.<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, then, this standing has nothing to do with becoming static, but rather it represents a continuous movement carried out by the person of faith.

Although *de silentio* distances Abraham from the security and comfort sought by the tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation, he nevertheless still associates Abraham with a particular kind of peace and rest. For example, as he writes in the “Preliminary Expectoration,” “Here [in the world of spirit] it holds true that only the one who works gets bread, that only the one who was in anxiety finds rest [*Hvile*]...”<sup>108</sup> Or, in problema III he notes regarding the knight of faith’s absolute relation to God, “as far as I

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<sup>102</sup> *SKS* 4, 209 / *FT*, 122.

<sup>103</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 4, 102 / *FT*, 7; *SKS* 4, 132 / *FT*, 37; *SKS* 4, 144 / *FT*, 50; *SKS* 4, 145 / *FT*, 51. Cf. *SKS* 4, 101 / *FT*, 5; *SKS* 4, 161 / *FT*, 69; *SKS* 4, 178fn / *FT*, 88fn. Unfortunately, the Hongs often translate *at blive staaende ved* as “to stop with”—a translation that masks the crucial nuance of the phrase as standing with or alongside something.

<sup>104</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 4, 209-10 / *FT*, 122-3.

<sup>105</sup> *SKS* 4, 132 / *FT*, 37 (the italicized emphasis is my own).

<sup>106</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:12 (NIV). See, *FT*, 344n23. This idea is also present in Ephesians 6:13, and Kierkegaard makes extensive use of it in his eighth reflection of part II of *Works of Love*.

<sup>107</sup> See Matthew 25:1-13. On Kierkegaard’s use of the image of the slumbering bridesmaids, see e.g., *SKS* 5, 213-14 / *EUD*, 213-14; *SKS* 7, 361 / *CUP1*, 396; *SKS* 8, 337-8 / *UD*, 237-8.

<sup>108</sup> *SKS* 4, 123 / *FT*, 27.

can see, he would also be able to find inner peace [*Hvile*] therein” even though “his noble silence would always be disturbed [*uroligere*] by the demands of the ethical.”<sup>109</sup> Perhaps most significantly, *de silentio* describes the knight of faith as having “an equanimity [*Ro i Tilvarelsen*]” in the sense that even though he is at every moment making the movement of infinity, he is nevertheless related to God in such a way that he can reclaim the finite world in peace (*Ro*).<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, such peace acts as a perfect cover for sacred tension in that to lack it would be a sign that one is in fact not a knight of faith, but rather a knight of infinite resignation who is unable to embrace the temporal.<sup>111</sup> The ambiguity of faith, then, is that the specific equanimity the knight of faith experiences and displays is what allows for the possibility of proper restlessness. With respect to sacred tension, then, the important question therefore concerns, ultimately, what one’s restlessness is grounded upon.<sup>112</sup> To conclude this section we may briefly touch upon this issue.

*The Apex on Which Abraham Stands: The Relation between Paradox and Sacred Tension*

Near the middle of problema I, *de silentio* writes the following: “How did Abraham exist? He had faith. This is the paradox *by which he remains at the apex* [*ved hvilket han bliver paa Spidsen*]...”<sup>113</sup> This description of Abraham in his precarious position is in direct contrast to the false Abraham who, as Kierkegaard describes him in a journal entry, “had not been able to keep himself *in suspensa* at the apex [*Spidse*] of faith until the end”<sup>114</sup> as well as to the “sleepwalker” who safely and securely crosses the abyss under

<sup>109</sup> *SKS* 4, 183 / *FT*, 93.

<sup>110</sup> *SKS* 4, 135 / *FT*, 40.

<sup>111</sup> As *de silentio* notes, the knight of infinite resignation is like the dancer who leaps majestically, but yet wavers upon landing. This wavering is precisely what reveals that he is a knight of infinite resignation and not a knight of faith. See *SKS* 4, 135 / *FT*, 41.

<sup>112</sup> This issue of “grounding” (i.e., *grunder*; *i Grunden*) is especially important for Anti-Climacus’ definition of faith (see, e.g., *SKS* 11, 242 / *SUD*, 131) and for Kierkegaard’s account of love and edification (see, e.g., *SKS* 9, 212-26 / *WL*, 209-24).

<sup>113</sup> *SKS* 4, 155 / *FT*, 62 (the italicized emphasis is my own). Cf. *SKS* 4, 132 / *FT*, 37; *SKS* 4, 178 / *FT*, 88.

<sup>114</sup> *SKS* 24, 458-9, NB25:34 / *JP* 6, 6791.

the peak (*Spidsen*) of Mount Moriah where Abraham stands.<sup>115</sup> With this overt connection between paradox and Abraham's mode of existence "at the apex" as my point of departure, I would like to bring this section to a close by drawing out in explicit terms the relation between paradox and sacred tension. My claim is a simple one: paradox in *Fear and Trembling* is precisely that which provides the condition for the possibility of Abraham's lived existential stance. Put in a metaphorical manner, without paradox "in the ground,"<sup>116</sup> as it were, sacred tension would have no place to find its footing. Indeed, this claim holds true for both forms of paradox at work in *Fear and Trembling* outlined above.

In the problemata, paradox in its limiting function is that which challenges the hegemony of human and social categories, especially when one attempts to give a complete account of reality strictly in relation to these categories. As such, not only does paradox disallow a certain kind of existential foundation comprised of cultural norms or speculative thought, but it also undercuts the possibility of the individual of faith from resting in such a foundation. This is seen most clearly in that the paradox pushes the individual away from Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* as well as the Hegelian system, and rather towards interiority, isolation, hiddenness, but most importantly, towards complete vulnerability before God. Paradox in the problemata, therefore, plays a crucial negative role in clearing out existential stances that evade tension such as those of the knight of infinite resignation and the tragic hero so as thereby to open the possibility for the life of sacred tension.

In the "Preliminary Expectoration," paradox in its dialectical function provides precisely the constructive condition and structure by which one enters into and remains

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<sup>115</sup> *SKS* 4, 154 / *FT*, 61.

<sup>116</sup> With this I am drawing a parallel to Kierkegaard's claim in *Works of Love* that the ability to edify others in love presupposes the presence of love "in the ground" (*i Grunden*). See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 219 / *WL*, 216-17.

within sacred tension. As we have pointed out above, it is impossible to live within sacred tension without the perpetual practice and presence of both dialectical movements of resignation and reception. For example, the false Abraham in the “Eulogy on Abraham” who, rather than trusting God, thrusts the knife into his own breast, *does not even make the first movement*,<sup>117</sup> and the knight of infinite resignation makes *only* the first movement. Neither of these figures engages with the paradox and in this respect both fall outside of sacred tension. Abraham, in contrast, embraces the paradox that he, in the practice of his faith, is to undertake the double-movement of resigning and receiving, and it is precisely the reality of this dialectic that allows Abraham to live in the manner he does, without any human foundation on which to stand while tensely positioned in relation to the divine.

In conclusion, then, we may say that without paradox both in its limitation and dialectical forms, Abraham would be no different than the surrogates of faith, but it is precisely because of paradox and Abraham’s relation to it that he enters into and lives within sacred tension.

#### **2.4 - Abraham within the Sacred Tension: Some Concrete Insights for Christian Existence**

In *Sections* 2.2 and 2.3 we outlined how paradox entails that Abraham finds himself within sacred tension. The purpose of this section is now to articulate in a more concrete sense some of the particular virtues associated with Abraham’s lived existential stance in *Fear and Trembling*, and towards this end I approach Abraham as an exemplar for Christian existence. As such, I argue that despite *de silentio*’s attack on ethics, ethics of a certain kind still have an important role to play in a paradox-informed account of the

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<sup>117</sup> SKS 4, 117 / FT, 21.

Christian life. Before taking up Abraham as an exemplar, we should, however, begin by briefly discussing the issue of ethics in *Fear and Trembling*.

*On the Limitations and Possibilities of Ethics in Fear and Trembling*

In the last half-century, there has been a great deal of disagreement within the secondary discussion concerning how ethics should be understood in *Fear and Trembling* both with respect to what *de silentio* means by “the ethical” (*det Ethiske*<sup>118</sup>) and with respect to what the text entails for the possibilities of articulating a constructive account of ethics. These two issues are intimately connected in the sense that many scholars have understood *Fear and Trembling* as rejecting ethics and the ethical in the direction either of moral nihilism or of faith.<sup>119</sup> There is certainly something to be said for such readings in that Kierkegaard does in fact employ *Fear and Trembling* to critique and to reject a *certain conception* of ethics that he believes ought not to be associated with Christian existence. This conception undoubtedly carries both Hegelian and Kantian connotations.<sup>120</sup> Thus, for example, with his notion of the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” *de silentio*

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<sup>118</sup> Cf. *det Sadelige*.

<sup>119</sup> The common thread underlying the moral nihilism readings is the assertion both that Kierkegaard uses *Fear and Trembling* to make substantial claims about ethics and that his view is ultimately morally bankrupt. See, e.g., Brand Blanshard, “Kierkegaard on Faith,” in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis, MN: Burgess, 1969), 116. The answer to this, argues Blanshard, is simple: we ought to recognize that Kierkegaard leads to moral nihilism, and therefore we ought to abandon his thought altogether. In reacting to such readings several scholars have claimed that *Fear and Trembling* really has nothing substantial to say about ethics. For example, C. Stephen Evans has argued that “*Fear and Trembling* is not a book about ethics; it is a book about faith” (“Introduction” in Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Wash (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xxii). Ronald M. Green is even more explicit than Evans in his rejection of ethical readings of *Fear and Trembling*. In a string of writings, one of which carries the unambiguous title “Enough is Enough! *Fear and Trembling* Is *Not* about Ethics,” Green argues that ethics within the text serves merely as a surface discussion for Kierkegaard’s deeper soteriological concerns meant to demonstrate the pre-eminence of grace over works. As he notes, *Fear and Trembling* “is a tribute to the one who first adopted the stance to which all his spiritual descendants are called: the stance of living ‘beyond ethics’ in absolute dependency on God’s grace” (“Enough is Enough! ‘Fear and Trembling’ is *Not* about Ethics,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 2 (1993), 204). In the end, although Green admits that *Fear and Trembling* might be able to function as a beginning to a study in ethics in that it points to some ethical concerns, he is adamant that such concerns are marginal at best.

<sup>120</sup> For a good account of scholars who have argued this view, see Seung-Goo Lee, *Kierkegaard on Becoming and Being a Christian: The Relation of Christianity to the Ethical Sphere of Existence in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 2004), 44-5n76.

attacks the Hegelian account of *Sittlichkeit* that would reduce ethics to social morality.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, with his important nod to the notions of sin and repentance in problema III, *de silentio* likely takes a jab at Kantian ethics, but one could also say any ethics that attempts to bring ideality into actuality while failing to take into full account the central role played by God in the ethical life.<sup>122</sup> The underlying point in both of *de silentio*'s critiques is that in articulating an account of Christian existence Kierkegaard ultimately rejects ethical frameworks that either make God secondary (as in the case of idealistic ethics devoid of the notions of sin and repentance) or simply makes God unnecessary (as in the case of social morality)—in short, any secular account of ethics.<sup>123</sup>

*De silentio*'s critical engagement with secular ethics in *Fear and Trembling*, however, does not entail a rejection of all forms of ethics.<sup>124</sup> In other words, the conception of ethics criticized by *de silentio* in the problemata need not be the only characterization of ethics at work in *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>125</sup> To develop this point, it may be helpful to outline

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<sup>121</sup> See, in particular, *SKS* 4, 148-59 / *FT*, 54-67.

<sup>122</sup> On this point, see, e.g., *SKS* 4, 323-4 / *CA*, 16. As *de silentio* puts it in *Fear and Trembling*, "An ethics that ignores sin is a completely futile discipline..." (*SKS* 4, 188 / *FT*, 98-9) and "As soon as sin emerges, ethics founders [*da gaaer Ethiken til Grunde*] precisely on repentance..." (*SKS* 4, 188n / *FT*, 98n). In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis also includes in this category ancient virtue ethics: "As all ancient knowledge and speculation was based on the presupposition that thought has reality, so all ancient ethics was based on the presupposition that virtue can be realized. Sin's skepticism is altogether foreign to paganism." See *SKS* 4, 326 / *CA*, 19.

<sup>123</sup> On this point, see Philip L. Quinn, "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 349.

<sup>124</sup> Thus, in response to Evans we may say that although he is certainly correct to recognize a text such as *Works of Love* as central to a Kierkegaardian ethics, such recognition need not preclude us from also reading *Fear and Trembling* in the same manner. Furthermore, in response to Green, we may not only say that his one-sided emphasis on grace is problematic given the importance *de silentio* places on works, but that his reading of the text presupposes far too narrow a view of ethics. As Green has argued in various writings, the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* is strictly a Kantian notion, and therefore we ought to think of *de silentio* as employing this account merely to point out that such ethics cannot be fulfilled through human effort. Apart from the problem that it is not entirely clear that *de silentio* does in fact intend the notion of "the ethical" in *Fear and Trembling* to be understood strictly in Kantian terms, we also have no good reason to restrict the ethical conceptions at work in the text to those of action-based moralities centered on divine commands, duties, rules, and laws. As Jung H. Lee has nicely put it, "what Green designates as 'the moral life in its most comprehensive sense' seems to be just *one particular version* of the moral life and not *the* moral life per se. Put differently, the interpretations which Green considers and ultimately rejects all seem to share certain characteristics which point towards a distinct picture of morality, a picture which Green seems to assume in his understanding of 'the ethical'" ("Abraham in a Different Voice: Rereading 'Fear and Trembling' with Care," *Religious Studies* 36, no. 4 (2000), 381).

<sup>125</sup> Indeed, several interpreters have pointed to constructive ethical insights that one can glean from *Fear and Trembling*. For example, Mooney has argued that *Fear and Trembling* represents a call to

briefly the distinction drawn by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety* between first ethics and second ethics. For Haufniensis, first ethics are those that see ideality as a task that all are able to achieve, and thereby their movement is that from ideality to actuality. It is these ethics, however, that, due to their ideal starting point, are ultimately "shipwrecked" on sin.<sup>126</sup> As Haufniensis remarks, "If ethics is to include sin, its ideality comes to an end."<sup>127</sup> In contrast, second ethics begins with actuality and moves from there to ideality. Beginning with actuality, for Haufniensis means a recognition of the reality of sin: "This ethics does not ignore sin, and it does not have its ideality in making ideal demands; rather, it has its ideality in the penetrating consciousness of actuality, of the actuality of sin..."<sup>128</sup> In addition, he notes on the same page that "The new ethics presuppose dogmatics, and by means of hereditary sin it explains the sin of the single individual, while at the same time it sets ideality as a task, not by a movement from above and downward but from below and upward."<sup>129</sup> As such, second ethics "belongs to a different order of things."<sup>130</sup> As Arne Grøn nicely puts it in *Subjektivitet og Negativitet*,

the "second" ethic [*etik*] is a transformation of ethics [*etikken*] in that it assumes as its starting point the reality of sin. This transformation of ethics is the conversion of "all ethical conceptualizations"... The opposition sin-faith [presented by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*] endows all ethical concepts with a further expression, just as a musical piece played on an organ receives another sense by being provided with yet another expression.<sup>131</sup>

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selfhood in the midst of a dilemmatic struggle where one affirms and asserts one's deepest loves and cares (*Knights of Faith and Resignation*); Lee has developed a care ethics reading of the text in which he argues for focusing on the caring stance Abraham assumes as a commitment to sustain and to foster his relationship with God ("Abraham in a Different Voice"); and J. Aaron Simmons has argued for understanding Abraham's relation to Isaac as inscribed in his relation to God and thus an example of "responsible subjectivity" ("What about Isaac? Rereading *Fear and Trembling* and Rethinking Kierkegaardian Ethics," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2007), 319, 322).

<sup>126</sup> SKS 4, 324 / CA, 17; SKS 4, 328 / CA, 20.

<sup>127</sup> SKS 4, 324-5 / CA, 17-18.

<sup>128</sup> SKS 4, 328 / CA, 20.

<sup>129</sup> SKS 4, 328 / CA, 20.

<sup>130</sup> SKS 4, 328 / CA, 20.

<sup>131</sup> Arne Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet: Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1997), 282. See, also, Arne Grøn, *Begrebet Angst hos Søren Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1994), 131-2.

In the end, we may say that the most crucial point to take away from Haufniensis' distinction between first and second ethics in *The Concept of Anxiety* as well as from *de silentio's* discussion of sin in *Fear and Trembling* is that any properly Christian account of ethics must necessarily be predicated upon and entirely infused with divine assistance.<sup>132</sup> In short, such an ethics only plays out in a direct and intimate God-relation in which God, through the continual provision of grace, overcomes human limitation and sin, and in which human beings humbly embrace such grace.

When we return to Abraham, we begin to see how he is able to provide us with a constructive ethical account that carries implications for Christian existence. Although *de silentio* points out that Abraham as “a righteous man, God’s chosen one”<sup>133</sup> does not become the single individual in relation to God by means of sin and in this respect his relation to God is not identical to the sinful Christian individual,<sup>134</sup> it is nevertheless still the case that the virtues he displays within the sacred tension as both continually striving and turning to God in dependence so as to overcome the temptation and despair to fall away from God are entirely consistent with the spirit of second ethics. As such, I argue in what follows that we may see Abraham as an exemplar for Christian existence. Before developing this argument, we may first consider and respond to an objection.

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<sup>132</sup> On this point, see C. Stephen Evans, “Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 26; Thomas P. Miles, *The Ethical Project Kierkegaard and Nietzsche Share: Illustrating, Analyzing, and Evaluating Different Ways of Life* (Austin, TX: University of Austin, 2006), 58; Thomas P. Miles, *Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on the Best Way of Life: A New Method of Ethics* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 53; Roe Fremstedal, “Kierkegaard’s Double Movement of Faith and Kant’s Moral Faith,” *Religious Studies* 48, no. 2 (2012), 209.

<sup>133</sup> *SKS* 4, 188 / *FT*, 99.

<sup>134</sup> However, given Haufniensis’ claim that all individuals after Adam are faced with the reality of original sin and Anti-Climacus’ claim that despair is a universal human condition, we need not consider Abraham sinless and perfect in the same manner as Kierkegaard would consider the God-man Jesus Christ.

*Abraham as Exemplar: An Objection and Reply*

In attempting to articulate an account of Abraham as an exemplar for Christian existence we run immediately into an objection. Simply stated, it is impossible to discern any normative value in Abraham or to glean any guidance from him in that insofar as he represents a singular expression of individuality he cannot, by nature, be emulated. This objection certainly carries weight in one sense: insofar as Abraham responds to a specific call from God, his specific response cannot be treated simply as a general rule to follow in all cases. However, the problem with this point as a blanket rejection of Abraham as an exemplar is that it presupposes normativity in *Fear and Trembling* is primarily or merely expressed in the actions carried out by Abraham. Nevertheless, if in raising the question of how one ought to live we move away from a restrictive action-based approach to a broader person-centered account we are thereby able to avoid the objection, for it remains altogether possible that Abraham's overall manner of existing can in fact serve as a source for emulation.<sup>135</sup> This approach to Abraham, then, is entirely consistent with *de silentio*'s challenge to his readers that they continually measure themselves against Abraham in order to gain a lucid picture of how they are living and how they ought to live.<sup>136</sup> But if Abraham is to play the role of an exemplar, what exactly is it about him that is to be emulated?<sup>137</sup> To answer this question, we may focus more concretely on Abraham's character and its associated virtues.

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<sup>135</sup> On this point, see George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 111.

<sup>136</sup> *SKS* 4, 117 / See, e.g., *FT*, 21. As Pattison notes, "What Johannes holds up to us then is not a paradigm of how exceptional individuals are entitled to act but how all individuals should act: that is, with the seriousness, earnestness, anguish and hope of an Abraham." See *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, 111.

<sup>137</sup> Significantly, *de silentio* also mentions Mary the mother of Jesus as exemplar. See *SKS* 4, 157-8 / *FT*, 64-5. For an excellent discussion on this point, see Claire Carlisle, "Humble Courage: Kierkegaard on Abraham and Mary," *Literature and Theology* (2014): 1-15.

*Abraham as Exemplar for Christian Existence: Living Virtuously within the Sacred Tension*

For Abraham to live within the sacred tension that we have described above requires, in addition to an earnest striving, also a character that is shaped by total dependence on God as this dependence plays out through an intimate God-relation. As Andrew A. Cross puts it in slightly different terms, “for [Abraham], complete reliance on God (on all things being possible) is paramount—not as a special kind of reason, but as the dispositional ground upon which he does all that he does.”<sup>138</sup> Such dependence is precisely what lies behind Abraham’s simple, cheerful, and confident response to the call of God: “Here am I.”<sup>139</sup> What makes this character possible and that which substantiates it, however, are the concrete virtues that Abraham’s practices. For the remainder of this subsection we may therefore briefly touch upon a few of the virtues central to Abraham’s lived existential stance.

First, Abraham practices the virtue of courage (*Mod*).<sup>140</sup> Moreover, it is not an exaggeration to say that courage is one of the most important virtues in *de silentio*’s text. As Clare Carlisle rightly notes, “Given the ‘fear and trembling,’ or anxiety, that Johannes *de silentio* emphasizes in his interpretation of Abraham, it should not be surprising that courage plays a central role in his account of Abraham’s heroism.”<sup>141</sup> It is important to note that Abraham’s courage, however, as courage carried out within the sacred tension is categorically different from other expressions of courage. As *de silentio* notes, “I know very well that even though I advance toward [faith] courageously, my courage is still not the courage of faith and is not something to be compared with it.”<sup>142</sup> It is for this reason

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<sup>138</sup> “Faith and the Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*,” *Inquiry* 46, no. 1 (2003), 23.

<sup>139</sup> *SKS* 4, 117 / *FT*, 21.

<sup>140</sup> For a good description of courage from Kierkegaard’s signed writings, see his 1844 discourse “Against Cowardliness” in *SKS* 5, 335-60 / *EUD*, 347-75.

<sup>141</sup> *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, 193. It is striking that Carlisle ends her book with a discussion on humble courage. See also Carlisle, “Humble Courage: Kierkegaard on Abraham and Mary.”

<sup>142</sup> *SKS* 4, 129 / *FT*, 33-4.

that *de silentio* identifies Abraham's courage as "a paradoxical and humble courage" as opposed to the "purely human courage" practiced by the knight of infinite resignation.<sup>143</sup> But what exactly does such courage consist in? Although *de silentio* notes generally that it is courage "to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd,"<sup>144</sup> we may follow Carlisle in adding that such courage is to accept suffering, to be loved by God, to become vulnerable, to respond to risk and uncertainty, and to confront and to accept transience.<sup>145</sup> Described in this manner, we may say that such courage is impossible to practice if one flees to the comfort and security of mere human and social categories, and therefore it represents a token characteristic of the life within sacred tension.

Second, closely tied to the virtue of courage is the virtue of trust (*Tillid*). Put differently, in courageously stepping forth in faith Abraham is also practicing and expressing a deep sense of trust in God, what Cross calls "trustful reliance upon God."<sup>146</sup> As Lee rightly points out, the practice of trust in God is precisely what defines and shapes Abraham's moral framework, for it is through this trust that Abraham "reveals his confidence in the goodwill and competence of God to take care of Isaac"—which in turn means that Abraham is not a murderer and is not lost.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, such trust is grounded on a relationship and a history that Abraham has with God. By the time Abraham offers Isaac on Mount Moriah, he has already walked a long road with God—

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<sup>143</sup> SKS 4, 143 / FT, 49. This is the difference between what Lauren Greenspan identifies as "heroic courage" and "religious courage." See "Courage," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 89. On the courage of the knight of infinite resignation, see Edward F. Mooney, "Understanding Abraham: Care, Faith, and the Absurd," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1981), 102. Indeed, as Mooney points out, this courage is certainly a noble sort of courage; however, this alone does not make it equivalent to the courage of Abraham.

<sup>144</sup> SKS 4, 143 / FT, 49.

<sup>145</sup> See *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, 81, 193, 196. Similarly, Kjell Johansen remarks that "Ethical courage in *Fear and Trembling*...is that [Abraham] dares to stand alone before God." See "Fear and Trembling—The Problem of Justification," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002), 275. Or, as Greenspan lucidly puts it, "religious courage...is typified in one's resolution to exist before God. This requires the decisive condition of submitting to and depending on a faith that offers no certainty." See "Courage," 91.

<sup>146</sup> "Faith and the Suspension of the Ethical," 19.

<sup>147</sup> "Abraham in a Different Voice," 392-3.

an important point to which *de silentio* affords particular attention: “By faith Abraham emigrated from the land of his fathers and became an alien in the promised land...By faith he was an alien in the promised land...By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all the generations of the earth would be blessed.”<sup>148</sup> Regarding this point, C. Stephen Evans proves insightful:

Abraham enjoyed a direct, special relationship with God. Abraham knows God as an individual; he knows God is good, and he loves and trusts God. Although he does not understand God’s command in the sense that he understands why God has asked him to [offer Isaac] or what purpose it will serve, he does understand that it is indeed God who has asked him to do this. As a result of this special relationship, Abraham’s trust in God is supreme.<sup>149</sup>

It is noteworthy, however, that such trust as it plays out in the sacred tension is never devoid of restlessness and difficulty, as if it ushers one into a harmonious state akin to that of stoic detachment. Rather, it is trust in the midst of the discomfort of knowing that one has left oneself open to significant loss and harm. As Cross remarks, such “maximum of trustfulness” entails that Abraham must relinquish self-reliance by “leaving his fate ‘in God’s hands’” rather than taking the protective strategy of becoming a knight of resignation.<sup>150</sup> To place one’s trust in something other than God such as the norms of one’s society (as is the case with the tragic hero) or on some abstract notion of the eternal or even oneself (as is the case with the knight of infinite resignation) would ultimately not be to trust in the manner of Abraham as one within the sacred tension.

Third, at the heart of Abraham’s character is the virtue of humility (*Ydmyghed*).

This virtue is closely tied to the virtue of courage in the sense that the practice of

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<sup>148</sup> *SKS* 4, 113-14 / *FT*, 17. On this point, see Evans, “Introduction,” xviii; Murray A. Rae, “The Risk of Obedience: A Consideration of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1, no. 3 (1999), 308, 319.

<sup>149</sup> “Is the Concept,” 145.

<sup>150</sup> “*Fear and Trembling*’s Unorthodox Ideal,” 243.

humility is at the same time the practice of courage.<sup>151</sup> It is precisely for this reason that *de silentio* remarks concerning the person who is contemplating the task of pursuing faith, “honest he must be, and he must not speak of this lack of courage as humility, since, on the contrary, it is pride, whereas the courage of faith is the one and only humble courage.”<sup>152</sup> Humility for Abraham, therefore, means to relinquish his desire for self-determination and control over his life and situation and to become entirely vulnerable before God—something neither the tragic hero nor the knight of infinite resignation is capable of doing. Furthermore, humility plays out in Abraham’s expectation of and insistence upon the best. As *de silentio* describes it, “Faith is convinced that God is concerned about the smallest things. I am satisfied with a left-handed marriage in this life; faith is humble enough to insist on the right hand, for I do not deny that this is humility and will never deny it.”<sup>153</sup> Interestingly, in settling for something less than the best, which in *de silentio*’s case means not making the movement of faith in receiving Isaac back, *de silentio* expresses a form of pride that is not that dissimilar from the lowly day-laborer described in *The Sickness Unto Death* who is unable to accept the gift of marriage to the Emperor’s daughter because he lacks the “humble courage” (*ydmøgt Mod*) not to be offended and thereby to believe the invitation.<sup>154</sup> In the end, it is precisely because *de silentio* lacks the humility of Abraham that he is unable, like Abraham, to live within the sacred tension.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> On this point, see Greenspan, “Courage,” 91; Carlisle, “Humble Courage: Kierkegaard on Abraham and Mary.”

<sup>152</sup> *SKS* 4, 164 / *FT*, 73. Such identification of improper humility with improper pride and proper humility with proper pride is reflected well in Kierkegaard’s claim from *Works of Love* that “humility before God is true pride.” See *SKS* 9, 269 / *WL*, 271.

<sup>153</sup> *SKS* 4, 129 / *FT*, 34. This is specifically a reference to the tradition in marriage when a king or noble would marry a commoner. In this case, he would offer his left hand, which symbolized that the commoner would not be able to partake in his inheritance. Thus, a left-handed marriage would be a lesser type than the right-handed marriage that is practiced between those from the same social class. (I would like to thank Susanne Rimstad for her help with this point.)

<sup>154</sup> See *SKS* 11, 199 / *SUD*, 84-5.

<sup>155</sup> It is here that we face a potential problem. As Mooney points out, virtue requires an active striving and commitment, but can we talk about humility (or thankfulness or receptivity) as something we can pursue? As he notes, “*Becoming* a self is a task we undertake. Yet the enablement that gets us through appears finally as a gift, as power bequeathed. Perhaps faith is like the action of *keeping still*, cousin to a

Finally, Abraham's character centers on the practice of the two closely related virtues of love (*Kjærlighed*) and joy (*Glæde*).<sup>156</sup> With respect to love, *de silentio* is clear that Abraham remains thoroughly loving throughout his trial, and in this fashion he loves both God and Isaac. As he notes in problema II in the context of a passage from the Gospels in which Jesus remarks, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple,"<sup>157</sup>

the absolute duty can lead one to do what ethics would forbid, but it can never lead the knight of faith to stop loving. Abraham demonstrates this. In the moment he is about to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical [i.e., *Sittlichkeit*] expression for what he is doing is: he hates Isaac. But if he actually hates Isaac, he can rest assured that God does not demand this of him, for Cain and Abraham are not identical. He must love Isaac with his whole soul. Since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he sacrifice him, for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God.<sup>158</sup>

What we see clearly here is the outplaying of the two great commandments in which one is called first to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and then to love one's neighbor as oneself.<sup>159</sup> As Cross points out, Abraham's love for God is an absolute love that cannot be mediated and as such this love is also intimately tied to the virtue of trust as absolute dependence upon God.<sup>160</sup> Far from representing a hatred for Isaac, such love for God is also to love Isaac properly in the sense that it serves as a reminder that Abraham as well as Isaac belong wholly to God,<sup>161</sup> and in this respect the two forms of

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stunned and quiet *submission*, an alert but yielding *immobility*" (*Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 104). I agree with this claim if we take stillness, submission, and immobility to be the antithesis to the hubristic movements of going beyond faith, and so long as we understand these notions not as the static stillness of death, but rather as the vigilant standing characteristic of sacred tension.

<sup>156</sup> Some interpreters such as Lee prefer to talk about care rather than love.

<sup>157</sup> Luke 14:26 (NIV).

<sup>158</sup> *SKS* 4, 165 / *FT*, 74.

<sup>159</sup> See Matthew 22:36-40; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18. This account and ordering of love to God and love to the neighbor is also clearly the framework that Kierkegaard employs in *Works of Love*. See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 27 / *WL*, 19.

<sup>160</sup> "Faith and the Suspension of the Ethical," 22.

<sup>161</sup> Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 80.

love are intimately connected. As J. Aaron Simmons puts it, “Abraham’s love for God as his love for Isaac are never isolated from one another. Rather, it is in the tension between the two claims upon Abraham that constitutes the drama of his responsibility to both.”<sup>162</sup> In loving Isaac in this fashion, Abraham is thereby able to experience the profound joy of faith, in comparison to which all other expressions of joy appear unhappy.<sup>163</sup> Abraham receives Isaac back in joy, but not only this, he lives his entire life in joy as he joyfully receives all things as a provision from God. Thus, despite the difficulty and the horror of faith, Abraham nevertheless preserves his joyful disposition. As James Kellenberger appropriately puts it, “Abraham, even in his trial, even in his anxiety, is joyful!”<sup>164</sup> In another text Kellenberger makes a similar important point:

For Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, it is joy that distinguishes a trusting faith in God from “infinite resignation”... Infinite resignation is attainable by a great exertion of will and brings rest but no joy. Faith, on the other hand, is joyful in its trust in God’s goodness in this life. For Kierkegaard, then, the kind of relationship to which God calls us, the relationship of faith, is imbued with joy for this life.<sup>165</sup>

We may therefore say that *de silentio* intimates the crucial paradox articulated by the Apostle Paul: simply stated, “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.”<sup>166</sup> In the end, then, joy as described here is a virtue that perfectly characterizes one living within the sacred tension.

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<sup>162</sup> “What about Isaac?” 336.

<sup>163</sup> *SKS* 4, 129 / *FT*, 34.

<sup>164</sup> *Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: Faith and Eternal Acceptance* (London and New York, NY: Macmillan and St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>165</sup> *Relational Morality* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 132.

<sup>166</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:10 (NIV).

*Two Concluding Questions*

To conclude this section, we may address two important questions: why call the characteristics of Abraham described above virtues, and why identify such characteristics as distinctively religious?

In response to the first question, we may simply note that insofar as we define the virtues, following Robert C. Roberts, as, for example, “enduring traits or qualities not merely of our bodies...but of us as persons,” traits that make up “a determinate way of being human,” or “dispositions to passive or quasi-passive episodic states of the subject such as emotions, perceptions, and thoughts,”<sup>167</sup> we may say that Abraham is certainly practicing virtues in his lived existential stance. Courage, trust, humility, joy, and love are not simply fleeting emotions or experiences that Abraham sporadically undergoes. Rather, they are deeply embedded and enduring dispositional characteristics that Abraham perpetually fosters and reinforces through concrete practice and that he continuously reaffirms throughout his life from the point of leaving Ur through his trial on Mount Moriah. It is precisely the incorporation of such characteristics into his existence that allows Abraham to continue in his task in obeying God’s command without wavering and with bold confidence (*Frimodighed*), and it is precisely the holism in this account which allows him to flourish as a knight of faith.

In response to the second question, it is crucially important to note that the virtues Abraham practices are not based on any notion of self-realization or self-actualization as is the case with classical virtue theory. Such an account of virtue ethics articulated, for example, by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, is precisely what *de silentio*

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<sup>167</sup> “The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 187. See also Anthony Rudd, “Kierkegaard on Patience and the Temporality of the Self: The Virtue of a Being in Time,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 3 (2008), 493.

suggests in *Fear and Trembling* is a futile discipline so long as it ignores sin.<sup>168</sup> In this respect, Bruce Kirmmse is entirely correct to point to the conflict between Kierkegaard and the classical virtue account,<sup>169</sup> just as scholars such as Mark Tietjen and Roberts are correct to point out that when virtue is recast in terms of the recognition of sin as well as in the grammar of faith, it is entirely possible to retain the broad conceptual schema of the virtues in approaching Kierkegaard.<sup>170</sup> Tietjen's definition of the virtues as "*qualities to be achieved by works that we must strive to do in response to God's grace, with the help of God's grace,*"<sup>171</sup> is thus entirely applicable to the case of Abraham as described in *Fear and Trembling*. Such recognition of the direct link back to God of Abraham's virtues of courage, trust, humility, love, and joy entail that these virtues are thoroughly religious in nature, which means that it is only possible to practice them for one living within the sacred tension. As such they provide a perfect window into the concrete content of this lived existential stance as it plays out in the life of Abraham and thereby they prove crucial for an account of Christian existence.

## 2.5 - Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have made the argument that the notion of paradox in *Fear and Trembling* is that which underlies Abraham's existential stance as one who lives within the sacred tension. Furthermore, I have argued that Abraham therefore serves as something of an exemplar for Christian existence, especially with respect to his character and to the specific virtues he practices. Of course, this view alone does not provide a complete

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<sup>168</sup> SKS 4, 188 / FT, 98. Cf. SKS 4, 326-8 / CA, 19-20; SKS 11, 196 / SUD, 82.

<sup>169</sup> "Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001), 191-210.

<sup>170</sup> Robert C. Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 151; Mark A. Tietjen, *Kierkegaard's Practice of Edification: Indirect Communication, the Virtues, and Christianity*, Dissertation (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2006), 26-7.

<sup>171</sup> *Kierkegaard's Practice of Edification*, 26-7.

picture of Christian existence, and for this reason it will be important to look to other expressions of paradox in the following chapters.

As a final word, I find it fitting to return to the very first words of *de silentio*'s text, the title "*Fear and Trembling*." As I argued in *Chapter 1*, perhaps the most paradigmatic expression of sacred tension is that which emerges in relation to the paradoxical dialectic of grace and works and that which plays out in the response to the divine call to live in such a way that one continuously affirms both realities. In the title we see the very same dynamic implied in its allusion to the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Philippians. As Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."<sup>172</sup> With Paul's words here we have the two notions of works and grace fully present: on the one hand, it is the believer who is to work, and, on the other hand, it is God who is working. When approaching *Fear and Trembling* it is therefore imperative to keep this passage in focus in order to avoid the mistake of claiming either that the text is only about the anxiety and horror of Abraham's deed,<sup>173</sup> or that the text is only about the grace of God.<sup>174</sup> Insofar as *de silentio* follows Paul's lead, he undoubtedly intends for his book to be read as dealing with both realities: Abraham, as an exemplar for Christian existence within the sacred tension works out his faith in responding to the command of God, but at the same time he is also fully receptive to the grace of God that is necessary for him to continue in working out his faith within the sacred tension. In the end, then, by offering *de silentio*'s text to his Christendom contemporaries under the title *Fear and*

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<sup>172</sup> NIV.

<sup>173</sup> See, e.g., Daniel M. Johnson, "Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard's Supposed Irrationalism: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard Yearbook Studies 2011*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 70.

<sup>174</sup> With respect to the former, see e.g., Johnson, "Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Kierkegaard's Supposed Irrationalism," 70. With respect to the latter, see e.g., Green, "Enough is Enough!" 200-1 and Green, "Deciphering," 272. In contrast to these views, Carlisle has the right idea: "Paul's message combines a call to responsibility with a denial of human self-sufficiency: the spiritual life is 'enabled' by God's work, but each member of the community is urged to 'live your life in the manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,' to 'stand firm in the Lord'..." See *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, 3.

*Trembling*, Kierkegaard's hope is that the example set by Abraham, the example of walking the tension-filled path of works and grace on which one refuses to rest in any human foundation, but rather perpetually resigns and perpetually receives, will inspire these contemporaries to follow suit and to enter, by means of paradox, into the existential stance of sacred tension.

### CHAPTER 3

#### PARADOX AND THE SELF: ON SELFHOOD, DESPAIR/SIN, AND CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

*A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.<sup>1</sup>*

*[P]aradox, faith, and dogma—these three constituents have an agreement and an alliance that are the surest solidarity and bulwark against all pagan wisdom.<sup>2</sup>*

*In the life of the spirit there is no standing still [Stilstand] (really no state [Tilstand], either; everything is actuation)...<sup>3</sup>*

In this chapter I take up the second of our four expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, the expression associated with the nature of the self and the task of selfhood as presented in the pseudonymous work *The Sickness unto Death*. Furthermore, I narrow in on the concrete implications this expression of paradox carries for Christian existence. Regarding the overall argument of the dissertation, *The Sickness unto Death* is significant not only because it offers a robustly Christian perspective on the notion of paradox, but also because it is here that we find perhaps the most developed anthropology underlying Christian existence in Kierkegaard's writings. As such, a careful and thorough consideration of the text can prove quite promising.

My argument can be summarized as follows. Anti-Climacus employs the notion of paradox in its dialectical and etymological forms in order to provide an account of what it means to become a self that is both properly related to itself and properly related to God.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the loss of tension associated with despair and sin, this

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<sup>1</sup> SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

<sup>2</sup> SKS 11, 209 / SUD, 96-7.

<sup>3</sup> SKS 11, 206 / SUD, 94.

