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FAITH AND AUTHENTICITY:  
KIERKEGAARD AND HEIDEGGER  
ON EXISTING IN 'CLOSEST CLOSENESS'  
TO THE NOTHING

Travis O'Brian

Heidegger accuses Christian faith of closing off any possible authentic relation to the nothingness of Dasein. But this paper aims to show how Kierkegaard's portrayal of faith in *Works of Love* is of a relation to a 'nothingness' even *more profound* (groundless) than the 'relative' or 'immanent' nothingness described in Heidegger's analysis of anxiety. My argument centres on the role of *desire* in the constitution of the self. Heidegger rejects desire as having any ontological import for Dasein. But Kierkegaard understands faith to be a "transformation" of desire (eros) – a transformation in which the self relates to the nothing in a way that both demands a concrete ethics and provides a psychologically more plausible motivation to "bring death as close as possible" than does authenticity.

In his essay *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger says "Anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation has the answer to the question 'Why are there essents rather than nothing?' even before it is asked."<sup>1</sup> Such a person thus either *fails* to ask "the question of all authentic questions"<sup>2</sup> or, if the believer does ask it, then he must "suspend" or *risk* his faith in doing so. The implication is twofold. First, the philosopher's question, "why are there essents rather than nothing?" has a deep priority over the question of faith. Secondly, since for Heidegger faith is always faith in the god who first of all "is,"<sup>3</sup> hence a being among beings, faith is thus a kind of comportment which closes one off from the anxious possibility of nothingness (as well as the philosophical questioning that arises from it). Consequently, as far as the analytic of Dasein is concerned, this means, above all, that the commitment of faith is, if it is one's *first* commitment, a form of inauthentic existence.

Heidegger contrasts the "security" of faith<sup>4</sup> with the "daring" of authentic Dasein<sup>5</sup> for the most part because he thinks that only authentic Dasein risks the possibility of the Nothing in a radical way. But I want to suggest here that Kierkegaard's understanding of the paradoxical centrality of love in the constitution of the self challenges us to a faith that not only *meets* Heidegger's own criteria for "authentic existence," but may in fact demand a more concentrated way of relating to the Nothing than that of which Dasein's own understanding (or: projection) is capable and, as a result, avoids the risk of abstraction to which authenticity falls prey. Along with this basic proposition, I will try to show why faith provides a better answer



than does authenticity to the question *why* one *should* choose to relate oneself to oneself in terms of nothingness.

The question of the meaning of authenticity is a massive one and already some of the limits of my discussion should be becoming apparent.<sup>6</sup> What concerns me here is the purely existential question of Dasein's relation to the nothing and how existing Dasein is able to maintain itself in this relation. I am not, for one thing, concerned here with the ontological question of Dasein's being as "uncoveredness." Rather, the aspect of authenticity upon which I will focus is Dasein's relation to the nothing in terms of its own self-relation and correspondingly of the nothing in terms of self-understanding and ultimate possibility – in short, of authenticity defined as a possible mode of existing in what Heidegger calls the "closest closeness" (*Die nächste Nähe*) to death as a possibility.<sup>7</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers many different ways to consider the meaning of authentic Dasein's existential relation to the nothing, such as "becoming guilty," or "wanting to have a conscience," or "a readiness for anxiety." But for the purposes of this paper, this notion of existing in "closest closeness" to the nothing is perhaps the clearest and best, if only because it refers more obviously to Heidegger's existential agenda than to his ontological one.

The place to begin such a discussion would seem to be with a comparison of the experience of *anxiety* as presented by Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Indeed, anxiety is for both writers an experience within existence that brings the self to the most intimate region of itself. Anxiety is therefore shown as the experience which delivers the self over to itself, over to the nothingness of the self, hence as a kind of opportunity for a "transformation" or "modification" of the self's self-relation – out of an ignorance or forgetfulness, and toward the possibility of becoming oneself in truth. Furthermore, for both Kierkegaard and Heidegger the experience of anxiety reveals that becoming oneself means: to be essentially related to oneself as an *impossibility*, an impossibility which the self, if it is to become itself in truth, must then relate to as its "ownmost" *possibility*. Faith and authenticity are, each for its own proponent, the mode of existing in which the self maintains itself in this relation to its truth in the most passionate or resolute way.