<sup>4</sup> Although Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death* is not as explicit about the role played by human others in his account of faith, and although many of his comments concerning such others are negative in nature (see, e.g., some of the remarks he makes about "the crowd" (*Mængden*): SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33-4; SKS 11, 229-34 / SUD, 117-23), we should nevertheless note that proper relation to oneself and to God also includes proper relation to others. This is implied in Anti-Climacus' discussion of the dialectic of recognition (see SKS 11, 193-4 / SUD, 79-80; Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of

account functions as an expression of sacred tension that can be described in a concrete fashion in terms of the virtues of dedicated patience and humble courage. With this reading of *The Sickness unto Death* in which we focus on the relationship between paradox and the self, we are therefore afforded another perspective on Christian existence that Kierkegaard employs as part of his ethico-religious challenge to his Christendom culture. In order to develop this argument, I proceed in six sections. In *Section 3.1*, I begin with several preliminary remarks on *The Sickness unto Death*. For *Section 3.2*, I outline the various ways in which paradox is manifested within the text in both its dialectical and etymological forms. In *Section 3.3*, I discuss despair and sin as negative responses to paradox, which I associate with loss of tension. For *Section 3.4*, I describe the positive response to paradox that I identify as the sacred tension of faith. In *Section 3.5*, I focus on the self within such tension and two central virtues of this self, namely dedicated patience and humble courage. In *Section 3.6*, I conclude with a few brief remarks.

### **3.1 - Preliminary Remarks on *The Sickness unto Death***

In broad terms, *The Sickness unto Death* is an investigation into the nature of the self and the various ways in which the self falls short of full selfhood. From the introduction it becomes clear that the focus of the book is not physical sickness, but rather the sickness of spirit that the Christian understands to be “the most appalling

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Despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1997*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 131-2; Arne Grøn, “The Dialectic of Recognition in *Works of Love*,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser together with Jon Stewart and Christian Tolstrup (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 147-8). In this respect, I suggest that Anti-Climacus’ account is entirely consistent with the social view Kierkegaard develops earlier in *Works of Love*. Several scholars have made a similar argument concerning the social implications of Anti-Climacus’ account. See, e.g., Sharon Krishek, “The Moral Implications of Kierkegaard’s Analysis of Despair,” *Religious Studies* 52, no. 1 (2016), 25-43; Gregory R. Beabout and Brad Frazier, “A Challenge to the ‘Solitary Self’ Interpretation of Kierkegaard,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (2000), 82-5; Arne Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet: Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1997), 348-51; C. Stephen Evans, “Who is the Other in *Sickness Unto Death*? God and Human Relations in the Constitution of the Self,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1997*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 1-15.

danger.”<sup>5</sup> Much as a doctor would diagnose an ill patient, the work unfolds in an algebraic fashion as it walks through various spiritual diagnoses, covering along the way themes such as despair, sin, and faith. Although the latter of these is afforded little *explicit* attention, it is still crucial to the argument of the book. As Anti-Climacus writes, faith is that by which he steers throughout the entire work “as by a trustworthy navigation guide” (*det sikre Sømærke*).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Anti-Climacus serves as a kind of superlative Christian who is deeply concerned with faith.<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason, among others, that Kierkegaard sees Anti-Climacus’ text as “extremely valuable.”<sup>8</sup>

With respect to the structure of the book, Anti-Climacus divides his argument into two parts entitled “The Sickness unto Death is Despair” and “Despair is Sin.” At first glance, these parts seem quite different in that the former appears to deal with the phenomenon of despair and the latter with the dogmatic issue of sin. Although it is correct to note that the two parts have distinct emphases, it is important not thereby to draw too sharp of a distinction between them. As Anti-Climacus remarks on the final page, the specific contrast sin/faith is what “has been advanced throughout this entire book,”<sup>9</sup> which means that although sin does not come into focus until *Part Two*, it is nevertheless implied in the notion of despair. In this respect, we have good reason to see the two parts of *The Sickness unto Death* not as atomistic investigations, but rather as two faces of the same coin.<sup>10</sup> In Arne Grøn’s assessment, this line of argument ought to help

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<sup>5</sup> SKS 11, 125 / SUD, 9.

<sup>6</sup> SKS 11, 196 / SUD, 82.

<sup>7</sup> SKS 22, 130, NB11:209 / JP 6, 6433. Even though Kierkegaard decides not to release *The Sickness unto Death* under his own name due to the radically high nature of its content and what he sees as his inability to live up to it, he still attaches his name as editor in order to signal that he endorses Anti-Climacus’ view. See SKS 22, 151, NB12:9 / JP 6, 6446.

<sup>8</sup> SKS 21, 293-4, NB10:69 / JP 6, 6361.

<sup>9</sup> SKS 11, 242 / SUD, 131.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see, e.g., Louis Mackey, “Deconstructing the Self: Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death*,” *Anglican Theological Review* 71, no. 2 (1989), 159-60; Gregory R. Beabout, *Freedom and Its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1996), 81; Arne Grøn, “The Relation Between Part One and Part Two of *The Sickness Unto Death*,” trans. Noel S. Adams, in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1997*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 37, 44, 45; Kristen K. Deede, “The Infinite Qualitative Difference: Sin, the Self, and

us to avoid focusing on one part to the exclusion of the other as well as to see that the first part is revealing not only for anthropology, but also for theology.<sup>11</sup> I agree with Grøn on this latter point, and I would like to suggest that the converse is also true, namely that the second part of *The Sickness unto Death* can be revealing not only for theology, but also for anthropology.

*The Sickness unto Death* has a definite polemical edge to it, and Anti-Climacus is explicit that the target of his attack is Christendom in both its civic and speculative forms.<sup>12</sup> For example, with respect to the former Anti-Climacus offers the following biting description of the common Danish citizen in Christendom: “In Christendom he is also a Christian, he goes to church every Sunday, listens to and understands the pastor, indeed, they have a mutual understanding; he dies, the pastor ushers him into eternity for ten rix-dollars—but a self he was not, and a self he did not become.”<sup>13</sup> With respect to the latter, Anti-Climacus argues that speculation with its hubristic pursuit of knowledge stands in the way of the pursuit of authentic Christianity. It is with this in mind he remarks,

I consider it an outright ethical task, perhaps requiring not a little self-denial in these very speculative times, when all “the others” are busy comprehending, to admit that one is neither able nor obliged to comprehend [Christianity]. Precisely this is no doubt what our age, what Christendom needs: a little Socratic ignorance with respect to Christianity...<sup>14</sup>

Anti-Climacus here clearly has the Hegelian system as his target and particularly the manner by which it threatens to do away with the radical call to the individual to stand as

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Revelation in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53, no. 1 (2003), 37.

<sup>11</sup> Grøn, “The Relation,” 40.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 214 / *SUD*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> *SKS* 11, 168 / *SUD*, 52 (the italicized emphasis is my own). One of the central problems Anti-Climacus addresses in this critique is that in Christendom people cease striving to become single individuals before God, but rather they settle merely with living as one among the crowd. See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 229 / *SUD*, 118; *SKS* 11, 231-3 / *SUD*, 120-2.

<sup>14</sup> *SKS* 11, 211 / *SUD*, 99.

a self before God in passionate pursuit of faith.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, then, Anti-Climacus' criticisms of both expressions of Christendom revolve around the same central issue, namely that Christendom hinders people from becoming full selves, which is to say that it is complicit in leading people into despair and sin.

In response to the problem of Christendom, Anti-Climacus not only offers a diagnosis of the sickness unto death, but in doing so he also sketches out a constructive view of the self. For Anti-Climacus, all human beings possess "primitivity" (*Primitivitet*) in the sense that each one is created to become a self that embraces his or her "name divinely understood."<sup>16</sup> As he remarks, "Despairing narrowness is to lack primitivity or to have robbed oneself of one's primitivity, to have emasculated oneself in a spiritual sense. Every human being is primitively intended to be a self, destined to be himself..."<sup>17</sup> The constructive task of drawing out this positive aspect of the human being is implied in the subtitle of the text, *A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Awakening has to do with becoming aware of one's existential situation, and upbuilding has to do with overcoming the sickness unto death towards spiritual vitality. Thus, we may say that Anti-Climacus offers the reader "theory for the sake of therapy" by which he elucidates the phenomena of despair and sin for the purpose of edification.<sup>18</sup> In support of his critical and constructive aims, Anti-Climacus affords the notion of paradox a significant role. To this notion we may now direct our attention.

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<sup>15</sup> SKS 11, 158-9 / SUD, 43-4; SKS 11, 231 / SUD, 120. On this point, see Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 237fn9; Deede, "The Infinite Qualitative Difference," 27.

<sup>16</sup> SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33-4.

<sup>17</sup> SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Psychology and Unconscious Despair," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 40.

### 3.2 - Paradox and the Self in *The Sickness unto Death*

Although the term paradox in its various forms occurs relatively few times in *The Sickness unto Death* compared to some of Kierkegaard's other works,<sup>19</sup> paradox nevertheless still has a crucial function in the text, particularly with regards to Anti-Climacus' account of the self. My claim in this section is that the occurrences of the concept in *Part One*, which fall under the notions of *relation* and *synthesis* in Anti-Climacus' development of his anthropology, represent an expression of the dialectical form of paradox, and that the significant occurrences of the term in *Part Two*, which are closely linked to the self as *before God*, represent expressions of the etymological form.<sup>20</sup>

#### *The Self as Self-Relating Relation: The Dialectical Form of Paradox*

To begin, we may narrow in on the account of the self presented in *Part One*. In the first lines of the first section, Anti-Climacus leads off with a general description of the structure of the self that serves as the foundation for the discussion of despair and sin in the remainder of the book.<sup>21</sup> He writes,

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still

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<sup>19</sup> The word occurs 17 times in *The Sickness unto Death*. There are two occurrences of *et Paradox* in *Part One*. *Part Two* contains fifteen occurrences of the term (*et Paradox*: 1 time; *paradox*: 1 time; *Paradoxet*: 8 times; *Paradoxerne*: 2 times; *det Paradox*: 3 times). In contrast, for example, the term occurs 308 times in *Postscript*, 103 times in *Fragments*, and 84 times in *Fear and Trembling*. See Leroy Seat, *The Meaning of "Paradox": A Study of the Use of the Word "Paradox" in Contemporary Theological and Philosophical Writings with Special Reference to Søren Kierkegaard*, Dissertation (Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967), 89.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to point out here that the etymological and dialectical aspects of paradox as they occur in *The Sickness unto Death* are fundamentally intertwined and even inseparable. As such, we should be careful in our analysis not to overemphasize their distinction. At the same time, however, it proves to be a helpful heuristic tool for characterizing Anti-Climacus' account of paradox in this work to take into account the slightly different nuances with which he is working, not least of all because these nuances carry slightly different implications for articulating an account of Christian existence.

<sup>21</sup> Beabout, *Freedom and Its Misuses*, 84.

not a self. In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.<sup>22</sup>

What is immediately striking about this passage is Anti-Climacus' employment of the language of "relation" (*Forhold*) and "synthesis" (*Syntese*) to describe the human being. But what does it mean to identify the human being with a relation and a synthesis, or one could even say a relational synthesis?

With his particular use of the language of relation Anti-Climacus offers a critical alternative to the reductionist tendency within Western philosophy to identify the human being and the self with a single higher faculty or some fundamental substance.<sup>23</sup> For Anti-Climacus, the self is essentially a dynamic relationship, which is to say that it is at the same time *both* infinite *and* finite, *both* eternal *and* temporal, *both* freedom *and* necessity, *both* psychical *and* physical,<sup>24</sup> with neither of these dialectical pairs undermining or taking precedence over the other, but rather standing in a reciprocal relation to one another. As Westphal writes, "It is not that the self [for Anti-Climacus] is a perishable substance to which one set of predicates applies and an imperishable substance to which the opposing predicates apply. The self is a single individual to which both sets of predicates apply,

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<sup>22</sup> *SKS* 11, 129 / *SUD*, 13. Kierkegaard earlier presented a similar account of the human being through the pseudonym Vigilus Haufniensis. See *SKS* 4, 388 / *CA*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Two examples of such reductionism are the views of Plato and Descartes. For Plato, the human being is essentially identified with the soul, which is itself comprised of one part associated with reason and another part associated with the desires (see, e.g., *Phaedrus* 246a-254e.). These parts are in relation to one another, but for Plato this is fundamentally a hierarchical relation in which the former is meant to master the latter. For Descartes, the human individual is comprised of two substances, extended substance (*res extensa*) and thinking substance (*res cogitans*), but he argues that the self is essentially identified with thought and first-person subjectivity, which he expresses in the phrase "*cogito ergo sum*" (see, e.g., *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), *Part Four*). In this manner, Descartes associates the self strictly with the latter of these two substances and thereby goes even further than Plato in eliminating any identifiable relationship between the two aspects of the human being. In the end, then, for Plato and Descartes the self ends up being construed in a monolithic manner. With his opposition to such views, Kierkegaard serves as a predecessor to 20<sup>th</sup> century critical thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>24</sup> Concerning the final of these pairs, see also Vigilus Haufniensis' discussion in *SKS* 4, 349 / *CA*, 43-4.

however different they may be from one another.”<sup>25</sup> We may say that Anti-Climacus’ account is therefore an attempt to articulate and to preserve the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the self.

In elaborating on this both/and aspect of the self, Anti-Climacus appeals to the notion of synthesis. Synthesis for him, however, can carry a couple of different meanings. First, the self as a synthesis means that the dialectical aspects comprising it are related in such a manner that each is *fundamentally* required and implied by the other.<sup>26</sup> To make this point more concretely, Anti-Climacus appeals to the analogy of respiration. Just as breathing depends upon both contrasting movements of inhaling and exhaling (*Ind- og Udaanden*), so also does personhood (*Personligheden*) require that both dialectical aspects of the self are essentially at play and intertwined.<sup>27</sup> This dynamic, then, is what differentiates a synthesis from a mere combination. Second, Anti-Climacus also employs the term synthesis to refer to the *act* of relating the dialectical parts.<sup>28</sup> This is precisely what he means with his claim that the relation of the dialectical pairs *alone* does not constitute selfhood,<sup>29</sup> but rather that the self emerges only when the relation is related to itself and is done so in a continuous fashion. Moreover, such an act of synthesis is set before each and every person as the task of becoming an authentic self. As Robert C. Roberts nicely puts it, “the self ‘synthesizes’ these elements of itself only if, of its own will, it orders these elements of itself in an appropriate order, relates them to each other in a correct relation. In this case, it becomes *genuinely* a human self, or ‘spirit’.”<sup>30</sup> In short,

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<sup>25</sup> Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 237.

<sup>26</sup> Heiko Schulz, “To Believe is to Be: Reflections on Kierkegaard’s Phenomenology of (Un-)Freedom in *The Sickness unto Death*,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1996*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 166; Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Self,” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>27</sup> SKS 11, 155 / SUD, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Deede, “The Infinite Qualitative Difference,” 30.

<sup>29</sup> SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Robert C. Roberts, “The Grammar of Sin and the Conceptual Unity of *The Sickness unto Death*,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 138.

then, the *synthesis* of the self requires at the same time a *synthesizing* of the self, which means that selfhood takes form precisely in the dynamic activity of becoming a self.

It is important to point out that Anti-Climacus' language of both/and synthesis is not to be equated with Hegelian dialectics or mediation. Hegel, in his attack upon the classical logic of Aristotle and particularly the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle, argues for an account of contradiction that includes movement as unfolding progress.<sup>31</sup> This is his famous theory of thesis-antithesis-synthesis in which one term is established and then negated by a second, leaving a third positive relation between the contradictory terms that then becomes a new term to begin the process anew on a higher level.<sup>32</sup> The key difference between this account and that of Anti-Climacus is that whereas Hegel talks about resolution of contraries, Anti-Climacus focuses on remaining with the tension of the unresolved contraries. Westphal makes this point well when he notes, "Anti-Climacus might better have spoken of a dialectical tension than of a synthesis; for the unity of the elements is paradoxical and unresolved. They do not dissolve into some third thing that is neither. The model would be more like oil and water than like the union of hydrogen and oxygen in a molecule of water."<sup>33</sup> In this respect, any movement in Anti-Climacus' account of the self is limited to the movement of interrelation rather than the movement of resolution.

In contrast to mediation, then, what Anti-Climacus offers is an account of the self as a paradox. More specifically, by paradox here Anti-Climacus intends the dialectical paradox of reciprocally-related opposites.<sup>34</sup> An important point we may emphasize concerning such a construal of the self is that the self ought not to be viewed in terms of

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<sup>31</sup> In *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1989), 439, Hegel writes, "Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality." Quoted in Jon Stewart, "Introduction," in *Mynster's "Rationalism, Supernaturalism" and the Debate about Mediation*, ed. Jon Stewart (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>32</sup> Stewart, "Introduction," 14.

<sup>33</sup> Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 237.

<sup>34</sup> On this point see Timothy Tian-min Lin, *Paradox in the Thought of Soren Kierkegaard*, Dissertation (Boston, MA: Boston University, 1969), 144, 148.

a static substance, and neither should it be understood merely as the inert “negative unity” of contraries.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it is more appropriate to understand the self as an active movement in the perpetual process of becoming.<sup>36</sup> As M. Jamie Ferreira puts it, “Although it achieves a ‘unity,’ the synthesis at issue is not a static resolution of thesis and antithesis; it is not a resolving of tension between ‘constituents’ or ‘factors’ of the self... This synthesis is a paradoxical situation...”<sup>37</sup> As we will see below, this point concerning the dynamic nature of the paradoxical self proves crucial for articulating the significance of paradox for sacred tension and Christian existence.

*The Self as Before God: The Etymological Form of Paradox*

The majority of the uses of the term paradox in *The Sickness unto Death* occur in *Part Two*, and particularly within the first section entitled “Despair Is Sin.”<sup>38</sup> Paradox functions here primarily to articulate the limitations of human understanding and ability as well as to challenge human hubris by emphasizing the radical difference between God and human beings.<sup>39</sup> For example, in a discussion on the nature of sin as a position, Anti-Climacus writes, “paradox, faith, and dogma—these three constituents have an agreement and an alliance that are the surest solidarity and bulwark against all pagan wisdom.”<sup>40</sup> It is precisely because paradox here serves as a limitation that Anti-Climacus makes an essential connection between paradox and offense, the latter of which he

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<sup>35</sup> SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., SKS 11, 146 / SUD, 30: “every moment that a self exists, it is in a process of becoming...”

<sup>37</sup> M. Jamie Ferreira, “Imagination and the Despair of Sin,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1997*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Anti-Climacus employs the term twice in *Part One*, but in a rather idiosyncratic fashion that does not relate to the dialectical or etymological forms. See SKS 11, 138 / SUD, 22.

<sup>39</sup> On this point, see Seat, *The Meaning of “Paradox,”* 229-30.

<sup>40</sup> SKS 11, 209 / SUD, 96-7. See also SKS 11, 218 / SUD, 106.

describes as “Christianity’s weapon against all speculation.”<sup>41</sup> But how, more specifically, are we to characterize this etymological form of paradox?

To begin, we may return to the issue of selfhood. Just as with the dialectical form, Anti-Climacus draws an important connection between the self and the etymological form of paradox. In this case, though, paradox is specifically linked to the self as it stands *before God*. As we have already shown, for Anti-Climacus the self is not simply the relation of opposing dialectical elements. Neither, however, is it merely the self-relating of this relation. Rather, included in the definition of the self from *Part One* is also a third relation, namely the relation of the entire relation to what Anti-Climacus identifies as “another” (*et Andet*):

Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another. If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation. The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another...to that which has established the entire relation.<sup>42</sup>

In this respect, becoming a self cannot be done in a strictly self-referential manner, but rather it plays out in relation to God who transcends the self-relating relation.<sup>43</sup> In the end, then, what we have is an account of the self as a relation that relates itself to itself by

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<sup>41</sup> SKS 11, 196-7 / SUD, 83.

<sup>42</sup> SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13-14.

<sup>43</sup> Because this discussion of “another” occurs in *Part One* where theological language is not yet in full force, one could be tempted to think that “another” need not refer to God. There exists, however, significant textual evidence against this view. For example, reading God as the other is implied in Anti-Climacus’ various claims he makes along the lines that the task of becoming a self “can be done only through the relationship to God” (SKS 11, 146 / SUD, 30. See also SKS 11, 143 / SUD, 27; SKS 11, 151 / SUD, 35; SKS 11, 155-6 / SUD, 40; SKS 11, 161 / SUD, 46. On this point see Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Psychology,” 46; Schulz, “To Believe is to Be,” 167; Christian Hjortkjær and Søren Willert, “The Self as a Center of Ethical Gravity: A Constructive Dialogue Between Søren Kierkegaard and George Herbert Mead,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2013*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 462). In a similar vein, reading “another” as God is supported by the definition of faith as the self relating to itself and willing to be itself by grounding itself *in the power that established the entire relation* (SKS 11, 242 / SUD, 131. Compare this to *Pap. VIII 2 B 170* and *Pap. VIII 2 B 168*). For Anti-Climacus, it is God alone who possesses such a power, and particularly the power to create selves that are of infinite nature. On this point, see Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Psychology,” 60.

relating to God as the other who grounds the entire relationship. In short, this is what it means for the self to exist as itself before God.

It is here where the self stands in relation to God that we begin to see the crucial role played by paradox in its etymological form. Any relationship between the self and God, but especially such an intimate one implied by the phrase *before God*, runs the risk of a pantheistic abolishment of the delineation between God and human beings. Although such a risk is in some sense implied by the incarnational movement of the divine into communion with humanity,<sup>44</sup> for Anti-Climacus its central underlying reason is humanity's problematic attempt within Christendom to encroach upon divinity, "first in a highbrow way through speculation, then in a lowbrow way in the highways and byways."<sup>45</sup> Christianity, however, is "safeguarded [*betrygget*] by the paradox"<sup>46</sup> from such hubris:

Christianity teaches that everything essentially Christian depends solely upon faith; therefore it wants to be precisely a Socratic, God-fearing ignorance, which by means of ignorance guards faith against speculation, keeping watch so that the gulf of qualitative difference between God and man may be maintained as it is in the paradox and faith, so that God and man do not, even more dreadfully than ever in paganism, do not merge in some way, *philosophice, poetice*, etc. into one—in the system.<sup>47</sup>

By means of paradox Christianity thus protects itself against "the most dreadful of all blasphemies"<sup>48</sup> that is the abolishment of the divine-human distinction.

In carrying out the task of articulating proper human limitation, Anti-Climacus appeals to what he identifies as the paradoxes of sin and atonement. Regarding the former, he argues that sin is a paradox in that it operates as a position rooted in the

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<sup>44</sup> *SKS* 11, 229 / *SUD*, 117: "No teaching on earth has ever really brought God and man so close together as Christianity..."

<sup>45</sup> *SKS* 11, 229 / *SUD*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> *SKS* 11, 229 / *SUD*, 117.

<sup>47</sup> *SKS* 11, 211 / *SUD*, 99.

<sup>48</sup> *SKS* 11, 229 / *SUD*, 117.

human being that must be revealed by God and that thereby cannot be grasped by the understanding. As he puts it, “I steadfastly hold to the Christian teaching that sin is a position—yet not as if it could be comprehended, but as a paradox that must be believed.”<sup>49</sup> Given the paradoxical nature of sin, Anti-Climacus points out how the Atonement with its incomprehensible complete forgiveness of sin is paradoxical in a similar fashion:

[T]he paradox is the implicit consequence of the doctrine of the Atonement. First of all, Christianity proceeds to establish sin so firmly as a position that the human understanding can never comprehend it; and then it is this same Christian teaching that again undertakes to eliminate this position in such a way that the human understanding can never comprehend it.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas speculation ultimately tries to temper this view of sin and atonement, and in so doing it attempts to do away with paradox, Christianity is “as paradoxical on this point as possible” in that it emphasizes both to the most radical extent.<sup>51</sup>

To summarize, paradox serves to emphasize the divine-human distinction and to limit the self by making it clear that the human being can neither understand nor overcome sin and that she must thereby rely upon divine aid and redemption. As such, paradox in its etymological form is directly tied to what it means to become a self before God. It is precisely in this sense that Anti-Climacus writes, “the crucial Christian qualification: before God...in turn has Christianity’s crucial criterion: *the absurd, the paradox, the possibility of offense.*”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *SKS* 11, 210 / *SUD*, 98. See also *SKS* 11, 218 / *SUD*, 106: “(this must be believed, since it is indeed the paradox that no man can comprehend) sin is a position...”

<sup>50</sup> *SKS* 11, 212 / *SUD*, 100.

<sup>51</sup> *SKS* 11, 212 / *SUD*, 100.

<sup>52</sup> *SKS* 11, 196 / *SUD*, 83.

### 3.3 - Responding to Paradox: Despair, Sin, and the Loss of Tension

Having outlined the notion of paradox, we may now shift our attention to the despair and sin comprising the “miserable condition” that is the sickness unto death.<sup>53</sup> In this section I argue that despair and sin represent negative responses to paradox that involve the loss of tension. This argument proves particularly important for the next section where I trace out sacred tension in large part by contrasting it with despair and sin. To begin, a couple of preliminary remarks are in order.

First, what is the relationship between despair and sin? On the one hand, Anti-Climacus is careful to highlight their differences: despair is employed in *Part One* to describe the sickness unto death considered as a human phenomenon, and sin is employed in *Part Two* as the description of the sickness unto death that makes recourse to dogmatic categories.<sup>54</sup> One could thus describe despair as a philosophical or phenomenological notion and sin as a theological one.<sup>55</sup> In one sense, the point of making this distinction for Anti-Climacus reflects Kierkegaard’s larger pedagogical and Socratic task: in engaging his readers it would be less effective in encouraging proper subjectivity regarding dogmatic categories for Anti-Climacus to jump immediately into a discussion of sin without first dwelling on the phenomenon of despair as a universal human experience to which the reader can immediately relate from the place in which she finds herself.<sup>56</sup> In another sense, Anti-Climacus also makes the distinction in order to lay emphasis on the point that sin as a theological notion is directly connected to one’s

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<sup>53</sup> SKS 11, 124 / SUD, 8.

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., SKS 11, 191 / SUD, 77; SKS 11, 193 / SUD, 79; SKS 11, 195 / SUD, 81; SKS 11, 208 / SUD, 96.

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., James L. Marsh, “Kierkegaard’s Double Dialectic of Despair and Sin,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 67.

<sup>56</sup> This is another expression of Kierkegaard’s fundamental principle of communication that if one is to succeed in leading a person to a specific place, one must meet him where he is and begin there. See SKS 16, 27-9 / PV, 45-7; Matthew T. Nowachek, “Kierkegaard as Pedagogue: Some Insights for Teaching Introductory Philosophy Courses,” *Teaching Philosophy* 37, no. 3 (2014), 346-8.

consciousness of existing “before God.”<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, Anti-Climacus is also clear that despair and sin are inseparable. The purpose of *Part Two*, “Despair is Sin,” is to make precisely this point.<sup>58</sup> We may thus say that although sin is described as despair paired with a conception of God, despair ought still to be considered sin.<sup>59</sup> This is an important point to carry with us in the analysis that follows not only because it reminds us of the congruity between Anti-Climacus’ language of despair and his language of sin, but also in that it serves as an important corrective to certain philosophically-oriented readings of *The Sickness unto Death* that would focus largely or exclusively on the first part of the text and the notion of despair to the exclusion of the rest.

Second, in that Anti-Climacus characterizes the self as a relation (*Forhold*), he describes despair and sin in terms of misrelation (*Misforhold*). Thus, regarding the self-relating relation, despair is the failure to relate the aspects of the self as initially and properly established by God.<sup>60</sup> In addition, despair and sin are the failure to relate properly to God—what Kierkegaard identifies in his papers as the *fundamental* misrelation.<sup>61</sup> Of these two broad forms of misrelation Anti-Climacus articulates several variations. We may briefly outline a few as preparation for our discussion of the loss of tension.

#### *Despair Defined with Regards to the Self as a Synthesis*

With respect to the self as a synthesis, Anti-Climacus describes two possible forms of despair. The first is despair defined by finitude/infinity. Proper selfhood is a

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<sup>57</sup> SKS 11, 191 / SUD, 77.

<sup>58</sup> See Beabout, *Freedom and Its Misuses*, 81, 111-14.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Anti-Climacus’ discussion of the pagan who lacks a conception of God, but who nevertheless is still “immersed in sin.” SKS 11, 194 / SUD, 81. This coheres well with Anti-Climacus’ claims that despair is universal (SKS 11, 138-44 / SUD, 22-8) and that every person is a sinner (SKS 11, 233 / SUD, 121).

<sup>60</sup> SKS 11, 132 / SUD, 16.

<sup>61</sup> *Pap.* VIII 2 B 168. Quoted in *JP* 1, 749.

process of “becom[ing] concrete” (*at vorde concret*) and to become concrete is neither to become finite nor infinite, but rather to exist as a synthesis of these two aspects.<sup>62</sup> One expression of the despair of infinitude/finitude, then, is the self’s attempt to become infinite and thereby to lack finitude. Such a person in despair soars off into limitless fantasy, speculation, and abstraction where she increasingly loses touch with her facticity. This despair coincides with the speculative strain of Christendom where the speculative thinker becomes so captivated with the abstract system that she fails to recognize her finite nature as an existing being. The converse expression of despair is that in which the self lacks infinitude. Anti-Climacus describes this as an artificial “limiting” (*Bornerethed, Begrændsethed*)<sup>63</sup> where the self reduces itself to its facticity. Moreover, he associates it with the civic expression of Christendom in which the individual “does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.”<sup>64</sup> Whether one slides into infinitude or finitude, the result is the same: the failure to become oneself.

The second form is despair defined by possibility/necessity, and, as with the previous form, such despair emerges from an emphasis on one of the dialectical aspects to the detriment of the other. On the one hand, the despair of possibility is to lack necessity as an important limiting condition for the self. As Anti-Climacus remarks, “possibility seems greater and greater to the self; more and more becomes possible because nothing becomes actual...but this is exactly the point at which the abyss [*Afgrunden*] swallows up the self.”<sup>65</sup> The problem here is precisely the inability of the individual to submit to necessity and to the limitations that are fundamental to the self. In Anti-Climacus’ terms, “Instead of taking the possibility back into necessity, he chases

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<sup>62</sup> *SKS* 11, 146 / *SUD*, 30.

<sup>63</sup> *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33. This artificial “limitation” (*Begrændsethed*) stands in contrast to the “boundary” (*Grændse*) established by the paradox. See, e.g., *SKS* 4, 249 / *PF*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> *SKS* 11, 149 / *SUD*, 33-4.

<sup>65</sup> *SKS* 11, 151 / *SUD*, 36.

after possibility—and at last cannot find his way back to himself.”<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, the despair of necessity is to lack possibility, and particularly to lose sight of the truth that for God all things are possible. Just as oxygen allows one to breathe, possibility is what revives the individual when he suffers under the weight of fatalism. As Anti-Climacus puts it, the imagination of possibility “teach[es] him to hope and to fear—or to fear and to hope—by rendering possible that which surpasses the *quantum satis* [sufficient standard] of any experience.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, if either possibility or necessity becomes lacking, the self slides into despair.

From this description, we now see how such despair relates to paradox. The self as a paradoxical synthesizing synthesis not only makes despair possible by nature of its constitution in the sense that this paradoxical dynamic provides the structure from which the individual can freely depart and thereby fall into despair, but paradox as an account of the dialectically opposed elements of the self provides one of the main reference points Anti-Climacus relies upon in order to identify what constitutes despair and how such despair is to be characterized. In short, then, paradox in its dialectical form as a description of the self serves as the ontological and epistemological basis for being able to suffer despair and to recognize it, but also eventually to overcome it.

#### *Despair Defined by Consciousness*

Anti-Climacus’ second broad category of despair turns on the idea that despair comes in gradations tied to consciousness such that greater consciousness entails greater despair. Despair therefore ranges from the state of being unaware of one’s despair to the full-fledged conscious despair of Satan.<sup>68</sup> With respect to the lowest level, namely the

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<sup>66</sup> SKS 11, 153 / SUD, 37.

<sup>67</sup> SKS 11, 156 / SUD, 41.

<sup>68</sup> SKS 11, 157 / SUD, 42.

despair that is ignorant of being despair, Anti-Climacus notes that such spiritlessness hardly qualifies as despair in that the individual lacks selfhood and the God relation; nevertheless, it is precisely such ignorance that *is* the despair.<sup>69</sup>

Conscious despair comes in two forms, namely despair of weakness and despair of defiance.<sup>70</sup> Regarding the former, Anti-Climacus notes that this despair can be despair *over something earthly* in that the individual feels he has been deprived of something required to become the self he wanted to be, or, it can be despair *over oneself* in that rather than embracing his weakness and thereby beginning down the path of recovery, the individual instead sinks down into his own despairing self. Simply put, then, characteristic of the despair of weakness is that the individual does not will to be the self that he is in his facticity. With respect to despair of defiance, the individual despairs not over the self that he is unable to be, but rather he despairs in willing to be a self he is not. As Anti-Climacus puts it, such despair is “the despairing misuse of the eternal within the self to will in despair to be oneself.”<sup>71</sup> Characteristic of the despair of defiance is the desire for mastery: “the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self [*concrete Selv*].”<sup>72</sup> Put another way, the self in defiance desires to usurp the place of God and thereby to become itself a god who is “in the beginning” (*i*

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<sup>69</sup> SKS 11, 161 / SUD, 46. This is the existence of the pagan who, regardless of the greatness of his achievements or his virtuousness, remains unaware of being a self before God and for this reason lives in despair.

<sup>70</sup> As Anti-Climacus notes, this is a relative distinction in the sense that “No despair is entirely free of defiance...On the other hand, even despair’s most extreme defiance is never really free of some weakness.” See SKS 11, 164 / SUD, 49.

<sup>71</sup> SKS 11, 181 / SUD, 67.

<sup>72</sup> SKS 11, 182 / SUD, 68. See also SKS 11, 183 / SUD, 69. Anti-Climacus describes the task “to become concrete” (*at vorde concret*) as a task that can only be done through a relationship with God. See SKS 11, 146 / SUD, 30.

*Begyndelsen*).<sup>73</sup> Such an attempt at self-divination is the self's greatest torment, but also its pleasure and delight.

The shift from weakness to defiance entails an increase in the intensity of despair leading to its most extreme form, what Anti-Climacus identifies as the demonic inwardness of “inclosing reserve” or “isolation” (*Indesluttethed*).<sup>74</sup> *Indesluttethed* represents the defiant state of the self where one separates oneself from both human others and the divine other, and shuts oneself within oneself and one's despair with no will to emerge. For Anti-Climacus, it is “inwardness with a jammed lock”<sup>75</sup> behind which “sits the self, so to speak, watching itself, preoccupied with or filling up time with not willing to be itself and yet being self enough to love itself.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, he remarks that *Indesluttethed* is “itself something spiritual and is one of the safeguards to ensure having, as it were, an inclosure [*Indelukke*] behind actuality, a world exclusively [*udelukkende*] for itself, a world where the self in despair is restlessly [*rastløs*] and tormentedly engaged in willing to be itself.”<sup>77</sup> Whereas selfhood for Anti-Climacus depends upon the dialectic of recognition in which one becomes a self in relation to human others and the divine other,<sup>78</sup> the person of *Indesluttethed* attempts to pull himself out of such a dialectic in order to make

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<sup>73</sup> SKS 11, 182 / SUD, 68. This is an allusion to Genesis 1:1 where God as creator is described as being “in the beginning” (i.e., *I Begyndelsen skabte Gud Himmelen og Jorden*) as well as to John 1:1 where Christ is described as existing “in the beginning” (i.e., *I Begyndelsen var Ordet*).

<sup>74</sup> *Indesluttethed* is at play in the despair of weakness as the state in which the self is passively trapped within itself, but its more severe expression emerges in the despair of defiance as the active closing off of the self. Moreover, it is important here to make a clear distinction between “inclosing reserve” (*Indesluttethed*) and “inwardness” (*Inderlighed*). Whereas the former represents the demonic turn inward that excludes human others and God, the latter represents a fundamental component of faith as the inward movement by which one separates oneself from the crowd (*Mængden*) as the single individual (*den Enkelte*) in order to meet human others and God in an authentic and properly subjective fashion. For a good discussion of inwardness, see e.g., how Johannes Climacus ties it to subjectivity (SKS 7, 173-228 / CUP1, 189-251) and how Vigilius Haufniensis ties it to seriousness/earnestness (SKS 4, 446-53 / CA, 146-54). This point concerning *Indesluttethed* and *Inderlighed* is also nicely represented with respect to language by the difference between the individual of inclosing reserve who in his inability to speak slides into demonic muteness (SKS 4, 424-6 / CA, 123-4) and Abraham as the knight of faith who is unable to speak but remains in a vitalizing stance of receptivity to God (SKS 4, 177-8 / FT, 88).

<sup>75</sup> SKS 11, 186 / SUD, 72. See also SKS 6, 177 / SLW, 189.

<sup>76</sup> SKS 11, 177 / SUD, 63. Anti-Climacus here discusses *Indesluttethed* near the end of the section on the despair of weakness.

<sup>77</sup> SKS 11, 186-7 / SUD, 73.

<sup>78</sup> SKS 11, 193-4 / SUD, 79-80.

the futile effort at becoming a self not by being constituted in relation to the other, but rather strictly in relation to himself and his own self-determined criterion (*Maalestok*).<sup>79</sup> Just as with milder states of defiance, *Indesluttethed* centers on control, but such control is hidden away so deeply that the self may appear entirely free, while at the same time becoming a prisoner to itself.<sup>80</sup> Ironically, by masking its defiance as a way of retaining control, the self ultimately loses control altogether.

Furthermore, *Indesluttethed* as the will to complete self-determination is at essence a form of rebellion against God that is an expression of the sin of pride.<sup>81</sup> Anti-Climacus describes such rebellion by employing a writing metaphor:

[I]t is as if an error slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error—perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production—and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author.<sup>82</sup>

Although Anti-Climacus notes that this form of sinful despair is rare, such rarity does not detract from its significance. Rather, he treats it as something of a *telos* that exemplifies the destructive end towards which all despair ultimately heads if it remains unchecked and unresolved.

Despair as described here is also closely tied to paradox. As we noted above, consciousness in despair and sin is directly linked to the increasing consciousness of oneself as a self that exists before God. Such consciousness, however, is only possible when the difference between God and humanity has been made manifest. For Anti-Climacus this manifestation is precisely the function of paradox in its etymological form.

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<sup>79</sup> *SKS* 11, 194 / *SUD*, 79.

<sup>80</sup> *SKS* 4, 425 / *CA*, 124.

<sup>81</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 223-4 / *SUD*, 112.

<sup>82</sup> *SKS* 11, 187 / *SUD*, 74.

In revealing such difference and allowing the individual to become conscious of himself before God, the paradox opens up the possibility of despair and sin as defiance. This dynamic is particularly apparent in the sin of the demonic individual of *Indesluttetbed* who is fully aware of the paradox and what it entails for his status in relation to God, yet who in offense freely rejects the paradox in an attempt at self-divination. Thus, we may say that without the etymological paradox there would be no possibility of despair or sin in terms of defiance against God.

### *Despair, Sin, and Loss of Tension*

Having introduced despair and sin, we may now turn our discussion to the manner by which these notions represent loss of tension.<sup>83</sup> In broad terms, Anti-Climacus notes that despair operates as “an impotent self-consuming” (*en afmægtig Selvfortærelse*) where the self cannot do what it wants, but rather despairs in “impotence” (*Afmægt*).<sup>84</sup> In addition, he describes the sinner as enervated (*afmattet*) like the coiled spring that has become slackened (*Springfjerdern afspænd*) and in which there remains “no momentum, no *impetus*.”<sup>85</sup> Anti-Climacus’ point with these claims is that despair and sin, despite any appearance to the contrary, are ultimately antithetical to vitality, which is to say that they constitute a loss of tension. As a more concrete description of this loss of tension, we may consider two points.

First, Anti-Climacus links the loss of tension associated with despair to improper forms of tranquility, security, and rest. One way this plays out is through the spiritless pursuit of such things as trivialities, diversions, and comforts. Spiritlessness of

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<sup>83</sup> The phrase “loss of tension” is more appropriate to describe the despair of weakness and the phrase “evasion of tension” to describe the despair of defiance. I nevertheless employ loss of tension here to encompass both.