In order to conceptualize the fundamental difference between Heidegger's and Kierkegaard's analyses of anxiety, we therefore must examine how each treats these key concepts of "possibility" and "impossibility" and determine how these relate to "nothingness." Formally speaking, the term "possibility" operates in a similar, three-tiered manner in both. First, "possibility" refers to what Heidegger calls "ontic affairs," simply the possibility to be or to do this or that. Marriage, for example, is one such possibility that I have either chosen or got myself into. This more familiar use of the term will not be of central concern here. Secondly, the ontological significance of the term "possibility" begins by conceiving of the self as, in Kierkegaard's language, characterised by "*being able*," and in Heidegger's language as being the "*potentiality for Being*"<sup>8</sup> – both of which indicate an essential *freedom*. To exist authentically is to relate to oneself as a sheer being-possible, *free* to be one's own "end."<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, "possibility" also signifies this "end," freedom's *for what?* Formally speaking,

Heidegger and Kierkegaard agree that freedom points toward a kind of "completion" of existence, a "being-whole," or "unity with oneself."<sup>10</sup>

The difference between the two thinkers becomes clearer when we turn to their respective definitions of "impossibility." Nevertheless, similarities enough remain even here. Both, for example, describe "impossibility" as inescapable *finitude* or radical "unfreedom" in which the self's ability to be itself comes to or is at an "end." Both furthermore describe existence as suffering this moment of unfreedom at two 'points': *behind*, the self is subject to a moment of genetic inability in which it is "delivered over" to or "given" to itself to-be, a givenness which Heidegger calls Dasein's "thrown facticity" and for which Kierkegaard adopts the Hegelian terminology of "immediacy;" *ahead*, this suffering is spoken by each as the phenomenon of "death." Both, thus, conceive of existence as emerging out of and moving toward "nothing," a "nothingness" they interpret phenomenologically as that over which the self has no ability, that which the self cannot appropriate *for* itself.

For neither thinker, of course, does the "end" of all possibility, "death," denote merely the biological 'end' of life. But their fundamental disagreement over what anxiety reveals to be constitutive structures of the self is highlighted by what each proposes to be the 'freest' response to this 'unfreedom.' According to *Being and Time*, anxiety reveals that Dasein's possibility is impossibility: "death" indicates that Dasein's freedom (possibility) is not *for* a certain, pre-determined possibility ('end'), but that freedom consists in Dasein's being-delivered-over to itself precisely as *nothing* to-be.<sup>11</sup> For Heidegger, Dasein's "task," at least insofar as there is something like "authenticity" to be won, is to uncover its Being-possible *for* nothing; Dasein is the being that is able to understand or "project" itself as Being on the ground of a "nullity." Dasein is *capable* of its nothingness, *able* to stand-under the burden of its ownmost impossibility.

But for Kierkegaard, in contrast, the self is, by itself, completely *incapable* of becoming adequate to itself, incapable, that is, of its 'being' (conceived as "unity with oneself"). *Why* the self is not capable of itself is a complex question that cannot be adequately addressed here, but it involves Kierkegaard's interpretation of "sin." Unlike Heidegger's analysis of "thrown facticity," in Kierkegaard's view the self is not necessarily oriented toward its *telos*; the self does not *necessarily* have its being as its "ownmost" concern. Rather, sin is a "leap" in which the self strives to take possibility into its own hands and, by doing so, to posit *itself* as the 'ground' and measuring task of existence. "Impossibility" means for Kierkegaard that the self is not *able* to achieve its "unitary" self; the self cannot appropriate its origin *ex nihilo* and "death" is the final seal of this *end* of possibility, for death comes between the self and its self-posed *telos*.

According to Kierkegaard, therefore, there is a constitutional *break* in the self; the self cannot relate itself to itself (to its possibility) in a direct way. Kierkegaard's language of the "leap of passion" indicates just this: the self must first of all relate to impossibility (nothingness) as the only *possible* site for a resurrection of possibility (the "possibility for possibility"<sup>12</sup>). This fundamental and constantly recurring failure of the project of autonomy finds 'positive' expression in Kierkegaard's famous formulation of the self as "a

derived, *constituted* relation . . . which relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another." Notice that whereas for Heidegger the self is *capable* of its "wholeness," so that Being-in-the-world/Being-for-others does not mark a *break* in the self (this being exactly the point where-at Levinas concentrates his criticism), for Kierkegaard the "another" refers to such an irrecoverable break – a moment of impossibility or passivity to which the self must relate, must strive to incorporate into itself, in the process of becoming itself. This active passivity, or passive activity, is *love* – which begins (in sin) as that kind of self-love which Kierkegaard calls *passion*, and which the tradition (both theological and philosophical) calls *eros* or *desire*. Passion is thus the self's existential drive to resolve the impossibility (or nothingness) of itself by way of the (foreign) possibility that is dialectically inseparable from it.