<sup>84</sup> *SKS* 11, 134 / *SUD*, 18. Compare this to *SKS* 10, 177 / *CD*, 165; *SKS* 8, 74 / *TA*, 77; *SKS* 8, 77 / *TA*, 80; *SKS* 8, 78 / *TA*, 81.

<sup>85</sup> *SKS* 11, 219 / *SUD*, 107.

this sort is dangerous precisely because it “not only does not cause any inconvenience in life but makes life cozy and comfortable” and thus is not regarded by most as despair.<sup>86</sup> More strikingly, such despairing loss of tension emerges in and is fostered through what many would identify as the experience of happiness. As Anti-Climacus writes, “happiness [*Lykke*] is not a qualification of spirit, and deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells also anxiety, which is despair; it very much wishes to be allowed to remain there, because for despair the most cherished and desirable place to live is in the heart of happiness. Despite its illusory security and tranquility [*sin illusoriske Tryghed og Rø*], all immediacy is anxiety...”<sup>87</sup> Such loss of tension is characteristic of civic Christendom with its comfort and security associated with social recognition where the despairing person “avoid[s] every gust of unfavorable wind”<sup>88</sup> by running to the crowd and its false sense of safety in numbers. Even the speculative thinkers within Christendom who put forward the appearance of moving beyond the trivialities of the commoners also evade tension by fleeing to what they perceive as their secure abstract philosophical system in which they avoid coming to terms with the concrete tension-filled existential stance that awaits would each one of them take the risk of becoming a single individual. Thus, although the person in despair finds some kind of rest in her trivial comforts, in the security of her social structure, and in her philosophical system, this rest is an improper sort in that it is improperly grounded. As Anti-Climacus notes, underlying such rest and its “spiritless sense of security” (*den aandløse Tryghed*) is not the proper grounding of the God relationship. Rather, “anxiety lies underneath [*i Grunden*]; likewise, despair also lies underneath [*i Grunden*], and when the enchantment of illusion is

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<sup>86</sup> SKS 11, 150 / SUD, 34.

<sup>87</sup> SKS 11, 141 / SUD, 25.

<sup>88</sup> SKS 11, 204 / SUD, 91-2.

over, when existence begins to totter, then despair, too, immediately appears as that which lay underneath [*i Grunden*].”<sup>89</sup>

Second, Anti-Climacus expresses despairing loss of tension in his description of sin as a particular kind of “state” (*Tilstand*). Although faith at times is also characterized as a state,<sup>90</sup> sin as a state differs in that it is essentially tied to immobility: each moment one remains standing (*bliver...staaende*)<sup>91</sup> in sin one sinks more deeply and becomes increasingly stuck. As Anti-Climacus puts it, “the abiding and lingering in sin [*Tilstanden i Synden*] is the continuance of sin, is the new sin.”<sup>92</sup> Moreover, he writes, “the state of sin is what holds [the sinner] together deep down where he has sunk [*hvor han er sunken*], profanely strengthening him with its consistency.”<sup>93</sup> Even as it projects the illusion of defiant strength, *Indesluttethed* as the greatest form of despair and sin represents the greatest loss of tension associated with becoming stuck in sin. For Anti-Climacus, the movement of *Indesluttethed* is a kind of nihilistic anti-movement in which one is incessantly dying, but cannot die, or, it is the nothingness of being unable to “reduce [one]self to nothing.”<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, the separation from God associated with the state of *Indesluttethed* is the utmost expression of the ossification of the self as it becomes bound to itself. Early on in his text Anti-Climacus provides something of a description of how this state of affairs looks, remarking, “if you have lived in despair, then, regardless of whatever else you won or lost, everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you—or still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and it *binds you to yourself* [*sætter Dig fast ved Dit Selv*] in despair.”<sup>95</sup> In the state of

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<sup>89</sup> SKS 11, 159 / SUD, 44.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14; SKS 11, 164 / SUD, 49; SKS 11, 242 / SUD, 131.

<sup>91</sup> SKS 11, 174 / SUD, 60.

<sup>92</sup> SKS 11, 218 / SUD, 106.

<sup>93</sup> SKS 11, 220 / SUD, 108.

<sup>94</sup> SKS 11, 134 / SUD, 19. See also SKS 11, 136 / SUD, 21.

<sup>95</sup> SKS 11, 144 / SUD, 28 (emphasis added). In his play *No Exit (Huis Clos)*, Jean-Paul Sartre famously writes that hell is other people. In contrast, for Anti-Climacus hell is oneself when one is bound to oneself with closed doors and no exit.

despair and sin, then, one loses all movement and thereby the sustained tension that is essential to the life of faith.

Despite the differences between the expressions of loss of tension described above, the common underlying cause for them is the same, namely a departure from the paradoxical. This is the case not only for civic Christendom and its rejection of paradox for finitude and necessity or for speculative Christendom and its rejection of paradox for infinitude and possibility, but also for the despairing sinner's rejection of paradox in his defiant and rebellious stance against God. For Anti-Climacus, however, the despairing loss of tension is not the sole response one may have to paradox. In the next section we may therefore articulate another possibility.

### **3.4 - Responding to Paradox: Living within the Sacred Tension**

In contrast to the negative response to paradox of despair and sin along with its associated loss of tension, Anti-Climacus outlines a positive response that involves the fostering and preservation of tension. In this section, I focus on Anti-Climacus' description of faith as tied to paradox and selfhood, and I develop this account in terms of the framework of sacred tension.

#### *Faith as Grounded Restlessness*

In that Anti-Climacus sets up faith as the opposite of sin (and despair),<sup>96</sup> a good place to begin our discussion of sacred tension is with his account of faith. Consider the following definition: faith is “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently [*grunder Selvet gjennemsigtigt*] in the power that established it.”<sup>97</sup> This

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<sup>96</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 236 / *SUD*, 124; *SKS* 11, 242 / *SUD*, 131.

<sup>97</sup> *SKS* 11, 130 / *SUD*, 14.

translation by the Hongs is rather unfortunate in that it gives the impression that Anti-Climacus is here describing faith as a kind of resting, and otherwise careful scholars seem to have appropriated this misrepresentation into their own expositions.<sup>98</sup> Although Anti-Climacus in his ruminations on faith does at times appeal to the language of rest,<sup>99</sup> his particular point with this definition is not one of resting, but of grounding.

At first glance, the idea of grounding might seem to imply the exact opposite of sacred tension as we have been describing it and thereby might seem to call into question our overall project in this chapter. This would certainly be the case were grounding to be understood in a foundationalist sense as providing certainty or security that allows one to come to a rest that is devoid of movement or impetus. Anti-Climacus' view of grounding, however, is not of this sort. Rather, Anti-Climacus sets up grounding as the antithesis to the "groundlessness" (*der ingen Grund er*)<sup>100</sup> of spiritless existence or to speculative existence that, metaphorically speaking, sews "without fastening the end."<sup>101</sup> He thus employs the concept as a non-foundational basis to counteract the nihilism of Christendom, which in turn makes possible the proper restlessness and perpetual movement essential to a living relationship with the living God. Moreover, such grounding for Anti-Climacus is required if repentance is to arise in the sense that the life of spirit only breaks through "from the ground upward" (*fra Grunden af*).<sup>102</sup> Anti-Climacus' account is therefore similar to Kierkegaard's view in *Works of Love* where love

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<sup>98</sup> See, e.g., Robert B. Puchniak, "Kierkegaard's 'Self' and Augustinian Influence," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2011*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 190; Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 251-2; Christopher B. Barnett, "Rest as Unio Mystica?: Kierkegaard, Augustine, and the Spiritual Life," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 16, no. 1 (2016), 70. In contrast, see the more careful analysis of William C. Davis, "Kierkegaard on the Transformation of the Individual in Conversion," *Religious Studies* 28, no. 2 (1992), 156.

<sup>99</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 130 / *SUD*, 14; *SKS* 11, 219 / *SUD*, 107.

<sup>100</sup> *SKS* 11, 214 / *SUD*, 101.

<sup>101</sup> *SKS* 11, 206 / *SUD*, 93. Both of these are expressions of the state of affairs where, paradoxically, despair and anxiety are present "*i Grunden*." *SKS* 11, 159 / *SUD*, 44.

<sup>102</sup> *SKS* 11, 174 / *SUD*, 59.

as foundational (*i Grunden*) in no way precludes, but rather enables the active striving of the faithful individual who practices the works of neighbor love.<sup>103</sup>

With his account of the restless grounding of faith, Anti-Climacus nevertheless still allows for a *certain kind* of rest, security, and tranquility. For example, he notes that the self is “unable to arrive at or be in equilibrium and rest [*Ligevægt og Ro*] by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation.”<sup>104</sup> Or later he remarks that although “security and tranquility [*Tryghed og Beroligelse*] can signify being in despair,” they can also signify “having conquered despair and having won peace [*Fred*].”<sup>105</sup> In addition, Anti-Climacus not only describes faith in terms of “a secure navigation guide” (*sikre Sømærke*),<sup>106</sup> but he also contrasts it with the absence of steadfastness in despair by identifying it as the state where the self becomes “eternally steadfast” (*evig fast*).<sup>107</sup> In interpreting such claims, it is crucially important to remember that Anti-Climacus always employs notions such as rest in a dialectical manner, and therefore they cannot be properly understood without recognizing that they also imply connotations such as restlessness, movement, risk or fear and trembling. Indeed, as he remarks in a footnote, “In the life of spirit, everything is dialectical.”<sup>108</sup> It is for this reason, for example, that Anti-Climacus can describe faith as the state (*Tilstand*) of peace, security, and tranquility where despair is entirely rooted out while noting that in the life of spirit “there is no standing still [*Stilstand*] (really no state [*Tilstand*], either; everything is actuation)...”<sup>109</sup> If one misses this dialectical point, one misses what is central to Anti-Climacus’ construal of Christianity.

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<sup>103</sup> SKS 9, 212-26 / WL, 209-24.

<sup>104</sup> SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14.

<sup>105</sup> SKS 11, 140-1 / SUD, 24.

<sup>106</sup> SKS 11, 196 / SUD, 82 (I have modified the translation).

<sup>107</sup> SKS 11, 183 / SUD, 69.

<sup>108</sup> SKS 11, 228fn / SUD, 116fn.

<sup>109</sup> SKS 11, 206 / SUD, 94. See also SKS 11, 151 / SUD, 36: “to become oneself is literally a movement in that place. To become is a movement away from that place, but to become oneself is a movement in that place.”

Having clarified what Anti-Climacus means by grounding in his account of faith as well as the manner by which such grounding is tied to rest and restlessness, we may dedicate the remainder of this section to a discussion of sacred tension as it is related to the forms of paradox outlined above.

*Sacred Tension and the Dialectical Paradox*

In that the loss of tension in despair and sin plays out through the failure or refusal to hold together the dialectical aspects of the self in a paradoxical relation, sacred tension is precisely the continuous striving of the self to exist in such a manner that the paradox of the self is fully embraced. What this means for the individual is that she places herself into the tense position where she unceasingly fights against the sinful tendency to slide to one side of the paradoxical dialectic to the detriment of the other<sup>110</sup> while struggling to affirm both aspects of the self. In Ferreira's terms, this is the task of "maintaining a dynamic tension between opposing elements (each of which is its opposite) without eliminating, or even unequally weighting one or the other."<sup>111</sup> What we have here, then, is not the resolution of tension associated with the dialectical constitution of the self, but rather the fostering and preservation of such tension. Thus, when Anti-Climacus writes that "the good health of faith...resolves contradictions [*løser Modsigelser*],"<sup>112</sup> we should therefore not understand him as arguing to do away with tension, but rather to overcome the "tormenting contradiction" (*qualfulde Modsigelse*) suffered by the despairing individual when she departs from the self's proper paradoxical constitution.

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<sup>110</sup> Anthony Rudd, "Kierkegaard on Patience and the Temporality of the Self: The Virtue of a Being in Time," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 3 (2008), 501.

<sup>111</sup> Ferreira, "Imagination and the Despair of Sin," 17.

<sup>112</sup> *SKS* 11, 155 / *SUD*, 40.

Described in this manner, living within the sacred tension can be understood as a distinctively ethical task.<sup>113</sup> In short, the ethical demand Anti-Climacus puts forward is that one become the self that God intends one to be—what Grøn identifies as “becoming a whole human being ethically understood”<sup>114</sup>—and that one must meet this demand with concrete striving.<sup>115</sup> As Domingos Sousa succinctly puts it, “For Kierkegaard the self is not a static entity but a dynamic and unfolding reality, something I must strive to become. One *is* not a self but *becomes* a self as an ethical-religious task to be actualized.”<sup>116</sup> For Anti-Climacus, this task is one that is “prodigious[ly] strenuous” (*uhyre Anstrengelse*) in that it is never fully achieved but rather requires continuous effort and dedication. Westphal correctly highlights this point when he notes,

The task of living the tension of the dialectical simultaneity of dipolar categories is an extraordinarily demanding and strenuous task. In fact, this way of describing it is misleading, for this task is difficult in a totally different way from that of ordinary tasks. Instead of an extraordinarily strenuous task we should speak of a uniquely strenuous task.<sup>117</sup>

Living within the sacred tension in *The Sickness unto Death*, however, cannot be reduced to strenuous ethical striving. Rather, the relation to God also plays an important role insofar as the human being alone is unable to become a full self strictly in her own power—a point implied in Anti-Climacus’ claim that the self in faith must be grounded “in the power [*den Magt*] that established it.”<sup>118</sup> The etymological paradox associated with the

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<sup>113</sup> By this, I mean the second ethics that takes into account the concept of sin. See *SKS* 11, 201-3 / *SUD*, 88-90. On this point, see, e.g., Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet*, 278ff.

<sup>114</sup> See, e.g., Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet*, 278. See also Lin, *Paradox*, 147; Peter J. Mehl, “Despair’s Demand: An Appraisal of Kierkegaard’s Argument for God,” *Philosophy of Religion* 32, no. 3 (1992), 170; Rudd, “Kierkegaard on Patience,” 499; Hjortkjær and Willert, “The Self,” 461-2.

<sup>115</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 170 / *SUD*, 55; *SKS* 11, 193-4 / *SUD*, 79-80. Such ethical striving stands in sharp contrast to “despairing striving” (*fortvilede Stræben*). See *SKS* 11, 183 / *SUD*, 69.

<sup>116</sup> “Kierkegaard’s Anthropology of the Self: Ethico-Religious and Social Dimensions of Selfhood,” *Heythrop Journal* 53, no. 1 (2012), 37.

<sup>117</sup> Westphal, “Kierkegaard’s Psychology,” 64.

<sup>118</sup> *SKS* 11, 242 / *SUD*, 131.

relation to God is therefore crucial for understanding the nature of sacred tension within *The Sickness unto Death*.

*Sacred Tension and the Etymological Paradox*

In that the loss of tension in despair and sin plays out in the individual's refusal to exist in a paradoxical relation to God predicated upon the divine-human distinction, sacred tension involves embracing one's status as dependent upon God and thus remaining in the tension where one perpetually risks believing that for God all things are possible, faces the possibility of offense, and remains open to the possibility of divine help. In unpacking this, we may narrow in on the notion of possibility (*Mulighed*).

As we have already pointed out in some detail above, Anti-Climacus in *Part One* of *The Sickness of Death* sets up possibility as the dialectical opposite of necessity. At the same time, he is clear that possibility is not *merely* a dialectical opposite, but it also serves as an *essential element* of faith. For example, in the section “*Necessity's Despair is to Lack Possibility*,” Anti-Climacus asks his reader to imagine a situation in which “salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible” after which he then asks the reader to imagine possibility tied to the idea that “for God everything is possible” and to believe in such possibility.<sup>119</sup> As he notes, the “battle of *faith*” (*Troens Kamp*)<sup>120</sup> begins where human beings have abandoned self-reliance and have come to a point of desperate need:

What is decisive is that with God everything is possible. This is eternally true and consequently true at every moment. This is indeed a generally recognized truth, which is commonly expressed in this way, but the critical decision does not come until a person is brought to his extremity, when, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *believe*.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> SKS 11, 154 / SUD, 38.

<sup>120</sup> SKS 11, 154 / SUD, 38.

<sup>121</sup> SKS 11, 153 / SUD, 38.

In stepping into the risk-filled tension of having no assurance and feeling entirely powerless but yet still believing, it is here “unexpectedly, miraculously, divinely, help does come.”<sup>122</sup> For Anti-Climacus, this is “the ever infallible [*sikker*] antidote for despair...”<sup>123</sup> Sacred tension, therefore, plays out exactly in holding onto belief in divine possibility in the midst of human impossibility while remaining within a relationship of dependence upon God in which one recognizes that God alone has the power to overcome human impossibility.

Another manner Anti-Climacus employs the notion of possibility that is relevant for describing sacred tension in relation to the etymological paradox is in terms of what he identifies as the possibility of offense (*Forargelses Mulighed*). For Anti-Climacus, paradox, as representing the radical difference between God and human beings, always carries with it the possibility of offense in the sense that the individual engaging the paradox may respond in one of two ways: either in offense or in faith.<sup>124</sup> It is precisely here upon the apex of faith as it is precariously perched over the abyss of despair that the individual finds herself in a radical tension. Resolution of such tension would come only if the individual were to become offended and fall into despair. Faith, in contrast, is never free of tension in the sense that the possibility of offense remains perpetually present in the life of faith as that which must “at every moment” (*i ethvert Øieblik*) be “throw[n] away.”<sup>125</sup> As Anti-Climacus puts it, “Not to be in despair must signify the destroyed possibility of being able to be in despair; if a person is truly not to be in despair, he must at every moment [*i ethvert Øieblik*] destroy [*tilintetgjøre*]<sup>126</sup> the possibility.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> SKS 11, 155 / SUD, 39.

<sup>123</sup> SKS 11, 155 / SUD, 39.

<sup>124</sup> SKS 11, 234 / SUD, 122.

<sup>125</sup> SKS 11, 133 / SUD, 17.

<sup>126</sup> Literally, “to make to nothing.”

<sup>127</sup> SKS 11, 131 / SUD, 15. See also SKS 11, 133 / SUD, 17.

In a footnote near the middle of a discussion on offense in *Part Two*, Anti-Climacus introduces a notion that is helpful for our investigation here, namely that of “annulled possibility” (*ophævet Mulighed*). As he writes, “offense as annulled possibility is an element in faith...”<sup>128</sup> In the context of his exposition of the nature of faith in *Fear and Trembling*, John Lippitt, himself drawing on the thought of Ronald L. Hall,<sup>129</sup> offers a helpful gloss on this notion:

[D]espair is necessary for faith as an annulled possibility: something which, at all times, the person of faith “at every moment, destroys, negates, annuls, as a possibility.” If it helps, consider this. In the *Postscript*, Climacus famously describes faith as like being out on 70,000 fathoms of water (CUP 204). If we combine these two images, despair is the desire to give up and stop treading water: survival (that is, faith) is only possible by refusing that temptation—and doing so *continually!*<sup>130</sup>

Niels Jørgen Cappelørn likewise provides an insightful discussion of this dynamic. As he remarks,

The believer who has passed through the possibility of offense and now thinks he or she has believed enough, has become perfect in faith and comprehends it, is in fact on his or her way to losing faith, just as he or she can lose his or her mind. The possibility of offense is indeed “a suspended moment” but only in the instant when the individual obtains faith. It is not, however, abolished in faith, but is included in it—as a lasting possibility. A perfect faith, a fulfilled faith, or a finished faith, which has completed the task of believing and of fighting faith’s battle against the possibility of offense, does not exist.<sup>131</sup>

Considered in this manner, we may say that for Anti-Climacus the ongoing destruction of the possibility of offense in order to remain in faith is precisely the same movement

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<sup>128</sup> SKS 11, 228fn / SUD, 116fn.

<sup>129</sup> See, especially, Ronald L. Hall, *The Human Embrace: The Love of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Love: Kierkegaard, Cavell, Nussbaum* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 35-9.

<sup>130</sup> John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 64-5. The quotation is from Hall, *The Human Embrace*, 36.

<sup>131</sup> Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, “The Movements of Offense Toward, Away From, and Within Faith: ‘Blessed is He Who is Not Offended at Me,’” trans. K. Brian Söderquist, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Practice in Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 108-9.

that has been described in both *Chapter 1* and *Chapter 2* as the tension-filled stance *between despair and security* where one unceasingly pursues God in perpetual fear and trembling and in the process is met by the divine. In a discourse from *Thoughts That Wound From Behind—For Upbuilding* published the year prior to *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard develops a strikingly similar idea:

No, away, pernicious sureness [*Sikkerhed*]. Save me, O God, from ever becoming completely sure [*sikker*]; keep me unsure [*i Usikkerheden*] until the end so that then, if I receive eternal blessedness, I might be completely sure that I have it by grace. It is empty shadowboxing to give assurance [*at forsikre*] that one believes that it is by grace—and then to be completely sure. The true, the essential expression of its being by grace is the very fear and trembling of unsureness [*Usikkerhedens Frygt og Bæven*]. There lies faith—as far, just as far, from despair [*Fortvivlelse*] and from sureness [*Sikkerhed*].<sup>132</sup>

In the same manner that for Kierkegaard remaining within the sacred tension depends upon grace, for Anti-Climacus the tension-filled process of annulling despair likewise requires divine assistance.

As a concluding word, we may note that the existential stance of living within the sacred tension that emerges in relation to the etymological paradox is for Anti-Climacus a fundamental expression of worship. Near the end of *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus makes the following significant claim: “The person who does not take offense *worships* in faith. But to worship, which is the expression of faith, is to express that the infinite, chasmal, qualitative abyss between them [the person and God] is confirmed.”<sup>133</sup> For Anti-Climacus, worship means recognizing divine superiority over the human being and embracing this in one’s life as the path to a right relation to God.<sup>134</sup> As we have displayed above, paradox in its etymological form provides the means for clearly

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<sup>132</sup> *SKS* 10, 219 / *CD*, 211. *Sikkerhed* can also be translated as “security.”

<sup>133</sup> *SKS* 11, 239-40 / *SUD*, 129.

<sup>134</sup> Kierkegaard develops this idea throughout his writings, but perhaps most strikingly in a discourse published in the year prior to *The Sickness unto Death* entitled “The Joy of It: That the Weaker You Become the Stronger God Becomes in You.” See, in particular, *SKS* 10, 142-3 / *CD*, 132.

drawing out the divine-human distinction and for making possible the existential stance where the believer continually trusts in God not only to overcome what is seen as humanly impossible but also to help in the process of perpetually annulling the possibility of offense.<sup>135</sup> Thus, for Anti-Climacus as for Kierkegaard, *living within the sacred tension* could just as well be construed as *worshipping within the sacred tension*.

### 3.5 - The Self within Sacred Tension: On Dedicated Patience and Humble Courage

Having offered an account of sacred tension in *The Sickness unto Death*, we may now move to a brief discussion of the self within such sacred tension by narrowing in on what I suggest are two of its central virtues. My aim in this section, therefore, is to provide a more concrete and substantive description of some of the significant aspects of Anti-Climacus' account of Christian existence.

#### *Dedicated Patience*

One crucial virtue that emerges within the sacred tension in association with the dialectical paradox is that of dedicated patience. In the process of becoming a self, patience is required precisely because the task of selfhood is temporally extended and thereby does not lend itself to immediate fulfillment. Moreover, the failure to hold together the dialectical aspects of the self due to human sinfulness entails that the Christian individual must time and again return to the task of selfhood without abandoning it in impatience in the moment of sin. The practice of such patience also requires dedication. Dedication to the task of selfhood is what allows one to wait in

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<sup>135</sup> The latter is exactly what Anti-Climacus intends with his contrast “*Tilbedelse—Forargelse*.” See SKS 11, 200 / SUD, 86.

patient expectancy for the task's fulfillment despite the extended nature of this task or its eventual postponement due to the individual's sin. In short, then, without dedication in the form of commitment to the task of selfhood, the individual will be unable to continue on in the process of patiently relating the aspects of the self towards the ideal of proper paradoxical relation. Rather, he will become frustrated and disillusioned with the task, such that he merely capitulates and settles into his despair and sin.

In his essay "Kierkegaard on Patience and the Temporality of the Self," Anthony Rudd develops a reading of *The Sickness unto Death* centered on the virtue of patience that proves relevant here. For Rudd, Anti-Climacus' account of *gaining the self* as "a process that I am engaged in throughout my life, one that does not issue in secure results on which I can then sit comfortably back, but one that must be renewed in every moment,"<sup>136</sup> is made possible precisely because of dedicated patience. In support of this claim, Rudd quotes Kierkegaard's own voice in the discourse "To Preserve One's Soul in Patience": "A person does not first gain his soul and then have the need for patience to preserve it, but he gains it in no other way than by preserving it, and therefore patience is the first and patience is the last..."<sup>137</sup> In Rudd' reading, such patience involves a backwards-looking aspect in that one acts in the present in relation to what has gone before, but it also involves a forward-oriented aspect that he describes as "a way of living in the expectancy of a fulfillment that is still to come."<sup>138</sup> Patience, when construed as Rudd does in terms of expectancy comes into perfect alignment with the notion of hope. It is for this reason that Anti-Climacus returns repeatedly to the importance of hope as that which guides the individual in her patient task of becoming a self.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Rudd, "Kierkegaard on Patience," 499.

<sup>137</sup> *SKS* 5, 190 / *EUD*, 187. Quoted in Rudd, "Kierkegaard on Patience," 499.

<sup>138</sup> Rudd, "Kierkegaard on Patience," 501.

<sup>139</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 156 / *SUD*, 41; *SKS* 11, 185 / *SUD*, 71. For good discussions on hope in relation to *The Sickness unto Death*, see Grøn, "The Relation," 38-9; Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet*, 151-5, 291-300, 357-70; David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 155-7.

*Humble Courage*

A second crucial virtue in *The Sickness unto Death* and that which emerges within the sacred tension in association with the etymological paradox is that of humble courage. In support of this claim, we may touch upon Anti-Climacus' reflections on humility, courage, and humble courage.

To return to a point alluded to above, despair and sin are fundamentally tied to lack of humility. For example, Anti-Climacus describes despair as "an unwillingness to be comforted by and healed by the eternal"<sup>140</sup> or as the refusal to undergo the humbling (*ydmýgende*) process of "becoming a nothing in the hand of the 'Helper' for whom all things are possible."<sup>141</sup> Likewise, the sin of pride is to lack the humility required for repentance, forgiveness, and thankfulness.<sup>142</sup> Thus, regardless of the severity of despair and sin, lack of humility is one of their central underlying characteristics.

In contrast, humility for Anti-Climacus is synonymous with receptivity. To practice humility is to become receptive to help and to healing as well as to become open to the possibility of being transformed by a power greater than oneself. Thus, whereas the despairing individual pridefully entrenches himself in his despair and sin, the person of humility turns "away from despair to faith and before God [*for Gud*] humbl[es] himself [*ydmýgende sig*] under his weakness..."<sup>143</sup> Moreover, whereas the demonic individual once and for all refuses "to hear anything about repentance and grace,"<sup>144</sup> the person of humility welcomes grace "by humbly [*med ydmýdt*] thanking God that he helped him to resist temptation for so long a time...and then humbling himself [*ydmýge sig*] under the

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<sup>140</sup> *SKS* 11, 184 / *SUD*, 70.

<sup>141</sup> See, *SKS* 11, 185 / *SUD*, 71.

<sup>142</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 223-4 / *SUD*, 110-12.

<sup>143</sup> *SKS* 11, 176 / *SUD*, 61 (I have modified the translation).

<sup>144</sup> *SKS* 11, 222 / *SUD*, 110.

recollection of what he has been.”<sup>145</sup> As such, rather than the inward retreat into the suffocating prison of *Indesluttetbed*, humility is an outward movement of freedom in “adoration under the extraordinary”<sup>146</sup> by which the believer ultimately comes to understand that the weight of God that weighs down “through humiliation” (*i Ydmygelse*) is at the same time that which “lifts one up” into glory.<sup>147</sup>

Alongside humility, courage also plays an important role in the *Sickness unto Death*. For example, as a contrast to the individual who lives in sensate categories and lacks the courage to become spirit,<sup>148</sup> Anti-Climacus draws a direct connection between courage and Christian existence. Thus, in the final few lines of the introduction he writes, “Only the Christian knows what is meant by the sickness unto death. As a Christian, he gained a courage [*Mod*] that the natural man does not know, and he gained this courage by learning to fear something even more horrifying.”<sup>149</sup> Anti-Climacus here connects courage to receptivity in the sense that such courage takes form only when the individual is taught by God what to fear. This connection between courage and receptivity is even more explicit in Anti-Climacus’ discussion of the despair of defiance in which he sets up courage as the alternative to such despair. As he notes, “through the aid of the eternal, the self has the courage [*Mod*] to lose itself in order to win itself.”<sup>150</sup> To summarize this account of courage we could thereby say, in the spirit of Kierkegaardian word-play, that it requires a great deal of courage (*Mod*) in order to relinquish one’s opposition (*Mod-stand*) to God.

Furthermore, at a couple of significant places within the text Anti-Climacus employs the compound term “humble courage” (*ydmygt Mod*), which he closely links to

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<sup>145</sup> SKS 11, 224 / SUD, 112.

<sup>146</sup> SKS 11, 199 / SUD, 86.

<sup>147</sup> SKS 11, 232fn / SUD, 120fn.

<sup>148</sup> SKS 11, 158 / SUD, 43.

<sup>149</sup> SKS 11, 125 / SUD, 8.

<sup>150</sup> SKS 11, 181 / SUD, 67.

the notion of offense. Consider, for example, the story Anti-Climacus employs in *Part Two* about a great emperor, a lowly day laborer, and an odd proposal. Anti-Climacus asks the reader to imagine that one day the emperor hits upon the idea to send for the laborer and to invite this lowly man to become his son-in-law. In response, the laborer becomes confused, self-conscious, and embarrassed, for he harbors the suspicion that the entire affair is merely a farce at his expense. For the laborer, a small favor from the emperor would have made sense, but the extraordinary offer now facing him is simply too much for him to accept. As Anti-Climacus remarks, it is precisely at this point that humble courage is required:

But this, this plan for him to become a son-in-law, well, that was far too much. Now suppose, however, that the plan dealt not with an external reality but an internal one, so that facticity could not provide the laborer with certainty but that faith itself was the only facticity, and thus everything was left up to faith, whether he had sufficient humble courage [*ydmøgt Mod*] to dare to believe it (for brash courage [*frøkt Mod*] cannot help unto *faith*). How many day laborers are there who would have this courage [*Mod*]? The person lacking this courage [*Mod*] would be offended; to him the extraordinary would sound like a gibe at him. He would then perhaps honestly and forthrightly confess: Such a thing is too high for me, I cannot grasp it; to be perfectly blunt, to me it is a piece of folly.<sup>151</sup>

In the discussion immediately following, Anti-Climacus draws a connection between this tale and the manner by which the Christian is called to exist “on the most intimate terms with God”<sup>152</sup> in an intimate relation to the incarnate Christ. In doing so, Anti-Climacus once again emphasizes humble courage and connects it to receptivity and divine help:

God comes to the world, allows himself to be born, to suffer, to die, and this suffering God—he almost implores and beseeches this person to accept the help that is offered him! Truly, if there is anything to lose one’s mind over, this is it! Everyone lacking the humble courage [*ydmøgt Mod*] to dare to believe this is offended. But why is he offended? Because it is too high for him, because his mind cannot grasp it, because he cannot attain bold confidence [*Frimodighed*] in the face of it and therefore must get rid of it, pass it off as a bagatelle, nonsense, folly, for it seems as if it would choke him.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *SKS* 11, 198 / *SUD*, 85.

<sup>152</sup> *SKS* 11, 199 / *SUD*, 85.

<sup>153</sup> *SKS* 11, 199 / *SUD*, 85-6.

With this description of the Incarnation and the response of the Christian, we see how humble courage becomes something of a cardinal virtue for Anti-Climacus.<sup>154</sup> In humble courage one opens oneself in receptivity to divine help as a key element of what it means to annul the possibility of offense. Moreover, in humble courage one takes an enormous risk in becoming vulnerable before the grace of God and trusting in such grace without any human guarantee that it will be fulfilled. For Anti-Climacus, it is precisely this aspect of Christian existence that requires courage—courage to accept the risk associated with objective uncertainty where one is out on 70,000 fathoms of water<sup>155</sup>—as well as the humility to be embraced by God after such a courageous step it taken. In the end, there is hardly a better description than this for what it means to live within the sacred tension.

#### *An Objection and Reply*

My focus in this section on dedicated patience and humble courage as crucial virtues of the self within sacred tension nevertheless invites an objection. Briefly stated, is not Anti-Climacus fundamentally opposed to the virtue framework? After all, he is unambiguous in his critique of pagan Greek ethics and his claim that the opposite of sin is not virtue, but rather faith.<sup>156</sup> Would it not therefore be fundamentally wrong-headed to talk about the virtues in relation to *The Sickness unto Death*?

As a reply, we may note that Anti-Climacus is unquestionably opposed to a *certain kind* of virtue ethics. Thus, we may once again agree with Bruce Kirmmse that Kierkegaard (and Anti-Climacus) ought not to be identified with the virtue framework if

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<sup>154</sup> Clare Carlisle makes a similar claim in relation to *Fear and Trembling*, noting that humble courage “is the cardinal virtue of religious life.” See, “Humble Courage: Kierkegaard on Abraham and Mary,” *Literature & Theology* (2014), 8.

<sup>155</sup> See *SKS* 7, 187 / *CUP1*, 204.

<sup>156</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 161 / *SUD*, 46; *SKS* 11, 183 / *SUD*, 69; *SKS* 11, 236 / *SUD*, 124.

by this we mean a system of self-actualization predicated entirely upon human wisdom and ability.<sup>157</sup> This, however, does not thereby entail that Anti-Climacus puts forward a blanket rejection of all notions of virtue. From our brief discussion above it becomes clear that although dedicated patience and humble courage require sustained practice and play a crucial role in shaping the disposition of the Christian individual as is characteristic of virtue in general, they are also essentially bound up with receptivity and divine intervention within the believer's life and therefore are fundamentally opposed to self-actualization. As such, it is entirely possible to talk about practicing patient dedication and humble courage as well as developing in these virtues without thereby assuming the classical virtue framework that Anti-Climacus rejects. In short, then, the virtues of patient dedication and humble courage both play an important role in how the Christian exists in that they are expressions of the practical, active, and sustained relationship of reliance upon God within the sacred tension that is essential to faith.

### 3.6 - Concluding Remarks

I have argued in this chapter that Anti-Climacus employs paradox in its dialectical and etymological forms in order to provide an account of what it means to become a self that is both properly related to itself and properly related to God. In addition, I have shown how this account functions as an expression of sacred tension in contrast to the failure of selfhood and the loss of tension associated with despair and sin. Moreover, I have focused on the virtues of dedicated patience and humble courage as characteristic of the self within sacred tension and characteristic of Anti-Climacus' description of Christian existence in general. In pointing to the centrality of these virtues as concrete

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<sup>157</sup> See Bruce Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001), 191-210.

pieces of what it means to exist as a Christian, I have thus complemented Grøn's claim concerning the unity of *The Sickness unto Death* (i.e., that *Part One* is not only anthropologically, but also theologically revealing)<sup>158</sup> by showing how Anti-Climacus' explicitly dogmatic reflections in *Part Two* are revealing not only for theology, but also for anthropology. In the end, then, I have argued for a reading of *The Sickness unto Death* that ties together the three important themes of paradox, sacred tension, and Christian existence.

In moving towards the conclusion of this chapter, we may make a connection back to the account of sacred tension introduced in *Chapter 1*. As we pointed out above, sacred tension regarding the dialectical paradox plays out in the *striving* of the individual to become a self, and sacred tension regarding the etymological paradox turns on *receptivity* in the sense that in order to become a self before God, one must accept one's limitations and open oneself to divine provision. Interestingly, it is in relation to these two expressions of sacred tension that we find another sacred tension between the sacred tensions. For Anti-Climacus, Christian existence can be reduced neither to striving nor to receptivity, but rather it must include both of these emphasized to their fullest. Moreover, insofar as striving maps onto the category of works and receptivity maps onto the category of grace, Anti-Climacus in his own particular fashion emphasizes the fundamental grace/works dialectic introduced in *Chapter 1* that is central to Kierkegaard's challenge to his contemporaries. In this respect, *The Sickness unto Death* plays a crucial role in Kierkegaard's overall ethico-religious task.

In looking forward to the next chapter, I would like to turn once again to offense. As we have pointed out at several places above, selfhood is intertwined with the possibility of offense. As Anti-Climacus remarks, "If 'the single individual' is to feel in

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<sup>158</sup> Grøn, "The Relation," 40.

kinship with God (and this is what Christianity teaches), then he also senses the full weight of it in fear and trembling, and he must discover—as if it were not an ancient discovery—the possibility of offense.”<sup>159</sup> Offense for Kierkegaard is fundamentally tied to the God-man whom he identifies as the *absolute paradox*, but despite this Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death* affords relatively sparse attention to the Incarnation. For this reason we may now shift our attention from this specific text to the question of paradox and Christian existence in relation to Kierkegaard’s Christology.

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<sup>159</sup> *SKS* 11, 232fn / *SUD*, 120fn.

## CHAPTER 4

### PARADOX AND THE GOD-MAN: ON CHRISTOLOGY, REJECTING/EMBRACING CHRIST, AND CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

*[F]aith, self-active, relates itself to the improbable and the paradox, is self-active in discovering it and in holding it fast at every moment [hvert Øieblik fastholde det]—in order to be able to believe.<sup>1</sup>*

*[T]he certitude of faith [Troens Visbed]...at every moment has within itself the infinite dialectic of uncertainty [Uvishedens uendelige Dialektik]...<sup>2</sup>*

*The God-man is the paradox, absolutely the paradox. Therefore, it is altogether certain that the understanding must come to a standstill [komme til at staae stille] on it. If a person is not conscious of offense at the loftiness, he will be aware of it in relation to the lowliness.<sup>3</sup>*

For this chapter I turn to the third of our four expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought, namely that associated with the God-man. In that Kierkegaard is fundamentally a Christocentric thinker,<sup>4</sup> Jesus Christ figures prominently in his philosophical and religious thought, with the paradox of the God-man playing a central role.<sup>5</sup> It will therefore be important for our study to dedicate close attention to Kierkegaard's discussion of this expression of paradox. My argument can be summarized as follows. As a response to the Christological accounts of his era, Kierkegaard develops his own view of the Incarnation by appealing to the notion of paradox. In particular, Kierkegaard offers two variations on which we will focus: first, the God-man as the dialectical unity of the eternal/temporal that transcends and challenges the understanding; and, second, the God-man as the dialectical unity of loftiness/lowliness that is the sign of contradiction and the possibility of offense. These Christological

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<sup>1</sup> *SKS* 7, 212 / *CUP1*, 233.

<sup>2</sup> *SKS* 7, 59 / *CUP1*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> *SKS* 12, 93 / *PC*, 82-3.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Tim Rose, *Kierkegaard's Christocentric Theology* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 7, 198 / *CUP1*, 217; *SKS* 7, 490-1 / *CUP1*, 540.

accounts in turn carry significant implications for Christian existence. In contrast to the loss of tension associated with either the indirect rejection of the paradoxical God-man by turning to the Christendom expression of faith in its civic or speculative forms, or the direct rejection of the paradoxical God-man that is offense, embracing the paradox of Jesus Christ represents a form of sacred tension characterized by passionate limitation, by holding on to security in insecurity as well as certainty in uncertainty, by the perpetual annulment of offense, and by imitation—the fundamental underlying virtue of which I argue is humble striving. In this respect, I suggest that Kierkegaard’s reflections on the paradox of the God-man prove crucial to his overall ethico-religious task of (re)introducing Christianity into Christendom.