With this introduction to Kierkegaard's concept of *eros*, the central line of my argument begins to emerge. The difference between Kierkegaard and Heidegger's analyses of anxiety comes down to this: that whereas for Heidegger anxiety reveals that Dasein's possibility *is* impossibility, nothing further and nothing more, for Kierkegaard, in contrast, anxiety reveals a fundamental doubleness in the self – that the self *can* become conscious of itself as an impossibility only because it is equiprimordially given to itself as an ultimate possibility. For Kierkegaard, accordingly, passionate self-awareness is, negatively speaking, the awareness of oneself as an impossibility; but positively speaking, it is the awareness that this impossibility is indirectly possible, mediated by and "with the help of" another – and that *love* (and neither "projection" nor "understanding") is the 'medium' which makes this mediation possible.

It safe to suppose that it is just because Heidegger does *not* discover a break in the circle of the self's relation to itself that he ignores 'love' or 'desire' as having any structural significance for Dasein. But we must then turn our attention to this 'medium' as it operates in Kierkegaard's work. Passion, as he understands it, is the desire to solve the riddle of the self's impossibility. But Kierkegaard further defines "despair" as the self's attempt to solve this riddle by relating to 'otherness' within the pale of immanence alone – either by relating itself to itself aesthetically, ethically, or immanent-religiously. Each of these "stages" of existence may be defined in the 'existentiell' terms of how the self relates to itself by relating to others. The aesthetic individual relates himself abstractly to others, using others simply as occasions for his particular enjoyment and a means to escape ennui. The ethical self, on the other hand, relates to the other as an occasion to express the universal. According to Kierkegaard, the ethical personality does not treat others truly as ends-in-themselves because the ethical is still a matter of expressing one's *own* possibility; the ethical person's relations to others remains in the context of a self-relation, that is, of an interest in becoming *oneself*.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the immanent-religious individual relates himself in resignation to others. From this perspective, no possible relation to another *can* have any ultimate (eternal) significance because the immanent-religious person, in guilt-consciousness, realizes the infinite depth of his impossibility. Consciousness of "guilt" is the consciousness that one cannot finally appropriate the nothingness of existence. *But* (and

this is where the immanent-religious differs from Heidegger's authenticity), the immanent-religious self does not relate to itself quite as a *sheer* impossibility, for consciousness of the self's impossibility *can* be brought to light, as we have seen, only in dialectical relation to possibility. Therefore, although the immanent-religious individual is "now distanced from (his being-possible in any ultimate sense) as much as possible . . . he still relates himself to it,"<sup>14</sup> for if he did not, he *could* not retain the consciousness of guilt by which he, the immanent-religious individual, relates himself to himself, defines himself.

It is most important to note that all three of these (despairing) stages are characterized by *self-love* (passion, infinite self-interest).<sup>15</sup> In all three, every instance of relating to another is a means by which the self relates to *itself*, or is at least a reflection of this self-relation. Thus, if the self is not to exist in a state of despair, if the self in the passion of inwardness is to relate to itself in truth as an impossible possibility, then its self-love must undergo what Kierkegaard calls "the transformation of the eternal."<sup>16</sup> In this transformation, the other is no longer related to in terms of what, in the vocabulary of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard calls personal inclination or "preference." This means that the other is no longer related to self-referentially; the relationship is no longer an immediate reflection of the self's relationship to itself. A beloved who is loved without such an *immediate* self-reference can only be, as we shall see, the *neighbour*.

Before we begin to explore the meaning of this "transformation," we should return for a moment to Heidegger, from whose path, with this talk of love and desire, we seem to have wandered irrecoverably. I do not, in fact, believe the word "desire" appears even once in the whole of *Being and Time*. Nevertheless, at one point he hypothetically suggests that we may speak of the "not-yet" of Dasein in terms of *Ausstand* – of a lack in Dasein that is yet to be paid, a *debt* that is "still outstanding." His final *rejection* of such terminology we may take to be his official rejection of "desire" as an essential structure of existence. Heidegger tells us that "this being-missing (we can read: "lack") as still-outstanding (read: the *debt* that must be paid if one is to fill a constitutional lack in the self), cannot by any means define ontologically that 'not-yet' which belongs to Dasein." Why not? Because "Dasein does not have . . . the kind of Being of something ready-to-hand-within-the-world . . . (Dasein's existence) is not constituted by a 'continuing' piecing-on of entities which, somehow and somewhere, are ready-to-hand in their own right."<sup>17</sup> In other words, Heidegger rejects desire as having an essential role in the constitution of Dasein because he believes that the logic of desire is objectifying, makes an "object" of Dasein. As this quote implies, if Dasein desires, it must desire some-*thing*, ready-to-hand. But some-thing cannot satisfy Dasein's "not-yet," for Dasein's "not-yet" is not something that can be paid off in this way.

Yet Heidegger does not reject the language of desire simply because no object can satisfy it – so far, the tradition is in agreement. He rejects such language rather because he believes it to be irremediably objectifying – in other words, inescapably linked to the philosophy of substance and the logic of "perfection." According to the tradition, desire begins in a lack. But according to Heidegger, there is no "lack" in Dasein. A lack presup-

poses a fullness, just as a failure presupposes there is something to be won. But the whole effort of *Being and Time*, we know, is to reject this "something." Hence, Dasein's "not-yet" does not signal a failure in itself: Dasein's Being is "not-yet," nothing more. Dasein's only "fullness" or "perfection" is death; Dasein's "end," we have seen, is death.

Are we forced, then, to agree that Kierkegaard's treatment of the self simply falls prey to Heidegger's criticism and rejection of the traditional categories? The remainder of this paper shall be taken up for the most part with considerations which I hope will prevent too hasty an assent. For I believe that Heidegger's sweeping rejection of the logos of desire, if it does not make the possibility of existence itself less conceivable, it at least makes the plausibility of Dasein's *choosing itself* in terms of authenticity less urgent, less forceful. Furthermore, a closer inspection of what Kierkegaard means by desire, and especially of what he calls "the transformation of desire by the eternal"<sup>18</sup> (which we now unveil as "faith"), might, I suggest, both have rid Heidegger of some of his prejudice against a faith which exists in "closest closeness" to the Nothing, and might also have helped to solve some of the difficulties involved in his notion of "becoming authentic."

The first consideration then, asks *why* Dasein *should* choose the "modification" of existence that is authenticity. The Nothing calls Dasein to authenticity in the phenomenon of conscience. But is "nothing" enough to elicit an authentic response? In other words, is the nothing which calls enough to evoke *responsibility*, even in the sense of Dasein's being-responsible for itself? Is it possible to be responsible to nothing? I wonder if this is not, anthropologically or psychologically at least, entirely incorrect. I wonder whether it is not necessary for there to be another that one is responsible *to* for there to be a reason to be responsible even *for* oneself.

Perhaps it is possible to argue that Heidegger here has the "nothing" function in a way similar to the way in which the "another" functions in Kierkegaard, at least in the sense that it is "other" than the Being of Dasein. Accordingly, there are commentators who speak of Dasein's "ontological obligation,"<sup>19</sup> the full recognition and acceptance of which defines authenticity. But not only can "obligation" here at best be meant metaphorically, but in a strange way Heidegger's nothing is not even "other" enough to take the place of Kierkegaard's "another" in this manner. For as is witnessed by the expression "no-thing," Heidegger speaks of a nothing that is relative to Being, and relative even to the "there" of Being which is Dasein. The question, again, is whether nothing, and especially this "relative nothing" (the Greek *me on*) is enough to summon Dasein to authenticity, or whether, if responsibility is never more than to oneself (and if assuming a self is even possible under such conditions – an assumption Kierkegaard refuses), there can be a satisfying answer to the question: Why be authentic? Why should I choose to risk the pain and disorientation of anxiety when I can lead a full life involved in the community and busy with whatever task is at hand, with things that need doing?

I am aware that many would argue that these concerns are misplaced because they are based upon anthropological or psychological considerations. But if the ontological, existential level does not accord with the existentiell, lived level – if, that is, what is demonstrated to be necessary in life

is not provided for on the structural level, we may then assume that the structural level as given by Heidegger remains, at the least, incomplete.<sup>20</sup> At any rate, for the moment we must leave this as an open question to Heidegger. But that it remains a question is enough, for our purpose at least, to stay the Heideggerian criticism that this “another” which Kierkegaard includes in the structure of the self renders inauthentic the individual who orients his existence in terms of it. For such an “other” just *may* make authentic existence possible – or, if this thesis proves too strong, *may* make at least render authenticity of far more pressing urgency.

Nevertheless, at this point I seem to have painted myself into an unnegotiable corner: somehow, I have managed to say that to exist in “closest closeness” to the nothing, it may be necessary to orient one’s existence in terms of “another.” Since, presumably, “another” is not nothing, does my argument not collapse into absurdity? Here we must turn to the crucial question and main thrust of my discussion: what is “faith” according to Kierkegaard, and how does this faith permit us to exist both in “closest closeness” to the nothing while, paradoxically, facing the radical “another” dwelling in the intimate self?