To carry out this argument I proceed in five sections. In *Section 4.1*, I begin with several preliminary remarks on Christology and Kierkegaard as a backdrop to the discussion of the paradox of the God-man. For *Section 4.2*, I outline two of Kierkegaard’s variations on the paradoxical God-man that he develops in the Climacean works and in *Practice in Christianity*, respectively. In *Section 4.3*, I focus on the loss of tension associated with rejection of the paradoxical God-man. In contrast to this, for *Section 4.4* I develop an account of the sacred tension involved in embracing the paradoxical God-man, and I outline the virtue of humble striving at the heart of such tension. In doing so, I reflect briefly on the biblical figures of John the Baptist and the Apostle Peter. In *Section 4.5*, I conclude by drawing an explicit connection between this chapter and the argument from *Chapter 1*.

#### **4.1 - Preliminary Remarks on Christology and Kierkegaard**

In broadest terms, Christology (i.e., *Christos-logos*) is simply discourse on Christ. Traditional orthodox Christology, in particular, is grounded on the orthodox creeds and

centers on the affirmation of Jesus Christ as true God and true man, fully God and fully human. In the same fashion that such Christology develops in response to certain problematic Christologies emerging at the time of the early church such as Ebionitism and Gnosticism (Docetism),<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard develops his particular thoughts on Christology in response to what he perceives as the problematic accounts of Christ floating around in his own 19<sup>th</sup> century context. *Anti-Climacus*, in *Practice*, provides a sketch of two such Christologies:

By way of didacticism, the God-man has been made into that speculative unity of God and man *sub specie aeterni* or made visible in that nowhere-to-be-found medium of pure being, rather than that the God-man is the unity of being God and an individual human being in a historically actual situation. Or Christ has been abolished altogether, thrown out and his teaching taken over, and finally he is regarded as one regards an anonymous writer: the teaching is the principle thing, is everything.<sup>7</sup>

In following the lead of David R. Law and Sylvia Walsh, we may identify these two views as speculative Christology and rationalist Christology, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, the rise of the former view in 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark can be traced back to the influence of Hegel and his account of mediation.<sup>9</sup> For Hegel, the Incarnation makes sense only when understood conceptually, for it is concepts alone that can undergo the process of mediation. This entails that Christ is construed in terms of the union of the abstract essences of divinity and humanity but not in terms of the unity of God and a *particular* temporal human being. Such an attempt to recast Christ apart from explicit emphasis on

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<sup>6</sup> *SKS* 12, 128 / *PC*, 123.

<sup>7</sup> *SKS* 12, 128 / *PC*, 123.

<sup>8</sup> David R. Law, "The Existential Chalcedonian Christology of Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2010*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 129-52; Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 112-13.

<sup>9</sup> This was, in turn, later adopted by Hans Lassen Martensen. See, e.g., "Rationalisme, Supranaturalisme og *principium exclusi medi* (I Anledning af H.H. Biskop Mynsters Afhandling herom i dette Tidsskrifts forrige Hefte)," *Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik* 1 (1839): 456-73, particularly 136-7. For a good discussion of this, see Jon Stewart, "Introduction," in *Mynster's 'Rationalism, Supernaturalism' and the Debate about Mediation*, ed. and trans. Jon Stewart (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), 1-45.

his concrete existence as a particular person in a particular time and in a particularly place is necessarily to misconstrue Christ and to de-emphasize his particular expression of humanity.<sup>10</sup> As Anti-Climacus describes it, “speculation takes away from the God-man the qualifications of temporality, contemporaneity, and actuality.”<sup>11</sup> The latter view represents the movement within the broader theological push of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe to transform Christianity into a religion of reason that downplays or even outright denies the divinity of Jesus Christ by re-characterizing him as a mere “teacher of moral values.”<sup>12</sup> This Christology was rampant among post-Enlightenment liberal theologians,<sup>13</sup> with David Strauss and his controversial book *Das Leben Jesu* at the center of the discussion. In short, Strauss argues for a particular reading of the Bible in which he removes from its account of Jesus any miraculous or supernatural elements, with the consequence that Jesus is recast as a gifted teacher who has merely been deified through the myth-making Christian tradition.<sup>14</sup> Although Kierkegaard affords less explicit attention to this Christology compared to that of Hegel and the Hegelians, such a humanistic presentation of Christ would undoubtedly have had a significant impact on his Christological view.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See David James, “The Absolute Paradox: Kierkegaard’s Argument Against Hegel’s Account of the Relation of Faith to Philosophy,” in *Kierkegaardiana* 24 (2007), 110, 117.

<sup>11</sup> *SKS* 12, 92 / *PC*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> Law, “Existential Chalcedonian Christology,” 131.

<sup>13</sup> See George Pattison, “D.F. Strauss: Kierkegaard and Radical Demythologization,” in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Tome II: Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 237. Friedrich Schleiermacher, considered the father of modern liberal theology, generally remains faithful to the traditional creeds and doctrinal statements concerning Jesus Christ. Despite this, he nevertheless rejects the Chalcedon two natures doctrine as incoherent. See *The Christian Faith* (London and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 1999), 391-8. Kierkegaard owned a copy of *Der christliche Glaube* (*The Auction Catalogue of Kierkegaard’s Library*, ed. Katalin Nun, Gerhard Schreiber, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 16) and he was quite familiar with Schleiermacher’s thought (Richard E. Crouter, “Schleiermacher: Revisiting Kierkegaard’s Relation to Him,” in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Tome II: Theology*, 197-231, ed. Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007)). As such we have good reason to suspect that Kierkegaard’s appeal to paradox in his description of the God-man may be directed in part against Schleiermacher’s Christology.

<sup>14</sup> Climacus appears to be addressing Strauss in his reference to “The modern mythical allegorizing trend” that “summarily declares Christianity to be a myth.” See *SKS* 7, 199 / *CUP1*, 218.

<sup>15</sup> Although Kierkegaard did not own a copy of Strauss’ book, he was nevertheless still engaged with Strauss’ ideas through, for example, his reading of Julius Schaller’s critical account of Strauss’ view: *Der historische Christus und die Philosophie. Kritik der Grundidee des Werks das Leben Jesu von Dr. D.F. Strauss* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1838).

From this brief discussion we see that these modern Christologies and the ancient heresies are similar in the sense that they tend towards eliminating the tension inherent to Christ as fully god and fully human.<sup>16</sup> It is in part in response to such a drift and the resultant one-sided and un-dialectical accounts of Christ that Kierkegaard turns to the notion of paradox.<sup>17</sup> What this means, I suggest, is that regarding the question of Christ's divinity and humanity Kierkegaard pursues a Christology that is entirely consistent with the traditional Christology of orthodox Christianity. In other words, although Kierkegaard never attempts to defend the orthodox view, he is nevertheless interested in retaining its categories and terminology.<sup>18</sup> As Murray Rae notes, "A striking feature of both the signed and the pseudonymous works of Kierkegaard is the ready acceptance of orthodox Christological confessions...The Christological formulations of the Nicene Creed and the Council of Chalcedon are upheld, when, under his own name, Kierkegaard writes, 'At every moment Christ is God just as much as he is man.'"<sup>19</sup>

Despite such similarity, the modern Christologies, as Anti-Climacus suggests in *Practise*,<sup>20</sup> nevertheless differ from the ancient heresies in one vital way, namely in that they are far more inclined to treat engagement with Christ simply as a theoretical and an academic exercise. As Kierkegaard sees it, with their particular approach to the doctrinal question of Christ the professors and speculative thinkers of his era act like puzzle-

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<sup>16</sup> Law, "Existential Chalcedonian Christology," 134; Sylvia Walsh, "Kierkegaard's Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 297.

<sup>17</sup> We may therefore agree with Kyle Roberts that Kierkegaard "articulated a Christology of paradox" ("The Living Word and the Word of God: The Pietist Impulse in Kierkegaard and Grundtvig," in *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity*, ed. Christian T. Collins Winn, et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 120) and with Law that Kierkegaard's "Christology is centred on the concept of paradox" ("Kierkegaard's Christology," *Theology* 99, no. 789, (1996), 206).

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 18, 83, FF:36 / *JP* 1, 284. On this point, see Murray A. Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation: By Faith Transformed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Rose, *Kierkegaard's Christocentric Theology*, 78; Law, "Existential Chalcedonian Christology," 134; Kelly Dean Jolley, "Kierkegaard's Climacus on Discipleship and the Incarnation," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1043 (2012), 88; Robert B. Puchniak, "Athanasius: Kierkegaard's Curious Comment," in *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*, ed. Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Murray A. Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (London and New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2010), 58. The Kierkegaard quotation comes from *SKS* 18, 83, FF:36 / *JP* 1, 284.

<sup>20</sup> *SKS* 12, 128 / *PC*, 123.

solvers who are interested merely in offering a rational and culturally acceptable account of the Incarnation.<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, however, was deeply opposed to this characteristically modern treatment of Christology. Indeed, such an approach to Christ for Kierkegaard is a distraction or, as Law describes it, “another attempt on the part of human beings to avoid the real challenge of Christianity.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Kierkegaard is clear to point out that Christ is a person and not a doctrine, and because of this it is crucial to resist the temptation to reduce Christology to an abstract affair that hinders the believer from developing a properly existential relationship with Jesus Christ. For Kierkegaard, then, Christology is a constant push away from the speculative problem to the concrete problem of what it means to exist in relation to the God-man. Thus, we may say that what Kierkegaard offers his readers is fundamentally an *existential Christology*. As we will see, paradox has a principle role to play in such an account.

#### 4.2 - The Paradoxical God-man: Two Variations

In this section we may outline two variations of the paradoxical God-man that Kierkegaard develops within his authorship. I begin with the Climacean account followed by that of Anti-Climacus from *Practice*. I conclude with a summary by which I briefly point to the etymological and dialectical aspects involved in these presentations of paradox.

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 12, 127 / *PC*, 121; *SKS* 12, 131 / *PC*, 126; *SKS* 23, 470, NB20:148 / *JP* 2, 1877. On this point, see Bradley R. Dewey, *The New Obedience: Kierkegaard on Imitating Christ* (Washington, D.C. and Cleveland, OH: Corpus Books, 1968), 59-60; David J. Gouwens, “Kierkegaard’s Understanding of Doctrine,” *Modern Theology* 5, no. 1 (1988), 20-1; Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology*, 59.

<sup>22</sup> David R. Law, “Making Christianity Difficult: The ‘Existential Theology’ of Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*,” in *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 238.

*Johannes Climacus on the Paradoxical God-man*

In tracing out the Climacean account we may begin with Climacus' introduction of the God-man in *Philosophical Fragments* through the mediums of a playful thought experiment and a poetic fairy tale.<sup>23</sup> To begin his thought experiment, Climacus leads off with the Socratic question "Can the truth be learned?"<sup>24</sup> to which he responds by considering two hypotheses: the "A" view of Platonic recollection, and an alternative "B" view that ironically resembles orthodox Christianity.<sup>25</sup> With the former, truth is understood as inherent to the individual. As such, the temporal point in which one gains the truth is of fleeting importance, for when one discovers the truth one discovers that one has always possessed the truth. Likewise, the teacher's significance is simply that of a "midwife" who serves merely to draw forth such inherent truth. With the latter, Climacus considers the case where the individual does not possess the truth and is even unable to obtain it. In this view, both the moment in time and the teacher are of absolute significance, for it is the teacher alone who brings truth into existence at a particular temporal point. Such an act, however, requires that the teacher overcome the learner's state of untruth (what Climacus identifies as "sin"<sup>26</sup>) by transforming the learner into an entirely new being. As Climacus makes clear, it is only the god who has the power to bring about such transformation—the god who is therefore a savior, a deliverer, and a reconciler.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Portions of this section are reproduced verbatim from Matthew T. Nowachek, "On the Non-Bracketing of Fairy Tale in Paradox Discourse: Kierkegaard, the Analytic Tradition, and the Importance of Inclusivity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2012), 5-20. Permission for reuse of this material has been granted by the publisher.

<sup>24</sup> *SKS* 4, 218 / *PF*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> See C. Stephen Evans, "The Role of Irony in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2004*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 63-79.

<sup>26</sup> *SKS* 4, 224 / *PF*, 15. Cf. *SKS* 7, 191 / *CUP1*, 208.

<sup>27</sup> *SKS* 4, 226 / *PF*, 17.

But what would lead the god to act in such a manner? For Climacus, the answer is love.<sup>28</sup> To expand on this point he presents a fairy tale (*et Eventyr*) about a great king who falls in love with a lowly maiden. This love, however, faces a fundamental challenge in that love requires equality in order to be realized within mutual understanding, but the king and the maiden are radically unequal. In response, the king considers the possibility of elevating the beloved to royalty in the hope that she would forget her lowly existence. The king nevertheless finds this option dissatisfactory in that he sees it as psychologically equivalent to deception. Perhaps the king could instead appear to the maiden in all of his splendor and in this fashion draw forth her love. Still, the king is dissatisfied because this option leaves him with the worry that the maiden will fall in love not with him, but with his riches and glory. All of this therefore leads the king to entertain an altogether different option, namely that of descent. Guided by the principle that love “does not change the beloved but changes itself,”<sup>29</sup> the king thus assumes the status of a lowly servant so as to woo the maiden in the hope that she will develop true love in the joy of mutual understanding.

Although Climacus never refers to Jesus Christ by name due to his ironic and indirect approach in *Fragments*,<sup>30</sup> he nevertheless paints a distinct picture of the Incarnation: with the aim of transforming sinners the god assumes the form of a lowly servant in order to carry out his loving task.<sup>31</sup> For the god, however, servanthood is not a mere disguise as it is for the king, but is rather his “true form.”<sup>32</sup> It is precisely this dynamic, whereby the god becomes a lowly human being in loving pursuit of other

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. *SKS* 11, 237-8 / *SUD*, 126-7.

<sup>29</sup> *SKS* 4, 239 / *PF*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> On this specific issue, see, e.g., *SKS* 7, 249 / *CUP1*, 274.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *SKS* 12, 30-1 / *PC*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> *SKS* 4, 238 / *PF*, 32.

human beings so as to overcome their sin that Climacus points to as the *absolute paradox*.<sup>33</sup>

But how, more precisely, should we understand this paradox?

One sense in which the Incarnation is paradoxical has to do with the dialectical constitution of the God-man, which is implied in the story of the god becoming a lowly human being. As Climacus remarks in *Chapter 4* of *Fragments*, the God-man is the “contradiction” (*Modsigelse*) that “unites contradictories [*Modsigelsen*], is the eternalizing of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal”<sup>34</sup> as well as “the eternal becom[ing] temporal” and “the eternal enter[ing] existence...”<sup>35</sup> In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus makes this point in a more explicit fashion by focusing on the dialectical relation between temporality and eternity at play in the God-man. As he notes, “let us assume that the eternal, essential truth is itself the paradox. How does the paradox emerge? By placing the eternal, essential truth together with existing. Consequently, if we place it together in the truth itself, the truth becomes a paradox. The eternal truth has come into existence in time. That is the paradox.”<sup>36</sup> Or later he remarks, “Christianity has itself proclaimed itself to be the eternal, essential truth that has come into existence in time; it has proclaimed itself as *the paradox*...”<sup>37</sup> In both *Fragments* and *Postscript*, this dialectical expression of the absolute paradox is therefore nicely summarized in Climacus’ succinct statement that “God, the eternal, has entered into time as an individual human being...”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See *SKS* 7, 191 / *CUP1*, 208; *SKS* 7, 204 / *CUP1*, 224; Rose, *Kierkegaard’s Christocentric Theology*, 63.

<sup>34</sup> *SKS* 4, 263 / *PF*, 61. Cf. *SKS* 4, 264 / *PF*, 62; *SKS* 4, 286 / *PF*, 87.

<sup>35</sup> *SKS* 4, 264 / *PF*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> *SKS* 7, 191 / *CUP1*, 209. This is in contrast to the Socratic paradox, which emerges when eternal truth is merely *related* to an existing temporal person—which is to say this is not an essential but an accidental paradox. See *SKS* 7, 188 / *CUP1* 205; *SKS* 7, 190 / *CUP1*, 207; *SKS* 7, 191 / *CUP1*, 209.

<sup>37</sup> *SKS* 7, 195 / *CUP1*, 213.

<sup>38</sup> *SKS* 7, 541 / *CUP1*, 596. See also *SKS* 7, 191 / *CUP1*, 209: the distinctly Christian paradox of the absolute paradox comes to be when “the eternal, essential truth [is placed] together with existing.”

A handful of scholars have provided helpful glosses on this eternal/temporal aspect of the paradox. For example, in his study on Kierkegaard's Christology, Law writes,

Eternity, on the one hand, and time and existence, on the other, are thus mutually exclusive opposites. If something is eternal it cannot be temporal and existent. If something is temporal and existent it cannot be eternal. But according to Kierkegaard, it is precisely these mutually exclusive opposites that are brought together in the incarnation. In Christ the eternal has become temporal and existent. Kierkegaard does not mean, however, that eternity is cancelled out. It remains eternal but *within* time. It is precisely this combination of contradictory categories that constitutes the paradox.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, Noel S. Adams has pointed out how this account of the god entering time despite its not being temporal is an expression of a metaphysical reality and not merely an epistemological device.<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein, Jon Stewart suggests that Climacus' metaphysical description of the paradox as that which "unites contradictories"<sup>41</sup> in certain respects resembles the Hegelian account of mediation.<sup>42</sup> It is important to note, however, as does Law, Adams, and Stewart, that for Climacus the absolute paradox is not something that can be mediated in the sense of resolving its dialectical opposites in the movement of mediation towards higher syntheses.<sup>43</sup> In other words, it opposes all attempts to diminish or to remove its inherent paradoxicality.

This last point brings us to a second sense in which the Incarnation is paradoxical, namely in its transcendence of human categories and associated limiting function. In *Fragments*, Climacus remarks that the understanding (*Forstand*) is a passion,

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<sup>39</sup> Law, "Kierkegaard's Christology," 207. See also Law, "Making Christianity Difficult," 236.

<sup>40</sup> Noel S. Adams, "The Significance of the Eternal in *Philosophical Fragments* in Terms of the Absolute Paradox," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1997*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 149.

<sup>41</sup> *SKS* 4, 263 / *PF*, 61. Cf. *SKS* 4, 264 / *PF*, 62; *SKS* 4, 286 / *PF*, 87.

<sup>42</sup> Jon Stewart, "The Paradox and the Criticism of Hegelian Mediation in *Philosophical Fragments*," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2004*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 204.

<sup>43</sup> Kierkegaard implies something similar in his journals when he writes that "Philosophy's idea is mediation—Christianity's, the paradox." See *SKS* 19, 211, Not7:22 / *JP* 3, 3072.

and thus like all passions it wills its own downfall (*Undergang*)<sup>44</sup>—in this case by discovering something that thought itself cannot think.<sup>45</sup> It is here that the absolute paradox emerges as “the unknown” (*det Ubekjendte*) which the understanding runs up against in its passionate attempt to understand. As Climacus remarks, “what is this unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides and which even disturbs man and his self-knowledge? It is the unknown...let us call this unknown *the god*.”<sup>46</sup> The absolute paradox is thus absolute in the sense that it is absolutely different from the human. On this point Climacus notes, “[I]f a human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him.”<sup>47</sup> Or in *Postscript* he remarks that “the absolute paradox expressly declines all explanation”<sup>48</sup> and that “the only possible understanding of the absolute paradox is that it cannot be understood.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Climacus is clear that such radical difference can be traced back to the sin of the knower and to the revelatory movement of the divine in overcoming such sin.<sup>50</sup> Thus, in a manner reflective of Anti-Climacus,<sup>51</sup> Climacus writes that the “paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute—negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality.”<sup>52</sup> As the unknown and the absolutely different, the absolute

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<sup>44</sup> This is similar to the way in which the passion of self-love wills to be overcome by the passion of love for another. See *SKS* 4, 244 / *PF*, 39; Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 150.

<sup>45</sup> *SKS* 4, 243 / *PF*, 37. Cf. *SKS* 7, 101-2 / *CUP1*, 104-5: “in lyrically seeking to surpass itself, thinking wills to discover the paradoxical...And Christianity is indeed the paradoxical.”

<sup>46</sup> *SKS* 4, 245 / *PF*, 39.

<sup>47</sup> *SKS* 4, 251 / *PF*, 46. On the absolute-relative difference, see *SKS* 7, 198 / *CUP1*, 217. Kierkegaard himself draws a similar distinction in *The Book on Adler*. See *SKS* 11, 98-9 / *BA*, 175-6.

<sup>48</sup> *SKS* 7, 511 / *CUP1*, 562.

<sup>49</sup> *SKS* 7, 199 / *CUP1*, 218.

<sup>50</sup> Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 49.

<sup>51</sup> See *SKS* 11, 212 / *SUD*, 100.

<sup>52</sup> See *SKS* 4, 252 / *PF*, 47. See also *SKS* 4, 224 / *PF*, 15. On this point, see Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: The Dialectic of Christian Existence* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 134-5; C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington and

paradox therefore functions as a boundary. In Climacus' words, "What, then, is the unknown? It is the boundary [*Grændsen*] that is continually arrived at..."<sup>53</sup> In establishing a boundary, the absolute paradox precipitates a collision between itself and the understanding in which the "paradoxical passion of the understanding is...continually colliding with this unknown" as well as perpetually "reaching it and being engaged with it" while never overcoming it.<sup>54</sup> Such a collision is the basis for what Climacus identifies as the unhappy meeting of offense as well as the happy meeting of faith, which we will return to in *Sections* 4.3 and 4.4, respectively.

#### *Anti-Climacus on the Paradoxical God-man*

Having introduced the Climacean account, we may now turn to the view of the paradoxical God-man developed by Anti-Climacus in *Practice*. Already at this point, however, one may object: is not this move fundamentally misguided given that Anti-Climacus appeals to the term "paradox" in *Practice* a mere nine times, of which only five are in reference to the God-man? In response, we may note simply that despite such relative paucity of references to the *term* paradox, Anti-Climacus still works extensively with the *category* of paradox by making use of notions such as "unity" (*Eenbed*), "composite" (*Sammensætning*), and "contradiction" (*Modsigelse*). By considering several examples of these notions, I suggest we are able to glean a decent picture of Anti-Climacus' account of the paradoxical God-man.

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Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 106; Adams, "The Significance of the Eternal," 149; Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> *SKS* 4, 249 / *PF*, 44 (translation modified; on this issue, see Matthew T. Nowachek, "John the Baptist as Exemplar for the Understanding: Reading Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* alongside an Upbuilding Discourse," *Theology* 116, no. 4 (2013), 263n16). Climacus employs similar language in *Postscript*. See, e.g., *SKS* 7, 201 / *CUP1*, 220.

<sup>54</sup> *SKS* 4, 249 / *PF*, 44.

For Anti-Climacus, the God-man is paradoxical in one sense as being “the unity [*Eenbeden*] of God...and an individual human being in a historically actual situation.”<sup>55</sup> To recall our discussion from *Section* 4.1, one of the Christologies Kierkegaard attacks is that by which the God-man is “made into that speculative unity of God and man *sub specie aeterni* or made visible in that nowhere-to-be-found medium of pure being...”<sup>56</sup> In Anti-Climacus’ view, however, the crucial point is not that the Incarnation is the unity of the abstract concepts of divinity and humanity, but rather that the Incarnation is fundamentally the unified composite of the dialectically related opposites of God and the *particular* person of Jesus Christ. As he remarks, “The God-man is not the union of God and man—such terminology is a profound optical illusion. The God-man is the unity [*Eenbeden*] of God and an individual human being.”<sup>57</sup> With this account, Anti-Climacus not only mirrors the dialectical view developed by Climacus in *Postscript*, but with his emphasis on the particularity of Christ’s humanity he also further develops Climacus’ fairy tale in *Fragments*.

Another way in which Anti-Climacus describes the paradoxical God-man is in terms of the dialectical unity of loftiness/lowliness. For example, in No. 3 of *Practice* he writes,

[Christ] is in lowliness and in loftiness one and the same [*den Ene og Samme*], and this choice would not be right if someone thought he was to choose between Christ in lowliness and Christ in loftiness, for Christ is not divided [*adskillt*]; he is one and the same [*den Ene og Samme*]. The choice is not: either lowliness or loftiness. No, the choice is Christ, but Christ is a composite [*et Sammensat*] and yet one and the same [*den Ene og Samme*], is the abased one and the lofty one...<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> SKS 12, 128 / PC, 123.

<sup>56</sup> SKS 12, 128 / PC, 123.

<sup>57</sup> SKS 12, 92 / PC, 82. Anti-Climacus, however, is not always precise with his language. At one point, for example, he writes about “what is united [*forenet*]” in the God-man in terms of “God and man” (*Gud og Menneske*). See SKS 12, 89 / PC, 77. Cf. SKS 18, 158-9, JJ:58 / JP 3, 3075; SKS 20, 394, NB5:54 / JP 1, 321.

<sup>58</sup> SKS 12, 164 / PC, 160. See also SKS 12, 71-2 / PC, 59-60. Cf. SKS 8, 351 / UD, 253; SKS 11, 238 / SUD, 127-8. Regarding this point, see Law, “Existential Chalcedonian Christology,” 140; Walsh, “Kierkegaard’s Theology,” 298-9. Anti-Climacus also expresses this paradox using the spatial language of “down” and “up.” See SKS 12, 158 / PC, 154: “Jesus Christ is the same in his abasement [*Fornedrelse*] as in his loftiness [*Opbøielse*].”

For Anti-Climacus, it is precisely the paradoxical state in which the glorious and powerful God becomes “the lowly, poor, suffering, and finally powerless human being”<sup>59</sup> that represents the “boundless self-contradiction” (*uendelige Selvmodsigelse*) which no human being can grasp. Interestingly, however, although Anti-Climacus is clear concerning the paradoxical nature of the God-man as a composite of loftiness and lowliness, he nevertheless emphasizes that the particular relation the single individual has to the God-man must begin with Christ in his abasement in that the call to come and find rest is spoken by Christ from his position of abasement.<sup>60</sup> As Law remarks, “from the human perspective” it is lowliness that becomes “the dominating element of Christ’s appearance and the medium through which the would-be follower must relate himself to Christ.”<sup>61</sup> It is exactly this dynamic that underlies Anti-Climacus’ description of the God-man in terms of “incognito” (*Incognito*) and “unrecognizability” (*Ukjendelighed*). As he puts it, “And now the God-man! He is God but chooses to become this individual human being. This, as said before, is the most profound incognito or the most impenetrable unrecognizability that is possible, because the contradiction [*Modsigelsen*] between being God and being an individual human being is the greatest possible, the infinitely qualitative contradiction.”<sup>62</sup> Another way to put this is that Anti-Climacus is here pointing to the importance of beginning with the crucified Christ as the suffering savior,<sup>63</sup> which, as several scholars have pointed out, reveals the deep influence on Anti-

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<sup>59</sup> SKS 12, 111 / PC, 102.

<sup>60</sup> SKS 12, 38 / PC, 24.

<sup>61</sup> David R. Law, *Kierkegaard’s Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 227.

<sup>62</sup> SKS 12, 135 / PC, 131.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., SKS 7, 542 / CUP1, 597; SKS 12, 12 / PC, 13; SKS 12, 250 / PC, 259; SKS 20, 203, NB2:157 / JP 3, 3090. On this point, see David R. Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 204; Law, “Existential Chalcedonian Christology,” 136.

Climacus of Luther and his *theologia crucis*.<sup>64</sup> The precise reason for such a starting point in relating to the God-man is something we develop in greater detail later on.

Lest this point about relating to Jesus Christ through his abasement is misunderstood in a manner that might call into question the paradoxical nature of the God-man, Anti-Climacus is intentional in his discussion of lowliness to affirm such paradoxicality by referring to the God-man as “a sign of contradiction” (*Modsigelsens Tegn*). As a sign, Jesus shows one thing (his lowliness) while pointing to another (his loftiness); but at the same time both the sign and the signified remain actual and essential to the God-man.<sup>65</sup> This is, for Anti-Climacus, what it means to say that this sign “contains a contradiction in its composition” but one where the contradictory parts do not “annul [*ophæve*]<sup>66</sup> each other in such a way that the sign comes to mean nothing or in such a way that it becomes the opposite of a sign, an unconditional concealment.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, even as one only has immediate access to lowliness, which means that the God-man establishes a paradoxical boundary that limits the individual’s attempt to arrive at loftiness apart from faith and revelation, within the life of faith both aspects of lowliness and loftiness must necessarily be presupposed in Christ.<sup>68</sup> As Law remarks, “It is because the God-man is a sign of contradiction that neither of the two natures can be dissolved into the other, nor one supplant or suppress the other. The divine and human natures, lowliness and loftiness stand in tension with each other. If this tension is removed, then

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<sup>64</sup> On this point, see Craig Hinkson, “Luther and Kierkegaard: Theologians of the Cross,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 1 (2001): 27-45; Noreen Khawaja, “Religious Truth and Secular Scandal: Kierkegaard’s Pathology of Offense,” *Philosophy Today* (2015): DOI: 10.5840/philtoday201510785. Cf. *SKS* 12, 79-80 / *PC*, 67-8.

<sup>65</sup> *SKS* 12, 130 / *PC*, 125-6. See also *SKS* 12, 103 / *PC*, 94.

<sup>66</sup> In using the term *ophæve* to reflect the German *Anfheben*, Anti-Climacus undoubtedly levels a critique against Hegel and the Danish Hegelians. See Jamie Turnbull, “Mediation/Sublation,” in *Kierkegaard’s Concepts: Tome IV: Individual to Novel*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 131-6.

<sup>67</sup> *SKS* 12, 130 / *PC*, 125.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *SKS* 16, 210 / *JFY*, 161.

the God-man dissolves before our eyes and becomes a merely human creation.”<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, were the contradiction to be annulled, the God-man would no longer serve as the possibility of offense insofar as offense for Anti-Climacus is dialectical: offense at loftiness becomes possible when one is confronted by Christ’s lowliness, and offense at lowliness becomes possible when one believes in Christ’s loftiness. In Walsh’s terms,

The qualitative contradiction of Christ consists in the fact that he combines both lowliness and loftiness in his person, which presents the possibility of offence first of all in relation to his loftiness or divinity...and then in relation to his lowliness or humanity...Neither loftiness nor lowliness is offensive in itself but only when united in Christ so as to make him ‘a sign of contradiction’ that is not directly recognizable as God but can only be seen as such indirectly in and through the incognito of his lowliness and abasement...<sup>70</sup>

In the end, then, we may agree with Law that the “choice confronting the human being is *not* between Christ in lowliness and Christ in loftiness, which would *divide* Christ, but of the *united* person of Christ, who is both lofty and lowly.”<sup>71</sup>

*Summary: Etymological and Dialectical Aspects of the Paradoxical God-man*

To conclude this section, we may briefly summarize our survey of Kierkegaard’s account of the paradoxical God-man, and we may do so by referring to the two broad categories outlined in the introduction to this study and which have been employed throughout. From the discussion above, it is clear that Kierkegaard emphasizes both etymological and dialectical aspects of paradox in his description of the God-man. With respect to the former, Climacus in *Fragments* highlights the manner by which the paradox limits human understanding in the understanding’s imperialistic attempt to gain mastery

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<sup>69</sup> Law, “Existential Chalcedonian Christology,” 141. See also Law, *Kierkegaard’s Kenotic Christology*, 221.

<sup>70</sup> Walsh, “Kierkegaard’s Theology,” 299.

<sup>71</sup> Law, “Existential Chalcedonian Christology,” 140.

over the paradox.<sup>72</sup> Anti-Climacus makes the same point at several places in *Practice*, as when he writes that “the understanding must come to a standstill on [the absolute paradox].”<sup>73</sup> Such an etymological aspect is likewise at work in Anti-Climacus’ portrayal of the God-man as the incognito and the sign of contradiction that causes the individual to be halted in her movement towards Christ. With respect to the latter, we see how Kierkegaard underscores the dialectical aspect of paradox in the accounts we have outlined: Christ as the dialectical unity of eternal/temporal, Christ as the dialectical unity of God/a particular human being, and Christ as the dialectical unity of loftiness/lowliness. The focus here is not only the duality of the God-man, but also the importance of holding the dialectical components of this duality in paradoxical tension. Although it is important to point out that these etymological and dialectical aspects are fundamentally intertwined and even inseparable, it is also imperative to take into account the particular etymological and dialectical nuances Kierkegaard assigns to the God-man in that these nuances carry slightly different implications for how the Incarnation operates as well as how one relates to Jesus Christ, and thus how Christian existence plays out in a concrete manner.

#### **4.3 - Loss of Tension in Rejecting the Paradoxical God-man**

Having outlined two variations of the paradoxical God-man, we may now turn to the loss of tension associated with their rejection, and particularly what I identify as *implicit rejection* and *explicit rejection*. The former assumes the form of Christendom expressions of faith that rely upon non-paradoxical accounts of the Incarnation. In that the God-man for Kierkegaard is essentially paradoxical, such a departure from paradox, though not necessarily intended as a rejection, is nevertheless implicitly to reject the

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<sup>72</sup> Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 61-2.

<sup>73</sup> SKS 12, 93 / PC, 82.

God-man. The latter represents the explicit refusal to accept the God-man precisely because it is paradoxical, which is the robust response to Jesus Christ that Kierkegaard identifies as offense. My claim is that both of these forms of rejection involve the loss of tension that we have been describing thus far in this study.

*Implicit Rejection: Christendom Expressions of Faith and Loss of Tension*

One form of implicit rejection of the God-man, which is characteristic of civic Christendom, plays out in the manner by which individuals appeal to an un-dialectical account of the Incarnation in order to bolster the established religious order and thereby their own standing within it. For Anti-Climacus, Christendom believers relate to Christ strictly in terms of his glory, beauty, and power—as he towers over Denmark with majesty much in the same way that Bertel Thorvaldsen’s statue of Christ towers over the congregation of Vor Frue Kirke.<sup>74</sup> As the glorious one who has overcome the world and embedded his authority within the establishment, Christ is also seen as the victorious head of the “Church triumphant” (*triumpherende Kirke*)<sup>75</sup> in relation to which members of this church, who thus view themselves as victors, assume a position of admiration. What is conspicuously missing from this account of the God-man, however, is any mention of Jesus Christ in his abasement, poverty, suffering, and weakness. Insofar as the God-man is, for Kierkegaard, essentially paradoxical as the dialectical unity of loftiness/lowliness, to emphasize Christ’s glory in the manner done within Christendom is thereby to reject the Incarnation.

Another form of implicit rejection of the God-man, which is characteristic of speculative Christendom, emerges in the attempt made by Christendom individuals to

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<sup>74</sup> Thorvaldsen’s *Kristus* altar statue represents Christ in his glorified resurrected state. Written on the base is the phrase “Kommer til mig” from Matthew 11:28, which is the same biblical text upon which Anti-Climacus grounds his early reflections in *Practice*.

<sup>75</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 12, 198-226 / *PC*, 201-32.

construe the God-man as something that can be proven by means of historical evidence or objective demonstration. Regarding historical evidence, Anti-Climacus parodies this view when he notes that “certainty [*Visheden*] that [Jesus] was God increases with every century, so that in our century, the nineteenth, certainty is the greatest it has ever been, a certainty of which by comparison the first centuries had only a vague inkling.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, with respect to objective demonstration Anti-Climacus writes in another ironical passage, “Behind these, the demonstrations [*Bevis*] and folios, we feel perfectly convinced [*overbevise*] ourselves and secure [*sikke*] against all attack, because every demonstration and every folio end with: ergo, Christ was the one he claimed to be. By means of the demonstrations it is just as certain [*saa vist*] as  $2 + 2 = 4$  and as easy as putting one’s foot in a sock.”<sup>77</sup> As becomes clear from these passages, motivating the turn to history and demonstration is the drive to obtain certainty and security in one’s relation to Christ so as to be assured that one has made the sensible choice in becoming a Christian.<sup>78</sup> What this move presupposes is that the God-man is precisely the kind of object that can be subjected to such a speculative exercise. In other words, the assumption at work here is that Jesus Christ can be related to in an objective fashion characteristic of the objective approach to truth described by Climacus in *Postscript*.<sup>79</sup> For Kierkegaard, however, the God-man is essentially paradoxical in that it always transcends the understanding and cannot be forced into the human frameworks of history and demonstration. As Anti-Climacus succinctly puts it, “one cannot *know* [*vide*] anything at all about *Christ*; he is the paradox...that history can never digest or convert into an ordinary syllogism.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> SKS 12, 42 / PC, 28.

<sup>77</sup> SKS 12, 104 / PC, 95. Cf. SKS 12, 49 / PC, 35.

<sup>78</sup> SKS 12, 49 / PC, 36: “in reliance on the fact that history makes it absolutely certain [*ganske vist*] that he was the great one” the believer in Christendom thus concludes “Ergo this is the right thing.”

<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., SKS 7, 177-82 / CUP1, 193-9

<sup>80</sup> SKS 12, 40 / PC, 25; SKS 12, 44 / PC, 30. Cf. SKS 12, 75 / PC, 63: “as the paradox [Christ] is an extremely unhistorical person.”

Therefore, to construe Christ in a speculative manner that removes the paradoxicality of the God-man as boundary and limitation is thereby to reject the Incarnation.

Such implicit rejection involves loss of tension in significant ways. With respect to civic Christendom, loss of tension comes as one departs from the paradoxical God-man and instead settles into the comfortable rest of the established religious order. In Anti-Climacus' view, the triumphant church that is led by the glorious Christ means that "the time of struggling is over" and that there is "nothing more about or for which to struggle."<sup>81</sup> As such, in contrast to those in the "Church militant" (*stridende Kirke*) who remain in perpetual tension by embracing the abased Christ as the object of their faith while paradoxically holding on to their belief in the glorious Christ,<sup>82</sup> members of the triumphant church sit back in comfort insofar as they deem that the victory has long been won and there is therefore nothing left to be done. Moreover, in relating to the glorious Christ through admiration such individuals need take no risks or suffer. Rather, in smug laziness<sup>83</sup> they can remain "safe and calm"<sup>84</sup> with the "assurances and reassurance"<sup>85</sup> of "the calm and easy days of Christendom..."<sup>86</sup> Whereas for Kierkegaard, engaging the paradoxical God-man with its unsettling dynamic of glory and abasement or loftiness and lowliness leads to the ratcheting-up of tension within the life of the believer, in Christendom individuals "slacken" (*afspændte*) the paradox of the Incarnation and thereby distil out "all the vitality and energy" (*Saft og Kraft*) from Christianity.<sup>87</sup> The resulting enervation is precisely the consequence of departing from the *dynamic*

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<sup>81</sup> *SKS* 12, 208 / *PC*, 211.

<sup>82</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 12, 17-18 / *PC*, 9-10.

<sup>83</sup> *SKS* 12, 97 / *PC*, 88.

<sup>84</sup> *SKS* 12, 237 / *PC*, 244.

<sup>85</sup> *SKS* 12, 243 / *PC*, 250.

<sup>86</sup> *SKS* 12, 238 / *PC*, 245.