As a prolegomena to the positive exposition of the meaning of faith in Kierkegaard, and in order to intercept a few potential misunderstandings, I should mention a couple of things which faith is *not*. First of all, faith is not an intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. This does not mean that Kierkegaard rejects the Church as an authority, but it is not to the *church* that the self relates when it relates itself to God in faith. Secondly and more importantly, faith is not a belief in some-*thing* that first of all “is” – not, at least, in terms of a “what.” Thus Kierkegaard says, “God himself is this: *how* one involves himself with Him. . . . In respect to God, the *how* is the what.”<sup>21</sup> Faith is this “how” one involves oneself with God (whose corresponding “what” we will discover below). In other words, Christianity is a *striving*.<sup>22</sup>

How, then, goes this striving? *How* is faithful existence? Of the many formulations that Kierkegaard gives in answer to this question, I choose *one* as exemplary: the faithful individual is he whose passion takes the form of a *Duty to be in the Debt of Love to Each Other*.<sup>23</sup> In the unpacking of this formulation that follows, I ask only that the reader listen for the way in which the self, in faith, actively comports itself in a “closest closeness” to nothing.

#### *Our Duty To Be in the Debt of Love to Each Other*

According to the existential logic unfolded in the drama of the stages, the individual is prepared for genuine Christian faith only once he comes to understand, in guilt-consciousness, that *he* cannot provide himself with the condition wherein he could become adequate to himself. In guilt-consciousness, as I have already explained, the individual comes to realize the impossibility of any final positive appropriation of the nothingness of the self into himself. The very structure of existence (understood by Anti-Climacus as the state of sin) prevents him from achieving such adequation. It is only at this point, a point which Kierkegaard often describes in terms of a kind of mystic “dark night,”<sup>24</sup> that the self is broken enough to accept,

in his need, that although *he* cannot give himself this condition, there is another, an *impossible* (paradoxical) *other* who can. To accept this condition, that one's ownmost possibility is possible only in relation to an impossible other, is to give the responsibility for self-adequation *over* to this other. The promise of final adequation *is* the incarnation of Jesus, the Christ, and faith is thus the passive activity of *accepting* the given promise and responding to it by giving one's passionate self-interest (read: *existence*) over to Him. This activity of 'handing over' is itself an abysmal striving, never complete. The existential, erotic striving for one's ownmost possibility is thus here *transformed* into a striving to empty oneself of this self-interest (but, note, while remaining dialectically interested in it – for if one loses the interest, the motivation to empty oneself of it also vanishes) by giving it up to Him who is the last hope but also the promise of an eternal possibility (*Salighed*). This 'handing-over' is the "how" of faithful existence, and this "transformation" of existence (in distinction from the term "modification" used by Heidegger) begins with the recognition of *duty*.

What is duty? The kind of duty spoken of here is not the ethical duty to express the universal in one's existence – a duty which, we saw, does not escape the autonomy of self-interest. Rather, *Christian* duty is assumed as a "task" which does not originate within the self, but which, nevertheless, the self recognizes and appropriates *for* itself, *as* its "ownmost" task. In duty, therefore, a displacement of the autonomy of the self occurs.<sup>25</sup> In assuming Christian duty, the individual recognizes that his own possibility-to-be is in fact *not* his own (or vice versa, what is not his own the self recognizes to be his ownmost). Thus the self (paradoxically, and thus by way of an uncertain leap) gives itself to itself by giving itself over to the authority of another.

In the passion of faith, of recognizing the necessity of duty, the self is indeed set back in radical finitude. Faithful existence is far from relating oneself to oneself on the ground of a false security in being. Yet as we have seen, self-conscious finitude necessarily expresses a doubleness: both impossible and possible. In the passionate language of faith, the impossibility is understood as the profound "I can't," the ultimate vanity of the self – that "*before God, I am nothing.*"<sup>26</sup> The possible, on the other hand, freedom, is transformed into the fortitude to maintain oneself in the call of duty. In faith then, what does duty call the self to hold itself into? *Debt*. It is our duty to be in debt.

Striking. Here Kierkegaard is apparently advocating precisely that which we have seen Heidegger reject – that is, thinking of the nothing that anxiety brings to the surface of existence in terms of a debt to be paid, in terms of "something still outstanding." But there remains a difference nevertheless. This difference does not lie in Kierkegaard's claim that the debt is an "infinite debt," for this claim, left merely as such, would not escape the objectifying logic of filling a lack, but would only defer the completion of the payment indefinitely. The difference rather lies in the fact that now, in its transformed mode, the self actually *desires* to be in debt.<sup>27</sup> We saw that Heidegger rejected the language of debt because according to him this language inevitably presupposes a philosophy of perfection and fulfillment. But Kierkegaard turns this language on its head. The everyday or natural state of human being indeed exists in the hope of such fulfillment,

but as such, it is in a state of *despair* – despair because forgetful of, even fleeing from, the impossibility or nothingness of its existence.<sup>28</sup> But faith, the “transformation” of this everyday state (which it thereby presupposes), does not seek perfection.<sup>29</sup> Thus Kierkegaard emphatically does not say it is our duty to *repay* the debt, but *to-be* in it: the *task* of faithful existence is no longer to resolve the debt, but to maintain oneself in it. As such, the debt can no longer be conceived strictly as a debt (or lack) of *being*.

One way to understand this is that, with the transformation of passion which is faith, the self no longer has its own being as its first “issue.” Its being is no longer its ownmost concern. In the untransformed, purely immanent mode of existence, passion responds to the debt as a debt in the self’s being and seeks to overcome it. But faith, the transformation of that passion, understands that the only way *out* of the debt is *through* the debt because only and precisely at the place of the break in the self, where the self discovers its impossibility, can the self begin to relate itself at the same time to an impossible (absurd) “possibility for possibility.” The self therefore desires to stay in debt and not to resolve or repay it; passion is no longer directly and in the first place concern for the self’s own being. On one level it remains this, of course, but only obliquely. Now one’s *own* existence is no longer the ‘direct’ focus of one’s concern. Rather, the ‘goal’ of self-interest breaks through the tyranny of the dilemma “to be or not to be” as the only two possible options.

When the self *desires* to be in debt, then it no longer relates to the debt as a debt of *being*, but rather as a debt of *love*. Already situated self-understandingly in the ultimate relativity of being/nothing, when the self in faith desires to be in debt, it no longer relates itself to itself as *something* to become; the source of the restlessness of existence it now understands in terms other than a lack of *being*. The transformation of desire thus lifts desire out of the logic of fulfillment (perfection) so that it henceforth strives to express a relation to a more fundamental abyss. And with this we have discovered “what” God is, according to Kierkegaard, in terms of “how” we relate to Him: we relate to God as nothing, the abyss of love.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, we venture to say that this “nothing” is a more abysmal nothing than that of which Heidegger speaks because it does not focus on the “to be or not to be.” The nothing here is not relative to being. It is, rather, the Greek *ouk on*, to which theology refers in the *ex nihilo* of creation.<sup>31</sup> (God is the *afgrund* whose self-generated Word loves creation into life and death.)

To love God in faith is to actively take up nothing as the task of existence. But if this is so, can we conceive of love as anything more than a pure abstraction? The quote we are now investigating does not equivocate; the activity of love cannot be more concrete: it is our Duty To Be in the Debt of Love to *Each Other*. In this “to each other” we hear the command to love your neighbour. Thus when Kierkegaard says that the faithful self strives to give its existence away to another, the other who is to receive this “gift” of the self is not directly God. God is not a tyrant who demands our existence from us; “God,” says Kierkegaard, “demands nothing for himself, although he demands everything from you.”<sup>32</sup> We give everything away, become as nothing before God, when we give everything to the neighbour.

The neighbour, unlike the friend or romantic beloved, is not marked by anything "distinctive." Without distinction, love for him is not the love of self-referential preference, but can only be called forth in obedient response to the duty to love. Thus, the transformation of passion is not in the least abstract. A command usurps the place of natural, spontaneous inclination and gives to duty its specific task: to love one's neighbour.

Now, at last having traced this strange, round-a-bout logic, we can conclude. The self in passion for its own impossible possibility to-be, renounces this concern by taking up the task of becoming nothing – not in a mystic retreat, but by venturing out again amongst beings – those beings called "neighbours." Faith, according to Kierkegaard, is to truthfully exist in "closest closeness" to the nothing. To "relate oneself to God," he says, "is to become as nothing."<sup>33</sup> Herein we see why Kierkegaard's description of faith provides a psychologically more plausible *motivation* to suffer an existence bound in the closest possible relation to nothingness than Heidegger's description of authenticity (and Kierkegaard, unlike Heidegger, makes no bones about the fact that such an existence, from a natural, everyday perspective, *is* suffering) precisely because to suffer this way *is* to respond to God in one's need – or more precisely, is to respond to the saving invitation of Christ, to become responsible *to* him.