<sup>87</sup> *SKS* 12, 49 / *PC*, 35. With regards to the term *Spænding*, cf. *SKS* 12, 74 / *PC*, 62; *SKS* 16, 211 / *JFY*, 162-3.

paradoxical God-man for expressing faith through the *static* entity of the *established* order (*det Bestaaende*)<sup>88</sup> with its coziness and gentle comfort.<sup>89</sup>

With regards to speculative Christendom, loss of tension comes as one departs from the paradoxical God-man and instead settles into the false assurances of the speculative system. Whereas engagement with the paradoxical God-man who transcends human categories opens up a space of radical tension characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity into which one with the full passion of subjectivity must take a risk in order to enter, the speculative engagement with Christ in his non-paradoxical form carries with it no such tension. In drawing speculative conclusions (*Slutninger*) about Christ, one departs from the invigoration associated with making a resolution (*Beslutning*) about something of which one has no objective certainty.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the push for certainty and security associated with the mis-construal of the God-man provides one with an enervating sense of peace and calm associated with the belief that one has arrived at truth and thereby need no longer struggle. Although for Kierkegaard such peace and calm are illusory precisely because the God-man is not something that can be proven or demonstrated,<sup>91</sup> they nevertheless operate as something of an opiate in the life of the speculative thinker that allows him or her to settle into the speculative system with the assurance that all difficulties have been neatly resolved. In other words, speculative engagement with Jesus Christ inevitably leads to the state of enervation where, metaphorically speaking, one no longer exists in the tension of uncertainty out on 70,000 fathoms of water,<sup>92</sup> but rather rests in what one believes to be genuine comfort and security upon a safe and fortified island (albeit an island of one's own construction) that

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<sup>88</sup> The term *det Bestaaende* carries connotations of standing firm, which is to say, lack of movement. As Anti-Climacus writes, “the Church militant is in the process of becoming [*er i Vorden*], whereas an *established* [*bestaaende*] Christendom *is* [*er*], is not becoming [*vorder ikke*].” See *SKS* 12, 207 / *PC*, 211. Cf. *SKS* 13, 25 / *PV*, 18.

<sup>89</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 12, 97 / *PC*, 88; *SKS* 12, 125 / *PC*, 117.

<sup>90</sup> *SKS* 4, 283 / *PF*, 84. See also *SKS* 7, 412 / *CUP1*, 454.

<sup>91</sup> *SKS* 4, 245 / *PF*, 40.

<sup>92</sup> *SKS* 7, 187 / *CUP1*, 204.

is far removed from the danger of the open waters. Having discussed implicit rejection of the paradoxical God-man, let us now shift our attention to the explicit rejection that Kierkegaard identifies as offense.

*Explicit Rejection: Offense and Loss of Tension*

The notion of offense (*Forargelse*) is fundamentally tied to the paradox of the God-man.<sup>93</sup> As Climacus describes it, offense “*comes into existence with the paradox...*”<sup>94</sup> More specifically, the paradoxical God-man serves as the possibility of offense in relation to which offense becomes actualized as the wilful refusal of the God-man *precisely because it is paradoxical*. Such explicit rejection, what Anti-Climacus would identify as “aggravated,”<sup>95</sup> is more severe than indirect rejection, and therefore its associated loss of tension is more intense. In what follows, we may touch upon offense as it occurs in relation to the two variations of the paradoxical God-man outlined in *Section 4.2*.

We may begin with offense in *Fragments*. To recall our discussion from above, the absolute paradox, as the unknown and a boundary, leads to a collision between itself and the understanding with two possible results: either the happy meeting of faith or the unhappy meeting of offense. In the appendix to *Chapter 3* entitled “Offense at the Paradox (An Acoustical Illusion),” Climacus describes the latter as the refusal of the understanding to accept both the transcendence of the paradox and its own limitations, which plays out in the passionate fury whereby the understanding declares the paradox to be foolish and absurd. This declaration, however, is an acoustical illusion (i.e., an echo) in

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<sup>93</sup> By offense Kierkegaard implies the scandalous stumbling block of which the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:23. See, e.g., *SKS 4*, 254n / *PF*, 50n; *SKS 7*, 195 / *CUP1*, 213; *SKS 7*, 200 / *CUP1*, 219; *SKS 7*, 266-7 / *CUP1*, 292-3; *SKS 7*, 490n / *CUP1*, 539-40n; *SKS 7*, 543-4 / *CUP1*, 598; *SKS 7*, 549 / *CUP1*, 605; *SKS 17*, 34-6, AA:18 / *JP 3*, 3247; *SKS 19*, 49, Not1:7 / *Pap.* II C 35; *SKS 22*, 244-5, NB12:168 / *JP 1*, 510; *SKS 22*, 304, NB13:48 / *JP 3*, 3034; *SKS 24*, 265, NB23:122 / *JP 4*, 4209; *SKS 25*, 391-2, NB30:14 / *JP 2*, 2227; *SKS 27*, 299-310, Papir 306 / *JP 4*, 3916.

<sup>94</sup> *SKS 4*, 255 / *PF*, 51. See Julia Watkin, *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 182.

<sup>95</sup> See *SKS 11*, 194-5 / *SUD*, 80-1.

that it is nothing more than what the absolute paradox has itself proclaimed<sup>96</sup>— something the understanding fails to grasp because it is too preoccupied with flaunting its own “magnificence” (*Herlighbed*) and superiority over the paradox.<sup>97</sup> Offense for Climacus thus operates as a form of pride: it is out of pride that the understanding refuses to give way in order for the paradox to give itself; it is out of pride that the understanding derides the paradox for being absurd; and it is out of pride that the understanding assumes a position of superiority in “insist[ing] that it itself has originated [*opfundet*] the paradox.”<sup>98</sup> It is this last point, and particularly Climacus’ use of a variation of the word *opfinde*,<sup>99</sup> that makes the connection to pride especially clear. In short, what we see here is a battle of origins, or rather a battle over which of the two actors is more foundational, with offense being the refusal of the understanding to recognize that the absolute paradox serves as its grounding (i.e., *Grund*).<sup>100</sup>

At first glance it would appear, contrary to what I am suggesting, that the description of offense as a form of passionate rebellion against the paradox represents a clear case of power and vitality. On a closer look, however, we see that this is not the case. As Climacus points out, offense at the absolute paradox is fundamentally a suffering and a weakness.<sup>101</sup> In one sense, the understanding suffers in that it does not originate the offense, but rather offense is something that is placed upon the understanding from outside of itself. In another sense, the understanding suffers in that its imperialistic attempt to comprehend is met by the overpowering limiting force of the

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<sup>96</sup> SKS 4, 254-5 / PF, 51-2.

<sup>97</sup> SKS 4, 256 / PF, 52-3.

<sup>98</sup> SKS 4, 256 / PF, 53.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Acts 17:29 where it is claimed that God is a product neither of human design nor of “human skill” (*Opfindsombed*).

<sup>100</sup> See, e.g., SKS 4, 251 / PF, 46-7. Cf. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, “The Movements of Offense Toward, Away From, and Within Faith: ‘Blessed is He Who is Not Offended at Me,’” trans. K. Brian Söderquist, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Practice in Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 100.

<sup>101</sup> SKS 4, 253-4 / PF, 49-50.

absolute paradox, which *wounds* and *crushes* the understanding.<sup>102</sup> Thus, even as the offended understanding lashes out against the paradox—when it “thrusts down the object of love” or when it “self-tormentingly disciplines itself to callous indifference”—all of this is nevertheless merely an “illusory expression of strength” that is still a suffering.<sup>103</sup> As Climacus remarks,

No matter if the offended one is sitting crushed and staring almost like a beggar at the paradox, petrifying [*forstenende*] in his suffering, or even if he arms himself with mockery and aims the arrows of his wit as if from a distance—he is nevertheless suffering and is not at a distance. No matter if the offense came and took the last crumb of comfort and joy from the offended one or if it made him strong [*stærke*]<sup>104</sup>—offense is nevertheless a suffering. It has struggled with the stronger [*den Stærkere*], and his posture of vigor [*Kraftstilling*] has a physical analogy to that of someone with a broken back, which does indeed give a singular kind of suppleness.<sup>104</sup>

Despite such passive suffering, there is, nevertheless, an active component of offense in the respect that the offended understanding does not allow itself to be annihilated (i.e., *tilintetgjøre*), but rather it remains standing in its prideful rejection of the paradox.<sup>105</sup> Even this stance, however, is still a fundamental expression of weakness, which is precisely Climacus’ point when he writes that “active offense is always weak enough to be incapable of tearing itself loose from the cross to which it is nailed or to pull out the arrow with which it is wounded.”<sup>106</sup> The weakness at play here is the same as that of the despairing self of *Indesluttethed* that we described in the preceding chapter, namely the state of the despair of weakness in which “sits the self, so to speak, watching itself, preoccupied with or filling up time with not willing to be itself and yet being self enough to love itself.”<sup>107</sup> In rejecting the paradoxical God-man, the offended understanding thus

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<sup>102</sup> SKS 4, 253 / PF, 49. On what he calls the “imperialism” of reason, see Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 61-2, 75-6, 78-9, 90, 93-4, 110, 116, 141, 178.

<sup>103</sup> SKS 4, 253 / PF, 49.

<sup>104</sup> SKS 4, 253-4 / PF, 50.

<sup>105</sup> SKS 4, 254 / PF, 50.

<sup>106</sup> SKS 4, 254 / PF, 50.

<sup>107</sup> SKS 11, 177 / SUD, 63. Interestingly, at one point in *Practice* Anti-Climacus uses the term *Indesluttethed* in what appears to be a positive manner. See SKS 12, 233 / PC, 228.

sinks down into frustrated impotence, and in this fashion it loses precisely the existential tension with its associated vigor that is characteristic of the life of authentic faith.

Offense in *Practice* differs slightly from the Climacean account in that Anti-Climacus explicitly ties it to the dialectical nature of the God-man as the paradoxical unity of loftiness/lowliness.<sup>108</sup> For example, in the invocation to No. 1, he writes, “Would that we might see you as you are and were and will be until your second coming in glory, as the sign of offense [*Forargelsens Tegn*] and the object of faith, the lowly man, yet the Savior and Redeemer of the human race, who out of love came to earth to seek the lost, to suffer and die...[A]gain and again in concern you had to repeat, ‘Blessed is the one who is not offended [*forarges*] at me.’”<sup>109</sup> In gesturing towards this particular dialectical expression of the nature of the God-man, Anti-Climacus points to two forms of offense: offense at loftiness and offense at lowliness.<sup>110</sup> With the former, one assumes Jesus Christ’s humanity as the starting point and thus becomes offended that such a lowly person claims to be God: “The possibility of essential offense in relation to loftiness, that an individual human being speaks or acts as if he were God, declares himself to be God, therefore in relation to the qualification ‘God’ in the composition God-man.”<sup>111</sup> With the latter, one assumes Jesus Christ’s divinity as the starting point and thus becomes offended that the almighty God manifests himself as a human being in a state of utter destitution: “The possibility of essential offense in relation to lowliness, that the one who passes himself off as God proves to be the lowly, poor, suffering, and

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<sup>108</sup> This account of offense is nevertheless similar to that described by Climacus in *Fragments* as that which arises from the limitation imposed upon the understanding. For Anti-Climacus, offense arises from the inability of the individual to comprehend how Jesus Christ could be both lofty and lowly at the same time. On this point, see Cappelørn, “Movements of Offense,” 110.

<sup>109</sup> *SKS* 12, 17-18 / *PC*, 9-10. Cf. *SKS* 12, 143-4 / *PC*, 140.

<sup>110</sup> *SKS* 12, 93 / *PC*, 82-3. Technically, Anti-Climacus speaks about three forms of offense. The first form he considers preliminary offense, which is the offense not at Jesus Christ as the God-man, but rather simply the offense that occurs when a single individual collides with an established order. See *SKS* 12, 92-3 / *PC*, 82; *SKS* 12, 94 / *PC*, 85. In contrast, offense proper is that which I have introduced here, namely offense at the lofty/lowly nature of the God-man. For a good discussion of this distinction, see Cappelørn, “Movements of Offense,” 111-17.

<sup>111</sup> *SKS* 12, 103 / *PC*, 94.

finally powerless human being.”<sup>112</sup> It is important to note that these forms of offense are dialectical in the sense that neither loftiness nor lowliness is in itself offensive, but rather each becomes such when related to the other.<sup>113</sup> Thus, both forms of offense are precisely offense at the *paradoxical* nature of the God-man: either that *this particular human being* claims to be God or that *God* claims to be this particular human being. As with offense in *Fragments*, such two-fold offense is likewise an expression of pride in the sense that it is grounded in the demand made by the offended individual that Jesus Christ conform to her own categories of what the Incarnation should or should not be as well as in the refusal to recognize and to relate to Jesus Christ as the paradox he essentially is.<sup>114</sup>

Having established that offense in *Practice* is therefore offense at the paradoxical nature of the God-man, how then is such offense tied to loss of tension? As the first step in answering this question we will need to return to the notion of the possibility of offense. In an important passage at the beginning of No. 2, Anti-Climacus remarks that the possibility of offense “is the crossroad, or it is like standing at the crossroad” where “one turns either to offense or to faith...”<sup>115</sup> For Anti-Climacus, this crossroad involves a certain kind of cessation of movement out of which faith or offense can emerge. In general terms, he describes this phenomenon as the moment in which the understanding “comes to a standstill” (*staaer...stille*) on the paradox and the absolute.<sup>116</sup> In describing the particular “crossroad” that emerges when it is made manifest that the call to the glorious God is voiced by Jesus in his abasement,<sup>117</sup> Anti-Climacus employs the etymologically related language of “the halt” (*Standsnigen*). As he puts it, “if you are disinclined to sneak

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<sup>112</sup> SKS 12, 111 / PC, 102.

<sup>113</sup> On this point, see Walsh, *Kierkegaard*, 128.

<sup>114</sup> SKS 12, 91 / PC, 81.

<sup>115</sup> SKS 12, 91 / PC, 81.

<sup>116</sup> See SKS 12, 93 / PC, 82; SKS 12, 114 / PC, 105; SKS 12, 126-7 / PC, 120. Cf. SKS 12, 123 / PC, 116: the understanding “comes to a standstill [*standser paa*] at the possibility of offense...”

<sup>117</sup> SKS 12, 28 / PC, 16.

into being a Christian, then there is a prodigious halt, the halt that is the condition for faith to be able to come into existence: you are halted by the possibility of offense.”<sup>118</sup> Thus, in running towards God in order to have one’s burdened lightened and to find rest (*Hvile*), individuals are stopped in their tracks as they collide with the paradoxical God-man in the incognito of utter lowliness. What both notions of “coming to a standstill” and “the halt” display is that cessation of movement is for Kierkegaard not inherently problematic; to the contrary, in this case stillness serves as the necessary condition for the emergence of both faith and offense. In other words, the halt is precisely what opens up a space in which one is able to make a choice between these two responses to the paradoxical God-man. But how, exactly, does the response of offense to the halt play out as loss of tension?

In one sense, offense in response to the halt involves a new and deeper form of motionlessness into which the offended individual slides. This motionlessness is qualitatively different from the cessation of motion introduced by the halt in that whereas the former includes the possibility of faith and therefore represents a stillness that is pregnant with edification, the latter as a rejection of the God-man is strictly destructive. For Anti-Climacus, despite the halt, the invitation still remains in full force and requires an immediate response, and therefore hesitation (i.e., delaying action by taking recourse in a certain kind of distance-creating reflective activity) is the primary expression of this offended lack of motion. As he puts it, “*Come here!* Oh, do not stand still [*staa...ikke stille*] and hesitate [*betænke Dig*]*—no, consider* [*betænke*] that each moment you stand still [*staaer stille*] after hearing the invitation you will hear its call more faintly and thus distance yourself even if you remain on the spot [*bliver paa Stedet*].”<sup>119</sup> In another sense, the offended response to the halt also plays out in what appears on the surface to

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<sup>118</sup> *SKS* 12, 53 / *PC*, 39.

<sup>119</sup> *SKS* 12, 34 / *PC*, 22.

be a robust form of motion. As Anti-Climacus points out, what one observes in the offense that is the rejection of the invitation to find rest in God is a vast crowd of people who at first shudder and recoil in meeting Jesus Christ, but then “storm ahead” and “trample down” in flight from the offensive lowly God—almost as if Christ, rather than offering an invitation, instead shouted “away, away O unhallowed ones!”<sup>120</sup> Although Anti-Climacus uses the image of fleeing here, what we see is the same dynamic of distancing oneself from God that is in actuality a form of stifling stillness. In other words, despite the superficial differences between hesitation and fleeing as offended responses to the halt, they both involve the same loss of tension: whether passively rejecting the God-man by refusing to heed the invitation and remaining standing still or actively rejecting the God-man by fleeing the invitation, both forms represent the enervation associated with becoming petrified in one’s corruption that is the state of sin. In the same fashion as with *Indesluttethed*, this offended response to the God-man is demonically inward-looking and suffocating. In short, then, the response of offense at the God-man that results from the refusal to embrace him in his full paradoxicality as described by Anti-Climacus in *Practice* represents yet another fundamental form of the loss of tension.

#### **4.4 - Sacred Tension in Embracing the Paradoxical God-man**

For this section we may turn our attention to the sacred tension associated with embracing the God-man and draw out in concrete terms what this entails for Christian existence. More specifically, I outline what I identify as four particular expressions of such sacred tension and I point to humble striving as the central virtue underlying these

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<sup>120</sup> SKS 12, 37 / PC, 23.

expressions—a virtue exemplified in the biblical figures of John the Baptist and the Apostle Peter.

*Sacred Tension in Embracing the Paradoxical God-man: Four Expressions*

The first expression of sacred tension is what we may identify as the dynamic movement of passionate limitation. To recall our discussion of *Fragments* above, the absolute paradox serves as a boundary with which the understanding is “continually colliding” (*støder...bestandig*) and which is “continually arrived at” (*bestandig kommer*),<sup>121</sup> but which is never transgressed or overcome. Whereas the response of offense to this situation is one of enervation, in the response of faith the understanding finds such continual unresolved colliding to be vitalizing. More specifically, the understanding runs up against the paradox and its own limitations, but out of *wonder*<sup>122</sup> it passionately embraces these limitations and is empowered to return to the paradox by which it once again undergoes the same process of collision—limitation—engagement. In faith, then, the understanding does not settle down by merely resolving itself to the incomprehensibility of the paradox, but instead, as Climacus argues, it responds to such incomprehensibility with a certain sort of dissatisfaction<sup>123</sup>—or, perhaps better put, with a profound sense of longing (i.e., *Længsel*)<sup>124</sup>—by which it restlessly seeks “to comprehend even more deeply...that the paradox is the paradox.”<sup>125</sup> Rather than something enervating or destructive, such longing dissatisfaction serves as an edifying impetus that increases tension by pushing the understanding into continuous striving

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<sup>121</sup> SKS 4, 249 / PF, 44.

<sup>122</sup> SKS 4, 256 / PF, 52; SKS 4, 290-1 / PF, 93.

<sup>123</sup> SKS 7, 555 / CUP1, 611: “Faith *must not be satisfied* [*maa ikke noies*] with incomprehensibility...”

<sup>124</sup> See, e.g., Romans 8:19. Such longing indicates that the individual is incomplete and imperfect (SKS 4, 362 / CA, 57-8), but it also points to what is beyond oneself such as the eternal that meets one’s longing (SKS 9, 309 / WL, 312).

<sup>125</sup> SKS 7, 201 / CUP1, 220.

whereby the Christian individual remains in passionate pursuit of the paradox.<sup>126</sup> Thus, although Climacus writes at certain places about the paradox replacing the category of motion (*Bevægelse*) with the category of rest (*Hvile*) or about the paradox bringing the understanding to a standstill,<sup>127</sup> he is nevertheless clear that faith is essentially a dynamic movement of perpetual engagement with the absolute paradox characterized by the passionate embracing of one's limitations.

A second expression of sacred tension is what we may call the dynamic of holding on to certainty in uncertainty or security in insecurity. On the one hand, in embracing the paradoxical God-man, Climacus is clear that the faithful individual must thereby give up a particular type of certainty and security. Underlying this point is Climacus' definition of faith as "*An objective uncertainty [den objective Uvished] held fast [fastholdt] through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness*"<sup>128</sup>—what he also describes as the "uncertainty of faith" (*Troens Usikkerhed*).<sup>129</sup> Objectively speaking, the person of faith is unable to rest in historical evidence or demonstration, but rather she restlessly remains in uncertainty; yet, it is just such restless uncertainty that leads to vitalization. In Climacus' terms, uncertainty "is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty [*det objektive Uvisse*] with the passion of the infinite."<sup>130</sup> On the other hand, embracing the paradoxical God-man for Climacus also involves a particular kind of certainty—albeit a certainty that is informed by uncertainty.<sup>131</sup> As he notes,

[T]he certitude of faith [*Troens Vished*] that relates itself to an eternal happiness is defined by uncertainty [*Uvisheden*]. If I remove the uncertainty in order to obtain an even higher certainty, then I do not have a believer in humility, in fear and

<sup>126</sup> SKS 7, 510 / CUP1, 561.

<sup>127</sup> SKS 4, 244 / PF, 38; SKS 4, 249 / PF, 44. Anti-Climacus makes a similar point when he notes that faith requires that human understanding come to a halt on the possibility of offense. See SKS 12, 113-14 / PC, 105. Cf. SKS 12, 111 / PC, 103; SKS 12, 123 / PC, 116; SKS 12, 126 / PC, 120.

<sup>128</sup> SKS 7, 186 / CUP1, 203.

<sup>129</sup> SKS 7, 414 / CUP1, 455.

<sup>130</sup> SKS 7, 186 / CUP1, 203.

<sup>131</sup> SKS 7, 393n / CUP1, 432n. See also SKS 7, 59 / CUP1, 55.

trembling, but an ethetic coxcomb, a devil of a fellow who, figuratively speaking, wants to fraternize with God but, strictly speaking, does not relate himself to God at all. Uncertainty is the sign, and certainty without it is the sign that one does not relate oneself to God.<sup>132</sup>

Sacred tension in relation to the paradoxical God-man is therefore to find certainty in the midst of uncertainty and security in the midst of insecurity. This is precisely “the struggling certainty” (*den stridende Visbed*) that one gains “not as the battle becomes easier or more illusory but only as it becomes harder.”<sup>133</sup> Moreover, what makes this dynamic a particularly good description of sacred tension is that in Climacus’ view it is *perpetually upheld* in one’s ongoing relation to the paradoxical God-man. Climacus makes this point in numerous passages,<sup>134</sup> but he does so particularly well in the conclusion to *Postscript* when he writes, “Faith is the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast [*fastholdt*] in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest. This formula fits only the one who has faith, no one else, not even a lover, or an enthusiast, or a thinker, but solely and only the one who has faith, who relates himself to the absolute paradox.”<sup>135</sup> Lest we give an improper picture of Climacus’ view, it is important to note that such perpetual holding fast of uncertainty is not something that the individual carries out strictly in his or her own power. Rather, it is possible only because divine enabling and aid are also involved. For Climacus, this is precisely what differentiates faith from the path of self-reliance, for as he notes, “it is easier to maintain a weak hope by one’s *own powers* than to gain certitude [*Visbed*] by virtue of the absurd.”<sup>136</sup> As such, the tension described here fundamentally depends upon one’s relation to the

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<sup>132</sup> SKS 7, 413 / CUP1, 455. Anti-Climacus explicitly connects such certitude to the denial of historical certainty. See, e.g., SKS 12, 242-3 / PC, 250. See also SKS 12, 105 / PC, 96; SKS 4, 285 / PF, 87; Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, 192.

<sup>133</sup> SKS 7, 206 / CUP1, 226. Climacus also describes this as “the martyrdom of believing against the understanding, the mortal danger of lying out over 70,000 fathoms of water, and only there finding God” (SKS 7, 212 / CUP1, 232) and the risk of faith—a faith that “*always* thanks God, is *always* in mortal danger...” (SKS 7, 212 / CUP1, 233).

<sup>134</sup> See, e.g., SKS 7, 187 / CUP1, 204; SKS 7, 212 / CUP1, 233; SKS 7, 511 / CUP1, 561.

<sup>135</sup> SKS 7, 554-5 / CUP1, 611.

<sup>136</sup> SKS 7, 390 / CUP1, 429.

absolute paradox as well as one's reception of divine assistance—which is precisely what makes it *sacred* tension.

A third expression of sacred tension is what we may identify as the dynamic of perpetual annulment of offense. Although this is certainly present in *Fragments* in the understanding's continuous avoidance of offense in continuously accepting its limitations, it is even more explicitly at play in *Practice*. To recall our discussion of *Practice* from above, Jesus Christ, from his position of lowliness, invites all to come to him after which this same lowliness serves as the halt that is the possibility of offense. In contrast to the offended one who falls away into enervation, the person of faith remains in the tense position involved in embracing the paradoxical God-man who is both seen as the lowly man and believed to be the glorious God. And despite his or her weariness, this person still pushes on “in taking one more step”<sup>137</sup> in engaging with Christ. Such a pushing on is precisely what it means to perpetually annul offense. Kierkegaard is clear that the possibility of offense never disappears for the existing believer, but rather it is “close by at every moment”<sup>138</sup> and “in relation to Christ *qua* God-man [it] will continue until the end of time”<sup>139</sup> much in the same way that a person's shadow never ceases to accompany her.<sup>140</sup> As such, the believer necessarily finds herself in the position by which she must continually renew her task of “push[ing] through the possibility of offense” by reaffirming the conviction that “I want only one thing, I want to belong to Christ, I want to be a Christian.”<sup>141</sup> Cappelørn provides a helpful gloss on this dynamic:

The believer who has passed through the possibility of offense and now thinks he or she has believed enough, has become perfect in faith and comprehends it, is in fact on his or her way to losing faith, just as he or she can lose his or her mind. The possibility of offense is indeed “a suspended moment” but only in the instant when the individual obtains faith. It is not, however, abolished in

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<sup>137</sup> *SKS* 12, 33 / *PC*, 22.

<sup>138</sup> *SKS* 16, 249 / *JFY*, 204.

<sup>139</sup> *SKS* 12, 102 / *PC*, 94.

<sup>140</sup> *SKS* 12, 127 / *PC*, 121.

<sup>141</sup> *SKS* 12, 122 / *PC*, 115.

faith, but is included in it—as a lasting possibility. A perfect faith, a fulfilled faith, or a finished faith, which has completed the task of believing and of fighting faith's battle against the possibility of offense, does not exist.<sup>142</sup>

Just as with the preceding two dynamics, what makes such annulment of offense a good representation of sacred tension is that it is not carried out once and for all, but rather is pursued at every moment. As Anti-Climacus nicely puts it, “faith conquers the world by conquering at every moment [*i ethvert Øieblik*] the enemy within one's inner being, the possibility of offense.”<sup>143</sup> Such tension is certainly an expression of restlessness that stands in stark contrast to the pseudo-rest of comfortable Christendom,<sup>144</sup> but it is at the same time also a form of rest, albeit rest in restlessness. In the invitation, Christ calls all to come and find rest (*Hvile*) in him, and the important emphasis here is on *in him* in the sense that such rest is precisely rest in the dynamic and paradoxical God-man with both his demands and his grace. Such a dynamic of restless rest is precisely what is at play in Matthew 11 upon which Anti-Climacus bases his reflections, for not only is Christ inviting the individual to find rest in him, but at the same time he also insists that his yoke be taken up—a yoke that is demanding but nevertheless still easy and light.<sup>145</sup> In summary, then, sacred tension as perpetual annulment of offense is the position in which one is halted but continually pushes on in faith by refusing to fall into offense. Such annulment is to find rest, but it is a rest that is grounded on the dynamic foundation of the paradoxical God-man, which means that it remains in perpetual movement in pursuit of Christ.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Cappelørn, “Movements of Offense,” 108-9.

<sup>143</sup> *SKS* 12, 88 / *PC*, 76. On this point, see Cappelørn, “Movements of Offense,” 116; Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard's Religiousness C: A Defense,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2004), 544; Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 161.

<sup>144</sup> *SKS* 12, 218 / *PC*, 223. On this point, see also *SKS* 16, 208 / *JFY*, 159.

<sup>145</sup> See Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>146</sup> Dewey thus describes this position as a *theologia viatorum*—a theology of pilgrims. See *The New Obedience*, 153.

A fourth expression of sacred tension in relation to the paradoxical God-man is that which plays out in the dynamic of imitation (*Efterfølgelse*).<sup>147</sup> In contrast to admiration, which is a “doz[ing] off” into infatuation where one distances oneself from Christ and settles down into risk-free comfort,<sup>148</sup> Anti-Climacus calls for Christians to be awoken into the dangerous task of imitation. Again, due to his polemical purposes in *Practice*, Anti-Climacus, while acknowledging the importance of holding on to belief in Christ in his loftiness, draws special attention to the abased Christ as the one who calls individuals into imitation. It is precisely in order to oppose the Christendom tendency to run off prematurely to the glorious Christ that Anti-Climacus stresses that “it is the abased Christ who is speaking, that every word we have from Christ is from him, the abased one.”<sup>149</sup> What this means, then, is that the imitating individual does not sit back in sleepy comfort, but rather she actively undertakes the task of conforming herself to Christ in his lowliness—which means first and foremost that she will inevitably face a great deal of suffering.<sup>150</sup> At the same time, however, Anti-Climacus is also clear that in imitation, Christ is to be understood and related to as the prototype (*Forbilled*) who is not simply the lowly human being, but rather the paradoxical unity of loftiness/lowliness that stands both *behind* the individual in lowliness and *ahead of* the individual in loftiness:

Christ came to the world with the purpose of saving the world, also with the purpose—this in turn is implicit in his first purpose—of being *the prototype*, of leaving footprints for the person who wanted to join him, who then might become an *imitator*; this indeed corresponds to “footprints.” That is why he let himself be born in lowliness and thereupon lived poor, abandoned, despised, abased—yes, no human being has lived so abased as he. By comparing the conditions of his life with Christ’s, even the otherwise lowliest person would have to come to the conclusion that his own life, humanly speaking, is far preferable in comparison with the conditions of Christ’s life. Why, then, this

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<sup>147</sup> Imitation for Kierkegaard is central to what it means to exist in a proper fashion as a Christian. See, e.g., *SKS* 12, 246 / *PC*, 254; *SKS* 16, 235 / *JFY*, 188. On this point, see Merold Westphal, “Kenosis and Offense: A Kierkegaardian Look at Divine Transcendence,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Practice in Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 37-8.

<sup>148</sup> *SKS* 12, 227 / *PC*, 233.

<sup>149</sup> *SKS* 12, 231 / *PC*, 237.

<sup>150</sup> See, e.g., Kierkegaard’s claim in *SKS* 13, 241-2 / *M*, 189. See also *SKS* 13, 189-90 / *M*, 145-6; *SKS* 13, 216 / *M*, 168.

lowliness and abasement? Because he who is truly to be the prototype and be related only to imitators must in one sense be *behind* people, propelling forward, while in another sense he stands *ahead*, beckoning. This is the relation of loftiness and lowliness in the prototype.<sup>151</sup>

The tension at work here, then, is precisely that in becoming an imitator of Christ one becomes “just as poor, despised, insulted, [and] mocked”<sup>152</sup> while still holding firm to belief in the glorious and lofty God who has the power to transform lowly sinners.<sup>153</sup> In other words, one is to struggle and to suffer all the while never letting go of the hope of glory. This dynamic is indeed the antithesis to the enervated stillness of offense in that it is within such a dynamic that one remains in the constant motion of following after (i.e., *følge efter*) Christ while embracing him in his full paradoxicality as both the lofty one and the lowly one.

Imitation, however, also serves as an expression of sacred tension in another crucial sense that is tied to Christ in his dual role as the lofty prototype and the lowly redeemer. In imitation, one inevitably falls short in one’s striving after the ideal demand set up by Christ that “crushes the imitator” and “thrusts him back.”<sup>154</sup> As such, the possibility of imitation also depends upon grace and redemption. In the lead-off prayer to his essay “Christ as the Prototype,” Kierkegaard offers a nice description of this dynamic:

Help us all, each one of us, you who both will and can, you who are both the prototype and the Redeemer [*Forbilledet og Forsoneren*], and in turn both the Redeemer and the prototype, so that when the striving one droops under the prototype, crushed, almost despairing, the Redeemer raises him up again; but at the same moment you are again the prototype so that he may be kept in the striving.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *SKS* 12, 231-2 / *PC*, 238.

<sup>152</sup> *SKS* 12, 234 / *PC*, 241.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. *SKS* 4, 226 / *PF*, 17. Anti-Climacus is clear to distinguish Christ’s loftiness from the loftiness that is recognized in the world as that which is associated with human power structures. Loftiness, for him, is therefore loftiness understood in a spiritual sense. See *SKS* 12, 232 / *PC*, 238.

<sup>154</sup> *SKS* 22, 249, NB12:177 / *JP* 2, 1857.

<sup>155</sup> *SKS* 16, 199 / *JFY*, 147. Cf. *SKS* 16, 208 / *JFY*, 159. For a similar account, see *SKS* 21, 362-3, NB10:198 / *JP* 1, 334.

The tension for the imitator is therefore that of *fully* striving after the ideal prototype while at the same time *relying entirely* upon the grace and redemption provided by the redeemer when this striving inevitably comes up short. With this dynamic Kierkegaard clearly gestures towards the fundamental tension of Christian existence encompassed in the Lutheran notion of *simil justus et peccator* in which believers find themselves negotiating the life of faith as both sinner and saved. Cappelørn nicely describes this in terms of tension: “Human beings are both forgiven of sin and continue to commit sin. Human beings can never overcome the tension in this life. They will always have a foothold in both camps.”<sup>156</sup> In the end, such a dual existence does not lead to despair, but rather it pushes the imitator into greater and greater existential tension as she continues to pursue and to be met by the paradoxical God-man who is both prototype and redeemer.

#### *Humble Striving and Two Concrete Exemplars*

To begin to draw this section to a close, we may turn to the virtue of humble striving. My claim is that this virtue is central to the disposition of the individual of faith living within the sacred tension that I have described above. In other words, sacred tension in relation to the paradoxical God-man requires that one’s existential stance is fundamentally informed by humility and striving. In what follows, I touch upon humble striving as well as show briefly how it is exemplified in two biblical figures that Kierkegaard discusses in his writings, namely John the Baptist and the Apostle Peter.<sup>157</sup>

For Kierkegaard, humility and striving are both crucial to the proper engagement with the God-man essential to sacred tension. With respect to the latter, for

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<sup>156</sup> Cappelørn, “Movements of Offense,” 101.

<sup>157</sup> In reflecting on these biblical figures, I am following the methodological lead of Iben Damgaard in *At lege fremmed med det kendte: Kierkegaards gendigtninger af bibelske figurer* (Copenhagen: Anis, 2008).

example, in *Fragments*, the individual who embraces the paradoxical God-man strives in perpetually pushing forward in pursuit of the paradox without falling into offense. In *Postscript* Climacus makes it clear that in relating to the absolute paradox of the God-man that closes off the objective way, the properly subjective individual who is not offended will respond with a fundamental striving that is “motivated and repeatedly refreshed [*forfrisket*] by the decisive passion of the infinite...”<sup>158</sup> And, for Anti-Climacus striving is precisely what it means to turn away from the possibility of offense in the halt and instead to move forward in imitation of Christ. With respect to the former, for example, in *Fragments* humility is what underlies recognition of the paradox as superior to the human understanding.<sup>159</sup> Moreover, humility in recognizing the paradox also involves the humble acceptance of revelation and grace. To recall our discussion from above, given that the knower finds himself in a state of sin in which he is fundamentally opposed to the truth, it becomes necessary for the god not only to reveal the truth but also to create the condition for the knower to grasp such truth by transforming him. Although Climacus allows for the possibility that one may freely reject such revelation out of pride and thereby fall into offense,<sup>160</sup> he is clear that it is only in humbly receiving what the god reveals as well as the god’s transforming work that one is able to come into the truth. In other words, while the sinful individual refuses to allow himself to be helped,<sup>161</sup> the person of humility accepts help and thus through the power of the divine becomes a new being. In addition, the task of imitation essentially involves humility.<sup>162</sup> Whereas

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<sup>158</sup> *SKS* 7, 186 / *CUP1*, 203.

<sup>159</sup> See Arne Grøn, “Transcendence of Thought: The Project of *Philosophical Fragments*,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2004*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 88.

<sup>160</sup> Lee Barrett, “The Paradox of Faith in *Philosophical Fragments*: Gift or Task?” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994), 275-6; Timothy P. Jackson, “Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 250.

<sup>161</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 12, 90 / *PC*, 78.

<sup>162</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 16, 244 / *JFY*, 198.

Christendom responds to the demands made by Jesus in his call to imitation by diminishing the demand, which is actually a veiled form of pride, for Kierkegaard authentic Christianity requires instead that the demand is radically emphasized and that one's inevitable failure to meet the demand in the attempt to imitate Christ is followed by humble confession and repentance.<sup>163</sup> As Anti-Climacus puts it, "each individual in quiet inwardness before God [*i stille Inderlighed for Gud*] is to humble himself [*ydmøge sig*] under what it means in the strictest sense to be a Christian, is to confess honestly before God where he is so that he still might worthily accept the grace that is offered to every imperfect person—that is, to everyone."<sup>164</sup> In the end, then, we may say that humble striving as outlined here is for Kierkegaard the most appropriate manner by which to engage the paradoxical God-man. It is for this reason that he identifies such humble striving as true worship:

[I]n order to worship God properly and to have the proper joy from worshipping, a person must conduct himself in this way: he must strive [*stræbe*] with all his might, spare himself neither night nor day; he must accumulate, and the more the better, what people of integrity, speaking humanly, would call good deeds. And when he then takes them and deeply humbled before God [*dybt ydmøget for Gud*] sees them transformed into something miserable and base—this is what it is to worship God...<sup>165</sup>

In order to lend further support to my claim that humble striving operates as the central virtue of what it means to exist within sacred tension in relation to the paradoxical God-man, we may conclude this section with an excursus into the biblical figures of John the Baptist and the Apostle Peter as concrete exemplars of such humble striving. Let us begin with John.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> SKS 12, 15 / PC, 7.

<sup>164</sup> SKS 12, 79 / PC, 67. See also SKS 12, 80 / PC, 68 where Anti-Climacus ties such humility to consciousness of sin.

<sup>165</sup> SKS 16, 203 / JFY, 154.

<sup>166</sup> Portions of this section are reproduced verbatim from Matthew T. Nowachek, "John the Baptist as Exemplar for the Understanding: Reading Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* alongside an Upbuilding Discourse," *Theology* 116, no. 4 (2013), 254-65. Permission for reuse of this material has been granted by the publisher.

One important glimpse into John the Baptist as exemplar comes in John 3:27-30. This gospel text recounts John's second testimony about Jesus in which he recognizes the superiority of Christ with the confident statement "This joy of mine is full. He must increase; I must decrease." In reflecting on this passage, Kierkegaard, in an upbuilding discourse from 1844 appropriately entitled "He Must Increase; I Must Decrease," focuses on both John's disposition (*Sindelaag*) and his task (*Gjerning*). As Kierkegaard describes it, John's disposition is one of humble self-denial.<sup>167</sup> In contrast to the improper forms of self-denial associated with the grumbling decreasing of one who is still egotistically concerned with his own status<sup>168</sup> or a grudging and peevish continuation in one's lowliness,<sup>169</sup> Kierkegaard describes John's disposition of "diminishing" (*at gaae ned*)<sup>170</sup> as one in which John recognizes, accepts, and lives out his subservient position to that which is superior, namely the Messiah. In denying himself, however, John does so neither in meekness nor in dour self-hatred, but rather in courage and bold confidence. Furthermore, John's task is one of preparation, which is the fulfilment of John's prophetic commissioning that he accepts and carries out with zeal. For Kierkegaard, this task centers on the two roles of servant and witness: in preparing the way for the Messiah, John takes an active step in serving the message and the mission of the one who is greater, and in this fashion he also witnesses to the one who is greater who has come. What this task means is not that John therefore disappears into the background; to the contrary, and paradoxically, by decreasing in order that the Messiah may increase, John himself is likewise elevated and increases.<sup>171</sup> For our purposes here, we may note that John's joyful diminishing that incorporates the zealous tasks of serving and witnessing

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<sup>167</sup> *SKS* 5, 273 / *EUD*, 279.

<sup>168</sup> *SKS* 5, 277 / *EUD*, 284; *SKS* 5, 281 / *EUD*, 289.

<sup>169</sup> *SKS* 5, 275 / *EUD*, 281.

<sup>170</sup> *SKS* 5, 273 / *EUD*, 279.

<sup>171</sup> *SKS* 5, 278 / *EUD*, 285.

provides an excellent concrete picture of what it means to practice humble striving in relation to the paradoxical God-man.