Furthermore, not only is the "nothing" to which the faithful individual relates a more abysmal nothing than that to which Heidegger refers, Kierkegaard has shown how existing in such "closest closeness" is the most concrete of tasks. For love of one's neighbour is not a feeling, not a "soul mood," but true love, he says, "is pure action."<sup>34</sup> For this very reason, the "transformation" of existence that is faith does not suffer from the danger to which the "modification" of authenticity is prone – the danger of being overly vague, abstract. Authenticity, in the end, is merely a modification of the understanding, perhaps a kind of more intense vision given in an intimate rapport with the fragility of Being. But as Patricia Huntington has asked, "Where does authentic resolve deliver me? . . . Heeding the call of conscience proves empty. . . . This 'moment of vision' is purely formal, abstract, 'indefinite'."<sup>35</sup>

If Heidegger had not been blinded by his preoccupation with sweeping the whole tradition away as "onto-theology," I wonder if he then might have been more open to that part of the Christian tradition which does not conceive of God in the first place in terms of "being" – as the god which first of all "is." Perhaps he would then have been more open to the possibility of faith as a mode of existing which relates to itself always in terms of its own nothing to-be.<sup>36</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p.7.

2. *ibid.*, p.6.
3. *ibid.*, p.7. I understand the argument presented in this paper as a kind of complement to Jean-Luc Marion's opposition to Heidegger's prioritising of the question of Being over the question of faith. In his book, *Dieu sans l'être*, Marion argues that to prioritise the question of Being, to insist that God first of all "is" and must therefore conform to the conditions of Being, is idolatry. Any possible relationship with God, if it is to escape the idolatry of Being, can only be one of *agape*: only *agape* "remains, paradoxically, unthought enough to free, some day at least, the thought of God from the second idolatry" (*God Without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson. [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991], p.45). Whatever resists the domination of thought cannot be completely circumscribed within the domination of understanding. It becomes, rather, a matter for *faith*.
4. *ibid.*, p.7.
5. Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics," in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Krell. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977), p.108.
6. For a much fuller discussion of authenticity in (ostensibly) the same setting as I present here, see Hubert Dreyfus and Jane Rubin, "You Can't Get Something for Nothing: Kierkegaard and Heidegger on How Not to Overcome Nihilism" (*Inquiry* 30, 1987, pp. 33-75). I say 'ostensibly' the same setting because they conclude that the later Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit* not only overcomes the difficulties of the formalistic and abstract presentation of authenticity in *Sein und Zeit*, but that it is also somehow "compatible" with Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian commitment, of "Religiousness B." They are able to make such a bewildering conclusion because, as they say, "in order to have a concrete commitment . . . I must model myself on someone who has one. While Kierkegaard [in *Practice in Christianity*] claims that this someone is Christ, the logic of Kierkegaard's own arguments leads to the conclusion that it need not be" (*ibid.* p. 46). Such a statement is practically self-refuting, so I will merely understate my objection with a question mark: Kierkegaard's 'logic' makes possible a Christianity without Christ? A little more argument would be required to convince me that one can have, as they suggest, a "Religiousness B" commitment to a *sport*. More interesting is Harrison Hall's "Love and Death: Kierkegaard and Heidegger on Authentic and Inauthentic Existence" (*Inquiry* 27, 1984, pp. 179-97). Hall traces Kierkegaard's deep influence on Heidegger's depiction of the temporal structures of *Dasein*. But, despite the promising title, since he does not really comprehend Kierkegaard's understanding of faith, he portrays Kierkegaard's position much closer to Heidegger's than it in fact is. In this light, Gordon Marino's "Salvation: A Reply to Harrison Hall's Reading of Kierkegaard" (*Inquiry*, 28, 1985, pp.441-53) is penetrating and forceful.
7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962, p.306); *Sein und Zeit*, p.262. Compare Kierkegaard on faith's task of "dying-to" oneself: "'To die to' means to regard everything as one will see it at the moment of death and consequently to bring death as close as possible" (*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* vol. I, 724, italics mine).
8. *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p.44; *Being and Time*, p.236.
9. "End" (*Ende*) is a word that Heidegger especially exploits in its double sense, as both the *telos* or "towards-which" of existence and the absolute finishing of existence. But Kierkegaard can also make use of this double entendre. See, for example, *The Sickness Unto Death* in which Anti-Climacus writes "if there is to be any question of a sickness unto death in the strictest sense, it must

be a sickness of which *the end is death and death is the end*" (trans. Howard & Edna Hong. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p.17, italics mine).

10. See, for example, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division 2,1. Although the language of "unity" and "continuity" is rife throughout Kierkegaard's authorship, see "On the Occasion of a Confession: Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing" in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993).