Another picture of John the Baptist as exemplar is that from Matthew 11:2-6. This passage recounts the situation in which John, who has been imprisoned by King Herod, sends his disciples to Jesus to enquire about whether or not Jesus is the expected Messiah. In response to John's disciples, Jesus offers a striking reply: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. *Blessed is anyone who is not offended on account of me.*"<sup>172</sup> In *Practice*, Anti-Climacus draws attention to this text by focusing on the peculiar nature of Christ's response and how this opens up the possibility of offense. As he notes, "Christ does not answer *directly*; he does not say: Tell John I am the expected one. That is, he requires faith..."<sup>173</sup> Christ's reply, then, entails that John is provided with no objective certainty on which to rest, but rather he is left to engage in a subjective fashion with the paradoxical sign of contradiction that has engaged him.<sup>174</sup> What we see in this text, and what plays out in the remainder of the Gospel account concerning John, is that John the Baptist faces the existential challenge of the paradoxical God-man with full earnestness by taking the active step of striving to believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah despite the inherent ambiguity of Christ's manifestation. To put this differently, in the face of uncertainty and in incredible risk, John humbles himself to follow Christ, and in this fashion he annuls the possibility of offense so as to live in faith. It is precisely within such humble striving, which Christ identifies as "blessed," that John moves forward with bold confidence to face his execution. As an account of what it means to exist in relation

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<sup>172</sup> Matthew 11:4-6 (NIV; translation modified; the italicized emphasis is my own). Kierkegaard alludes to this passage in the same 1844 discourse discussed above. See *SKS* 5, 276-7 / *EUD*, 283-4.

<sup>173</sup> *SKS* 12, 103 / *PC*, 94.

<sup>174</sup> For a nice description of this dynamic, see Cappelørn, "Movements of Offense," 113.

to the paradoxical God-man, John's example is among the greatest within the New Testament.

Along with John the Baptist, the Apostle Peter likewise provides the Christian with a valuable concrete example of humble striving in relation to the paradoxical God-man.<sup>175</sup> In particular, this plays out most clearly in the dramatic and turbulent process of Peter's imitation of Christ. Peter certainly offers an unambiguous picture of what it means to fall short of the demand established by the prototype. For example, he doubts Christ and sinks into the Sea of Galilee after beginning to walk on water; he wrongly rebukes Christ for predicting his impending death, which is met by Christ's own rebuke of Peter, "Get behind me Satan!"; three times he fails to remain awake with Christ at Gethsemane; and three times after Christ's arrest he denies his master. Additionally, in *Practice Anti-Climacus* lays particular emphasis on Peter's offense at the lowliness of the God-man associated with Christ's suffering and powerlessness. As he notes,

[W]hat causes Peter to be quite beside himself, what hits him like a stroke, is that he had believed that Christ was the Father's only begotten Son. That a human being falls into the power of his enemies and then does nothing, that is human. But that the one whose almighty hand had done signs and wonders, that he now stands there powerless and paralyzed—precisely this is what brings Peter to deny him.<sup>176</sup>

In his writings Kierkegaard makes not a few references to these failures, and, moreover, on account of Peter's sin Kierkegaard even identifies him as a "pitiful prototype" (*sorgelige Forbilledé*).<sup>177</sup> Despite this pitifulness, Kierkegaard nevertheless still views Peter as "the

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<sup>175</sup> Compared to some biblical figures such as Abraham, Peter receives far less attention in Kierkegaard's authorship. Despite this, Kierkegaard nevertheless describes Peter as an important figure. See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 114 / *WL*, 110; *SKS* 9, 168 / *WL*, 167-8; *SKS* 12, 126 / *PC*, 119. On this point, see Joel D.S. Rasmussen, "The Pitiful Prototype: Concerning Kierkegaard's Reflections on the Apostle Peter as a Model for Christian Witness," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2007*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Jon Stewart, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 274.

<sup>176</sup> *SKS* 12, 112 / *PC*, 104. Cf. *SKS* 12, 125-6 / *PC*, 118-19.

<sup>177</sup> *SKS* 10, 298 / *CD*, 278.

most honest and faithful disciple”<sup>178</sup> and the “epitome of all perfections.”<sup>179</sup> Although Kierkegaard is clear that Peter serves as a prototype because of the risk he takes to follow Christ and to leave “the certain [*det Visse*] and choose the uncertain [*det Uvisse*],”<sup>180</sup> we may also point out that Peter is a powerful example of what it means in humility to receive redemption and because of this to be saved from offense in order to continue to strive. Both the Bible and Kierkegaard focus on more than simply Peter’s failure to live up to the ideal demand; they also stress how his life is informed by grace: as Peter sinks into the Sea of Galilee, Christ comes and raises him out of the water; after Peter falls asleep three times and denies Jesus three times, the resurrected Christ meets him with a three-fold forgiveness and a new commission to carry on the task of striving; and as Peter in offense improperly rebukes Christ, Jesus nevertheless moves forward in building his church upon Peter. In Peter, therefore, what we observe is not humility and striving that work against one another, but rather the vitalizing dialectic of humble striving. In his sinful failures, in his acceptance of Christ’s redemption, and in his recommitment to imitation, Peter thus displays precisely how such humble striving is central to Christian existence as it plays out in relation to Jesus Christ. And by living in a manner expressed by such humble striving, not only is Peter blessed (*salig*), but through such blessing Christ himself receives incredible joy (*Glæde*):

[Christ’s] joy over the believer is like a human being’s joy over becoming understood, completely understood, by another. He is indeed not like a human being; he cannot be understood or comprehended—he must be believed—but in faith you belong to him completely, and his joy is as great as that of the person who found someone who understood him. How great was his joy when he considered Peter blessed—“Blessed are you, Simon Peter,”—because Peter believed; how great his joy was you can see in his asking Peter three times: Do you love me?<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> SKS 9, 114 / WL, 110.

<sup>179</sup> SKS 9, 168 / WL, 167.

<sup>180</sup> SKS 10, 192 / CD, 182.

<sup>181</sup> SKS 12, 90 / PC, 78-9.

In the end, then, we may say that with his humble striving, Peter provides the Christian with one of the greatest examples of what it means to relate in a proper manner to the paradoxical God-man.

#### 4.5 - Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I argued that Kierkegaard, in contrast to what he understands to be the problematic Christological views of his era, develops his own account of the Incarnation by appealing to the notion of paradox. Moreover, I focused on two variations of the paradoxical God-man as presented in the Climacean works and in *Practice*, which I suggested carry significant implications for Christian existence. In particular, I claimed that in contrast to the loss of tension associated with both indirect and direct rejection of the paradoxical God-man, embracing the paradox of Jesus Christ represents yet another expression of sacred tension in Kierkegaard's thought, of which the central virtue proves to be humble striving.

In converging on humble striving as the central virtue for what it means to exist as a Christian within the sacred tension associated with the paradoxical God-man, we have once again come full circle to *Chapter 1*. More specifically, from our discussion in this chapter it becomes apparent that humble striving mirrors the fundamental dialectic of grace/works that we previously outlined. On the one hand, by emphasizing the importance of striving in continuously running up against the paradox that stands as a boundary to human understanding without succumbing to offense as well as by emphasizing the tasks of passionate limitation, holding on to certainty in uncertainty and security in insecurity, perpetually annulling offense, and imitation, Kierkegaard clearly points to the centrality of works in the life of the believer. On the other hand, by placing significant stress on humble acceptance of one's limitations as revealed by the paradox,

on embracing the God-man in the role of savior who overcomes one's sin by providing the condition, and on the necessity of resting restlessly in the lowly inviter who calls all to come to him so that they may be redeemed and transformed, Kierkegaard emphasizes the irrevocable importance of grace for the Christian. Just as with grace and works, we may also point out that for Kierkegaard neither striving nor humility is to be stressed to the exclusion of the other, but rather they are both to be held in dynamic tension. Moreover, humble striving also mirrors the grace/works dialectic outlined in *Chapter 1* in the sense that it is likewise intimately tied to the fear and trembling that the Apostle Paul describes in Philippians 2:12-13 and to which Kierkegaard repeatedly returns in his authorship. In Anti-Climacus' words, the task of the Christian is "above all [to] maintain humility and fear and trembling in relation to what it truly means to be a Christian. For it is along that way that you must go in order to learn and to practice resorting to grace in such a way that you do not take it in vain..."<sup>182</sup> As we have argued in this chapter, such a task is possible only when one remains in a continuous and intimate relationship with the paradoxical God-man. In this sense, Climacus' words are entirely appropriate when he notes, "O blessed fear and trembling! How blessed to be able to fulfil God's requirements while smiling at the demands of the times. How blessed to despair over not being able to do it as long as one does not let go of God!"<sup>183</sup> For his Danish contemporaries who attempt to avoid the tension as well as the fear and trembling associated with humble striving in particular and the dialectic of grace/works in general, Kierkegaard's account of the paradoxical God-man thus serves as a radical challenge and a crucial piece of his overarching ethico-religious task of (re)introducing Christianity to Christendom.

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<sup>182</sup> SKS 12, 77 / PC, 65.

<sup>183</sup> SKS 7, 128 / CUP1, 138.

One important theme we have discussed in this chapter has been the love of God and the God-man for the individual human being. Love, for Kierkegaard, is one of the central components of the life of faith. For this reason, in our final chapter we may turn to Kierkegaard's account of love that he develops in *Works of Love*. As we will see, paradox and sacred tension are also at play in significant ways within this text.

## CHAPTER 5

PARADOX AND LOVE:  
ON DOUBLE-VISION, GROUNDING, AND CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

*Just as the quiet lake originates [grunder] deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person's love originate even more deeply in God's love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake nor a human being's love.<sup>1</sup>*

*[T]he life of love is hidden, but its hidden life is in itself motion [Bevægelse] and has eternity within itself.<sup>2</sup>*

*[A] life without loving is not worth living...<sup>3</sup>*

In this chapter I turn to the fourth and final expression of paradox we will consider, namely that which Kierkegaard associates with Christian love (i.e., *Kjerlighed*). Up to this point I have not been overly explicit in my argument to emphasize the fundamental role played by human others as well as the centrality for the Christian life of relating to and remaining in relationship with such others. I have thereby run the risk of construing Kierkegaard as an advocate for a spiritualized individualism in which the solitary individual's relationship to the divine is set up as the only factor that *really* matters for the life of faith.<sup>4</sup> My focus here on Kierkegaard's foundational text *Works of Love* (*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*),<sup>5</sup> with its emphasis on the importance of loving both God *and* human beings, therefore makes a much needed contribution to my overall project. When

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<sup>1</sup> SKS 9, 17-18 / WL, 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> SKS 9, 18 / WL, 10.

<sup>3</sup> SKS 9, 45 / WL, 38. Cf. Socrates' claim from the *Apology* that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

<sup>4</sup> This impression emerges in *Chapter 2* in my emphasis on Abraham's relationship to God, in *Chapter 3* in my emphasis on the individual as existing *before God*, and in *Chapter 4* in my emphasis on the individual's pursuit and imitation of Christ. Mark C. Taylor criticizes Kierkegaard on this front in his work *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 343-72, which has in turn been nicely answered in Gregory R. Beabout and Brad Frazier, "A Challenge to the 'Solitary Self' Interpretation of Kierkegaard," *History of Philosophical Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (2000): 75-98.

<sup>5</sup> As Ronald Green and Theresa Ellis correctly put it, "*Works of Love* is not just a study of Christian love. It is the capstone of Kierkegaard's entire philosophy of love." See "Erotic Love in the Religious Existence-Sphere," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 367. See also M. Jamie Ferreira, "Love," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 328.

we assume the lens of this work, what emerges is a picture of Christian existence as sacred tension characterized by the lover who remains perpetually engaged in loving relationships with God and with others—a dynamic existential stance I characterize in this chapter as *loving within the sacred tension*.

The task undertaken here, however, might appear at first glance to be an improper attempt to import the concept of paradox from Kierkegaard's earlier philosophical writings into his explicitly Christian work on love where it is not entirely at home.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this perception is sharpened by the fact that Kierkegaard employs neither the word *Paradox* nor its cognate forms a single time within *Works of Love*. In response, we may note that the absence of the *terminology* of paradox in Kierkegaard's exposition does not thereby entail that the *notion* of paradox has no important role to play therein.<sup>7</sup> To the contrary, Kierkegaard makes use of this notion in a manifold of ways. For example, both M. Jamie Ferreira and William McDonald have pointed to dialectical pairings such as one/many, gift/need, sameness/difference, and transparency/hiddenness as expressions of paradox.<sup>8</sup> As such, I suggest we would not be incorrect to side with Ferreira when she notes that for Kierkegaard "love is filled with paradox" and with McDonald when he writes that "Christian love is characterized by paradox..."<sup>9</sup> My aim in what follows, therefore, is not to argue *that* paradox is at play in *Works of Love*, but rather to articulate what paradox looks like with respect to Christian love and the manner by which such paradox thereby informs Christian existence.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard: 'Paradox' and Irrationalism," *Journal of Existentialism* 7, no. 27 (1967): 401-16.

<sup>7</sup> The term *Modsigelse*, however, which at certain places can stand in for the term paradox, does occur on numerous occasions in the Danish version of *Works of Love*. See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 15; *SKS* 9, 19; *SKS* 9, 31; *SKS* 9, 68; *SKS* 9, 135; *SKS* 9, 157; *SKS* 9, 225; *SKS* 9, 233; *SKS* 9, 273; *SKS* 9, 309; *SKS* 9, 310; *SKS* 9, 336; *SKS* 9, 355; *SKS* 9, 356-7; *SKS* 9, 360.

<sup>8</sup> Ferreira, "Love," 329; William McDonald, "Love," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome IV: Individual to Novel*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Ferreira, "Love," 329; McDonald, "Love," 109.

I develop my argument in five sections. In *Section 5.1*, I make a few preliminary remarks on Kierkegaard's view concerning the importance of love for human beings as well as the polemical purposes underlying *Works of Love*. For *Section 5.2*, I trace out the manner by which paradox is at play in the text both in terms of vision and in terms of the grounding of love. For the next two sections I discuss the existential implications of such paradox, namely how departing from it is tied to enervation and loss of tension (*Section 5.3*) and how embracing it represents a vitalized state of sacred tension characterized by the virtues of humility, courage, and hope (*Section 5.4*). Finally, I conclude in *Section 5.5* by drawing a connection between *loving within the sacred tension* and the fundamental grace/works dialectic introduced in *Chapter 1*.

### 5.1 - Preliminary Remarks on Love and *Works of Love*

A good question with which to lead off our analysis of *Works of Love* is, why afford so much attention to love? The simple response is that for Kierkegaard love (both *Elskov* and *Kjerlighed*) is central to what it means to be human. In his view, love is fundamentally implanted by God in every human being, but not only this, God has also implanted a need (*Trang*) and a longing (*Længsel*) for such love—both to love and to be loved.<sup>10</sup> As he describes it at the beginning of his deliberation “Our Duty to Love the People We See,” “How *deeply* the need of love [*Kjerlighedens Trang*] is rooted in human nature [*i Menneskets Væsen*].”<sup>11</sup> A few lines later he connects this need to the longing of human beings for companionship that he once again describes as essential to human nature—a claim he strengthens by pointing to how even Jesus Christ experienced such a need:

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 155-6 / *WL*, 154-5; *SKS* 9, 175 / *WL*, 175. On this point, see Pia Søtoft, *Kierkegaard og Kærlighedens Skikkelser* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 2014), 35.

<sup>11</sup> *SKS* 9, 155 / *WL*, 154.

Throughout all ages everyone who has deeply pondered human nature has acknowledged this innate need for companionship [*Trang til Selskab*]...So deeply is this need rooted [*Grundet*] in human nature...and so *essentially* [*væsentligen*] does it belong to being human, that even he who was one with the Father and in the communion of love [*Kjerlighedens Samfund*] with the Father and the Spirit, he who loved [*elskede*] the whole human race, our Lord Jesus Christ, even he humanly felt this need to love and be loved [*at elske og at blive elsket*] by an individual human being.<sup>12</sup>

All of this would suggest, then, that if we want to speak about Christian existence in a manner faithful to Kierkegaard we must necessarily do so in terms of love.

Given what he sees as the importance of love, one of the central purposes Kierkegaard assumes in *Works of Love* is to challenge inadequate conceptions of love at play in his 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural context.<sup>13</sup> For example, Kierkegaard narrows in on the manner by which the misappropriation of grace within Christendom has adversely affected the practice of love. In short, by taking in vain the Lutheran teaching of faith by grace alone, individuals within Denmark have forgotten the demand and the difficulty essential to Christian love, that is, that love requires radical sacrificial action as part of working out one's salvation.<sup>14</sup> It is because of this issue that Kierkegaard focuses his attention, as made evident by the title of his book, not on describing love as a philosophical or theological *concept*, but rather in characterizing *works* of love as a *concrete practice*.<sup>15</sup> With this emphasis on works we see the deeply Socratic nature of Kierkegaard's polemic in that Kierkegaard employs his reflections to disturb his comfortable

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<sup>12</sup> SKS 9, 155-6 / WL, 154-5. For good commentary on this point, see M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21; Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 158; Søltøft, *Kierkegaard og Kærlighedens Skikkelser*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> SKS 9, 66 / WL, 59; Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, "Historical Introduction," in Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), xvi.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Philippians 2:12-13. See also Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 248-9; Amy Laura Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 41.

<sup>15</sup> As Kierkegaard succinctly puts it in the two prologues of the text, his reflections "are *Christian deliberations*, therefore not about *love* but about *works of love*." See SKS 9, 11 / WL, 3; SKS 9, 211 / WL, 207. For a nice gloss on this point, see M. Jamie Ferreira, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 126.

Christendom readers, or as Ferreira describes it, to awaken and to provoke.<sup>16</sup> Alongside such unsettling is also the Socratic incitement to self-examination.<sup>17</sup> As Kierkegaard puts it early on in his text in reference to the Christian lover, it is “beneficial and necessary that the single individual carefully and consciously pay attention to himself and, if possible, help others (in such a way as one person can help another, since God is the true helper) to become Christians in an even deeper sense.”<sup>18</sup> In summary, then, Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the *works* of love extends from his view of the significance of love for existence and functions as a Socratic challenge to Christendom that is meant to unsettle at the same time it is to encourage.<sup>19</sup>

Such a focus on works, however, would seem to leave Kierkegaard in a rather un-dialectical position. In *Chapter 1* we pointed out that Kierkegaard’s ethico-religious task often functions as a corrective, and, as such, Kierkegaard tends to place greater emphasis on the counter-position that stands against the problematic view he is attacking. The corrective, however, does not mean that Kierkegaard thereby ignores the opposite position or advocates for a one-sided account.<sup>20</sup> Put differently, in undertaking his attack on misconceptions of love, Kierkegaard does not desire for his counter-emphasis on *works* of love to become the new norm, which would then require yet another corrective. As such, despite the un-dialectical impression of love one may receive on a surface reading of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard’s account, I argue, is far richer and

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<sup>16</sup> Ferreira, *Kierkegaard*, 125. Hall also picks up on this point nicely in emphasizing the role of Kierkegaard’s text in unsettling the individual in order to turn her to dependence upon God. See Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 3, 13, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Robert C. Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory,” in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 84; Anthony Rudd, “Believing All Things?: Kierkegaard on Knowledge, Doubt, and Love,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 124.

<sup>18</sup> *SKS* 9, 55 / *WL*, 48.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> J. Michael Tilley, “Corrective,” in *Kierkegaard Concepts: Tome I: Absolute to Church*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 84. See also Ferreira, *Love’s Grateful Striving*, 252.

more nuanced. In order to develop this point, we may turn now to our discussion of paradox and love.

## 5.2 - Paradox in *Works of Love*

In this section I discuss the particular expressions of paradox that I argue are at the heart of Kierkegaard's argument in *Works of Love*. To begin, I focus on what I identify as the *paradoxes of vision*, namely the dialectic of blindness/sight associated with love for all and love for one, and the dialectic of seeing/unseeing associated with forgiveness. As such, I follow the lead of several scholars in pointing to the central role the theme of vision plays in *Works of Love*;<sup>21</sup> however, my aim here is to afford even more explicit attention to the paradoxical nature of such vision. In addition, I argue that Christian love for Kierkegaard is also paradoxical in an etymological sense in that Kierkegaard emphasizes how such love originates in and depends upon the hidden and unfathomable love of God that is "in the ground" (*i Grunden*) and that, although an enabling force, nevertheless serves as a limitation and a challenge to human understanding and ability.

### *Blindness and Sight: The Work of Love in Loving All and Loving One*

The first paradox of vision we may discuss assumes the form of the dialectic of blindness/sight, by which the Christian lover is called to love all human beings as the neighbor, apart from distinctions, at the same time that she is to love the single individual

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 201-6; M. Jamie Ferreira, "Equality, Impartiality, and Moral Blindness in Kierkegaard's 'Works of Love,'" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 1 (1997): 65-85; Arne Grøn, "The Dialectic of Recognition in *Works of Love*," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser together with Jon Stewart and Christian Tolstrup (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 147-57; Patrick Stokes, "Kierkegaardian Vision and the Concrete Other," *Continental Philosophy Review* 39, no. 4 (2006): 393-413.

in his or her concrete particularity and concrete situation. Let us focus on each of these dialectical elements in turn.

On the one hand, to carry out the Christian task of love entails, in Kierkegaard's view, a certain type of blindness. But what does it mean to talk about blindness in relation to love? In assuming Matthew 22:39 as his starting point, Kierkegaard develops the commandment that one shall love all human beings, each and every human being, as the neighbor. For Kierkegaard, however, the neighbor as object of love is only revealed when it is mediated through God's love as "the middle term" (*Mellembestemmelsen*) between self and other.<sup>22</sup> What this means, then, is that in turning to God's love the lover is thereby able to love all people, each and every person, as the neighbor. In Kierkegaard's words, "because God is the middle term" there are therefore "no limits to the objects [of love], because the neighbor is all human beings, unconditionally every human being."<sup>23</sup> To meet the neighbor in this fashion requires one to turn away from externals and difference. As Kierkegaard describes it, external difference is like the actor's costume, which is to say that it is secondary to a common and shared humanity: "when the curtain falls on the stage, then the one who played the king and the one who played the beggar etc. are all alike; all are one and the same—actors. When at death the curtain falls on the stage of actuality...then they, too, are all one, they are human beings."<sup>24</sup> To elaborate further on this inner core of humanity to which the lover turns her gaze in loving the neighbor, Kierkegaard draws on the metaphor of a watermark:

[T]he neighbor is eternity's mark [*Evighedens Mærke*]—on every human being. Take many sheets of paper, write something different on each one; then no one will be like another. But then again take each single sheet; do not let yourself be confused by the diverse inscriptions, hold it up to the light, and *you will see a*

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<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard makes reference to this concept on several occasions—at times identifying the concept of neighbor as the middle term. See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 60 / *WL*, 54; *SKS* 9, 61 / *WL*, 54; *SKS* 9, 64 / *WL*, 58; *SKS* 9, 65 / *WL*, 59; *SKS* 9, 74 / *WL*, 67; *SKS* 9, 83 / *WL*, 77; *SKS* 9, 111 / *WL*, 107; *SKS* 9, 122 / *WL*, 119; *SKS* 9, 144 / *WL*, 142; *SKS* 259 / *WL*, 260.

<sup>23</sup> *SKS* 9, 74 / *WL*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> *SKS* 9, 92 / *WL*, 87.

*common watermark [et fælles Mærke] on all of them. In the same way the neighbor is the common watermark, but you see it only by means of eternity's light when it shines through the dissimilarity.*<sup>25</sup>

As Kierkegaard argues, carrying out this act of vision in which one turns away from dissimilarity and instead looks through the lens of God's love whereby one focuses on eternity's hidden internal mark on the other, requires that one ultimately close one's eyes. Succinctly put, one "sees the neighbor only with closed eyes, or by looking *away from* the dissimilarities."<sup>26</sup> Involved in such willed blindness, then, is the act of resignation (i.e., *at opgive; Opoffrelse*)<sup>27</sup>: not only does one relinquish the attempt to hold onto any difference that would distinguish one from others and that would afford one a position of superiority in relation to them, but in closing one's eyes one also relinquishes one's preferential love (*Forkjerlighed*) in the sense that one refrains from granting such love a privileged position in one's loving. For example, in closing one's eyes one loves the enemy as the neighbor while looking beyond the "costume" of enemy just as one loves the son as the neighbor while looking beyond the "costume" of son. Such love thus does not look outward for its cues to concrete difference and the cultural categories informing such difference, but rather in becoming blind to such things it looks for direction from the eternal and aligns its vision with the divine perspective provided by God's own love.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard's view of love, contrary to the manner by which it has been portrayed by some critics,<sup>28</sup> is not limited to blindness, but also fundamentally involves a certain kind of sight in which one turns one's gaze to the concrete particular in his or her concrete situation. In relief to the task of closing one's eyes to externals and

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<sup>25</sup> SKS 9, 94 / WL, 89 (my emphasis).

<sup>26</sup> SKS 9, 75 / WL, 68. See also SKS 9, 164 / WL, 163.

<sup>27</sup> SKS 9, 62 / WL, 55; SKS 9, 111 / WL, 106-7.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Theodor W. Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8 (1939-40), 413-29; Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *Den Ethiske Fordring* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1957); and more recently, Sharon Krishek, "Two Forms of Love: The Problem of Preferential Love in Kierkegaard's 'Works of Love,'" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 4 (2008): 595-617. These views have been subjected to a great deal of criticism and for this reason I do not feel that it is necessary to revisit this debate here.

difference, Kierkegaard describes this second act of vision in terms of loving the people that we see before us *with open eyes*. This is precisely the point he makes in his deliberation “Our Duty to Love the People We See” in which he reflects on the biblical passage 1 John 4:20 concerning loving the brother one sees, and through this he presents the dialectical contrast to his deliberation on the other as the neighbor. Thus, as Kierkegaard remarks in describing his discourse, “*the duty to love the people we see*, but not in the sense as if the discourse were about loving all the people we see, since that is love for the neighbor, which was discussed earlier. It means rather that the discourse is about the duty to find in the world of actuality the people we can love in particular and in loving them to love the people we see.”<sup>29</sup> Such a turn to the object of love that exists before one’s earthly eyes is thereby to embrace difference and particularity. As Kierkegaard succinctly puts it, “So it is also in the relationships of love [*Kjerlighedens Forhold*] among human beings; only true love [*den sande Kjerlighed*] loves [*elsker*] every human being according to the person’s distinctiveness.”<sup>30</sup> What this means, for example, is that in loving my wife Helena as the neighbor I am at the same time still required to love her as the concrete particular person she is with all of the requirements that accompany loving her as my wife. To ignore her particular situation, needs, desires, longings, and so forth associated with her unique status as *the woman of whom I am her husband* in pursuit of an abstract or spiritualized love would be to fail to see her properly and thereby to fail to love her properly. Moreover, for Kierkegaard this account of vision is not incidental or secondary, but rather is central in that it represents the bearing of fruit essential to Christian love. As he argues in “Love’s Hidden Life and Its Recognizability by Its Fruits,” in order for Christian love to be complete it must move out from the hidden

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<sup>29</sup> SKS 9, 160 / WL, 159. One important challenge of this act of vision, then, is constantly to prevent oneself from loving in a manner that idealizes love and the other. See SKS 9, 162 / WL, 161.

<sup>30</sup> SKS 9, 268-9 / WL, 270.

depths into the concrete world where the lover and the beloved exist.<sup>31</sup> Turning one's gaze outward so as to take concrete action in loving the concrete particular other is thus for Kierkegaard essential to what it means to love in a properly Christian manner.

*Seeing and Unseeing: The Work of Love in Forgiveness*

A second way in which Kierkegaard construes love as paradoxical vision is through the dialectic of seeing/unseeing that he associates with forgiveness.<sup>32</sup> This is an account he develops most explicitly in "Love Hides a Multitude of Sins."<sup>33</sup> The focus of this deliberation is the work of love in hiding sins. As Kierkegaard puts it, "*Love bides a multitude of sins. It does not discover sins; but not to discover what still must be there, insofar as it can be discovered—that is hiding.*"<sup>34</sup> Hiding sins, however, is not simply to overlook them, but rather involves the dialectical activity of seeing and unseeing—a dialectic where the sin is seen but at the same time is unseen. Let us touch upon each of these dialectical elements in turn.

On the one hand, in addressing a wrong committed by the other, it is important that one not merely ignore the wrong, but see the wrong clearly for what it is. In understanding this point, it is crucial to remember that for Kierkegaard the purpose of love is edification of the other,<sup>35</sup> which in this particular case is edification of the sinner who is an offender. To overlook the sin, to ignore it, or to downplay it in such a way that one thereby fails to challenge the offender and thereby leaves him to his wrongdoing, however, would be utterly unedifying. As Kierkegaard puts it in a later deliberation, "It

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<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 18-19 / *WL*, 10-11; 1 John 3:18.

<sup>32</sup> Portions of this section are reproduced verbatim from Matthew T. Nowachek, "Challenging the Violence of Retributivism: Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, and the Dialectic of Edification," *Journal for Peace and Justice Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014): 19-50. Permission for reuse of this material has been granted by the publisher.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *SKS* 5, 65-86 / *EUD*, 55-78.

<sup>34</sup> *SKS* 9, 280 / *WL*, 282.

<sup>35</sup> *SKS* 9, 212-26 / *WL*, 209-24.

would be a weakness, not love, to make the unloving one believe that he was right in the evil he did...No, it is of importance, it is part of love's work, that with the help of the loving one it becomes entirely clear to the unloving one how irresponsible he has acted so that he deeply feels his wrong."<sup>36</sup> Thus, just as a doctor might need to sharpen her focus on a cancerous growth so as to be able to attack and to remove it, in carrying out the work of love in forgiveness it is crucial that one focus one's vision with surgical precision on the particular wrong that was committed so that it may be forgiven.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, love for the sinner requires that one also carry out the particular task of vision in unseeing the same sin that is seen. Regardless of the offense, the offender still remains a bearer of love and one who is stamped with the eternal mark of the divine. As such, Kierkegaard is clear that this person ought to be loved, and loved in such a manner that the sin committed is not itself multiplied. In Kierkegaard's view, everything (even, for example, an upright demand for justice) may become an occasion for the multiplication of sin so long as such multiplication is not actively and perpetually opposed. To employ again the image of cancer, sin is like the malignant growth that, left untreated, will simply continue to grow. This means that to deny forgiveness by remaining focused on the sin is not only unloving, but also serves as a catalyst by which such sin is multiplied. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard writes about forgiveness in terms of unseeing. To unsee the sin is to remove it from one's vision and to hide it such that one is able to love the other fundamentally as the beloved and *not* to remain transfixed on the other as the sinner and offender who has wronged the lover. To drive home this point concerning making unseen what has been seen, Kierkegaard draws on

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<sup>36</sup> *SKS* 9, 333 / *WL*, 338.

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard does not dedicate too much explicit attention to the issue of justice in *Works of Love*, with one exception being his deliberation "Love Does Not Seek Its Own" (*SKS* 9, 263-77 / *WL*, 264-79). Nevertheless, the demand to see the wrong is clearly a requirement of justice—albeit a form of justice that centers on edification of the wrongdoer as opposed to, say, retribution. On this point, see Nowachek, "Challenging the Violence of Retributivism," 19-50.

the metaphor of hiding sins behind one's back: "What is hidden from my eyes, that I have never seen; but what is hidden behind my back, that I have seen."<sup>38</sup> In this sense, one sees the sin but then puts it out of sight by placing it behind one's back. And, by unseeing the wrong in this fashion, by hiding it, the lover creates a space in which the sinner can be met not as a moral monster for whom there exists no hope in this life or the next, but rather as the neighbor and the bearer of love out of whom love can be enticed in the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. For Kierkegaard, such paradoxical vision is at the very heart of faith. As he puts it, "Just as one by faith *believes* the *unseen into* what is seen, so the one who loves by forgiveness *believes away* what is seen. Both are faith. Blessed is the believer, he believes what he cannot see; blessed is the one who loves, he believes away that which he indeed can see!"<sup>39</sup>

From the discussion above we see how paradox with respect to vision, what we may now identify as *loving double-vision*,<sup>40</sup> is at the heart of Kierkegaard's account of Christian love. This dialectical expression of paradox, however, is not the only way in which paradox is at play in *Works of Love*. Rather, paradox also shows up in an etymological sense in relation to God's love as a foundation "in the ground" (*i Grunden*) that underlies and enables human love. In order to develop this point, we may begin with the notion of grounding itself after which we may then draw out the particular paradoxical nature of grounded love.

### *The Paradoxical Grounding of Love*

In the deliberation "Love Builds Up" Kierkegaard describes the edifying nature and function of Christian love by dwelling on the metaphor of building. Just as

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<sup>38</sup> SKS 9, 293 / WL, 296. This image is itself a Hebrew metaphor. See Isaiah 38:17.

<sup>39</sup> SKS 9, 292 / WL, 295.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 104.

constructing [i.e., *at bygge op*] a physical structure requires that one build upon a foundation “from *the ground up* [*fra Grunden af*],”<sup>41</sup> love, in order to edify (*at opbygge*) must likewise be built up from a foundation. Without such a foundation for one’s love, the lover would merely be “building in the air,”<sup>42</sup> which is to say not building at all. For Kierkegaard, then, the edifying work of love is indeed grounded, and it is love itself that serves as the foundation. As he describes it,

Love [*Kjerlighed*] is the source of everything and, in the spiritual sense, love is the deepest ground [*dybeste Grund*] of the spiritual life. In every human being in whom there is love, the foundation, in the spiritual sense, is laid. And the building that, in the spiritual sense, is to be erected is again love, and it is love that builds up. Love builds up, and this means it builds up in love.<sup>43</sup>

Such foundational love, however, cannot be laid by any human being since this task would be “suprahuman,”<sup>44</sup> but rather, it is laid by the divine.<sup>45</sup> Thus, God, who is himself love, not only determines the nature of love, but also implants love into each and every human being.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, this grounding is fundamentally hidden—concealed in the heart of the individual and thereby hidden from the world, but even concealed in part from the individual lover herself.<sup>47</sup> In making this claim, Kierkegaard, in the lead-off deliberation of *Works of Love*, employs the image of the hidden spring: “Love’s hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable [*uudgrundeligt*], and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness [*uudgrundeligt Sammenhæng*] with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates [*grunder*] deep down in the hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person’s love originate [*grunder*] even more deeply in God’s love.”<sup>48</sup> With respect

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<sup>41</sup> SKS 9, 218 / WL, 216. See also SKS 9, 226 / WL, 224.

<sup>42</sup> SKS 9, 214 / WL, 212.

<sup>43</sup> SKS 9, 218 / WL, 215.

<sup>44</sup> SKS 9, 219 / WL, 216.

<sup>45</sup> SKS 9, 219 / WL, 216. See also SKS 9, 147-8 / WL, 146.

<sup>46</sup> SKS 9, 129 / WL, 126.

<sup>47</sup> See SKS 9, 221 / WL, 218.

<sup>48</sup> SKS 9, 17 / WL, 9. On this point, see Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 162; Steven Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Transcendence* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 190.

to grounding, then, the picture we are given here is that divine love serves as the hidden foundation for all human love that is at the same time both the force that carries out the edification and the love that results from such edification.

It is here with Kierkegaard's identification of God's love as the hidden and unfathomable foundation for human love that paradox is clearly at work. More specifically, grounded love is associated with the etymological function of paradox as a limiting boundary. To continue with the image introduced above, because love originates in the deep spring of God's love it thus remains outside of what human understanding can fully grasp and what human beings have the ability to create and to control. As Kierkegaard puts it, "Just as the quiet lake originates darkly in the deep spring, so a human being's love originates mysteriously in God's love. Just as the quiet lake invites you to contemplate it but by the reflected image of darkness prevents you from seeing through it, so also the mysterious origin of love in God's love prevents you from seeing its ground."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Kierkegaard also points out that such divinely grounded love that is expressed through the divine command *you shall love the neighbor* "did not arise in any human being's heart."<sup>50</sup> As such, the understanding runs up against a limit that cannot be crossed, or better put, the hidden grounding of love and its associated divine commandment leads to a collision between the "merely human" and the "essentially Christian."<sup>51</sup> Rather than creating or discovering love on his her own power, then, it is imperative that every human being come to a standstill in order thereby to "come to know the deeper love *from God*..."<sup>52</sup> The paradoxicality of love in serving as a limiting force for human understanding and ability as described here mirrors the etymological descriptions of paradox we have outlined in previous chapters: the same dynamic is at

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<sup>49</sup> SKS 9, 18 / WL, 10.

<sup>50</sup> SKS 9, 32 / WL, 25.

<sup>51</sup> SKS 9, 117 / WL, 113. See also SKS 9, 32 / WL, 24-5.

<sup>52</sup> SKS 9, 358 / WL, 364 (my emphasis). See also SKS 9, 17-18 / WL, 9.

work in the paradox in *Fear and Trembling* whereby Abraham is unable to fall back on his human moral categories but instead runs up against the mystery of God in relation to which he must in faith wait upon God's empowering (*Chapter 2*); in the paradox in *The Sickness unto Death* whereby the self is unable to serve as its own grounding, but rather in receptivity must ground itself in the power that established it (*Chapter 3*); and in the paradox of the Incarnation in *Fragments* that serves as a boundary for the understanding in relation to which one must humbly decrease as well as in the paradox of the Incarnation in *Practice* that brings with it the possibility of offense in its demand that the individual meet God in humility (*Chapter 4*).

Such identification of grounded love as paradoxical in an etymological sense is supported by the fact that in describing such love Kierkegaard points to the possibility of offense. It is important to remember that for Kierkegaard the possibility of offense always accompanies the paradoxical and is a sign that paradox is at work in fundamental ways.<sup>53</sup> But why pair Christian love with the possibility of offense? Or, put in another way, what exactly is so offensive about grounded love?

First, the paradox of grounded love is offensive in that it demands that human understanding avow self-sufficiency in accepting divinely-imposed limitations. In a clear allusion to 1 Corinthians 1:23 and its reference to the perceived foolishness and offensiveness (*Daarskab og Forargelse*) of the gospel,<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard notes that grounded love as the essentially Christian comes into the world in contention with human reason (*Fornuft*) and with the purpose of bringing human sagacity (*Klogskab*) to the point of being

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<sup>53</sup> In general, the possibility of offense plays a key role in *Works of Love*. See, e.g., *SKS 9*, 65 / *WL*, 58-9. Indeed, Kierkegaard identifies the possibility of offense as "the greatest danger," but because it is something that always accompanies authentic Christianity it is that which in faith must continually be held open (*SKS 9*, 197-8 / *WL*, 199). Thus, for Kierkegaard it is important that we are weary of those who would try to do away with the possibility of offense (*SKS 9*, 198 / *WL*, 199). As has happened in Christendom, people have slowly become numb to this reality, and it is for this reason that it is crucial to rouse the sleeping believers into taking it seriously (*SKS 9*, 198-9 / *WL*, 199-200; *SKS 9*, 198 / *WL*, 199).

<sup>54</sup> *SKS 9*, 197 / *WL*, 198; *SKS 9*, 369 / *WL*, 376.

offended.<sup>55</sup> While it is nevertheless possible and necessary to understand love in a certain sense in that such basic understanding is a prerequisite to practicing love,<sup>56</sup> it is not possible to understand such love in the sense of fully grasping its grounding. Again, this is the direct consequence of the hiddenness and inaccessibility of such grounded love. Just as is the case in *Fragments*,<sup>57</sup> the collision of offense that results between the imperialistic understanding and the impenetrable boundary that is the mysterious grounding of love becomes a painful affair so long as one refuses to embrace his or her own limitations and to acknowledge the otherness of divine love. As Kierkegaard writes, “suffering is also the most painful and also the most pernicious when someone, instead of being gladdened by love in its manifestations, wants to take delight in fathoming [*at udgrunde*] it, that is, in disturbing it.”<sup>58</sup>

Second, the paradox of grounded love is offensive in that it demands self-denial as part of becoming an instrument of God. Kierkegaard is clear throughout *Works of Love* that self-denial is fundamental to the proper practice of love.<sup>59</sup> To develop this point he draws on the language of self-sacrificing and annihilation. With respect to the former, he writes, “By love...God understands self-sacrificing love in the divine sense, the self-sacrificing love that sacrifices everything in order to make room for God...”<sup>60</sup> With respect to the latter, Kierkegaard employs the same language of “annihilation” (*Tilintetjorelse*) that Anti-Climacus employs in *The Sickness unto Death* to talk about the task

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<sup>55</sup> SKS 9, 198 / WL, 199; SKS 9, 228 / WL, 226. Cf. SKS 9, 28 / WL, 20; Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory,” 90; Walsh, *Kierkegaard*, 163; Søltøft, *Kierkegaard og Kærlighedens Skikkelser*, 273. For a good discussion of *Kløgskab*, see Mark A. Tietjen, “Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kierkegaard on Prudence,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Christian Discourses: And, The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 165-189.

<sup>56</sup> SKS 9, 32 / WL, 24-5.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., SKS 4, 253 / PF, 49.

<sup>58</sup> SKS 9, 17 / WL, 9.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., SKS 9, 62 / WL, 56; SKS 9, 354 / WL, 360.

<sup>60</sup> SKS 9, 123 / WL, 119.

of faith in annihilating the possibility of offense,<sup>61</sup> but here he ties annihilation specifically to striving to relate to God properly in one's loving:

[The world claims]: Above all, be an earnest person by having forgotten the one and only earnestness, to relate yourself to God, to become nothing [*at blive til Intet*]. Oh, but keep in mind—yet it does not help to talk—but would to God that you might understand what you lost, that this annihilation [*Tilintetgjørelse*] before God is so blessed that you at every moment would seek to return to this annihilation more intensely, more warmly, more fervently than the blood returns to the place from which it was forcibly expelled. But to worldly wisdom [*verdslig Klogskab*] this, of course, is and must be the greatest foolishness [*Daarskab*]. Therefore [the world claims] never hold fast to God...“never hold fast to God, because by holding fast to him, you lose what no one who holds fast to the world ever lost, not even the person who lost the most—you lose unconditionally everything.”<sup>62</sup>

The underlying point of both self-sacrifice and annihilation is the demand that the individual lover become humble before God, particularly in the admission that in one's own power one is unable to do anything, let alone successfully carry out the Christian task of love.<sup>63</sup> This, in turn requires that the individual turn to God and his grounded love in dependence and obedience in order to seek grace and forgiveness so as to allow oneself to serve as a loving instrument (*Redskab*) for God<sup>64</sup>—a movement radically offensive to the autonomous natural human who wants to retain control over himself rather than relinquish such control in becoming a tool in the hands of the divine.

### 5.3 - Loss of Tension: Improper Loves as Departures from Paradox

Having outlined several ways in which paradox is at play in *Works of Love*, we may now discuss the concrete implications such paradox carries for existence. To begin, I briefly outline in this section three forms of love that prove improper in their departures

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<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 11, 131 / *SUD*, 15; *SKS* 11, 133 / *SUD*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> *SKS* 9, 107 / *WL*, 103.

<sup>63</sup> See *SKS* 9, 358-9 / *WL*, 365.

<sup>64</sup> *SKS*, 9, 358 / *WL*, 364. See also *SKS* 9, 91 / *WL*, 86.

from paradox, and which Kierkegaard in turn associates with enervation and loss of tension.<sup>65</sup> With their improper groundings and their resultant visual impairments, such loves provide a good contrast to the account of Christian love we develop in *Section 5.4*.

### *Three Improper Loves*

One improper form of love is the expression of love practiced by the common citizen in Christendom. Rather than grounding his love on the paradoxical foundation of God's love, this person instead grounds his love in the finite and the social. In loving, he takes his cues from his fellow Danish citizens—the crowd—and as a result, rather than being a radical response to God's love and God's love commandment, his love is reduced to an exercise in emulating the behavior, customs, and norms of his society. For example, the Christendom lover would claim that to love in a proper Christian manner need not require anything as extreme (or even as apparently perverse) as loving one's enemies,<sup>66</sup> but rather can be as simple as fulfilling one's marital duties, taking good care of one's children or nurturing one's friendships.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, once one has interpreted and appropriated the Christendom norms for love, all that remains to be done is to solidify these norms in one's daily life through habit (*Vane*).<sup>68</sup> Such love can be appropriately characterized (in keeping with our visual theme) as suffering from the visual impairment of near-sightedness in the sense that the lover's vision extends merely to his own immediate preferential loves, whether mother, father, wife, child, friend or

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<sup>65</sup> Whereas Kierkegaard reserves the word *Kjerlighed* for Christian love, he describes these loves in terms of *Forkjerlighed* and *Elskov*.

<sup>66</sup> Though habitual and for the most part unreflective, Christendom love is nevertheless still informed by a certain kind of sagacity (*Klogskab*), which means that one nevertheless remains sensible and calculating in one's love, never loving in a manner that would be risky or that would place one in a position of radical vulnerability.

<sup>67</sup> Judge William's apparent conflation of the love expressed through the institution of marriage with authentic Christian love in *Either/Or* could qualify nicely here. On this point, see Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 112.

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 43-5 / *WL*, 36-7.

colleague. In that such a cultural lover has no sight for the neighbor, we may say that such vision clearly fails to achieve the paradoxical duplicity Kierkegaard describes as requisite of Christian love.

A second improper form of love is the aesthetic expression practiced by the romantic poet. In contrast to the Christendom lover who looks to a finite and cultural grounding for his love, the poet attempts to ground his love on some sense of the infinite and the eternal. In that the concrete is perceived by the poet as itself imperfect and incomplete, he perpetually pushes his love away from this to the ideal where it is apparently rendered safe and secure.<sup>69</sup> As Sharon Krishek puts it, “In a way, the aesthetic lover wants to turn the first *moment* of love into an *eternity*. He wants to ‘freeze’ the moment of interest and create for himself a sphere devoid of the threatening passage of time...”<sup>70</sup> What loving in this fashion means, however, is that the poet no longer loves a real human being, but merely an ideal projection of his own creation.<sup>71</sup> Again, as Krishek notes, with their love the romantic poets “all manage to hold on safely and securely to *something*—but *not* to what they had originally intended. They all end up without genuinely relating to the actual object of their love.”<sup>72</sup> Although such poetic love involves the eternal in some form, for Kierkegaard it is nevertheless still improperly grounded in that such eternity is not God’s eternal love that requires vulnerability and total dependence upon divine provision, but rather the eternal as an idealized projection of the poet who ultimately desires to retain control over his love. Such love can be appropriately characterized as suffering from the visual impairment of far-sightedness in the sense that the poet is so focused in his love on the distant ideal that he is entirely unable to see the

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<sup>69</sup> This is a similar movement that Socrates makes in the *Symposium*.

<sup>70</sup> Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> What we see here is that such idealized love operates, in fact, as a veiled form of self-love. As Kierkegaard puts it, “Christianity certainly knows far better than any poet what love is and what it means to love. For this very reason it also knows what perhaps escapes the poets, that the love they celebrate is secretly self-love...” *SKS* 9, 27 / *WL*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, 13. See also Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 86-7.

concrete particular who is right in front of him. Thus, just as in the case of civic love, poetic love too fails to achieve the paradoxical duplicity that Kierkegaard describes as fundamental to Christian love.

A third improper form of love is the expression of self-love practiced by the person of *Indesluttethed*. To recall Anti-Climacus' definition, *Indesluttethed* is "inwardness with a jammed lock"<sup>73</sup> behind which "sits the self, so to speak, watching itself, preoccupied with or filling up time with not willing to be itself and *yet being self enough to love [at elske] itself*."<sup>74</sup> The key difference, however, between this self-love and the particular self-love of the Christian lover that Kierkegaard identifies as central to all proper love,<sup>75</sup> is that whereas the latter grounds itself in the love of God and thereby serves the purpose of fostering love for God and love for others, the latter is grounded strictly in the prideful self that desires to separate itself from God and from others. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard identifies such hidden self-love as "the most dangerous traitor of all" that "consists in selfishly not willing to love oneself in the right way..."<sup>76</sup> Similarly, he describes it as "the most dangerous kind of faithlessness"<sup>77</sup> and the ultimate despair that, in refusing to be changed by duty's shall, thereby loses the eternal.<sup>78</sup> Such prideful love could appropriately be identified as an extreme expression of narcissistic vision. Just as Narcissus in the Greek myth becomes so infatuated with the image of himself reflected in a pool of water that he misses the call of Echo as the concrete other beside him and thereby dies utterly alone in the isolation of his own self-love, for Kierkegaard the person of *Indesluttethed* becomes so selfishly transfixed by his own self-created and self-sustained image of selfhood that he becomes increasingly cut off from all forms of

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<sup>73</sup> SKS 11, 186 / SUD, 72.

<sup>74</sup> SKS 11, 177 / SUD, 63 (my emphasis).

<sup>75</sup> SKS 9, 111 / WL, 107.

<sup>76</sup> SKS 9, 31 / WL, 23.

<sup>77</sup> SKS 9, 166 / WL, 166.

<sup>78</sup> SKS 9, 48 / WL, 40-1. See also SKS 9, 251-2 / WL, 252.

otherness. Such visual impairment, what could be likened to the gradual process of losing one's sight due to cataracts, entails that God and human others slowly fade into fuzziness and darkness with the result that the person of *Indesluttethed* is left utterly alone in his own self-centered blindness.

*Improper Loves, Enervation, and Loss of Tension*

For Kierkegaard, the improper loves outlined above are associated with enervation and loss of tension in various ways. Consider a few points in support of this claim.

With respect to civic Christendom love, for example, by departing from the eternal source of God's love for the finitude of social comparison one not only ceases "to move forward"<sup>79</sup> (*bevæge sig fremad*) by focusing on oneself,<sup>80</sup> but one thereby slides into a state of extreme enervation. Kierkegaard puts this point forcefully by drawing on several striking images:

Comparison is the noxious shoot that stunts the growth of the tree; the cursed tree becomes a withered shadow, but the noxious shoot flourishes with noxious luxuriance. Comparison is like the neighbor's swampy ground; even if your house is not built upon it, it sinks nevertheless. Comparison is like the secret consumption's hidden worm, which does not die, at least not until it has eaten the life out of love. Comparison is a loathsome rash that turns inward and is eating at the marrow. Therefore beware of comparison in your love!<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, with respect to habit in love Kierkegaard writes of the "indolence of habit" (*Vanes Dvaskehed*) by which one loses "the tension of eternity" (*Evighedens Spændkraft*)

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<sup>79</sup> SKS 9, 182 / WL, 182.

<sup>80</sup> In criticizing social comparison, Kierkegaard likens it to a flying arrow that "has an impulse to want to dwell on itself, perhaps in order to see how far it has come, or how high it is soaring above the earth, or how its speed compares with the speed of another arrow that is also flying with the speed of an arrow," which ultimately means that "in that same second the arrow falls to the ground" (SKS 9, 182 / WL, 182).

<sup>81</sup> SKS 9, 186 / WL, 186.

much in the same way that over the years “a spring loses its tension [*Spændkraft*] and becomes weak.”<sup>82</sup> A few pages later he offers this stark critique of habit:

Just as the river that sprang out of the rocks is dissipated further down in the sluggishness of the dead waters, so also love is dissipated in the lukewarmness and indifference of habit [*Vanes Lunkenhed og Ligegyldighed*]. Alas, of all enemies, habit is perhaps the most cunning, and above all it is cunning enough never to let itself be seen, because the person who sees the habit is saved from the habit. Habit is not like other enemies that one sees and against which one aggressively defends oneself; the struggle is actually with oneself in getting to see it. There is a predatory creature, known for its cunning, that slyly attacks the sleeping; while it is sucking blood from the sleeper, it fans and cools him and makes his sleep even more pleasant. Such is habit—or it is even worse; that creature seeks its prey among the sleeping, but it has no means to lull to sleep those who are awake. Habit, however, has this; it sneaks, sleep-lulling, upon a person, and when this has happened it sucks the blood of the sleeper while it fans and cools him and makes his sleep even more pleasant.<sup>83</sup>

With this passage Kierkegaard is not attacking habit in all of its manifestations,<sup>84</sup> but rather he is drawing out how habit becomes problematic when it is tied to worldly comfort. Kierkegaard is sharply critical of such worldly comfort precisely because of the manner by which it leads to relaxation of the tension that is at the heart of Christianity and Christian love. Thus, towards the end of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard describes the comfortable lover in Christendom in critical terms as one who “does not take too much to heart eternity’s or God’s requirement for an essential and essentially strenuous [*anstrengt*] life” but who is much happier to live life “easy and comfortable [*let og beqvemt*].”<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, the drive for security underlying both the poet’s idealized love and the demonic individual’s self-love likewise leads to enervation and loss of tension. With

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<sup>82</sup> SKS 9, 34-5 / WL, 27.

<sup>83</sup> SKS 9, 43-4 / WL, 36.

<sup>84</sup> Kierkegaard is not in principle opposed to all forms of habit. Rather, he would likely be in favor of habit as the means by which one fosters a virtuous disposition of faith. On this point, see, e.g., Mark A. Tietjen, *Kierkegaard, Communication, and Virtue: Authorship as Edification* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>85</sup> SKS 9, 363 / WL, 370.

respect to the former, Kierkegaard points out that in attempting to secure his love against loss by idealizing it, the poet transforms his love into a form of static self-love devoid of all of the risk and vulnerability associated with loving the other in her concrete particularity.<sup>86</sup> Without such risk and vulnerability, however, this love is unable to move, to change, and to grow. As such, rather than a fortress to protect love, such idealized love becomes instead a prison of selfishness within which the alienated poet slides into the suffocating and enervating noxiousness of self-love.<sup>87</sup> Something similar could be said of the self-love of the person of *Indesluttethed*. In attempting to protect his self-love by pulling away from God and from others, and by attempting to take such love into his own control, the demonic individual becomes increasingly enervated. To describe this dynamic, Kierkegaard employs the images of sickness and sinking. Just as the jaundiced individual “sees everything yellow,” the demonic self-lover in his own despairing revolt against God and others sees everything in a negative light and thereby “sinks deeper and deeper [*sinker dybere og dybere*]” into his own sickness.<sup>88</sup> In refusing God and God’s transformative love as well as by refusing to open himself in love to his fellow human beings—in other words, by “locking himself out of love” (*lukker sig selv ude fra Kjerlighed*),<sup>89</sup> this person thereby cuts himself off from the power and vitality that sustains human existence. Such, for Kierkegaard, is an apt description of the despair where one slips into greater and greater nothingness and thereby becomes ultimately “shut out [*udelukket*] from salvation [*Saligheden*].”<sup>90</sup> Thus, far from hell being other people,<sup>91</sup> for Kierkegaard hell could more appropriately be described in C.S. Lewis’ terms as the empty lifelessness

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<sup>86</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 27 / *WL*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *SKS* 9, 246 / *WL*, 246.

<sup>88</sup> *SKS* 9, 284 / *WL*, 286.

<sup>89</sup> *SKS* 9, 14 / *WL*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> *SKS* 9, 262 / *WL*, 263.

<sup>91</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit: A Play in One Act*, trans. Paul Bowles (New York, NY: Samuel French, 1958).

in which the defiant individual is allowed exactly what he despairingly desires, that is, to be left utterly alone in his self-love.<sup>92</sup>

#### 5.4 - Sacred Tension: Christian Love as Embracing Paradox

The paradoxes of love, however, need not result in enervation and loss of tension. Rather, when embraced in their etymological and dialectical forms they play a central role in fostering and sustaining an existential state of vitality and tension that is fundamentally informed by the virtues of humility, courage, and hope. In developing this claim, we may begin by turning to sacred tension in relation to love's paradoxical grounding.

##### *Loving within the Sacred Tension: Love's Paradoxical Grounding*

The attempt to articulate an account of sacred tension in relation to the picture of grounding sketched above nevertheless leads to an important objection. In short, is not the claim that love is grounded simply to slip back into a kind of foundationalism that is antithetical to vitality and tension? Put differently, is it not contrary to sacred tension as we have been describing it thus far in this dissertation to talk as Kierkegaard does, for example, about love being made secure or coming to rest in the grounding of God's love?

First off, it is important to point out that for Kierkegaard the rejection of God's love as a foundation is in no way vitalizing as one may be led to believe. Instead, such a rejection is deeply nihilistic. To recall our earlier discussion, in relation to divine grounding Kierkegaard remarks that to build up "without a foundation [*Grundvold*] at all

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<sup>92</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (London: HarperCollins, 2002).

is impossible—it is building in the air,<sup>93</sup> which entails that the humanistic attempt to do away with such grounding, that is, to “unground” (i.e., *udgrunde*)<sup>94</sup> love, whether by seeking an alternative pseudo-foundation or by rejecting all foundations, is to slip into the absurdity of groundlessness. Such is the consequence of social comparison and poetic idealization, but also of the demonic individual who refuses to bind himself to divine love as is proper,<sup>95</sup> and instead in despair binds himself to himself.<sup>96</sup>

In contrast to such groundlessness, embracing God, God’s love, and God’s law as foundational is exactly what allows one to avoid the collapse into nihilism. As Kierkegaard writes,

God wants each individual, for the sake of certainty [*Sikkerhedens...Skyld*] and of equality and of responsibility, to learn for himself the Law’s requirement. When this is the case, there is durability [*er der Hold*] in existence, because God has a firm hold on it [*har Hold i den*]. There is no vortex [*Hvirvel*], because each individual begins, not with “the others” and therefore not with evasions and excuses, but begins with the God-relationship and therefore stands firm [*staaer han fast*] and thereby also stops, as far as he reaches, the dizziness that is the beginning of mutiny.<sup>97</sup>

What is implied here, then, is not some static foundationalism, but rather a dynamic foundation that is God, through his own love and love commandment, perpetually holding onto the lover. Moreover, for Kierkegaard rather than being enervating and contrary to tension, such a dynamic grounding is fundamentally vitalizing and enabling. To make this point, he draws on the language of “nourishment” (*Næring*): the one who loves, and particularly loves by believing all things, “is like those plants whose propagation is hidden—he breathes in God; he draws nourishment from his love for

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<sup>93</sup> SKS 9, 214 / WL, 212.

<sup>94</sup> SKS 9, 17 / WL, 9.

<sup>95</sup> See SKS 9, 37 / WL, 29; SKS 9, 118 / WL, 114-15; SKS 9, 353 / WL, 359. For a good commentary on this point, see Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 38.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. SKS 11, 144 / SUD, 28.

<sup>97</sup> SKS 9, 121 / WL, 118.

God, he is strengthened [*styrker*] by God.”<sup>98</sup> Such nourishment, however, does not happen once and for all, but rather is a continuous process that extends from an ongoing relationship of dependence upon God.<sup>99</sup>

It is with this particular account of grounding as a dynamic, vitalizing, and enabling force that Kierkegaard thus associates love with stability. For example, Kierkegaard composes an entire deliberation on how Christian love “abides” (*bliver*) in the sense of sustaining all love and even all of existence by means of perpetual activity.<sup>100</sup> As he writes, “with regard to human love we say that love abides, it is readily apparent that this is a work or that it is not an inactive characteristic [ *hvilende Egenskab*] that love has as such, but a characteristic that acquired at every moment [*i hvert Øieblik*], and also, at every moment is acquired, is an active work.”<sup>101</sup> Moreover, in the deliberation “You *Shall* Love,” Kierkegaard describes the stability of Christian love in terms of “enduring continuance” (*Bestandighed*) that is granted by God when love has “undergone the change of eternity by having become a duty...”<sup>102</sup> It is through such stability that love is thereby liberated. As Kierkegaard puts it with regards to the love commandment, “This *shall*, then, makes love free in blessed independence. Such a love stands [*staaer*] and does not fall with the contingency of its object but stands and falls with the Law of eternity—but then, of course, it never falls. Such love is not dependent on this or that; it is dependent only on that alone which liberates—therefore it is eternally independent.”<sup>103</sup> Just as with

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<sup>98</sup> SKS 9, 244 / WL, 244.

<sup>99</sup> On this point, see Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 261. As Kierkegaard puts it in drawing on another metaphor, it is by means of “the eternal that Christianity at every moment [*i ethvert Øieblik*] creates fresh air and a prospect” (SKS 9, 246-7 / WL, 246).

<sup>100</sup> See “Love Abides,” which is a deliberation on 1 Corinthians 13:13 in SKS 9, 298-311 / WL, 300-14. See also SKS 9, 16 / WL, 8. For a good commentary on this topic, see Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 180, 184. Cf. Kierkegaard's similar use of *bliver* in *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* (SKS 11, 48 / WA, 44-5).

<sup>101</sup> SKS 9, 299-300 / WL, 301-2. See Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 180.

<sup>102</sup> SKS 9, 39 / WL, 32. Kierkegaard continues: “[I]t is not self-evident that what exists [*bestaaer*] at this moment will also exist [*bestaaer*] at the next moment, but it is self-evident that the enduring [*Bestandige*] exists [*bestaaer*].” Cf. SKS 9, 39 / WL, 31; SKS 9, 41 / WL, 33. See also SKS 9, 181 / WL, 180: as Kierkegaard writes, in order for love to remain vital it “*must be kept [bliver] in its element,*” which is “infinite, inexhaustibility, immeasurability.”

<sup>103</sup> SKS 9, 46 / WL, 39.

the image of the faithful bridesmaid who remains standing in vigilant expectation of the bridegroom,<sup>104</sup> the language employed here of standing (*Bestandighed; at staa*) is to be read not as static resting, but rather in terms of dynamic activity.

When love abides in the manner described here, the Christian lover is therefore afforded a specific kind of security. For example, Kierkegaard remarks, “Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured [*evig betrygget*] against every change, eternally made free in blessed independence, eternally and happily secured [*evig lykkelig sikkeret*] against despair.”<sup>105</sup> Later on, he employs even stronger language in talking about becoming perfectly secured: “*only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured* [*evig betrygget*]. This security of eternity [*Evighedens Betryggethed*] casts out all anxiety and makes love perfect, perfectly secured [*fuldkommen betrygget*].”<sup>106</sup> In addition, security also plays out in the sense of helping the lover to become “eternally and infinitely secured” (*evigt og uendeligt sikkeret*) against deception.<sup>107</sup> This is the main point of Kierkegaard’s deliberation “Love Believes All Things—and Yet Is Never Deceived,” in which he argues that in believing all things by grounding one’s love in the eternal, one can never be deceived so long as one continues to believe by remaining properly grounded in one’s love.<sup>108</sup> All of this discussion of security in love can be summarized in a simple point Kierkegaard makes in the conclusion to *Works of Love*: the security of authentic Christianity relies entirely on the dynamic interrelation between God’s provision and the faithful individual’s trust in such provision.

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<sup>104</sup> See Matthew 25:1-13. Kierkegaard discusses the image of the slumbering bridesmaids in several places. See, e.g., *SKS* 5, 213-14 / *EUD*, 213-14; *SKS* 7, 361 / *CUP1*, 396; *SKS* 8, 337-8 / *UD*, 237-8.

<sup>105</sup> *SKS* 9, 36 / *WL*, 29 (bold emphasis removed).

<sup>106</sup> *SKS* 9, 40 / *WL*, 33. For a similar statement, see *SKS* 9, 41 / *WL*, 34. Furthermore, Kierkegaard contrasts the security provided by the eternal and love for and from God with the insecure love that is merely between human beings (without God’s love as the middle term). See *SKS* 9, 132 / *WL*, 129.

<sup>107</sup> *SKS* 9, 244 / *WL*, 243.

<sup>108</sup> See *SKS* 9, 228 / *WL*, 226. See also *SKS* 9, 241 / *WL*, 240; *SKS* 9, 243 / *WL*, 242-3.

This sense of security in turn carries important implications for how Kierkegaard construes the notions of rest and comfort. In contrast to the rest associated with Christendom love, which is actually a destructive form of restlessness,<sup>109</sup> proper rest in love is what it means to find peace in the grounding of the eternal and the eternal love commandment. For example, Kierkegaard writes, “‘You *shall* believe’...Never has any greater security been found, and never will the peace of eternity [*Evighedens Hvile*] be found in anything other than this *shall*.”<sup>110</sup> In a striking passage from “Love Abides,” Kierkegaard likewise describes the Christian lover as finding rest in the eternal. As he notes, “His love is eternal, relates itself to eternity, rests [*hviler*] in the eternal. Therefore *at every moment* he is waiting for the same thing he is waiting for *eternally*, and therefore without restlessness [*Uro*], because in eternity there is time enough.”<sup>111</sup> It is exactly such vigilant and active waiting that is the “elevated calmness”<sup>112</sup> (*ophøiet Ro*) and “holy stillness”<sup>113</sup> (*bellige Stilhed*) characteristic of faithful dependence on God and which is another expression of Kierkegaard’s metaphor of the “quiet” (*stille*) surface of the lake fed at its bottom by a gushing spring.<sup>114</sup> Thus, in contrast to the “emptiness and loathsomeness in human grounds of comfort [*menneskelige Trostegrunde*]” that offer no consolation,<sup>115</sup> Christianity provides the only genuine sense of comfort: “Christianity always has consolation [*Trost*], and its consolation is different from all human consolation in that the latter is aware only of being a compensation for the loss of joy—Christian consolation *is joy*.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> SKS 9, 217 / WL, 214.

<sup>110</sup> SKS 9, 41 / WL, 34.

<sup>111</sup> SKS 9, 309 / WL, 312.

<sup>112</sup> SKS 9, 337 / WL, 342-3.

<sup>113</sup> SKS 9, 248 / WL, 248.

<sup>114</sup> SKS 9, 17-18 / WL, 9-10.

<sup>115</sup> SKS 9, 49 / WL, 42.

<sup>116</sup> SKS 9, 71 / WL, 64. Such joy is nevertheless fundamentally ongoing and active, which is exactly the idea underlying Kierkegaard’s claim that “to love people is the only blessed comfort [*den eneste salige Trost*] both here and in the next world” (SKS 9, 368 / WL, 375).

From the discussion above we now see how the sacred tension associated with embracing love's paradoxical grounding is indeed informed by a certain sense of stability, security, rest, and comfort. Given this point, however, it is important in order to avoid confusion to conclude this discussion of grounding by reiterating that for Kierkegaard love still necessarily involves some element of instability, insecurity, restlessness, and discomfort. It is not as if in grounding one's love on God's love one need no longer take any risk in love or that one may settle back in comfort with the coziness of divine assurance. To the contrary, the human lover always finds himself in a state of vulnerability where he is constantly faced with the possibility of loss, suffering, and the threat of meaninglessness. As we noted above, it is the desire to overcome such instability and insecurity that pushes the lover in civic Christendom to seek certainty in his cultural categories, the poet in his idealizations, and the demonic individual in his self-love. For Kierkegaard, though, in carrying out the task of loving one is not to avoid such instability and insecurity, but rather to embrace it while at the same time throwing oneself in faith onto the firm (albeit dynamic) foundation of God's love. Furthermore, such love is restless and uncomfortable not only because it is "in itself motion [*Bevægelse*],"<sup>117</sup> but also because such motion is fundamentally a motion of perpetual struggle. It is precisely in this sense that Kierkegaard writes of how "the certitude of faith" (*Troens Visshed*) is inseparable from the "struggle of faith" (*Troens Strid*).<sup>118</sup> By emphasizing such a duality in love, Kierkegaard thereby pushes his reader into a place of tension where one remains vulnerable in the insecurity of one's earthly loves but simultaneously remains secure both in one's trust in God's love and in the belief that

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<sup>117</sup> SKS 9, 18 / WL, 10.

<sup>118</sup> SKS 9, 372 / WL, 379-80. For a good commentary on this idea, see Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 145.

such love will nevertheless work all things for good.<sup>119</sup> Such a faithful existential stance of heightened tension is exactly that which Kierkegaard characterizes over and over again in his writings in terms of fear and trembling where one is out over 70,000 fathoms of water but still remains joyful. And it is exactly this stance in relation to the paradoxical grounding of God's love that proves central to what it means to love within the sacred tension.

*Loving within the Sacred Tension: Love's Paradoxical Double-Vision*

In embracing the paradoxes of vision the Christian lover is likewise ushered into a state of sacred tension. One way this plays out is that in practicing the dialectical vision of Christian love the lover finds resolve in neither of the dialectical poles, but rather she lives in a manner by which she perpetually holds together both in a tense relationship. Regarding the blindness/seeing dialectic, although Kierkegaard does assign a priority of sorts to blindness given both his concern regarding how love in Christendom has been reduced to preferential love and his corrective aim, he is also clear that to attempt to love God in a manner antithetical to love for the other in his or her particularity would be a radical departure from authentic Christianity. As such, the Christian lover is required by paradox to remain in a state of tension whereby she both sees the other as neighbor and sees the other as concrete particular, and thus perpetually plays each of these forms of vision against the other in order to sharpen the practice of both. With respect to the seeing/unseeing dialectic, both acts of seeing and unseeing are likewise essential to what it means to love in a proper fashion. Neither act of merely unseeing the sin or merely seeing the sin would be edifying. Thus, Christian love likewise necessitates that the lover

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. Romans 8:28; *SKS* 5, 28 / *EUD*, 19: "What, then, is the eternal power in a human being? It is faith. What is the expectancy of faith? Victory—or, as Scripture so earnestly and so movingly teaches us, that all things must serve for good those who love God."

exist in such a manner that she hold together both of these acts of vision in constant tension and without allowing one to undermine the other. It is only through such tension that she may continue to move forward in living out the loving task of forgiveness.

A second way in which sacred tension plays out with respect to the paradoxes of vision is in the sense that the lover is required to love in a manner by which she perpetually carries out her loving vision even as this vision is never completed. For Kierkegaard, this is what it means to talk about loving vision in terms of action. Such a sense of action is that which Kierkegaard points to in his striking description of Christian love as the holy process of fulfilling the law:

Christian love, which is the fulfilling of the Law...is sheer action [*idel Handlen*]; consequently it is as far from inaction [*Uvirksomhed*] as it is from busyness. It never accepts anything in advance or gives a promise in place of action; it never rests [*tillfredsstiller*] satisfied in the delusion of being finished; it never dwells on itself; it never sits idle [*sidder den orkesløs*] marveling at itself...Christian love is sheer action, and its every work is holy, because it is the fulfilling of the Law.<sup>120</sup>

Moreover, Kierkegaard describes this perpetual carrying out of loving vision in terms of striving (*Stræben*).<sup>121</sup> In loving the other through loving double-vision one is required to adopt a militant (*stridende*)<sup>122</sup> disposition in which one remains in a constant struggle (*Strid*)<sup>123</sup> to see the other as both neighbor and concrete particular, both sinner and beloved, and thereby perpetually to carry out the tasks of loving and forgiveness. In attempting to shed some light on the idea of such active and striving love, Ferreira offers a helpful distinction between fulfilment and completion:

The word “fulfill” is ambiguous—it can mean two quite different things. Kierkegaard assumes that I can fulfill the love commandment whenever I act in the appropriate way: love can be shown “in the least little triviality as well as in the greatest sacrifice” (WL, 181). There is nothing that cannot be done lovingly,

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<sup>120</sup> SKS 9, 103 / WL, 98-9. See also SKS 9, 299-300 / WL, 301-2.

<sup>121</sup> See, e.g., SKS 9, 174 / WL, 174: “...if you want to be perfect in love, strive [*stræb*] to fulfill this duty...”

<sup>122</sup> SKS 9, 193-4 / WL, 194.

<sup>123</sup> See, e.g., SKS 9, 191-2 / WL, 192.

with a sense of responsible caring—for this reason, Kierkegaard thinks fulfillment of the commandment is something of which everyone is capable (with grace). If I can at a given point in time perform a loving action, then I am capable of fulfilling the duty to love. But this is different from *completing* the duty to love—there will always be more I can do. I can never finish the task, but that does not mean that I can never fulfill the duty. So we can fulfill the command to love or take infinite responsibility even though we cannot complete it.<sup>124</sup>

What Ferreira describes here is exactly the state of tension of the lover of double-vision. In her loving vision the lover is perpetually pushed to love perfectly by actively striving to hold together both dialectical aspects of vision. And in this fashion she exists in the space of radical tension in which she is continuously bringing her loving vision to fulfillment even as she is never capable of bringing the same loving vision to completion.<sup>125</sup>

In order to provide a concrete picture of the sacred tension associated with paradoxical double-vision, and particularly the paradoxical dialectic of seeing/unseeing that is forgiveness, Kierkegaard turns his reflections in *Works of Love* to the figure of Christ. For Kierkegaard, Christ serves as the “prototype,” “the explanation,” the one whose life is “sheer love,” and the “highest example” of what it means to fulfil and to perfect the law.<sup>126</sup> As such Kierkegaard also understands Christ’s particular loving vision as the greatest exemplar of what it means to love within the sacred tension.<sup>127</sup> But what, exactly, is this loving vision to which Kierkegaard refers?

One way in which Christ manifests his loving vision is in relation to the crowd and Sanhedrin council that he faces prior to his crucifixion. In setting up this account in “Love Hides a Multitude of Sins,” Kierkegaard begins by asking his readers to envision

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<sup>124</sup> Ferreira, *Kierkegaard*, 137. See also Ferreira, “Love,” 339-40.

<sup>125</sup> Such tension is particularly clear in the task of paradoxical double-vision that is forgiveness in the sense that forgiveness is never simply granted once and for all, but rather is continuously upheld in the action and striving of the one forgiving to continue to see the other in a paradoxical fashion as *simul justus et peccator*—simultaneously sinner and saved.

<sup>126</sup> *SKS* 9, 105 / *WL*, 100; *SKS* 9, 106 / *WL*, 101; *SKS* 9, 263 / *WL*, 264; *SKS* 9, 285 / *WL*, 287; *SKS* 9, 285 / *WL*, 288.

<sup>127</sup> By focusing here on Christ’s vision, I follow the lead of Hall and Gouwens. See Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, 41-2; Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 205.

Christ's condemners and their harmful gaze: "imagine the raging crowd; imagine the circle of dignitaries—and then imagine how many a glance [*Blik*] was directed at [Christ], aimed at him, only waiting for him to look in that direction so that its glance could also convey its mockery, its contempt, its pity, its scorn for the accused!"<sup>128</sup> In response to such condemnation Christ could justifiably have paid back the crowd and the council with his own righteously wrathful gaze. But this is not how the scene plays out in Kierkegaard's retelling. Christ's vision was instead the look of loving blindness in which he discovered nothing and thereby hid the multitude of sins of his accusers.<sup>129</sup> In this fashion, just as with the children's game in which one pretends not to see what is before oneself, Christ, with his particular vision "loves with his eyes open" and in this way he is "unable to see the evil that takes place right in front of [him]."<sup>130</sup> For Kierkegaard, Christ's radical love of his accusers in this fashion is indeed a form of madness. It is, however, not madness as understood by the offended human sensibility, but rather a "divine kind of madness"<sup>131</sup> that is a pure expression of compassion and forgiveness.

A second way in which Christ manifests his loving vision is in relation to his disciple Peter. Kierkegaard describes this dynamic in "Our Duty to Love the People We See" within his discussion of what it means to love irrespective of any change in the object of love. Regarding this theme he writes, "*there is no limit to love; if the duty is to be fulfilled, love must be limitless, it is unchanged, no matter how the object becomes changed.*"<sup>132</sup> For Kierkegaard, this account of love is particularly applicable to Peter: over the course of Christ's ministry, Peter changed in many ways with the most tragic change being his transformation from friend to traitor who, rather than rushing to the aid of Jesus in his

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<sup>128</sup> *SKS* 9, 285 / *WL*, 287.

<sup>129</sup> This is the same dynamic that plays out in Christ's statement from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" See Luke 23:34 (NIV).

<sup>130</sup> *SKS* 9, 285 / *WL*, 287.

<sup>131</sup> *SKS* 9, 285 / *WL*, 287.

<sup>132</sup> *SKS* 9, 168 / *WL*, 167.

time of need prior to the crucifixion, becomes instead a cowering spectator. As

Kierkegaard describes the betrayal,

[Peter] came, he was present, but he did not lift a finger; he calmly stood there and looked on—yet, no, he did not stand calmly; his one and only thought was to save himself and on any condition; he did not even take flight (that would have been almost more forgivable); no, he remained standing there as a spectator [*blev staaende som—Tilskuere*], which he made sure he could be, by denying [Christ]...<sup>133</sup>

With this particular spectator's gaze Peter therefore joins the "blinded [*forblindet*], raging crowd" and its own harmful gaze in heaping insult upon Christ.<sup>134</sup> How, then, did Christ react? Indeed, as a response to such betrayal one would think that a gaze of vengeance would be entirely warranted. Or, if nothing else, it would seem that Christ would be justified simply in "look[ing] away from Peter" and saying "I would rather not see that traitor before my eyes!"<sup>135</sup> But this is not how Christ responded. Rather, he practiced an altogether different kind of vision. As Kierkegaard puts it, "How differently Christ acted! He did not look away from Peter in order to become seemingly unaware of his existence; he did not say, 'I do not want to see that traitor'; he did not leave to take care of himself. No, he 'looked at him.' He immediately caught him with a look..."<sup>136</sup> In contrast, for example, to the threatening gaze described by Sartre in which self and other are set up in conflict and competition with one another,<sup>137</sup> Christ's gaze is the gentle and compassionate look of a welcoming subject. In Kierkegaard's terms, "And how did Christ look at Peter? Was this look repelling; was it like a look of dismissal? Ah, no, it was as when a mother sees the child in danger through its own carelessness, and now, since she cannot manage to grasp the child, she catches it with her admittedly

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<sup>133</sup> *SKS* 9, 169 / *WL*, 168.

<sup>134</sup> *SKS* 9, 169 / *WL*, 169.

<sup>135</sup> *SKS* 9, 170 / *WL*, 170.

<sup>136</sup> *SKS* 9, 170 / *WL*, 170.

<sup>137</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1958), 340-400.

reproachful but saving look.”<sup>138</sup> Ultimately, it is because of such vision that the possibility of reconciliation is opened up by which Peter in his apostolic commissioning can later be forgiven three times,<sup>139</sup> and that Peter himself can thus write in his epistle about the work of perfect love in hiding a multitude of sins.<sup>140</sup>

With these two accounts of loving vision we see clearly how Christ serves as a paradigmatic exemplar of what it means to live within the sacred tension associated with paradoxical double-vision. In his relation to the crowd and the council, Christ exists in a space of absolute tension in which he affirms both aspects of the seeing/unseeing dialectic. Clearly, Christ sees the sin of the crowd in its condemnation of him, but at the same time it is precisely because he sees this sin that he is thereby able to unsee it in his compassionate forgiveness of his accusers. Likewise, in his relation to Peter Christ exists in the space of absolute tension in which he affirms both aspects of the blindness/sight dialectic. In loving Peter despite Peter’s transformation, Christ closes his eyes to Peter as betrayer and instead focuses his vision on Peter as the neighbor who ought to be loved. At the same time, however, Christ also sees Peter in his concrete particularity with his particular faults and his particular sin. It is because Christ sees this sin and thereby understands Peter’s concrete fear and sorrow that results from such sin, that Christ can meet Peter in love in precisely the manner needed by Peter *qua* betrayer—as a compassionate motherly figure concerned for her destitute child who is in mortal danger. Ultimately, though, what makes such loving vision exemplary is not only that through it Christ exists in such a manner that he holds together both dialectical aspects of vision in perpetually unresolved tension, but that he does so perfectly. At no point does Christ slide to either side of the dialectic, but at every moment he actively strives to remain in

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<sup>138</sup> *SKS* 9, 170 / *WL*, 170.

<sup>139</sup> See John 21:15-17; *SKS* 12, 90 / *PC*, 78-9. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes of Christ’s love as “the same love that with a look rebuked—or forgave—Peter.” See *SKS* 9, 104 / *WL*, 100.