11. *Being and Time*, p. 307: "the possibility (of death) reveals itself to be such that it knows no measure at all . . . but signifies the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence . . . Being-towards-death, as anticipation of possibility, is what first makes this possibility possible and sets it free as possibility."

12. *The Concept of Anxiety*, p.42.

13. Louis Mackey illustrates this point well, exposing Judge William's tendency to "make of his wife's humanity a willing plasticity to his own prerogative" ("The Poetry of Inwardness" in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson. (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), p.43).

14. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard & Edna Hong. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), p.535.

15. It is true that Johannes Climacus explicitly says that the dialectical relation to possibility is enough to keep the immanent-religious individual from despairing (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p.554), but what he means by "despair" here is not the dogmatic interpretation given by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Johannes simply means that the realization of the infinite depth of the self's impossibility does not push the self to an attitude of despairing nihilism – nihilism being "a kind of ill temper." Nevertheless, according to Anti-Climacus' dogmatic account, since the guilt-consciousness of the immanent-religious individual is still a matter of *recollection*, he is still in despair. "Resignation," he says, "is a kind of despair . . . in despair to will to make the eternal suffice, and thereby to be able to defy or ignore . . . the earthly and temporal" (*Sickness Unto Death*, p.70fn).

16. *Works of Love*, trans. Howard & Edna Hong. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p.47.

17. *Being and Time*, p.287.

18. *Works of Love*, p.55. The quote I have in mind actually reads: ". . . the eternal then rescues love precisely by making it eternal."

19. See, e.g., James Demske, *Being, Man, and Death: A Key to Heidegger*. (Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1970), p.19.

20. I owe this observation to Ignace Verhack, who made the point during his lectures on *Being and Time*, winter-spring semester, 1999.

21. *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* vol. II, 1405.

22. *Works of Love*, p.188.

23. *Ibid.*, Part 1, V.

24. See, e.g., *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Edna & Howard Hong. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991), p.195. Kierkegaard here dramatically presents the "most bitter moment" of being "abandoned by God" – abandoned, that is, by one's own *idol* of God. Here is the *break* with immanence, the break represented by Johannes Climacus as the "downfall" of passion (*Philosophical Fragments*, p.37) and Anti-Climacus in *Sickness* as "losing the understanding" (p.38). See also *Journals and Papers* vol. II, 1410-11.

25. This, of course, goes in the face of Kant. But again, for Kierkegaard *Christian* duty is an undoing of all autonomous ethics.

26. *Works of Love*, p.109.

27. *ibid.*, p.174.

28. Although it is more usual to define despair as the loss or forgetfulness

of the eternal, since the eternal is never present without its dialectical counterpart – nothingness, vanity, impossibility – despair can equally be conceived of in terms of forgetfulness of the nothingness of the self.

29. *ibid.*, p.159. "It is commonly thought that love . . . seeks excellency and perfection. . . . (But) this whole conception is a delusion."

30. To speak of an *abyss* (*afgrund*) of love is not an exaggerated use of language here. Compare the following two quotes, first from *Practice in Christianity*: "The contradiction is to require of a person that he make the greatest possible sacrifice, dedicate his whole life to being sacrificed – and why? Well, there is no 'why;' so it is indeed lunacy, says the understanding. There is no 'why,' because there is an infinite 'why'" (p.120). And then from *Philosophical Fragments*: "But, humanly speaking, consequences built upon a paradox [the paradox, we can say, of requiring the individual to dedicate his life to loving sacrifice in response to Christ] are built upon the *abyss* (*afgrund*)" (p.98).

31. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), p.188, where he discusses the difference between philosophy's *me on* and theology's *ouk on* which, he says, in contrast to the former, "is the nothing which has no relation at all to being."

32. *Works of Love*, p.159.

33. *ibid.*, p.109

34. *ibid.*, p.106.

35. Patricia Huntington, "Heidegger's Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited: From Ontological Abstraction to Ethical Concretion," in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušík & Merold Westphal. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995), p.53. Daniel Berthold-Bond, in his article "A Kierkegaardian Critique of Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity" (*Man and World* 24, 1991, pp.119-142), also complains of the abstractness and purely formal structure of authenticity. He finds a possible 'corrective' in Kierkegaard's portrayal of the repetition of the aesthetic: "the category of repetition presupposes a first *inauthentic* articulation of what can only afterwards be transformed through repetition. Heidegger, however, has rejected the first circumnavigation of life offered by curiosity" leaving authentic being "stranded" in contentless abstraction" (p.137).

36. Thanks to Ignace Verhack, Johan Taels, and especially Benjamin Jones, for their encouragement and criticism.