<sup>140</sup> 1 Peter 4:8.

the tense position in which he fully and flawlessly affirms both. This is itself a marvel given the sins of both the crowd and Peter, for Christ was not only able to see the infinite transgression of his accusers in their rejection of God, but despite this infinite evil he was nevertheless at the same time able to see his accusers with infinite compassion. In the end, for Kierkegaard there is no greater example of what it looks like to love within the sacred tension than this.

### *Three Virtues: Humility, Courage, and Hope*

Having offered an account of sacred tension in *Works of Love* in relation both to the paradoxical grounding of love and to the paradoxes of vision, we may now touch upon what I suggest are three of its central virtues.

First, loving within the sacred tension fundamentally involves the virtue of humility (*Ydmyghed*), and particularly humility that stands in opposition to the prideful claim that one does not have a need for God and God's love.<sup>141</sup> For Kierkegaard, in embracing God as the unfathomable grounding for all love as well as in binding oneself to eternity's commandment the lover thereby avoids "go[ing] astray and turn[ing] into pride [*Stolthed*]."<sup>142</sup> Such opening up of oneself to the divine is precisely the movement of self-denial that Kierkegaard identifies as the "*holy* modesty [*hellig Undseelse*], which is inseparable from all true love..."<sup>143</sup> Of course, not all forms of humbling are constructive; some are in fact destructive and lead to both enervation and loss of tension.<sup>144</sup> It is therefore important for Kierkegaard to reaffirm that *proper* humbling

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<sup>141</sup> *SKS* 9, 46 / *WL*, 39.

<sup>142</sup> *SKS* 9, 74 / *WL*, 67. On the issue of proper pride, see, e.g., John Lippitt, "Kierkegaard and the Problem of Special Relationships: Ferreira, Krishek, and the 'God Filter,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72, no. 3 (2012), 189.

<sup>143</sup> *SKS* 9, 336 / *WL*, 341.

<sup>144</sup> See, e.g., *SKS* 9, 269 / *WL*, 271. For a similar point, see *Pap.* VII B 92, 306 / *WL*, 408. As a particular example of this, I have in mind the social humbling that Kierkegaard describes in *Two Ages* as "leveling" (*Nivelleringen*) and which he suffered in his late life at the hands of the satirical magazine, the *Corsair*.

occurs in relationship with God where God is the edifying force in the ground with regards to which the lover humbles himself. This is the dynamic Kierkegaard emphasizes in his discussion of the process of winning the one who is overcome where offender and lover are humbled not before one another, but before the good:

With the aid of the third [i.e., God and God's love] that the loving one has introduced between them, they are both humbled [*ydmgyede*]. The one who loves humbles [*ydmgyer*] himself before the good, whose lowly servant he is, and, as he himself admits in frailty; and the one overcome does not humble himself before the loving one but before the good. But when in a relationship between two people both are humbled, then there of course is nothing humiliating [*Ydmgyende*] for either of them.<sup>145</sup>

Closely associated with such proper humility is the act of confession (*Tilstaaelse*), by which one admits of one's limitations and thereby accepts one's proper standing in relationship to God.<sup>146</sup> And in adopting such a disposition where one recognizes he is unable to love under his own strength, the lover is thereby provided power by the gushing spring of the divine to "hold out" or "persevere" (i.e., *at staa til*) in carrying on with the humanly impossible task of Christian love.<sup>147</sup> As Kierkegaard nicely describes this dynamic in relation to the lover winning the one overcome, through the movement of humility one discovers God to be "the support [*den Bistand*] with whose help he continues to stand [*bestaaer*]."<sup>148</sup> In the end, then, such humility before God is for Kierkegaard at the same time what it means to possess a true sense of pride.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *SKS* 9, 334 / *WL*, 339-40.

<sup>146</sup> See *SKS* 9, 190 / *WL*, 190-1.

<sup>147</sup> Regarding the etymological nuances of *at staa til*, see *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, bind 1-28, udgivet af Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1918-1966), bind 21, 1943, §6.8.

<sup>148</sup> *SKS* 9, 329 / *WL*, 333. With the use of the term *bestaaer*, Kierkegaard is most likely making a linguistic connection to confession (*Tilstaaelse*) and the task of persevering (*at staa til*). On this point, see *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, bind 21, 1943, §6.3.

<sup>149</sup> *SKS* 9, 269 / *WL*, 271. Cf. *Pap.* VII B 92, 306 / *WL*, 408: "Pride is humility before God and humility before God is pride. What people call pride is a mean-minded composition of modesty and vanity..." On this issue, see Lippitt, "Kierkegaard and the Problem of Special Relationships," 182-9.

Second, central to loving within the sacred tension is also the virtue of courage (*Mod*). Whereas the person who departs from the paradoxical dynamic of Christian love does so out of a lack of courage both to let go of control and to trust in the mysterious and unpredictable God, the person of faith who embraces the paradoxes of love does so through courage.<sup>150</sup> With respect to the paradox of grounded love, Kierkegaard is clear that it requires courage to seek the support of divine love, to allow oneself to be edified by such love, but most of all in one's loving to take the step of becoming transparent and vulnerable before God. Indeed, it is the loving act of throwing oneself entirely into the arms of the living God that represents for Kierkegaard "the highest courage" (*det høieste Mod*).<sup>151</sup> Moreover, regarding the paradoxes of vision, much like Abraham's courage in being willing to sacrifice Isaac, it requires courage to resign one's preferential loves in loving others as the neighbor and to trust that these same preferential loves will nevertheless be returned as a gift. Likewise, it requires courage to unsee the sins of the offender in offering forgiveness. Not only must the lover courageously confront the real possibility that the offender may not turn from his sin and may instead despise the lover even more, but the lover must also courageously persevere in believing that, regardless of how impossible reconciliation may seem, by placing one's trust in God's love the work of love in forgiveness will never be disappointed.

Finally, the virtue of hope (*Haab*) is fundamentally at play in loving within the sacred tension. Although Kierkegaard, in following the Apostle Paul's lead in 1 Corinthians 13, is clear that love is greater than hope, for him hope is nevertheless an indispensable component of love. As he puts it, "love, although greater than hope, would

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<sup>150</sup> This is the case not least of all in that it is precisely the love commandment that draws out courage from the Christian lover when such courage is failing or has been lost. As Kierkegaard puts it, "wherever the purely human loses courage, the commandment strengthens." *SKS* 9, 50 / *WL*, 43. See also Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, 38.

<sup>151</sup> *SKS* 9, 244 / *WL*, 244.

take it upon itself, as its service and its work, to bring hope.”<sup>152</sup> It is important to point out, however, that by hope he does not mean something along the lines of a superficial wishing such as is implied in the statement “I hope that we will have good weather in Copenhagen tomorrow.” Rather, for Kierkegaard, hope in *Works of Love* is fundamentally hope in the infinite possibility that is opened up by the eternal, which allows the Christian lover to hope all things. As Kierkegaard writes,

[T]he loving one hopes all things. No indolence of habit, no pettiness of mind, no hairsplitting sagacity, no quantities of experience, no slackness of the years, no bitterness of evil passions corrupt for him his hope or counterfeit the possibility for him; every morning, yes, every moment he renews his hope and refreshes [*forfrisker*] possibility, while love abides and he in it.<sup>153</sup>

This is the same idea Anti-Climacus develops in *The Sickness unto Death* when he writes “What is decisive is that with God everything is possible. This is eternally true and consequently true at every moment.”<sup>154</sup> Such hope in possibility is a direct consequence of grounding oneself in God’s love, and thereby it serves an important role as a vitality-preserving antidote to the worldly loss of tension. Thus, in the first paragraph of “Love Hopes All Things—and Yet Is Never Put to Shame,” Kierkegaard makes the following crucial statement:

When the God-forsaken worldliness of earthly life shuts itself in within itself in complacency [*slutter sig inde med sig selv i Selvtilfredshed*], the confined air develops poison in itself and by itself. And when in temporality time in a certain sense drags on so slowly and yet so slyly swiftly that one never with concentrated attentiveness becomes aware of its vanishing, or when the moment gets stuck and stands still [*sætter sig fast og bliver stillestaaende*], when everything, everything is mustered to turn the mind and powers upon the moment—then the prospect is lost, and this detached, God-forsaken moment of temporality, whether longer or shorter, becomes a falling away from the eternal [*Affald fra det Evige*]. See, this is why so often at various times a need [*Trang*] is felt for a refreshing, enlivening breeze [*forfriskende, oplivende Luftning*], a mighty gale [*et mægtigt Pusl*], that could cleanse the air and dispel the poisonous vapors, a need [*Trang*] for the rescuing movement [*en stor Begivenheds frelsende Bevægelse*] of a great event that rescues by

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<sup>152</sup> SKS 9, 258 / WL, 259.

<sup>153</sup> SKS 9, 257-8 / WL, 258.

<sup>154</sup> SKS 11, 153 / SUD, 38.

moving what is standing still [*at bevæge det Stillestaaende*], a need [*Trang*] for the enlivening [*oplivende*] prospect of a great expectancy—lest we suffocate in worldliness or perish in the oppressing moment!<sup>155</sup>

Furthermore, with respect to the lover's relation to other human beings, such hope in divine possibility means that in love one never abandons the belief that the other is redeemable and may be transformed by love to become himself a lover. For Kierkegaard, this is what it means to hope in a loving fashion:

But *lovingly* to hope all things signifies the relationship of the loving one to other people, so in relation to them, hoping for them, he continually holds possibility open [*bestandigt holder...aaben*] with an infinite partiality for the possibility of the good. That is, he lovingly hopes that at every moment [*i ethvert Øieblik*] there is possibility, the possibility of the good for the other person.<sup>156</sup>

In the end, it is the dual nature of hope as hope *in the possibility of the eternal* and hope *in the possibility for the other* that makes such hope a central component of what it means to love within the sacred tension.

## 5.5 - Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I argued that paradox fundamentally informs Kierkegaard's account of Christian love both in a dialectical sense as paradoxical double-vision and in an etymological sense as the paradox of God's love that is the limiting yet enabling dynamic foundation for all love. These paradoxes, I suggested, carry significant implications for Christian existence. In particular, I claimed that in contrast to the loss of tension associated with improper love that departs from such paradox, embracing the paradoxes of love represents another expression of sacred tension in Kierkegaard's

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<sup>155</sup> *SKS* 9, 246 / *WL*, 246. See also *SKS* 9, 26 / *WL*, 18.

<sup>156</sup> *SKS* 9, 253 / *WL*, 253. Or, as Kierkegaard puts it further on in the same deliberation, "It is possible that the one who sank the deepest...could be raised up. It is still possible that the love that became cold could again begin to burn. Therefore never give up on any human being; do not despair, not even at the last moment—no, hope all things" (*SKS* 9, 254 / *WL*, 254).

thought—what I have identified here in terms of *loving within the sacred tension*. Moreover, I pointed to humility, courage, and hope as three central virtues of such tension.

With this account of loving within the sacred tension I suggest that we have once again come full circle to *Chapter 1* and our discussion there of what we identified as the fundamental sacred tension associated with the grace/works dialectic. This claim is supported by the fact that throughout his text Kierkegaard draws an explicit connection between Christian love and the notions of grace and works. On the one hand, Kierkegaard's emphasis on works is reflected most obviously in the title of the book, but also in his insistence of the practical and active nature of love as well as how such love is necessarily recognized by its fruits. In addition, this emphasis is also particularly apparent in Kierkegaard's discussion of double-vision and the sacred tension associated with such vision in the sense that to love in a properly Christian fashion is to work out one's salvation through the perpetual tension-filled task of holding together the dialectic of blindness/seeing and the dialectic of seeing/unseeing. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's emphasis on grace comes forth most clearly in his discussion of the grounding of God's love as the fundamental enabling force in the life of the Christian lover. In Pia Søltoft's reading, God's gift of grace is not only that which makes possible the striving of the individual lover, but such a gift is inherent to the task itself. In Søltoft's reading this point is reflected in Kierkegaard's own Danish terminology, for at the heart of every Christian task (*Opgave*) is nevertheless the notion of gift (*Gave*).<sup>157</sup> Moreover, it is because of this dynamic of grace that Kierkegaard gestures time and again to the centrality for love of self-denial. For example, in "The Work of Love in Praising Love" he notes, "What a human being knows by himself about love is very superficial; he must come to know the deeper love from God—that is, in self-denial he must come to know the deeper love

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<sup>157</sup> Søltoft, *Kierkegaard og Kærlighedens Skikkelser*, 28.

from God—that is, in self-denial he must become what every human being can become...an instrument for God.”<sup>158</sup> What self-denial in the service of becoming an instrument implies is the recognition that the individual “is capable of nothing”<sup>159</sup> and that it is only through God’s movement of loving grace in the life of the lover that the works of love can thus be fulfilled.<sup>160</sup>

Just as with the grace/works dialectic in *Chapter 1*, for Kierkegaard it is crucially important when talking about Christian love to affirm both grace and works in their robust fullness. Put differently, for Kierkegaard the individual lover exists in the tension where she is both able to do nothing and at the same time nevertheless able to do everything. Appropriately, Kierkegaard describes this dynamic by pointing to the contradiction involved in being God’s “co-worker” (*Medarbejder*):

Precisely this becomes the contradiction [*Modsigelsen*] in blessedness and terror [*i Salighed og i Forfærdelse*]: to have an omnipotent one as one’s co-worker. An omnipotent one cannot be your co-worker, a human being’s co-worker, without its signifying that you are able to do nothing at all; and on the other hand, if he is your co-worker you are able to do everything. The strenuousness [*Anstrengende*] is that it is a contradiction or is simultaneous; thus you do not experience the one today and the other tomorrow. Moreover, the strenuousness is that this contradiction is not something you must be aware of once in a while but is something you must be aware of at all times [*i ethvert Øieblik*].<sup>161</sup>

Such a contradiction in love associated with the grace/works dialectic serves as a radical challenge to Kierkegaard’s Christendom contemporaries. Not only does the emphasis on works in characterizing love confront those in Christendom who have become comfortable in their civic faith, who have adopted a false sense of rest in their love, and who thereby have lost the radical demand of what it means to work out one’s salvation

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<sup>158</sup> *SKS* 9, 358 / *WL*, 364.

<sup>159</sup> *SKS* 9, 359 / *WL*, 365.

<sup>160</sup> Moreover, as Kierkegaard sees it, this is the highest for a human being: “Truly, only by loving the neighbor can a person achieve the highest, because the highest is to be able to be an instrument in the hand of Governance.” See *SKS* 9, 91 / *WL*, 86.

<sup>161</sup> *SKS* 9, 356-7 / *WL*, 362-3.

through love, but the emphasis on grace also challenges the same individuals to find a proper sense of stability, security, rest, and comfort by turning to God in holy respect and utter dependence through self-denial. In leveling this challenge Kierkegaard once again draws on the language of fear and trembling.<sup>162</sup> As he writes in the conclusion to *Works of Love*, “just as the well-disciplined child has an unforgettable impression of rigorousness, so also the person who relates himself to God’s love...is bound to have an unforgettable fear and trembling [*Frygt og Bæven*], even though he rests [*hviler*] in God’s love.”<sup>163</sup> In the end, then, we may say that Kierkegaard’s account of the paradoxes of love as fostering the sacred tension where one is called upon to remain both fearful and restful in one’s love proves to be a central piece of Kierkegaard’s overarching ethico-religious task of (re)introducing Christianity to Christendom. Yet, far from being an abusive and vitriolic attack, this task is for Kierkegaard instead a loving celebration and reaffirmation of the simple and profound truth that God has already revealed to each and every human being, namely that “to love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living.”<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Although the notion of fear and trembling is crucial to Christian existence as sacred tension, Kierkegaard is clear that love (*Kjerlighed*) nevertheless remains “the primus motor in the Christian life” (*SKS* 18, 14, EE:25 / *JP* 3, 2383).

<sup>163</sup> *SKS* 9, 378 / *WL*, 385-6. See also *SKS* 9, 23 / *WL*, 15. Cf. *SKS* 9, 275 / *WL*, 277.

<sup>164</sup> *SKS* 9, 368 / *WL*, 375. See also *SKS* 9, 45 / *WL*, 38.

## CONCLUSION

*Command the seaman to sail without ballast—he capsizes; let the generation, let every individual in it try to exist without the unconditional—it is and remains a vortex [Hvirvel]. In the intervening period, for a longer or shorter time, it may seem otherwise, that there is steadfastness and security—fundamentally [i Grunden] it is and remains a vortex.<sup>1</sup>*

*There must be weight—just as the clock or the clock’s works need a heavy weight in order to run properly, and the ship needs ballast. Christianity would furnish this weight, this regulating weight [regulerende Tyngde], by making it every individual’s life-meaning [Livets Betydning] that whether he becomes eternally saved is decided for him in this life.<sup>2</sup>*

*According to the teaching of Christianity...there is only one loftiness [Høibed]: to be a Christian—and one abyss [Afgrund]: paganism.<sup>3</sup>*

In the concluding remarks here we may now bring to a close our study of paradox and its significance for Christian existence in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard. Towards this end, I begin with a brief recounting of several of the major conclusions we have drawn out over the course of the study. Following this, I then touch upon three brief points concerning the importance of the study and I sketch out one particular possibility for future research that the study has opened up regarding the issue of nihilism. Last of all, I conclude with a final personal note.

### A Brief Recounting

Given the extensive ground covered in this study both thematically and in terms of engaging with a wide range of Kierkegaard’s writings, there are indeed many conclusions that we have drawn out over the course of the preceding five chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> SKS 13, 26 / PV, 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> SKS 25, 443, NB30:71 / JP 1, 1003.

<sup>3</sup> SKS 10, 68 / CD, 59 (translation modified).

Although it would not be possible here to offer a full recounting of all of these conclusions, we may nevertheless touch upon a few of the major ones. With this aim in mind, I begin by considering several conclusions from *Chapter 1* followed by several conclusions from *Chapters 2-5*.

The purpose of *Chapter 1* was to articulate and to establish the particular reading of Kierkegaard's thought that was to serve as the foundation upon which the argument concerning paradox and Christian existence in *Chapters 2-5* was to be built. Towards this end, we began by outlining Kierkegaard's account of his nominally Christian Danish culture (i.e., Christendom) and we focused particularly on several of the problems Kierkegaard identifies with this culture such as how it entices individuals into worldly comfort away from striving and thereby undermines genuine Christian existence. Moreover, we pointed out how Kierkegaard, in drawing inspiration from Socrates, takes upon himself the ethico-religious task of (re)introducing Christianity into Christendom with the goal of helping his contemporaries to become authentic Christians. These points are themselves fairly well-established in Kierkegaard scholarship, and are thus not entirely new. The more novel conclusions of this chapter, in contrast, dealt with what I claimed to be Kierkegaard's specific understanding of what it means to exist as an authentic Christian and the specific means by which the individual is to strive after and is ushered into this goal. As we argued, becoming an authentic Christian for Kierkegaard does not mean that one attains a static state in which one ceases to develop or to grow. To the contrary, I claimed that this *telos* can be better understood as the restless process of becoming that I identified in terms of *living within the sacred tension*. With the introduction of the notion of sacred tension, I suggested that Kierkegaard is not primarily asking his readers to carry out specific moral actions or to perform specific religious practices, but rather he is encouraging each one *to adopt a general disposition where Christian faith can take root and be perpetually fostered*. In making this point, I narrowed in on

what I identified as the fundamental sacred tension Kierkegaard associates with the dialectic of grace/works. This was an important conclusion in that I would later make the argument in *Chapters 2-5* that the particular accounts of sacred tension associated with the various expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's writings are in one way or another related back to this fundamental sacred tension. Furthermore, in focusing on the grace/works dialectic, I also suggested at the end of the chapter that paradox has a key role to play in encouraging and fostering sacred tension—a point that served to set up the argument concerning paradox and Christian existence in *Chapters 2-5*. In summary, then, *Chapter 1* accomplished three broad goals: first, it located the study firmly within the context of Kierkegaard's ethico-religious attack upon Christendom; second, it introduced the new concept and new terminology of sacred tension as well as suggested how such sacred tension serves as the *telos* of Kierkegaard's attack; and third, it pointed to paradox as a crucial means for encouraging and fostering such sacred tension.

In *Chapters 2-5* we considered four different expressions of paradox in Kierkegaard's thought: 1) paradox that is associated with the faith of Abraham; 2) paradox that is associated with the nature of the self and the task of selfhood; 3) paradox that is associated with the God-man; and 4) paradox that is associated with Christian love. In each of these cases, we displayed, on the one hand, how rejection of or departure from the specific paradox(es) under consideration leads to enervation and loss of tension and, on the other hand, how embracing the specific paradox(es) we outlined increases and fosters tension, thereby helping to usher the individual into a state of sacred tension akin to that which we outlined in *Chapter 1*. Given the differing expressions of paradox and the differing ways in which they fostered vitality and tension, the state of sacred tension associated with each looked slightly different. Despite such variation, each nevertheless involved similar virtues as the others. With respect to paradox and faith, we pointed to the centrality of the virtues of courage, trust, humility, love, and joy.

Regarding paradox and the self, we narrowed in on the virtues of dedicated patience and humble courage. Concerning the paradox of the God-man, we discussed the centrality of the virtue of humble striving. And finally, in relation to the paradox of Christian love, we settled upon the significance of the virtues of humility, courage, and hope. By reflecting in this manner on these concrete virtues, we therefore provided a concrete picture both of the robust implications for Christian existence that paradox carries and of the nature of the disposition one assumes as living within the sacred tension. In this regard, we may at this point conclude that at the heart of Kierkegaard's ethico-religious task is his employment of paradox to help usher his contemporaries into a state of sacred tension in which these contemporaries are challenged to become individuals who practice the Christian virtues of courage, dedication, hope, humility, joy, love, patience, striving, and trust. Thus, far from Kierkegaard's ethico-religious project being merely deconstructive or negative in nature, Kierkegaard infuses his existential challenge with the thick and robust positive content of the virtues that are inextricably tied to his particular understanding of Christianity.

### **Significance of the Study: Three Brief Points**

In beginning to round off this conclusion we may touch upon three brief points regarding the significance of our study. First, on the most basic level, this study is important simply in that it offers another interesting and worthwhile angle on what proves to be a central notion within Kierkegaard's thought. The in-depth discussion of paradox provided above is certainly needed in Kierkegaard studies particularly given that paradox has received less attention in recent years within Anglophone scholarship than at certain times in previous decades, and certainly far less attention than it deserves. At the same time, however, a growing number of Anglophone scholars such as Noel S. Adams,

Matthew Bagger, Ronald L. Hall, M. Jamie Ferreira, and Anthony Rudd have in the last couple of decades been increasingly returning to and engaging with the notion of paradox. As such, this study also makes a valuable contribution to what I would suggest is a positive emerging trend in Kierkegaard studies to locate paradox once again at the center of Kierkegaard's thought. Second, this study is important in that it makes an explicit connection between paradox and Christian existence, and in doing so it provides further support for the view that paradox in Kierkegaard's thought operates not merely as a philosophical concept but as an existential as well as moral and ethical notion. More specifically, by reaffirming the concrete significance carried by paradox for the question of how one is to live and particularly how one is to live as a Christian, this study has much to contribute to the growing interest within Kierkegaard research on Kierkegaard's relation to ethics in general and Kierkegaard's relation to virtue ethics in particular. Finally, this study is valuable in that it introduces and develops the new concept and new terminology of sacred tension.<sup>4</sup> As we pointed out in *Chapter 1*, several scholars have alluded to the significance of the notion of tension in Kierkegaard's thought, but what this study does is to draw out in even more explicit terms how this tension looks, how it is sacred in the sense of being directly tied to Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity, and how it is specifically connected to paradox. The hope of this study is that with this new concept and new terminology the scholarly engagement with Kierkegaard's thought and writings might be enriched in interesting and productive ways, particularly within the recent movement in Kierkegaard studies to reassess Kierkegaard's existentialism and its significance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See also Matthew T. Nowachek, "Living within the Sacred Tension: Kierkegaard's Climacean Works as a Guide for Christian Existence," *Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 5 (2014), 883-902.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre has been hosting a series of annual conferences with the following themes: "Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Existential Approach" (2015), "Reconsidering the Existential: the Aesthetic, the Ethical, the Religious" (2016), and "Existence and Communication: Kierkegaard and the Philosophies of Dialogue" (2017).

### One Possibility for Future Research: Sacred Tension and the Issue of Nihilism

As the penultimate section of this conclusion, I would like to entertain briefly the claim that this study carries the potential to make a particularly valuable contribution to further scholarly work concerning the issue of nihilism.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, I would like to suggest that the Kierkegaardian account of living within the sacred tension we have developed above is uniquely apt for offering a promising new way forward in responding to the challenge of nihilism that is an alternative to other Western responses of the past two centuries. Before drawing out this claim, however, we should first offer a brief characterization of nihilism as well as outline two central responses to it. Although such a survey paints with broad brush strokes and thus misses some of the nuance of the discussion, it should nevertheless suffice for our purposes here.

Nihilism is a convoluted notion that has been employed in a variety of ways and thus is notoriously difficult to tie down.<sup>7</sup> A good place to turn in offering a broad characterization of it, however, is to Friedrich Nietzsche. As Bernard Reginster and Roe Fremstedal have pointed out, nihilism for Nietzsche is both a socio-cultural phenomenon and a consequence of the particular Platonic-Christian commitments that have been made within Western societies to foundationalist accounts of truth.<sup>8</sup> With respect to the latter, Nietzsche claims that our religious and philosophical views have

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<sup>6</sup> This connection has recently begun to be (re)explored in the secondary literature. See, e.g., Bartholomew Ryan, “The Plurality of the Subject in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard: Confronting Nihilism with Masks, Faith and *Amor Fati*,” in *Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity*, ed. João Constâncio, Maria João Mayer Bronco, and Bartholomew Ryan (Berlin and New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 317-42; Roe Fremstedal, “Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: Despair and Nihilism Converge” in *Modernity—Unity in Diversity? Essays in Honor of Helge Høibraaten*, ed. Kjartan Koch Mikalsen, Erling Skjei, and Audun Øfsti (Oslo: Novus, 2016), 458.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1992), 9. On pages 17-18 Carr provides a nice schema of various overlapping senses of nihilism that include the following: epistemological nihilism, alethiological nihilism, metaphysical or ontological nihilism, ethical or moral nihilism, and existential or axiological nihilism.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Fremstedal, “Kierkegaard and Nietzsche,” 458.

been responsible for erecting a hollow edifice of meaning and value that is unrealizable because of its life-negation and otherworldliness, and as such this edifice collapses in upon itself. This implosion is what Nietzsche describes as the death of God,<sup>9</sup> and for him it represents the coming to fruition of the emptiness of our categories of truth and the consequent meaninglessness and valuelessness that thereby emerges. Put differently, the death of God is the realization that the truths we once believed to be so intuitively well-grounded and upon which we have built all meaning and value within our Western culture in fact prove to be thoroughly groundless—the consequence of which is that existence itself is seen as meaningless.<sup>10</sup> In Nietzsche’s view, such is the weighty and horrifying reality confronting the modern individual. As he remarks in *The Gay Science*,

[A]nd, now that this faith [in the traditional account of truth] has been undermined, how much must collapse because it was built on this faith, leaned on it, had grown into it—for example, our entire European morality. This long, dense succession of demolition, destruction, downfall, upheaval that now stands ahead: who would guess enough of it today to play the teacher and herald of this monstrous logic of horror, the prophet of deep darkness and an eclipse of the sun the like of which has probably never before existed on earth?<sup>11</sup>

In another passage from *The Gay Science* Nietzsche describes the nihilism that emerges from the cataclysmic event of the death of God in this fashion: “What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as through an infinite nothing?”<sup>12</sup> Such a radical challenge of nihilism would become one of the central philosophical problems for Nietzsche and for the generation following him, with a variety of thinkers attempting various responses to it.

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119-20.

<sup>10</sup> Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 199.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120.

One response, what we may characterize in broad terms as the atheistic and humanistic existential response, begins by embracing the challenge of nihilism brought on by the death of God and employs this challenge as the catalyst for the humanistic creation of new values. Nietzsche himself was the first to follow this line of thought. Thus, within the same aphorism in which he characterizes the death of God as the greatest horror, he also identifies it as the reason for “cheerfulness.”<sup>13</sup> In his view, the implosion of traditional accounts of truth opens up a radical new possibility in which the free spirits of the world are liberated to create new values, to become gods themselves, and to set out in a new direction away from the failed foundationalism of the Western tradition with its dehumanization and existential malaise.<sup>14</sup> As Nietzsche movingly describes it,

Indeed, at hearing the news that “the old god is dead,” we philosophers and “free spirits” feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation—finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an “open sea.”<sup>15</sup>

Following closely in Nietzsche’s footsteps, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus formulated similar responses to nihilism revolving around the humanistic creation of value in the face of the abyss and the absurdity of a universe devoid of any inherent meaning and value.<sup>16</sup> For Sartre, this assumes the form of the radical freedom of the individual who chooses himself and his own morality precisely in the act of choice,<sup>17</sup> and

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<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 199.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 199.

<sup>16</sup> Both Sartre and Camus are seen as representative voices of modern existentialism even as they themselves ultimately disavow the label.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Sartre’s response to the student who is forced to make a choice between going off to war or remaining at home with his mother. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 46: “Man makes himself; he does not come into the world fully made, he makes himself by choosing his own morality, and his circumstances are such that he has no option other than to choose a morality. We can define man only in relation to his commitments.”

for Camus this is perhaps best represented by his depiction of Sisyphus who, despite the absurdity associated with his eternal punishment to roll a stone up a hillside, nevertheless revolts against this absurdity through the willful choosing of his own fate.<sup>18</sup> What is striking about all three of these responses is how Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus embrace the groundlessness of existence, but also how serious each of them understands the threat of nihilism to be for the human being and the human experience.

In more recent years, a second sort of response to nihilism, one that assumes the form of something of a nonchalant or cheerful resignation, has begun to replace the first. Karen Carr has identified this as “the banalization of nihilism” characterized not by seriousness and anxiety, but rather by “joyous affirmation,” “lighthearted playfulness” or “benign indifference.”<sup>19</sup> In Carr’s view, this response is characteristic of those she identifies as the deconstructionists, but also particularly of Richard Rorty and his anti-foundationalist neo-pragmatism.<sup>20</sup> With respect to the latter, argues Carr, the removal of truth from its pedestal of absolutism is happily embraced and cheerfully replaced with an account of truth where truth becomes nothing more than those agreed-upon ideas, beliefs, and opinions that emerge within the discourse of a particular community in a particular time and place.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, then, nihilism is simply no longer seen as a problem. One important and insightful point of Carr’s analysis is her claim that in rejecting absolutes and grounding in the cheerful embrace of nihilism, the anti-foundationalists nevertheless still gravitate towards some kind of ideology, which, in the end, proves merely to be the most powerful voice in the discourse.<sup>22</sup> Given the force of capitalism in our culture, I would suggest that a good case can be made that the banal

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<sup>18</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, 88.

<sup>21</sup> See Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, 139-40.

resignation to nihilism at play in our Western societies is intimately tied to materialism and the ethos of consumption. As such, we could say that the modern human being no longer experiences or takes seriously the challenge and anxiety of nihilism in the same way as earlier generations because she has nonchalantly left behind the question of truth to instead become immersed in the distractions of consumer products, material comforts, and entertainment.<sup>23</sup>

In returning to Kierkegaard after this short excursus through nihilism and a few of the responses to it, we should begin by pointing out that Kierkegaard is certainly aware of and wrestling with the issue of nihilism as we have been describing it above. At numerous places within his writings—a handful of which we have pointed to over the course of this study—Kierkegaard writes about the threats of the abyss [*Afgrund*] and of the vortex [*Hvirvel*] that emerge when one falls away from Christianity, from God, and from the eternal. With respect to the former, for example, Kierkegaard in *Christian Discourses* draws a contrast between the “loftiness” of the Christian and the “abyss” [*Afgrund*] of paganism.<sup>24</sup> Or, with respect to the latter, Kierkegaard, in *The Point of View* writes of the vortex that emerges when one is no longer tied to the unconditional:

Command the seaman to sail without ballast—he capsizes; let the generation, let every individual in it try to exist without the unconditional—it is and remains a vortex [*Hvirvel*]. In the intervening period, for a longer or shorter time, it may seem otherwise, that there is steadfastness and security—fundamentally it is and remains a vortex. Even the greatest events and the most strenuous lives are nevertheless a vortex or like sewing without fastening the end—until the end is once again fastened by the application of the unconditional, or by the single individual’s relating himself to an unconditional, even though at ever so great a distance.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Blaise Pascal’s discussion of diversion in *Pascal’s Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1958), 41. This is ultimately to slide back into what Kierkegaard characterizes as the aesthetic world-view. Thus, for example, in the first part of *Either/Or* the aesthete A, in an essay entitled “Rotation of Crops” remarks, “what was it that delayed the fall of Rome? It was *panis* and *circenses*. What is being done in our day? Is consideration being given to any means of amusement?” See *SKS* 2, 276 / *EO1*, 286.

<sup>24</sup> *SKS* 10, 68 / *CD*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> *SKS* 13, 26 / *PV*, 19-20.

Moreover, Fremstedal is correct to equate the notion of despair [*Fortvivelse*] in Kierkegaard's thought with nihilism,<sup>26</sup> and as such we can say that Kierkegaard's reflections on despair, and in particular the entirety of *The Sickness unto Death*, are meant as a sustained engagement with the challenge of nihilism.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard is acutely sensitive to nihilism as it emerges in relation to the rise of modernity and modern society. In particular, Kierkegaard dedicates a good portion of his work of social criticism, *Two Ages*, to diagnosing and responding to precisely the nihilistic implications of what he calls the present age. In the shift of Danish society from a monarchical to constitutional government, a new entity has emerged, "the public" (*Publiken*), armed with the weapon of what Kierkegaard calls "levelling" (*Nivellering*). In levelling the crowd strikes out against the single individual in the attempt to shape all into conformity with a sickly sense of enervated sameness. Such loss of individualism entails the triumph of a corporate existence in which there no longer exists any meaning and value for the individual as an individual. For Kierkegaard, such nihilism of the crowd is closely tied to comfort in the sense that within this nihilistic state nobody rises up and takes a risk, but rather everyone simply sits back in calculated ease. Again, this is precisely the idea behind the image discussed in *Chapter 1* above of the spectacle of the treasure on the thin ice in which nobody really ventures out to claim the prize, but instead everyone is content to sit back in comfort and to be entertained.<sup>27</sup> In Kierkegaard's view, this is perhaps the greatest malady of the modern era: we go for rides in the park, we go to the theater, we visit church for its aesthetic elements, and so forth; in short, we live our lives for the most part within superficial aesthetic categories. And at the same time, in failing in this fashion to take the risk of becoming an individual before

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<sup>26</sup> Fremstedal, "Kierkegaard and Nietzsche."

<sup>27</sup> *SKS* 8, 69-70 / *TA*, 71-2.

God, we slide into the vortex and the abyss of a nihilistic coma all the while we apathetically shrug our shoulders in comfort and false security.

All of this, I would argue, suggests that Kierkegaard's thought is adequately equipped to engage with the contemporary discussion of nihilism. Moreover, with respect to this particular study, I would also argue that his thought has much to offer by way of formulating a new and interesting response to the challenges and issues nihilism raises that is itself an alternative to the responses outlined above. In particular, the Kierkegaardian account of sacred tension is potentially relevant on two fronts. First, as we have argued above, with respect to the issue of grounding, the notion of sacred tension is dialectical in the sense that it departs from traditional forms of foundationalism while nevertheless still retaining a certain kind of grounding on the divine—the divine which itself operates as a dynamic foundation. As such, we could speak of sacred tension in terms of what we may call *dynamic foundationalism*. In this respect, in responding to the challenge of nihilism, Kierkegaard is entirely consistent with the atheistic existentialist thinkers in looking beyond traditional foundationalism; but, at the same time he need not follow them in rejecting divinity as a form of grounding. Instead, sacred tension offers a way of moving forward with a response to nihilism that functions as a form of grounded groundlessness and that remains intimately tied to Christian faith.<sup>28</sup> Second, sacred tension also provides a response to nihilism that need not go the way of cheerful or banal resignation that inevitably ends up in consumerism and materialistic comfort. For Kierkegaard, faith as living within the sacred tension is a serious and earnest (i.e., *Alvor*) affair that does not allow for indifference or existential malaise in the face of questions of truth. Rather, in sacred tension one must always remain seriously and earnestly committed to striving in relation to the dynamic foundation provided by God, and one is

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<sup>28</sup> The emphasis in this particular response to nihilism thus falls on the term “sacred” in sacred tension.

constantly being pushed out of the comfort and security associated with modern consumerist society in order to grow and to develop through an edifying sense of tension into greater relationship with the living God.<sup>29</sup> This is precisely what Kierkegaard means when he writes of Christianity and the God-relation as the “regulating weight” that provides each and every individual with the deep sense of meaning associated with the task of struggling and striving in this life in order, through grace, to become eternally saved.<sup>30</sup> In the end, then, the Kierkegaardian account of sacred tension would appear to provide great resources for those engaging with the issue of nihilism that need not settle with either of the two responses outlined above, but instead points out a new path to move forward in engaging with an old problem. This line of thought, however, will not be developed here, but instead will be left to be picked up and carried on by others.

### **A Final Personal Note**

As is consistent with Climacus’ “truth is subjectivity” thesis and Kierkegaard’s insistence that all engagement with Christian truth must be carried out in a personal manner, I would like to end this academic study with a brief personal note. As anyone who has undertaken the daunting task of dissertating knows, the process is a long one that is filled at various times with doubt and uncertainty. Despite this, I can nevertheless say in the spirit of Aristotle that this philosophical project both began and was sustained by a deep sense of wonder. In addition, this wonder has been ambivalent in the Kierkegaardian sense in that it has been informed in equal measure by both fear and blessedness. As such, the process of completing this study has in many ways mirrored the account of living within the sacred tension that I have been developing in the pages

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<sup>29</sup> The emphasis in this particular response to nihilism thus falls on the term “tension” in sacred tension.

<sup>30</sup> *SKS* 25, 443, NB30:71 / *JP* 1, 1003.

above—a process in which I have found myself restlessly moving forward but nevertheless doing so with an assurance provided by the hope that the *telos* I have been pursuing is indeed worthy of the pursuit. Moreover, just as with the sacred tension associated with grace and works, I have been reminded time and again that in working towards fulfillment of the idea I began several years ago I have all the while been graciously upheld and supported by a power that extends beyond myself. Rather than attempting to elaborate any further on these points, I would prefer to allow Kierkegaard the opportunity to do so, for he has, after all, already articulated what I am trying to communicate here far better than I ever could. Thus, as is appropriate for a study on the thought of Kierkegaard, the final word is left to Kierkegaard himself:

Wonder...which is the beginning of all deeper understanding is an ambivalent passion that in itself contains fear and blessedness. Or was it not fearful, my listener, that what was sought was so close to you, that you did not seek but God sought you? Was it not fearful that you could not stir without being in him, could not be stilled without being in him, could not be so unnoticed that you were not in him, and could not flee to the farthest limits of the world without his being there and everywhere along the way, could not hide in the abyss without his being there and everywhere along the way, and could not say to him, "In a moment," because he also was in the moment when you said this?...But was it not blessed that the powerful one could confine you in the darkest nook and yet could not shut God out? Was it not blessed that you could fall into the deepest abyss where one sees neither the sun nor the stars and yet can see God? Was it not blessed that you could go astray in the lonely desert and yet immediately find the way to God? Was it not blessed that you could become an old man who had forgotten everything and yet never forget God because he cannot become something past, that you could become mute and still call to him, deaf and still hear him, blind and still see him? Was it not blessed that you dare to rely upon him, that he would say as we human beings say, "In a moment," because he was with you the moment he said it!<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> SKS 5, 404 / TDIO, 24.

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